



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

Contemplation: At the Center

Shortly after the election of Pope Francis in 2013, photos of the crowd awaiting his first appearance were published [alongside photos](#) of an earlier crowd awaiting the appearance of Pope Benedict XVI. In 2005, the massive crowd simply stood waiting. Eight years later, they held thousands of phones aloft in order to record what was to come. It seems that, as cameras have become ubiquitous, we seek to chronicle as much as we can, often at the expense of truly experiencing it in the first place. We risk ending up with more photos on our phones than memories in our minds.

In a similar way, on our home visits, we sometimes seek to learn, and write down, everything that can be known, like the gentile in the famous Talmudic story, who demanded to be taught the entire law while standing on one foot. We bring along clipboards holding forms with a hundred boxes that we feel bound and committed to fill, and sometimes begin to focus more on that clipboard than on the person before us, just as so many in that 2013 crowd stared at their cameras instead of Pope Francis. What do they – and we – truly remember from our encounters? What greater understanding do we gain from a page of notes or a picture than what is revealed through an encounter in which we are fully present?

Our Manual reminds us, in the context of confidentiality, that *"Because people tend to share personal information more freely with their Vincentian visitors in the relaxed atmosphere of their own homes, Society members should be careful to record only what is essential to serve them."* [\[Manual, 21\]](#) It's okay to take notes, of course, but the more we record, the more we ensure that very little on our pages of notes will be at all necessary, much less essential, to serve them. As the Manual suggests, the more we record, the less we demonstrate our commitment to confidentiality. In turn, the less we truly respect the dignity of the neighbor

It is possible, in our day and age, to record everything. It is not possible, in any day and age, to experience everything twice. Our home visits are not an occasion to record, but to experience, to listen, and to try to understand. We are not there to inventory lives, or to audit the books, we are there to listen to our neighbors *"with [our] hearts, beyond all words and appearances."* [\[Rule, Part I, 1.11\]](#) We *"seek to understand them as [we] would a brother or sister."* [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#)

All we really *need* in order to pay an electric bill is a copy of the bill, but paying a bill is not the most important reason we are there. We are there to form relationships. We are there to share God's love and Christ's hope through our loving and humble presence. We do that best not by seeking all the knowledge in the room, but by remembering that God is at its center. This should be easy to remember on a home visit. After all, He is sitting right in front of us.

Contemplate

Do I allow myself to be distracted from the encounter by a desire to "write it all down"?

Recommended Reading

['Tis a Gift to be Simple](#)