

VINCENTIAN CONTEMPLATIONS

Volume II



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

Introduction

Our Vincentian Formation is a lifelong process of becoming. Through our service to Christ's poor, our friendship with them and with each other, and our devotion to our shared spirituality, we seek to grow in holiness.

Our Rule reminds us that our personal dedication to our formation is also essential. These Contemplations are offered as a way for Vincentians to learn from the words and example of our Saints and Blesseds so that we might prayerfully examine our own words and actions.

Inline references are provided for those who wish to see the quotes in context, and if you are reading these Contemplations electronically, you can simply click on the link.

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Being That Kind of Person

Why does it sometimes seem difficult to withhold judgment when we visit our neighbors in need?

In his famous essay “The Undeserving Poor,” [\[Serving in Hope, Module IV\]](#) the late Bishop Kenneth Untener explains how easy it is to serve a poor child, because they can’t help it if they’re poor, and they haven’t the ability to work their way out of it.

They are not the ones that are difficult to serve – it’s the ones who seem to be the cause of their own problems; the ones we help up only to see them fall again. You know - *those kind of people*.

In his biography of Sister Stanislaus Malone, [Nun with a Gun](#), biographer Eddie Doherty recounts the story of Sister Helen, an older nun who once told an alcoholic to leave and not come back, saying “it would be a waste” of time and resources to keep helping him when he would only start drinking again.

The man left, but not before reminding her that she did not know the temptations he had faced.

After he left, Sister Helen sobbed at her own failure of charity, saying, “*What right had I to assume he would succumb again to the evils of drink? How many battles has he won? Nobody knows. I think only of the battles he has lost – and the battles I myself have won.*”

It is easy to remember that time we beat temptation, or pulled ourselves out of difficulties by our bootstraps, and to let it color our judgment of the failures of others. We forgive and forget our own failures of will or of virtue, because deep inside we understand that our failures don’t define us; that however our own stumbles may be seen by others, we are “*not that kind of person.*”

It was because of this human fallibility that St. Vincent taught that we should “*get in the habit of judging events and persons, always and in all circumstances, for the good. If an action has a hundred facets to it...always look at its best side... even though intelligence and human prudence tell us the contrary.*” [\[CCD XI:638\]](#)

Perhaps this is part of Christ’s meaning when he commands us to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” [\[Mt 22:39\]](#) Love is offering not only our assistance, but our understanding, our patience, and the benefit of the doubt.

Because we are all made in His image, and we are all “*that kind of person.*”

Contemplate

How can I better “see the good” in all circumstances?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditation II](#) – especially 10. *Expecting and Seeing*

May I have a Word with You?

Blessed Frédéric, layman and primary founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, is considered the primary role model for members of the Society. In his words and in his deeds Frédéric leaves us with an example of charity and virtue. At the same time, his words can remind us of our own frailty and of the needs of the neighbors that we serve.

Writing from Lyon, where he was at the time starting out in the practice of law and living with his elderly mother, Frédéric shared with his friend Francois Lallier his experience of what has been called "[one of the deepest forms of poverty](#)":

"At the moment," he wrote, "I am suffering a malady which will appear strange in a town where I have so many relatives and friends; I mean isolation." [[Letter 173, 1838](#)]

As a lawyer, he argued before the court, and spoke with colleagues and clients daily, but never shared personal conversations. He tended to his mother, who was ill, but could not unburden himself without upsetting her in her frail state.

And so, in the midst of a bustling city, the city in which he'd grown up, in a profession that required interaction and conversation, he nevertheless felt alone.

Don't the poor whom we serve often live and work in some of the most crowded areas of our cities? Don't they walk down streets filled with people? They walk right past us, in our coffee shops and restaurants, or we breeze past them, phones pressed to our ears, without so much as a glance, or a smile.

To whom can they speak? With whom can they share their thoughts, their needs, their hopes, their discouragements? Who will hear them? Who will listen?

Perhaps the increased isolation we all have experienced this past year will help us to better appreciate our Essential Element of friendship, meant to be shared not only with each other, but with our neighbors in need.

Perhaps, like Frédéric, we will "*appreciate now by its privation the whole value of the spoken word, how much more it cultivates thought than the dead letter of the greatest writers.*" [[Letter 173, 1838](#)]

In the poor we are called to see Christ, the Incarnate Word. With our words we share not just information, but what our Rule [\[2.5.1\]](#) calls us to share: ourselves.

Contemplate

How can I better offer words of comfort, healing, and friendship?

Recommended Reading

[Spirituality of the Home Visit](#)

From that time on, how could I not love them?

Vincentians are called to serve the hungry, the homeless, the poor – all those who are suffering or deprived. Doing this work can sometimes lead us to discouragement, because we see so many problems we cannot solve, and we know that today's groceries won't satisfy next month's hunger.

And after all, who are we to try to ease the suffering of others when we are weighed down by burdens of our own?

Writing to his lifelong friend Ernest Falconnet, Bl. Frédéric once confided that many times he felt burdened by his own problems and worries, but then he went *"into the dwelling of a poor person confided to my care. There, because so many unfortunates have more to complain about than I, I scolded myself for being discouraged."* [[15 Days of Prayer, p.81](#)]

The poor will always be with us, as surely as our own hunger will return each day. This is why our Rule reminds us, we *"should never forget that giving love, talents, and time is more important than giving money."* [[Rule, Pt. I, 3.14](#)]

Our primary purpose is not the feeding, but the sharing, and in the end, whatever loaves and fishes we have to offer will be enough for God's plan, if we share them [for love alone](#). And as we comfort, we will in turn be comforted, just as the five loaves and two fish, shared by Christ's disciples, returned to them as twelve baskets filled with food.

To invert the old saying, "there *because* of the grace of God go I." There to the poor; there to the hungry; there to deprivation and to sadness; there to Him who beckons us; there to Him who comforts and redeems us, even as we, "weak Samaritans," seek to offer comfort.

As Bl. Frédéric taught, the poor are *"the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and charity..."* [[O'Meara, p. 177](#)]

How can we ever tire, or be discouraged, when what we offer is to Christ Himself? As Frédéric realized when those impoverished families lifted his spirit:

"From that time on, how could I not love them?"

Contemplate

In giving, do I keep my heart open to receiving?

Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#) *More a novel than a biography, this is an inspirational story of Frédéric's life.*

God's Gift, Wrapped in Humility

Have you ever seen somebody, puffed up with himself, stride into a room, clearly expecting to be the center of attention? Sometimes we hear people mutter, "He thinks he's God's gift to us..."

It's a shame that this expression is used as a derisive commentary on personal vanity, because, when you think about it, aren't we all "God's gifts?" That seems like an easy thing to understand when we refer to a newborn infant as a "gift from God."

You, too, are "God's gift" to your brothers and sisters. So am I. This is not a validation of our vanity - quite the opposite! In vanity, we make ourselves the center. By contrast, as God's gift, I am not *for me*, I am *for you*. God is the center. He carefully created us, wrapped us, and sent us.

To be God's gift, then, is a call not to vanity, but to our Vincentian virtue of humility in which we accept that "*all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*" [[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1](#)]

Following Christ's call to serve Him in the person of His poor, Vincentians seek to share not only our time, our talents, and our possessions, but also *ourselves* in a spirit of generosity. [[Ibid](#)]

And in giving, we receive.

As Fr. Hugh O'Donnell explains in an article titled [Apostolic Reflection](#), "*God is present in each person and in the community.*"

In other words, while each of us is a unique creature of God, all of us together, as a group, also are a unique instance of God's grace. The group does not change when a new person enters – it becomes an entirely new group, enriched by receiving another gift from God.

The vain man sees himself not only as the gift, but as the giver; the one who should be thanked. We are called to offer God's gift, wrapped in humility, seeking nothing in return. Miraculously, when we do so, this gift of love will be multiplied.

What a wonderful exchange of gifts; what a wonderful celebration!

For we truly are the gifts when God is the Life of the party.

Contemplate

Are there times I try to keep this gift to myself?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

Our Labor of Love

On the very first page of our Rule you will find a truly remarkable statement: “*No work of charity is foreign to the Society.*” [\[Rule, Pt. I, 1.3\]](#)

All modern communities thrive by specialization; farmers farm, builders build, writers write, and so on. Within the community of charitable and philanthropic organizations, there also tends to be specialization; shelters for the homeless, food pantries for the hungry, utility assistance, legal aid – the list, especially in this generous nation, is nearly endless.

Through specialization, each of us contributing what we are best able to contribute, more needs can be met overall, and this is obviously to the good!

But the Society of St Vincent de Paul not only *lacks* a specialty, it would seem that we explicitly *dismiss* specialization.

Or do we?

Vincentians are called, above all else, “*to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love.*” [\[Rule, Pt. I, 1.2\]](#)

Our service, our works, are the means towards growth in holiness; we’re called to see the face of Christ in those we serve, to fulfill [His teaching](#), and to draw others to Christ through our example of charity.

