



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE US SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Contemplation: All Things Considered

In the Society, our actions are guided by Holy Scripture, by our Rule and traditions, and by guidelines. We honor them in that order of precedence; where guidelines contradict the Rule or Holy Scripture, the guidelines must be changed. Guidelines appear in formal texts such as the [Manual](#), but with our respect for subsidiarity, perhaps the most important guidelines are those which Conferences adopt for themselves.

There is a temptation, when hearing the word “guidelines”, to think of them as something like the [Pirate Code](#), unserious, and easily tossed aside as a matter of simple preference. Yet our Conference guidelines are much more than that.

New Conferences are formed with no guidelines of their own, but with Rule and the advice of their supporting Council to help them live the Rule in the early works. It is over the course of their first year, in preparation to apply for aggregation, that they develop guidelines that fit their particular community’s needs and their own abilities, seeking to consider all things within their growing experience.

Guidelines, then, are not meant to restrict the actions or decisions of members, but to empower them; not to enumerate what cannot be done, but to remind members what can, and should, be done. It is the difference between saying “*we never provide more than X dollars in assistance*” and saying “*the home visit team may approve up to X dollars of assistance*”. Importantly, then, guidelines should always account for those occasions in which the assistance which is needed exceeds that guideline. How is this decided and approved? By the Conference officers, or the Conference as a whole?

The amount of material assistance we offer is just one small thing that guidelines should cover, but in all areas, we arrive at our guidelines through a process of discernment and consensus within our Conferences. Guidelines, then, are not arbitrary directives, but shared rules, agreed to by all. This is one reason that our Rule requires Conferences and Councils to periodically “*evaluate their service to the members and the poor, the effectiveness of their special works and all activities, and explore ways to provide better service. They should also consider new types of needs they may seek to alleviate and how to find those who are in need.*” [\[Rule, Part III, St. 22\]](#) This review naturally includes evaluation of guidelines, in consideration of new experiences and changing circumstances.

As individual members, it is not our prerogative to independently act outside of Conference guidelines. If we think they should be changed, we should always feel free to share our thoughts with the circle of friends, the community of faith, that is our Conference.

Contemplate

Am I tempted, at times, to act on my own, rather than trusting my Conference to listen to my concerns?

Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#)