



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

Contemplation: To Be Vincentian

“A Conference meeting” the Rule instructs, “shall incorporate Spirituality, Friendship, [and] Service”. [\[Rule, Part II, Statute 7\]](#) These three, of course, are the Essential Elements of the Society, and importantly, we are expected not to incorporate or highlight only one of them, but all three. Why is that?

The Essential Elements have been included in the Rule for only about twenty years, but they have been known to us, in different words, since the beginning. The Essential Elements – all of them – unite us. Blessed Frédéric once said that the “*distances that stand between the most loyal of friends do not separate the Christian spirits or wills that come together to love one another, to pray, and to act...*” [1367, to the Assembly, 1837]

Each element is important by itself, of course, but unlike [the theological virtues](#), of which the greatest is love (charity), our Essential Elements are equal and inseparable; each one informs, motivates, and enriches the other two. We have all experienced a strengthening of a friendship when we share a meal, work on a project, or perhaps take a trip with somebody. Frédéric noted this also but went on to explain that “*if purely human acts have this power, moral acts have it even more, and if two or three come together to do good, their union will be perfect.*” [\[142, to Curnier, 1837\]](#) The special character of Vincentian friendship is the bond formed by our charitable works, our service to Jesus Christ. Again, emphasizing this link between service and friendship, he explained that “*the strongest tie, the principle of a true friendship, is charity ... and good works are the food of charity.*” [\[82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

Our service, of course, has never been about the bread, or the firewood, or the financial assistance. The challenge our founders hoped to meet was how to translate their faith into deeds. It isn't about the firewood, it is about the faith. “*We must do,*” Frédéric said, “*what Our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the Gospel. Let us go to the poor.*” [\[Baunard, 65\]](#) Our service, then, is a pure expression of our spirituality, it is our special way of living our faith, and of following [the greatest commandment](#).

It is because of this unity between the essential elements that the friendship we share with one another we share also with the neighbor, welcoming him into our community of faith, and inviting him, along with us, to union with Jesus Christ.

Esse, the Latin root of essential, means “to be.” Essence is the very nature of our being; that which is essential is what makes us who we are. Ours is more than the friendship that shares a meal or a drink, more than the spirituality that joins hands to pray around the table, and more than the service that enhances a resumé. Each element is important by itself. Together, they are the essence of the Society.

Contemplate

Does friendship build my spirituality, spirituality motivate my service, and service enrich my friendship?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module I](#)