And so, on our home visits, when we observe not only additional material needs, but ways in which we might help to alleviate the causes of the neighbor’s distress, we eagerly seek to do so, through our individual efforts, and through our many special works, from Thrift Stores to disaster relief; from tutoring to prison ministries.

None of these works stems from an ambition merely to provide greater amounts of material assistance, but from a commitment to [love our neighbors as ourselves](#).

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, then, does have a specialty, but it is the charity, not the works.

We’re not, after all, the Society of Rent Assistance, or of Groceries; we are the Society of St Vincent de Paul, called by the example of our patron to “love God with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.”[\[CCD XI:32\]](#) Charity itself is not a work; charity is love. No work offered in love is foreign to us.

And if we truly seek to serve Christ, how can it be otherwise?

Contemplate

Do I serve my neighbor [for love alone](#)?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#) - especially 23. *The Vincentian Witness*

Together Towards Holiness

New friends are silver, they say, and old friends are gold. Maintaining our friendships during this long year of absence and isolation has been challenging.

As Bl. Frédéric once explained, friendships, when we are separated, can be nourished via letters, which are a “*truly an epistolary meeting where one always gains and never loses.*” [[Letter 142. 1837](#)]

Surely our modern conference calls and videoconferences have served us as ably as the letters of another era, yet even in these modern days, “*friendship being a harmony between souls...cannot subsist in a prolonged absence.*” [[Ibid](#)]

As challenging as it is to maintain our friendships without meeting in person, it is nearly impossible to form new ones, as we are called to do with the neighbors we serve. On home visits, we learn not only from words and facial expressions, but from the full circumstances and surroundings; body language; interaction with others in the home; things we can only experience in person.

All friendships are strengthened by spending time together, whether sharing a meal, a conversation, a movie, or other recreation. But our Vincentian friendship is a special bond, whose “*strongest tie... is charity... It is a fire that dies without being fed, and good works are the food of charity.*” [[Letter 82 1834](#)]

This friendship is more than recreational, more than mere “silver or gold.” It is one of the Essential Elements of our vocation, formed, nourished, and strengthened at every Conference meeting and home visit.

Indeed, the first edition of the [Rule in 1835](#) declared that “*the unity of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul will be cited as a model of Christian friendship... which ...will make of all our hearts one heart, of all our souls one soul...*”

It is through our friendship that we answer our calling to “*journey together towards holiness.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] In our Conference meetings, where we gather together in His name; in prayer, where our voices joined; on our home visits, where we serve [as He asked us to serve](#); there, [as He promised](#), Christ will be in our midst.

As grateful as we are for technologies that have kept us connected during this time, one of the blessings we look forward to as we return to normalcy in coming weeks and months is the renewal of our living friendship. Vincentian friendship, like our relationship with God, is ultimately not intended to be a long-distance relationship.

Contemplate

When gathered with my Vincentian friends, do I look for Christ in our midst? Do I find Him?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

Putting Ourselves First?

To become a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is to dedicate ourselves to serving others, to “love God...with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.” We hope that our works always are characterized by the Vincentian virtue of selflessness.

And yet, as Bl. Frédéric put it, “it is in our own interest first of all that our association has been established, and if we assemble under the roof of the poor, it is at least equally for them as for ourselves, so as to become progressively [better friends](#).” [82. To Curnier, 1834]

It is an idea he repeated often, and one that remains in our Rule today, “that the end of the Society is especially to rekindle and refresh ... the spirit of Catholicism...and that [visiting the poor](#) should be the means and not the end of our association.” [182 to Lallier, 1838]

If the Society was formed in our own interest first, what happened to selflessness? Even Frédéric once remarked on the “egoism which is at the bottom of our work...” [82. To Curnier, 1834]

Recalling the Society’s founding, when the young Catholics were challenged to show the good of the church in the world, Frédéric’s answer was not merely to bring bread and firewood to the poor, but, through these works of charity, to share Christ’s love and promise of salvation.

Our works feed our charity, and our charity feeds our friendship, which is what [Aquinas called](#) “the friendship of charity, which is God.”

This friendship grows through our “community of faith and works erasing little by little the old divisions of political parties and preparing [us] to become better ... in order to make others happier.” [290. to Amelie, 1841]

As the [Apostle John reminds us](#), “whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

We make our home visits [for love alone](#); the most important thing we share with our neighbors is ourselves.

In other words, if our purpose in the Society is to better ourselves, it is ultimately for the benefit of others; to make of ourselves more worthy gifts.

Contemplate

Do I see the face of Christ in my fellow Vincentians?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Louise de Marillac](#), especially Meditation 14: Love One Another

A Voice That Speaks to Our Hearts

On his [way to Damascus](#), Saul of Tarsus, feared Roman tormentor of the early Christians, was struck from his horse, temporarily blinded by a great bolt of lightning, and commanded by Christ Himself to cease his persecution. Soon after, he began to preach God's word as Paul the Apostle.

For most of us, our moments of conversion are not so obvious. Instead, they require senses that are both open and willing to perceive [a light, silent sound](#), a tiny whispering voice, a voice that speaks only to our hearts.

"God speaks often enough to our heart," St. Vincent assures us, *"it's up to us to be attentive to His voice..."* [\[CCD X:128\]](#) It's easy for a quiet voice to be lost in the moment; to be drowned out by our daily stresses. It's easy to let those stresses [harden our hearts](#).

As Vincentians, we are called to see Christ's face in those we serve. We pray and prepare to see Him before every home visit. Shouldn't we also seek to hear His voice?

The voice that says to us "I need your help," also is whispering, quietly but insistently, "I am here."

If we don't understand Him immediately, that's okay. God speaks outside of time; His voice is still there to be heard when we pause to reflect on our experiences, to discern what He is telling us. We do this through individual contemplation and prayer, but also through Apostolic Reflection within our Conferences, relying on what [Father Hugh O'Donnell describes](#) as St. Vincent's "absolute conviction that 'God is here!'"

Our hearts are converted in many small moments, calling us sometimes to leaps, but more often to small steps of faith, *"content to see the stone on which we should step without wanting to discover all at once and completely the windings of the road."* [\[Letter 136. To François Lallier, 1836\]](#)

Like Saul walking in blindness down the road to Damascus, we take our first, stumbling steps, however small they are, knowing that *"God is especially pleased to bless what is little and imperceptible: the tree in its seedling, man in his cradle, good works in the shyness of their beginnings."* [\[Letter 310, to Amelie, 1841\]](#)

Contemplate

Reflect on a recent Vincentian experience. Can you hear God's voice?

Recommended Reading

[Apostolic Reflection with Rosalie Rendu](#)

The Joy of Angels

To trust in Providence and to do God's will are two sides of the same coin. After all, without trust in His Providence, doing His will would be merely a chore that would quickly become burdensome. Instead, it should be for us a source of joy!

Our [Rule](#) tells us that our Conference meetings are held in a spirit of "Christian joy." [\[Rule, Part I, 3.4\]](#) How quickly that spirit of joy went missing in the early days of the Society, Blessed Frédéric recounted to his friend Léonce Curnier, when the Conference began "*fulfilling [its] duties from habit,*" and was "*stricken with a general discouragement.*" [\[Letter 90, 1835\]](#)

How could it be otherwise if we merely deliver bread and pay bills; if we let our works become ... work?

Like our Patron, we seek to "*love God with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows,*" [\[CCD XI:32\]](#) That sounds an awful lot like work, but it is a labor, quite explicitly, of love! Knowing this, we soon see that however challenging it may be at times, "*those very things that we thought would cause us pain, on the contrary give us joy.*" [\[CCD X:50\]](#)

Charity itself is not work, but love – the love of God. That is why, as St. Vincent teaches, "*God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken but the charity that accompanied it.*" [\[CCD I:205\]](#) The outcome is never up to us, but when we seek to do His will, we can trust the outcome to His providence.

And so, through prayer, discernment, and reflection, individually and in our Conferences, we seek to know God's will. As Vincentians, our ultimate goal is for God's will to become our own, so that "*it will be no longer [we] who love, but Christ who loves through [us]*" [\[Rule, Part I, 2.1\]](#)

Benet of Canfield, a great influence on St Vincent, taught that God's will is "[all the whole spiritual life.](#)" That is why, for Vincent, "*the goodness of God, the Will of God, the pleasure of God, and the joy of God*" were of one piece. [\[CCD X:86\]](#)

To do God's will is not to [labor in vain](#), but to serve in hope, and to [rejoice in hope!](#)

At the beginning of every Conference meeting, we say the [Lord's Prayer](#), asking that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. "*Not as it is in Hell, where it is done of necessity,*" Bl. Frédéric once explained, "*nor among men, where it is often done with murmuring, but as it is in Heaven, with the love and the joy of angels.*" [\[Baunard, 343\]](#)

Contemplate

When I feel that I am doing His will, do I open my heart to joy?

