



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

## Contemplation: Not a Separation but a Bond

Among the four Permanent Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine is subsidiarity, by which we preserve the dignity of each person, and of each organization by reserving to them the decisions which affect them most directly, and which they can best fulfill. [cf. [CSDC, IV](#)] As a faithful Catholic organization, then, it is only logical that “*The Society embraces the Principle of Subsidiarity as its basic standard of operation.*” [Rule, Part I, 3.9]

This principle is most often invoked to explain the relationship of Conferences to Councils, and Councils to higher level Councils, all the way to the Council General. The first significant addition to the Rule pertained to the addition of Councils, which, it said, existed primarily to provide “*unity of direction in important matters, and great freedom for action of each Conference in the details of its works.*” [1841 Rule, Ch. II] The current Rule continues to explain the role of Councils in very similar terms.

As then-President-General Bailly explained in 1841, “*a Council ... is rather a link than a power... to explain or solve the difficulties which arise naturally in a young Society. But all this has been imposed on no one, all is freely accepted, followed, and may be abandoned.*” [Bailly, Circ. Ltr. 1841]

Although it can be tempting to view all this as justification to ignore everything our higher Councils recommend to us, a more complete understanding of subsidiarity must include its mutual nature. The word itself derives from the Latin *subsidium*, meaning “support.” The term was used by Roman armies to refer to forces held in reserve, or reinforcements. The purpose of reinforcements is of course not to consume or command the regular forces, but to strengthen and help them.

While establishing new Conferences in his home city of Lyon in 1836, Frédéric expressed this relationship in a letter to Emmanuel Bailly, explaining that just the first Conference had once benefitted from Bailly’s “*advice and example,*” it would become the highest priority to enable the new members to have the same benefit by establishing these new Conferences “*in union with the society of Paris. Our work here is nascent, but it is living. It is feeble, but it can become strong by preserving its bonds with the mother work.*” [135, to Bailly, 1836]

Subsidiarity, then, is not a hierarchy but a union; not a separation but a bond; a mark of neither dependence nor independence, but of “*a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends.*” [Rule, Part I, 3.3] As Bailly explained, between Councils and Conferences “*there is neither authority nor obedience; there may be deference and advice; there is certainly, above all, charity; there are the same end, the same good works; there is a union of hearts in Jesus Christ our Lord.*” [Bailly, Circ. Ltr., 1841]

### Contemplate

Does my Conference seek advice and example from its Council? Does my Council offer support and freedom to its Conferences?

### Recommended Reading

It is always good to re-read [The Rule](#)