Recommended Reading

Instead of reading, watch this particularly joyful rendition of [Ode to Joy](#) from Beethoven's Ninth

Filled with God for the Day

Vincentians are people of prayer. Together as Conferences, we pray to open and close each meeting, retreat, and reflection; we attend Mass together on our [Vincentian feast days](#); we ask God's blessings upon each other and upon the neighbors we serve. We are, as Blessed Frédéric often said, "*united in works and prayers*." [[Letter 135 to Bailly, 1836](#)]

Our Vincentian vocation, though, is not limited to our Conference meetings or to our works, but is "a vocation for every moment of our lives." [[Rule, Part I, 2.6](#)] Our call to prayer is an individual one. We hear this call repeated throughout our [Rule](#): we "pray before personal encounters or visits" [[Part I, 1.7](#)]; we promote "a life of prayer and reflection;" and our "personal lives are characterized by prayer..." [[Part I, 2.2](#)]

Saint Vincent de Paul famously began each day with three hours of prayer. And what better way to start the day? Conversing with a God who loves us so much, St. Vincent taught, we will "*rise promptly and joyously*." [[CCD X:101](#)] Beyond that, he advised, "*prayer being your first occupation, your mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day*." [[CCD IX:23](#)]

We humble ourselves in prayer, but dwell "*more on His strength than on [our] own weakness*" in the hope that He will accomplish His good in us and through us. In prayer, we abandon ourselves to what Vincent called "*His paternal embrace*," [[CCD V:166](#)] and what Frédéric called "*the maternal guidance of Providence*." [[Letter 310 to Amelie, 1841](#)]

Finally, in our individual prayer, we remember not only to lay out our own needs before God, but the needs of our Vincentian friends. Frédéric once described this mutuality of prayerful intentions as the "*one rendezvous where Christian souls are sure of meeting and conversing together*." [[Letter 493 to Dufieux, 1843](#)]

Vincentians are people of prayer. It is the basis of our friendship, of our meetings, and of our service. It is through our prayer that we daily recommit ourselves to our vocation, to each other, and to Divine Providence.

Amen!

Contemplate

Is prayer a part of my day - every day?

Recommended Reading

[15 Days of Prayer with Blessed Fredric Ozanam](#)

Man's Best Friend

Ours is a ministry of *presence*. For all the bread, for all the rent, for all the material things we may at times provide, there is nothing more important, nothing more valuable, and nothing more lasting than simply to be in the presence of our neighbors in need.

This is sometimes difficult to remember because we Vincentians are people of action. We want to identify the problem and fix it! Efficient “interviews,” though, are not what makes the Society unique. There are hundreds of agencies ready to dig for information in the name of solving the problem.

But what the suffering poor need much more than a thorough form to fill out is somebody who will sit with them; who will share their sadness, if only for a moment. Like a true friend.

Blessed Rosalie Rendu, who taught and inspired the earliest members of the Society, genuinely enjoyed being in the company of the poor. She would often go to the soup kitchen and spend hours there in conversation. In [Queen by Right Divine](#), biographer Kathleen O'Meara recounts that men who “came for their plate of rice and beans” would often confide to Rosalie “almost unawares, some secret of moral or physical misery worse than the hunger they had come to assuage.” [\[P. 73\]](#)

They didn't share their stories in response to a list of questions, or an application form; they opened up to a friend who cared about them, who respected them, and who loved them. Somebody who was with them because that was where she wanted to be.

Our Rule calls us to “establish relationships based on trust and friendship.” [\[Rule, Pt. I, 1.9\]](#) It was trust and friendship that led those men in the soup kitchen to open up to Rosalie; her trust in them, and her friendship towards them, inspired them to respond in kind.

In 1869 [Florence Nightingale](#) found that patients often responded more to dogs than to people. Modern science has found that a dog's presence can not only relieve anxiety but can even lower blood pressure. Dogs seem to sense when a person is sad, and simply sit alongside them, asking nothing in return. People even open up and speak to dogs about their problems.

A dog doesn't answer, offer advice, or solve your problem. He's just there, fully and completely, for you.

Imagine if we could take the first steps towards the holy example of Blessed Rosalie by learning from the example of “[man's best friend!](#)”

Contemplate

On my home visits, do I sometimes interrupt the silence?

Recommended Reading

[A Heart on Fire](#) – especially III. “A Network of Presence and Charity”

The Spirit of Youth

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is blessed with many active youth and young adult members, whose fresh enthusiasm for the Lord's work infuses all of us with renewed energy in our vocation. Like the first Conference, formed by young men barely out of their teens, we seek out and welcome young members! For the rest of us, though, our own advancing age does not excuse us, as our Rule reminds us, from striving "*to preserve the spirit of youth.*" [[Rule, Part I, 3.5](#)]

Blessed Frédéric often invoked the spirit of youth in his speeches and writing, beginning when he was a student. He was acutely aware that others might find him "very rash to propose [his] young man's ideas," [[Letter 85, to Bailly, 1834](#)] yet he proposed them anyway. He even went so far as to once say that his ideas really were not even his own, but "the echo of the young Christian people among whom I live." [[Letter 97, to Curnier, 1835](#)]

It was Frédéric's vision not only that a network of charity might encircle the world, but that renewing the faith in young people would carry on throughout their lives, and in turn light a fire in the hearts of their countrymen. Recognizing the Society as "a vocation for every moment of our lives," [[Rule, Part I, 2.6](#)] he believed it could help to prepare "a new generation which would carry into science, the arts, and industry, into administration, the judiciary, the bar, the unanimous resolve to make it a moral country and to become better themselves in order to make others happier." [[Letter 290, to Amelie, 1841](#)]

Throughout his life Frédéric continued not only to call on young people to serve, but to be energized by the fire of the young people in his classes and in the Society, by what our Rule calls their "enthusiasm, adaptability and creative imagination." [[Rule, Part I, 3.5](#)]

As Vincentians, we grow together in holiness and in friendship, challenged by youth to greater energy and ambition; tempered by age to seek the achievable; each of us at our stage in life blessed by the gifts of all the others, united in work that is ageless and timeless.

Founded 188 years ago, the Society itself "is not old," wrote Ozanam biographer Monsignor Louis Baunard. Rather, "it is, and continues to be, young with eternal youth, with the youth of Charity that knows not decay." [[Baunard, 416](#)]

"Life is however not standing still," Frédéric wrote late in his life, "and I shall have to seize whatever little youth remains...and to keep my 18-year-old promise to God." [[Baunard, 331](#)]

Contemplate

As I grow older, how do I keep my promise to God young?

Recommended Reading

[The Frédéric Ozanam Story](#)

Connected by Unbroken Spokes

In 2018, a list of [Cultural Beliefs](#) was added to our Rule, better defining for us the commitments we make in this vocation. Among them is the commitment to “contribute to the success of our Vincentian work when we support *One Society*.” [\[Rule, Part III, Statue 2\]](#) Although only added to the text of the Rule in recent years, this ideal of solidarity was dear to our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam.

As it has always been, the work of the Society is done by individual members, [visiting](#) in pairs to serve the poor in their neighborhoods, and meeting and praying frequently with their local Conferences. With respect for the principle of subsidiarity, Conferences, within the limits of the Rule, govern themselves. It would be quite possible, if you chose, to go a very long time without so much as being aware of any Vincentians from other Conferences. But we are called to choose otherwise!

Even without seeing one another, “what magic there is in words from afar and in the approbation of so great a number of [friends](#),” Frédéric wrote, likening the bonds between Conferences to the living and life-giving bonds between conjoined twins. [\[Letter 169, to Lallier, 1838\]](#) Celebrating a local success in Paris, he was quick to add that “our moral strength...comes from other conferences in Paris and the provinces. This solidarity raises us in the eyes of the world at the same time that it gives us confidence.” [\[Letter 173, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

Each new member, each new Conference, immediately inherits 188 years of tradition, becomes part of a network of charity spanning the globe in [152 countries, on all five continents](#). Each Conference, with its local character and concerns, enriches and is enriched by the greater whole. That is why Frédéric cautioned that the Society’s growth is not important without “unity in proportion as the circle widens, each of its points connected with the center by unbroken spokes.” [\[Letter 137, to Janmot, 1837\]](#)

This unity, this solidarity, is the reason we have [District, Diocesan, and National Councils](#), it is the reason we have an annual [National Assembly](#), and the reason we celebrate [Vincentian Feast Days](#) together. Following one such celebration, Frédéric marveled that “at the same hour, thirty other conferences established in the farthest removed sections of the country celebrated the same solemnity. How can there not be given some hope to such a strength of association?” [\[Letter 310, to Amelie, 1841\]](#)

As we seek to serve Christ in the person of the poor, we constantly bless and are blessed by our fellow Vincentians, assuring each other “that we are not alone, and that our works and prayers are surrounded with much better works and prayers, which protect them against corruption from without and draws upon them the blessing of heaven.” [\[Letter 165, to Bailly, 1837\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I meet with members from other Conferences, and remember them in my prayers?

Recommended Reading

[Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam](#)

To Have a Friend

Sometimes, caught up in the bustle of our lives, we allow our home visits to become transactional: pay the bill, say a prayer, and move on. We love our neighbors no less for this habit! Indeed, it's *important* to keep the lights on, to avoid the eviction, and to provide food! The situations are often dire, and the assistance we offer can seem like first aid. But is this enough if our home visits are “the means, not the end of our association?” [[Letter 182, to Lallier, 1838](#)] Can our growth in holiness be transactional?

Father Dennis Holtschneider [once offered this useful exercise](#) for measuring how well we are living our Rule: *would an outside observer write these words to describe how we behave?* Watching me paying a bill and move on, would that observer say, “wow, he really establishes relationships based on trust and friendship!” [[Rule, Part I, 1.9](#)]

For the past ten years (or so) the Society has promoted a concept called “[Systemic Change](#),” which is often misapprehended as if it were something new. It isn't! Its roots run as deep as the Society itself, in which the very first Conference in 1833 did not merely drop off food or firewood, but adopted families in need, visiting them regularly, seeking to truly walk with them, and change their lives.

It isn't easy. Bl. Frédéric said so himself. He once recounted that on his earliest visits, he would drop the firewood and exit as quickly as possible. As time went on, he grew in his understanding of what Christ had modeled, and what was asked of us who seek to follow Him; he saw that firewood alone is not “help which honours.” [[O'Meara, 229](#)]

Trust and friendship are built over time, not all at once or instantly. Sometimes our one bag of groceries is truly all that is needed, but how would it be if we took the time to call and check in a few weeks or months later? We will not only see how they are, we will show who we are: friends.

In 1841, Frédéric wrote about the hundreds of families who had received food from the Society, but also about the boys who received schooling, young men placed in apprenticeships, and “future tears” dried because of the loving friendship of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. [[Letter 290, to Amelie, 1841](#)]

The letter of James, a favorite of Bl. Frédéric's, reminds us of the importance of caring for “[the necessities of the body](#).” These needs are the primary reason our neighbors come to us, but they are not the primary reason we go to them. We are called to see and to serve Christ in the person of the poor; to put our “hand in their wounds,” as Frédéric said. [[Letter 137, to Janmot, 1836](#)]

But Christ asks more of us than merely to recognize Him, he calls us to [follow Him](#) and to walk with Him, not only for one day. To have a friend, you have to be a friend. We serve in the hope that both the poor and Christ will say to us: “I no longer call you servants. I call you friends.” [[John 15:15](#)]

Contemplate

How can I be a better friend to those in need?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope Module VII, Our Vincentian Home Visit](#)

More Ancient, and Therefore More Sacred

Our Rule calls us to be a “voice for the voiceless,” helping the poor and disadvantaged to speak for themselves, but also, when necessary, speaking on their behalf. [\[Rule, Part I, 7.5\]](#) But where do we begin? To whom do we speak? And who are we to presume to speak for anybody?

Blessed Frédéric once pointed out that “the knowledge of social well-being and of reform is to be learned, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret...” [\[Baunard, 279\]](#) It is through the relationships we form on our home visits that we gain an understanding of poverty that cannot be learned by all the academic study in the world. It is this knowledge, and this spirit of friendship with our neighbors in need that gives us our voice.

Like many Vincentians, I think, one of the most eye-opening things I learned when I first began doing home visits was how much poverty there was right in my own neighborhood. In most communities, there is no shortage of people willing to help, but there are many people who are quite convinced that poverty is a problem that exists primarily in far-off places; not in their own city, town, or suburb.

What a service we can do simply to let our own communities know that their neighbors are in need. Imagine the outpouring that might happen if people only knew how many were hungry, how many were being evicted, or how many were sitting in the dark after the power had been shut off.

This knowledge we have gained is not our secret to keep, but our sacred trust to fulfill.

Advocacy by Vincentians is not partisan in any sense. Indeed, Frédéric once described the Society as “a community of faith and works erasing little by little the old divisions of political parties...” [\[Letter 290, to Amelie, 1841\]](#) As members, the [Rule stated in 1835](#), we should “abstain from being inflamed by political leanings which array parties in opposition, and from starting among themselves those irritating questions which divide mankind. Our Society is all charity: politics are wholly foreign to it.”

No community, no government, no political party can even begin to solve problems that they do not understand. Among other groups, dedication to the poor may be fleeting, and may change with times or fashions.

We will always remain dedicated, and we will always be a voice for the voiceless, because we believe, with Blessed Frédéric, that this cause is “more ancient and, therefore, more sacred.” [\[Baunard, 301\]](#)

Contemplate

What do my friends and neighbors know about the needs in their communities?

Recommended Reading

[Voice of the Poor Guide](#)

Our Call to Servant Leadership

When we think of leaders, we are acculturated to envision military commanders, heads of state, celebrity CEOs, and the like; dynamic, charismatic, larger than life. Leaders, we are taught, are “large and in charge.” It is difficult, then, for most of us to believe that we can be that person; that we are called to leadership. But if you are a Vincentian, you are called.

Rather than the province of kings and generals, ours is a special type of leadership, modeled for us by Christ Himself. Most memorably, in the [Gospel of John](#), Christ washed the feet of the disciples, afterwards explaining: “*You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.*”

In a [passage](#) that was a favorite of St. Vincent’s, Christ further explained the role of a leader, saying, “*let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.*”

A Vincentian servant leader, such as a Conference President, is not called to be the boss or the commander. Rather than making all the decisions, Presidents fulfill the decisions of the Conference members.

In 1651, one of Vincent’s confrere superiors wrote to him, complaining of the men in his care, even going so far as to complain that he “preferred to direct animals rather than men.” In reply, Vincent explained that this approach “*is true of those who want everything to give way to them, nothing to oppose them, everything to go their way, people to obey them without comment or delay, and, in a manner of speaking, to be adored.*”

But that, Vincent explained, is not our way. He reminded the missionary that leaders should “*consider themselves the servants of others, who govern in the light of how Our Lord governed.*” [[CCDIV:181-182](#)]

Christ could have come to us as a king, a warrior, or a man of wealth. Instead, as Frédéric pointed out, he “was hidden for thirty years in the workshop of a carpenter.” [[Complete Works, Lecture 24, quoted by Gregory](#)] He “did not come to be served but to serve...” [[Matthew 20:28](#)]

In the Society, the person does not seek the office, the office seeks the person. [[Manual, 35](#)] Servant leaders are called less to *be* something, than to *do* something; we are called not to be “large and in charge,” but instead, to be small, and for all.

Contemplate

Am I called right now to servant leadership? To be an officer, committee chair, or something else?

Recommended Reading

[Characteristics of a Vincentian Servant Leader](#)

The Light of the World

Have you ever noticed that in virtually every picture of St. Vincent de Paul, he is smiling? Just a small, gentle smile with a twinkle in his eye that reassures us, puts us at ease, and makes us smile, too. Wouldn't a permanent smile like that be a great gift for all of us to share?

Vincentians take great pride in loving God "with the strength of our arms, and the sweat of our brows," [\[CCD XI:32\]](#) but we should always remember that ours is a vocation of gentleness! We may indeed work up a sweat at times, and even get our hands dirty, but ours are ultimately works of love, not feats of strength. We are moved by a tireless desire to love not only *affectively*, but *effectively*.

This distinction was made by [St. Francis de Sales](#), who profoundly influenced Vincent. Affective love, Vincent taught, comes from the heart; it helps us to feel God's presence, and fills us with warmth and affection. Love is effective, though, when we provide for the needs of others because of the love of God; when we serve, one might even say, [for love alone](#). [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

Effective love, then, is an act of will; to will, as St. Thomas Aquinas said, the good of another. [\[Summa,II-II, Q27, A2\]](#) That sounds like work! But even as we do the work, the deep, abiding love of God that warms our hearts should shine through us in gentleness and kindness. Deeply inspired by St. Francis de Sales' example of gentleness, Vincent testified for the cause of his beatification, saying that "*his abundant, gentle goodness overflowed on those who enjoyed his conversation because of the example of his devotion.*" [\[CCD XIIIa:91\]](#)

Gentleness, like all the virtues, must be both internal and external. When we are filled with the spirit and love of God, Vincent explained, we can hardly help but smile. In turn, we will offer our hearts with our "*smiling face and cheerful disposition.*" [\[CCD XII:156\]](#)

When we smile, it is sometimes said that we are "beaming," or that our faces "light up." And why shouldn't they? We serve in hope, and our smiles are a visible sign of the hope and love that we bring with us. Perhaps this is part of the light Christ taught us not to [hide under a bushel](#), but to shine before others.

Vincentians love God with the strength of our arms, but loving our neighbor begins with a smile, and we can smile without even breaking a sweat!

Contemplate

Does the love of God within me shine outwardly through my smile?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

At Present We See Indistinctly

Have you ever been in an airport, or a grocery store, and run into an acquaintance that you only know from work, a club, or church, and it took you an extra moment even to recognize them? After all, not only are the surroundings unfamiliar, but your friend may also be dressed in “dad shorts” instead of business casual. Our circumstances affect what we see; there is no way around that. It’s human nature.

As Vincentians, we are called to see the face of Christ in the neighbors we serve. [\[Manual, p.51\]](#) This should be easy – we know His face well! We regularly see Him at church. He is there upon the crucifix at the altar; there, in the Stations of the Cross that line the walls; there in the many beautiful paintings and icons. We also are used to seeing His suffering, but we see it through “hope-tainted eyes,” knowing that his suffering leads to our salvation; knowing He still lives.

So, when we emerge from Mass, when we are no longer in that familiar place, will we easily recognize Him? Or might it take an extra moment?

On our [home visits](#), it’s sometimes easy to forget that we are serving Christ, because like that acquaintance in the grocery store, we are seeing Him outside of the familiar surroundings where we think that we know Him best. As devoted as we are to seeing His face, it can take an extra minute to recognize Him wearing different clothes, and behind a different face than the one we see in church.

St. Vincent often reminded his followers often that Jesus chose to live a life of radical poverty. He was not on earth as a king, but as a carpenter. It may make it easier to recognize Him when we remember that Christ came to us in fully human form and experienced a fully human life. We know that [he became angry](#); we know [he got exasperated](#); we know [he got discouraged](#); we know [he was afraid](#); and we know that [Jesus wept](#).

In [Redemptor Hominis](#), Pope Saint John Paul II explained that Christ incarnate “*fully reveals man to himself.*” He reveals to us the human dimension of Redemption, and it is that which we are called to recognize in the neighbor; looking beyond appearances, beyond surroundings, and beyond emotions to find “*the greatness, dignity, and value that belong to his humanity.*”

It may not have been home visits Christ was talking about when He said to “[knock and the door will be opened...](#)” but maybe remembering those words while standing on the doorstep on our next visit will help to remind us who we are there [to see](#).

Contemplate

In faces of impatience, sadness, anger, or fear, have I sometimes failed to recognize Christ?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#) (read it and use it!)

The State in Which We Were Created

Our five Vincentian virtues come from St. Vincent's five "Characteristic Virtues," with one difference: what Vincent called *mortification*, we call *selflessness*. While the distinction between the two is not trivial, he also talked about the "spirit of mortification," which is a good way for us to understand our call to selflessness. [\[CCD XII:249\]](#)

The word "mortification" comes from the Latin *mortificāre*, meaning "to put to death," which is the same image our Rule uses, calling selflessness "dying to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice." [Rule, Part I, 2.5.1] And isn't this what Christ taught? "[If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.](#)"

Through mortification, we may physically separate ourselves from earthly needs, as with fasting during Lent. But the purpose of mortification is not physical; it is not exterior, but interior, "to mortify our egoism and open our heart to love of God and neighbor." [\[Benedict XVI, Lenten Message\]](#) Yes, we become hungry when we fast, but it is "dying to our ego" that we seek.

Indeed, our Catechism teaches that our call to conversion "does not aim first at outward works, 'sackcloth and ashes,' fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion." [\[Catechism, 1430\]](#) While mortification is a means, you could say, selflessness is its end.

St. Louise de Marillac said that the importance of mortification was "the necessity of keeping our souls constantly in the state in which they were created." [\[Spiritual Writings, 797\]](#) She went on to explain that while we are created in God's image and likeness, we become "disfigured" when we allow our passions to overwhelm us. Those passions may be the food or treats that we give up for Lent, but more importantly they are the self-centered motivations that we sometimes allow to take over. The more we focus on ourselves, the less we are able to truly be friends to others.

Lack of the "spirit of selflessness," Vincent taught, not only separates us from God, but from each other; so much so that "*we can't live - I repeat - we can't live with one another if our interior and exterior senses aren't mortified.*" [\[CCD XII:249\]](#) The first Rule in 1835 echoed this idea, saying that without self-denial, understood as surrendering one's own opinion, "no association is durable. The man who is in love with his own ideas will disdain the opinions of others..." [\[Rule, 1835, Introduction\]](#)

We die to our egos, to our selfishness, and to our will only to be filled with new life, to be filled with God! And when we share ourselves with the neighbor, we may truly share Him, also.

Contemplate

What part of myself do I allow to separate me from others?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Neighbors in Deed

Although we do not mean it to, giving material assistance to people puts them at a disadvantage; they “owe” us something they likely will never repay. The fear of indebtedness often makes asking for help more difficult. Even when we are in very dire straits, we don’t want to impose, we don’t want to be burdens, and we don’t want to be indebted.

Yet on nearly every home visit, we meet a neighbor with a light bill, rent, or other need, and not enough money to pay for it. The math is simple; what else can we do?

“Help honors,” Blessed Frédéric taught, “when it may become mutual.” [\[O’Meara, 229\]](#) He went on to explain that this means offering not only material help, but a kind word, a handshake, some encouragement – all those things that we may one day need, as well.

As our Rule puts it, “Vincentians should never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.14\]](#) Or, as Blessed Rosalie Rendu put it, “They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you can bring them.” [\[Apostle in a Top Hat, 57\]](#)

How many times can we hear “you are the only ones who called me back” before we realize that this personal connection is the whole point?

In other words, a home visit is not a math problem. It is the beginning of a “relationship based on trust and friendship.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) This is why we don’t visit “clients.” There is nothing mutual in a relationship with a client; it does not “honor.”

It is good to use the right words, but using the words is not enough. After all, in the [Parable of the Good Samaritan](#), Christ did not ask us simply to *call each other* neighbors, but to *be* neighbors, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

To have a neighbor, you have to be a neighbor. To have a friend, you have to be a friend. To have a brother or sister, you have to be a brother or sister. Our brothers, sisters, neighbors, and friends don’t owe us a dime. They repay us fully with their handshakes, their prayers, and their friendship.

And for those things, we are all neighbors in need.

Contemplate

How can I become a better friend?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#) – especially 6. *Home Visits in the Vincentian Tradition*

Chopping the Wood

Trust in providence is central to our Vincentian vocation. This means more than simply trusting that “everything will be okay.” It means trusting that if we do His will, the outcome will also be His will, whether we understand it completely or not.

In our Conferences, doing His will means we [gather together in His name](#), we [serve Christ in the person of His poor](#), we [love the neighbor as ourselves](#), we [treat him with mercy](#), and we are generous with our time, our talents, our possessions, and ourselves. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) It may seem frustrating, at times, when it seems that our help...doesn't help. But what is the outcome we seek?

St. Vincent taught that “God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken but the charity that accompanied it.” [\[CCD I:205\]](#) Charity, [the love of God](#), is our purpose. The true outcome we seek is the full flourishing and eternal happiness of all persons, [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) which we know is not in our control!

Just as Christ wept for God's mercy to deliver Him from the agony of the cross but submitted to the [Father's will](#), Frédéric Ozanam wrote down his own lament on his fortieth birthday. Bedridden with the illness that would take his life a few short months later, he poured out his wishes to “grow old alongside my wife, and to complete my daughter's education.” Still, he said, “I am coming if you call me, and I have no right to complain.” [\[Book of the Sick, Prayer from Pisa\]](#)

Trust in providence is most important exactly when it is most difficult. Frédéric expressed during his own suffering, that it might become “a source of merits and blessings,” bringing with it “those inexpressible consolations which go hand in hand with [God's] real presence.” [\[Ibid\]](#)

Ours is a ministry of presence; not only our physical presence, as true friends with those in need, but our presence as a sign from a loving God, who sent us to the neighbors to sit with them, to listen to them, to pray with them, and help in any way that we can. We bring what material assistance we can, but we seek most importantly to bring some part of God's “inexpressible consolation.”

Trust in providence is not passive; it is actively doing God's will – tirelessly, devotedly, and [for love alone](#). To paraphrase an old Frank Clark “Country Parson” saying, “Trust in providence is what makes you feel the warmth of the hearth while you're outside chopping the wood.”

So perhaps, if we are to “*to bring this divine fire, this fire of love*” as St. Vincent calls us to do, [\[CCD XI:264\]](#) we'd best keep chopping the wood.

Contemplate

Do I tire too easily while chopping the wood?

Recommended Reading

[The Book of the Sick](#), by Frédéric Ozanam

Through the Glass

Our Rule calls us to “seek out the poor,” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#) but why should we need to seek them out? Aren't they looking for us?

Vincentians know that it is difficult to ask for help. With gentleness, we often reassure our neighbors in need that we are glad they have called us, and glad that we can help. We also know that material assistance is not the most important thing we can offer, and not the most important thing that anybody needs.

The suffering of poverty is much deeper than lack of food or shelter. Imagine yourself in poverty, walking down the street, on your way to a job that might just cover your bills, but can't possibly cover anything more. A thousand other people are there with you on the sidewalk, none of them knowing what you are going through. Glancing through the glass as you pass a café, you see the smiling faces drinking \$8.00 coffee that you know you can't afford, and you begin to feel that maybe the coffee just isn't for you. But it isn't just the \$8.00 price tag – it is the growing feeling that the community that surrounds you, filled with comforts and leisure that seem so out of reach, is a community that simply does not include you.

We are created to live in community – all of us, and each of us. When material poverty leads us to believe we are not only deprived but forgotten, that is true poverty; [poverty in spirit](#).

We seek out the poor not because they are difficult to find. They are right there, on the other side of the glass, seeing us with our coffee, and believing we don't see them. We seek them not because they need us, but because we need them; because we have been [promised by our Savior](#) that whatsoever we do to the least among us He will receive as if done for Himself.

With a cup of coffee, a warm embrace, and a prayer of hope, we welcome the poor into community; not seeking any reward for ourselves, but because we can see them, and they “are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see...” [\[Letter 137, to Janmot, 1836\]](#)

We should need no special urging to seek out the poor. From inside our warm café, we need only to see through the glass, and [then face to face](#), the one we have been seeking all along.

Contemplate

Are my eyes open to His presence?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#)

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You

“Come Holy Spirit, live within our lives,” we pray to open every Conference meeting, asking to be strengthened by the first [fruit of the Holy Spirit](#): love. But let us also pray for the second fruit: joy!

Love sometimes means doing things we do not want to do, putting the needs of another before our own. For Vincentians, this often begins with an interruption – we’d like to finish our meal, enjoy the weekend, or just relax and watch television, but the poor are calling. We don’t begrudge the poor their needs, of course, but we can sometimes adopt an unfortunate mindset; a grim sense of duty, a commitment to do the work, no matter how difficult or even unpleasant it may be at times.

After all, St. Vincent calls us to love God “with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow.” It sounds like hard work, this whole love business! We know that it’s worth it, but who smiles while plowing the field?

We do!

Reflecting on the grace of God above both the splendors and hardships of earth, St. Louise once asked, “Why are our souls not in a continuous state of joy and happiness?” [\[Sp. Wr., p. 774\]](#) As Robert Barron, Bishop of Los Angeles, sometimes explains, God’s love exists only in the form of a gift; once we receive it, we give it away, only for it to be replenished. So, for every act of charity, for every gift of love, it is we who are receiving. Why would we *not* be filled with joy?

[The Lord loves a cheerful giver](#). Blessed Frédéric advised his brother Charles to “bring a joyful dedication to the works” of the Society. [\[Letter 314 to Charles Ozanam, 1841\]](#) We serve not out of duty, not for reward, but for love alone, so that we may “draw nearer to Christ, serving Him in the poor and one another.” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

This is the truth that ultimately should bring us such joy that we can hardly contain it: we are in the presence of the living Christ!

[It is in giving that we receive](#), and in giving to the One whom we adore that we are filled with joy.

Contemplate

How can I let go of cares and smile?

Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to Be Simple](#)

We Do Not Have Two Lives

We understand our Vincentian vocation to be a lay vocation, not religious or clerical. Yet the laity are called to much more than charitable works and attending Mass on Sundays. Indeed, in [Apostolicam Actuositatum](#), Pope Saint Paul VI said that as “*sharers in the role of Christ as priest, prophet, and king, the laity have their work cut out for them...*” That sounds like a very tall order, but to learn how we may fulfill this calling, we need look no farther than the example of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam.

Frédéric lived his faith in every part of his life. He felt God’s presence in friendship, writing to his mother that it “makes one love more than ever a religion that makes all its children equal and gathers together the great and the small who... inspire you with so much love for humanity.” [\[Letter 55, to his mother, 1833\]](#) He saw and served Christ in his friends.

Advising his friend on marriage, he explained that “in your wife you will first love God, whose admirable and precious work she is, and then humanity, that race of Adam whose pure and lovable daughter she is.” [\[Letter 107, to Curnier, 1835\]](#) In his faithful devotion as husband and father, Frédéric saw and served Christ in his wife and daughter.

For most of his adult life, Frédéric was a college professor, where he believed he and his Catholic colleagues should strive “to fulfill our vocation as professors in a Christian manner and to serve God in serving wholesome teaching...” [\[Letter 516 to Foisset, 1843\]](#) He never shied from defending the truth, yet in doing so, he never offended anybody. Frédéric saw and served Christ in his profession.

As a proud Frenchman, Frédéric served in the National Guard during the 1848 revolution and ran for a seat in the legislature that same year. Through his newspaper, *L’Ère Nouvelle*, he offered commentary on social issues of his time, always seeking to mediate social tensions, and to remind his fellow citizens of their obligations to one another. Indeed, he once went so far as to say that this was “the possible usefulness of our Society of St. Vincent de Paul.” [\[Letter 137 to Janmot, 1837\]](#) Frédéric saw and served Christ in his fellow citizens.

Frédéric anticipated Pope Saint John Paul II’s teaching that for the laity there “cannot be two parallel lives,” one spiritual and one secular. [\[Christifidelis Laici, 59\]](#) He even explained it using similar words:

“*We do not have two lives, one to seek the truth, the other to practice it,*” he wrote. [\[Letter 1143, to Hommais, 1852\]](#) “*It requires so little to be an excellent Christian, all you need is an act of the will.*”

More importantly, he lived his faith in all the parts of his life: in work, in family, in friendship, and in charity. He is for us, and for all Catholics, a role model of the [Apostolate of the Laity](#).

Contemplate

In what parts of my life can I better see and serve Christ??

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#) (especially 4. *How Do We Define Ourselves?*)

According to How We Use It

Formation is not a single thing we do; it is a lifelong process of becoming. In all that we read, in all that we contemplate, in all those we meet, and in all that we do, we are being formed. We can allow ourselves to be formed passively - consuming the pop culture, feeding our appetites - or we can form ourselves deliberately, with a specific end in mind.

In other words, as Blessed Frédéric once wrote, “*Life is despicable if we consider it according to how we use it, but not if we recognize how we could use it, if we consider it as the most perfect work of the Creator...*” [[Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836](#)]

Aristotle proposed that we become by doing: if you want to become a builder, you build. By extension, he argued, if you wish to become virtuous, you do virtuous things; you practice the virtues. [[Nichomachean Ethics](#)] St. Vincent echoed this idea when he taught that “*the will has to act, and not just the understanding; for all our reasons are fruitless if we don’t go on to [actions.]*” [[CCD XI:175](#)]

And so, from our earliest days, following the guidance of our families and churches, we learn through our actions how to be better. Our actions form us, and they can form us for better or worse, and this is the core of what we call the Human Dimension of Formation. As Vincentians, we choose our actions more deliberately, more specifically. We choose to serve our neighbors, [exactly as Christ asks us to do](#). If it is really that simple, why does it take a lifetime?

It would be wonderfully easy if our Christian formation could be completed with a single home visit, wouldn’t it? It also would be wonderfully easy if a single trip to the gym would make us fit and slender for life! Simple, it turns out, does not always mean easy. After all, even a clearly marked path may be narrow, or steep.

Each time we serve the neighbor and do so for love alone, we seek to do His will. Our actions bring us closer to God, a little bit at a time. Our actions form us, and transform us, but not all at once.

The Lord tells us, in the [Book of Leviticus](#), to be holy, for He is holy. Christ tells us, in the [Gospel of Matthew](#), to be perfect, just as the Father is perfect. The word “holy” comes from the Old English *hāl*, meaning “whole” or “complete.” The word “perfect” comes from the Latin *perficere*, meaning “to complete.”

Christ is the light and the life; He is perfect; He is complete. The rest of us continue in our formation, our lifelong process of becoming.

Contemplate

How was I formed today? What drew me closer to God?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Formation, A Foundation Document](#)

Damascus, Emmaus, and the Vincentian Pathway

One of the central tenets of our Vincentian spirituality is our call to see the face of Christ in those we serve. It seems so simple, and yet at times we lose our focus and lose sight of Him during our home visits. It is easy to allow ourselves to think ahead to the “solution” before we even learn the problem. We let tomorrow blind us to the present.

But we are called to be present – to be both *here* and *now* for the neighbors we serve. Listening is not thinking ahead to our own answer, but listening as if to Christ Himself, looking in His eyes and hearing His voice.

On the very day of Christ’s resurrection, two of His followers walked along the road to Emmaus, discussing all that had happened, including the account of the empty tomb, when “[Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.](#)”

Christ was right there with them, in the flesh, and they could not recognize His face. They looked but couldn’t see. They walked and listened but did not recognize Him until He broke the bread with them at supper that evening! In speaking about Christ behind them, they were blinded to Christ before them.

This was not the only time the apostles lost sight of Christ’s face. As Bl. Frédéric pointed out, “*The fault of many Christians is to hope little.... They are apostles in the boat during the storm: they forget that the Savior is in the midst of them.*” [[Ramson, Put Your Hands into Hers, 14](#)] Like the apostles in the boat, we also sometimes allow our “troubles of the day” to overwhelm our senses, and to blind us to the true hope – the hope in which we are called to serve.

Saul of Tarsus, feared oppressor of the early Christians, was converted with great drama on the road to Damascus. Struck blind by a flash of great light, he did not see Christ’s face that day, but heard His voice. Only after three days was his sight restored, as he became Paul, Christ’s apostle, who would later teach, “[at present, we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face...](#)”

Our moments of conversion tend to be less dramatic than Paul’s, but we, too, are on a journey. Ours may not be the road to Damascus, or even to Emmaus, but Christ awaits us along our Vincentian pathway. We will see Him when we act with patience, when we follow St Vincent’s admonition to “[not tread on the heels of Providence...](#)”

He may not always seem obvious, and we may see Him only indistinctly, but we are called to see and to serve Him, even if we have to squint a little, and even if we have to slow down.

Contemplate

Have I looked past Him, or through Him in my hurry to be someplace else?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#) - especially 3. *Jesus Christ, the Center*

Inspirations of the Heart

The Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a beautiful spiritual document. Despite what its title may lead us to believe, it is not a set of detailed instructions, prescribing how we must act in all situations. Rather, it is a description of *how* we act, especially serving the neighbor, “*in the Vincentian spirit.*” [[Rule, Part II, Statute 8](#)] So, rather than ask, “what is the Rule telling me to do?” we should ask instead “does the Rule describe how I serve?”

The Apostle Paul explained that the new covenant is written on our hearts, not carved in stone. It is a “[covenant not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life.](#)” Paul was not, of course, rejecting Scripture, but explaining we can only fulfill God’s will by opening our hearts to the Spirit, and allowing God’s work to be done through us.

Blessed Frédéric made a similar point when his friend Léonce Curnier, who was starting a new Conference at Nimes, asked for advice on how the Paris Conferences operated.

In our works of charity, Frédéric wrote, “*it is necessary to give yourself up to the inspirations of the heart rather than the calculations of the mind. Providence gives its own counsel through the circumstances around you, and the ideas it bestows on you. I believe you would do well to follow them freely and not tie yourselves down with rules and formulas.*” [[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834](#)]

Rules and formulas are familiar to us, though! It can be comforting to know we can only do so much; our hands are tied; or [we can't help, because the bell rang.](#)

But the more that we chisel in stone, the less we are guided by the spirit; the more we decide in advance, the less we hear the cry of the poor; the more we focus on calculations, the less we act [for love alone.](#) But how can I trust my own poor judgment?

St. Vincent taught that it is pleasing to God for us to “*get in the habit of judging events and persons, always and in all circumstances, for the good. If an action has a hundred facets to it...always look at its best side. In the name of God, Monsieur, let us act in that way even though intelligence and human prudence tell us the contrary.*” [[CCD II:638](#)]

No rule can tell us what to do on every home visit. But our Rule describes Vincentians as people who see the suffering Christ in the poor and are guided by the Holy Spirit. Vincentians serve in hope. [[Rule, Part I, 1.2, 1.7-1.8](#)]

[Therefore, since we have such hope, we act very boldly.](#)

Contemplate

Have I allowed prudence to make me too timid in serving the poor?

Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#) (especially *Part I*)

Dove-like and Holy, Perfecting the Other Virtues

“Simplicity,” St. Vincent once said, “is the virtue I love most” [\[CCD I:265\]](#) and our Rule lists it first among our five Essential Virtues. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) So what does the virtue of simplicity call upon us to do?

Simplicity, Vincent taught, is a virtue primarily concerned with God. In simplicity, we present ourselves, and our words, with absolutely no intent to mislead or evade; we are always straightforward. We do this, he said, for the love of God and for His greater glory, because God is Himself “pure act and a very simple being” and is “pleased with simple souls.” [\[CCD XII:246\]](#)

In serving the neighbor, it is especially important to act and to speak with simplicity. The world our neighbors must navigate has no shortage of false claims and promises, empty flattery and performative insults. As we seek to build relationships based on trust and friendship, then, we have to be very careful not to appear “wily, clever, [or] crafty.” [\[ibid\]](#)

There is something of a childlike nature in the virtue of simplicity. Indeed, St. Louise explained that it was Christ’s “simplicity and charity which led Him to come to us as a child so as to be more accessible to His creatures.” [\[Spiritual Writings, 718\]](#) Similarly, describing the childlike simplicity of one of his missionaries, Vincent marveled that his “simplicity made him lovable and loved by everyone, but especially by God, who no doubt usually communicated with him in a special way, since *cum simplicibus est sermocinatio ejus*. (His discussion is with the simple.)” [\[CCD II:377\]](#)

Like all virtues, simplicity must be both external and internal. We seek, in our words and in our deeds, in our hearts and in our souls, the “simplicity of being” that Louise described, that allows God’s grace to act in us without obstacles. [\[Spiritual Writings, 818\]](#)

So, just as acting with simplicity means we do not deceive, and we do not exaggerate, it also means we must not be motivated by anything but the pure charity of our acts; we must do good only to do good, and because God wills it - never to simply make ourselves look good, or to gain favor.

Both Vincent and Louise used the image of a dove to describe the honesty, purity, and sincerity of the virtue of simplicity – the same symbol we use to represent the Holy Spirit. So perhaps when we open our Conference Meetings, asking the Holy Spirit to live within our lives, we might consider it a prayer for this virtue, that our simplicity may be like that of the missionary whom Vincent praised, “dove-like and holy, a simplicity that perfected his other virtues.” [\[CCD II:377\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I ever hide behind “it’s complicated” to explain away my failure to speak or to act directly?

Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to be Simple](#)

There is Always Much Love Where There is Much Faith

Given that our Rule [Part I, 2.2] reminds us that our “ideal is to help relieve suffering [for love alone](#),” it seems fair to say that the heart of our Vincentian vocation lies in ... our hearts. How can our human hearts be filled with enough love? The answer perhaps begins with the Greatest Commandment, which calls us first to “[love the Lord, your God, with all your heart](#)...”

Our hearts lead us very powerfully, filled with our hopes and our dreams, our joys and our fears. Left to their own devices, our hearts can become distracted, our worries can keep us from serving God fully, even when we truly believe we are serving His will. It is because of this that we must first “[Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence do not rely](#).”

As important as *acts* of virtue are, they are not complete unless they are both interior and exterior. In other words, if we seek to act “for the love of God,” [\[Catechism, 1822\]](#) we must seek first the love of God within us. This means letting go of the [troubles of the day](#), giving them all to God, in order to make room for His love.

In his letters to St. Louise, who often struggled with anxieties, St. Vincent urged her to find peace in her heart, reminding her that “He will reign in you if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle, and you will honor in a sovereign way the God of peace and love.” [\[CCD I:111\]](#)

In this he echoed St. Augustine, who taught that “[our hearts are restless, until they rest in You](#).”

We are taught to love, to trust, and to rest our hearts in the Lord! He assures us that “[when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me](#)...” What better way could there be to prepare to serve our neighbor than by giving our hearts first to God; by allowing His peace and His love to replace our desires and anxieties?

If we love God first and fully, if we love Him with all our hearts, they will be filled to overflowing with His love, and we will become His instruments to serve our neighbors in need.

“That is because,” Bl. Frédéric wrote, “the human heart easily allows itself to be captured by love and there is always much love where there is much faith.” [\[Letter 145, to Velay, 1837\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I sometimes let my own anxieties push God to the side?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

Do Not Grow Old with the World

Both the Society and the church celebrate our long traditions and ancient texts; both the Gospels and the Rule govern our actions; we seek models in the Saints and Blesseds of our church and of our Vincentian family. But should this mean we must be set in all of our ways?

The question arises from time to time, as new servant leaders or new members suggest special works that our Councils and Conferences have never tried before. Certainly, new approaches or programs must remain within the limits set by our Rule, but often, we greet new ideas with resistance, for no other reason than that they are new.

Frédéric, who saw the Society grow from seven members to hundreds of Conferences around the world, celebrated the many innovations, especially those that served the particular needs of their localities. “I then favor innovations,” he wrote, explaining that “in human affairs, success is possible only by continual development, and that not to go forward is to fall back.” [[Letter 80, to Pessonneaux, 1834](#)]

Home visits will always remain the core work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. These visits are a spiritual practice before all else; serving Christ in the person of His poor, and offering them Christ’s love and hope. The home visit, along with the Conference meeting, is the rock on which we are built; our foundation, but not our limit. After all, “the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions.” [[Rule, Part I, 1.6](#)]

Even in the earliest days of the Society, special works such as apprenticeship programs and schools were established to help people move out of poverty, to address needs that were observed in the course of the friendships developed on home visits. The Society collaborated with other organizations in order to accomplish even more.

Among the many reasons to welcome new members is that they are often a source of new ideas, their “more ardent zeal, new ideas, and original insights prevent routine from setting in and the primitive fervor dying.” Conferences, Frédéric observed, have seasons, too, for “there is change in all human things.” [[Letter 141 to Ballofet, 1837](#)] His hope was that the Society, whose very foundation was unforeseen, would continue to prosper, and to be guided by providence.

The Society, like the church, is changing and unchanged, ever young; we are built on a rock, not set in stone. We don’t change for the sake of change alone, but to better fulfill God’s will, to love our neighbor, and to grow in holiness through our works.

“The religion of your forefathers,” Blessed Frédéric reminds us, “does not grow old with the world. Ever renewing itself, it keeps pace with progress, and it alone can lead to perfection.” [[Baunard, 20](#)]

Contemplate

Am I open to discerning God’s will, even when it means change from the familiar?

Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#)

The Holy Joy of Your Heart

In our dedication and zeal, we sometimes feel as if we cannot rest as long as there are neighbors in need of our help. As laudable as this sentiment may seem, in practice it serves neither ourselves or the neighbor if we do not pause for both mental and physical rest.

Writing to a missionary who had labored without rest for many weeks, St. Vincent urged him to slow down: “*Have you somewhat moderated your excessive fervor? I beg you, in the name of Our Lord, to do so.*” [CCD II:27] Of another priest, whom Vincent believed may have literally worked himself to death, he remarked, “*In short, his zeal made him do more than he was able.*” [CCD II:375]

Of course, St. Vincent was not afraid of hard work! After all, it was he who said we must “*love God...with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.*” [CCD XI:32] Yet we also must be mindful that “[The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.](#)” The harder we work ourselves without respite, the less able we will be to continue the work. And so, advising St. Louise not to feel guilty about her own exhaustion, Vincent once went so far as to tell her, “*I am ordering you, moreover, to procure for yourself the holy joy of your heart by all the relaxation you can possibly take...*” [CCD I:145]

There is always more work to be done, but there is only one of you. We prepare to follow God’s will by [resting our hearts in His peace and love](#), filling ourselves to overflowing so that we may share that love with the neighbor. We must also reserve and recover our physical strength through rest, knowing that “*There is no act of charity that ... permits us to do more than we reasonably can.*” [CCD II:68]

In a sense, pushing ourselves to do more than we reasonably can could be seen as an act of vanity; believing ourselves so indispensable that our efforts cannot be spared. But trusting in providence doesn’t mean only that the money or materials resources we need will be provided, it is trusting that God has called enough people to do His work, as well.

When you think about it, when we insist on carrying too much of the load ourselves, we can even rob others of the opportunity to serve more fully!

Our Rule reminds us that work in our Conferences comes “only after fulfilling the family and professional duties.” [Rule, Part I, 2.6] Certainly among those personal duties is care for our own well-being, including rest and relaxation.

Caring for ourselves is not just for ourselves. As Vincent once reminded Louise, “*Increase your strength; you need it, or, in any case, the public does.*” [CCD I:392]

Contemplate

How can I better share God’s love by sharing God’s work?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

The Measure by Which We Measure

In serving the neighbor, we are reminded by the Rule [\[Part I, 1.9\]](#) that we do not judge them, but seek instead to understand them as we would a brother or sister. This echoes Christ's admonition that "[as you judge, so will you be judged](#)," which he offers in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, shortly before explaining that [what we ask will be given to us](#). These two teachings together may be a good way to think about our home visits.

What does it mean to understand somebody as we would a brother or sister? Surely, our brothers and sisters are capable of the same sort of mistakes as anybody else; sometimes they even bring their problems on themselves. We don't judge them because we already know our brothers and sisters deeply – we are born of the same parents; we grew up with them; we love them. Whatever sort of people they are, we know that we are the same sort of people.

When our brother asks us for bread, [we won't hand him a stone](#). We won't give our sister a snake if she asks for a fish. So, when a neighbor places his needs before us, how should we receive them? We listen to them and respect their wishes, "for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, [we] see the suffering Christ." [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#)

"But I've heard this story a hundred times before!" we are sometimes tempted to think. Bishop Robert Barron often explains that in prayer we are not going to [change God's mind, or tell Him anything He doesn't already know](#). Indeed, [God knows what we need before we ask him](#)! Still, we place our needs before God in prayer. God wants us to do this; He tells us to do this.

In a similar way, our neighbors place their needs before us; they humble themselves in seeking our mercy and compassion. Unlike God, we really don't know what they need before they ask. We only know that our neighbor, our brother, our sister, our friend is suffering, and that we have asked him to come to us.

It takes both love and humility to see not only our brothers and sisters, but Christ Himself in the neighbor. Love reminds us to [humbly regard others as more important than ourselves](#). Humility reminds us "that all that God gives us is for others ..." [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) And Christ reminds us, [over](#) and [over](#) and [over](#) again, that as we give, [so shall we receive](#).

We've heard it a hundred times.

Contemplate

How can I better open my heart to the cry of the poor?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module IV – Our Vincentian Mission](#)

Our Participation in the Divine Light

It is perhaps the central irony of our Vincentian vocation that while our “ideal is to help relieve suffering for love alone, without thinking of any reward or advantage for [ourselves]” it is also true that we do this for ourselves, as a necessary step towards our growth in holiness. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) So how do we reconcile what seems to be both self-serving and selfless at the same time?

Saint Louise de Marillac offers some insights on charity and the mystery of the incarnation that may help us to understand how, in serving the neighbor, we serve our own souls.

God, Louise explains, chose to come into this world in a form that was not at all “consistent with His grandeur.” He didn’t even come as the greatest of men, but as a poor man. Everything he did as man, she writes, was beneath Him.

“He came as humbly as can be imagined,” she tells us, *“so that we might be more free to approach Him.”* [\[Sp. Writings, 700\]](#)

God’s incarnation in Christ is an invitation! He wants to know us and wants us to know Him. The God of Moses was so great in His glory that [nobody could see Him and live](#). The poor carpenter of Nazareth is our brother, our neighbor, our friend...and still our God.

As Louise often reflected, God created our souls only so that we may be joined with Him. Making it possible for us to know Him was a supreme act of humility. In serving the poor, then, we must exhibit this virtue of humility, commensurate with Christ’s own humility. They are, for us the sacred images of God, and “how shall we not love Him in [their] persons?” [\[Letter137, to Janmot, 1837\]](#)

How can we do anything then, but to offer our time, our talents, our possessions, and ourselves? [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) How can we help but serve? Indeed, Louise teaches, *“the person who does not love does not know God, for God is Charity. The cause of love is esteem for the good in the thing loved.”* [\[Sp. Writing, 710\]](#)

In serving with humility and in selflessness, in serving [for love alone](#), we not only do as God asked us to do, we do as Christ Himself did.

“This practice of charity is so powerful that it gives us the knowledge of God... the greater our charity the greater our participation in this divine light which will inflame us with the fire of Holy Love for all eternity.” [\[Sp. Writing, 711\]](#)

Contemplate

How can I better seek to imitate Christ in my service?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Louise de Marillac](#)

Trust to God for the Rest

If we truly trust in providence, truly abandon ourselves to the will of God, does that mean we are called to simply let things happen? On the contrary, Frédéric taught, our “detachment from the world must not be turned into discouragement about our duties... We must think as if we were to quit the earth tomorrow, and we must work as if we were never to leave it.” [Baunard, 423]

God expresses His will to us through His word in the Scriptures. For Vincentians, there are several specific teachings that stand out, not least of which is the [Parable of the Good Samaritan](#). In the story, Christ recounts the mercy shown by a passing Samaritan to the victim of a robbery and assault. Importantly, he concludes by telling us to “go and do likewise.”

He does not say “wait for my signal,” or “stay tuned for further instructions,” but “*go and do likewise.*”

Go. Act. Do.

Similarly, he tells us that our [corporal works of mercy](#) - feeding, clothing, and comforting those in need - will be judged as if done to Himself.

Feed. Clothe. Be merciful.

In neither instance does Christ demand that we achieve a particular earthly end. As St. Vincent said, “God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken but the charity that accompanied it.” [CCD I:205] And charity, the Catechism says, is to love our neighbor as ourselves not for the sake of paying the bill, or preparing the meal, but for the love of God. [CCC, 1822]

Although [Veronica wiped the face of Jesus](#), He nevertheless was nailed to the cross, in accordance with God’s will. But Veronica did all the good she could do, with mercy and with love.

Trust in providence, then, begins with doing God’s will as best we can discern it, and then trusting that the outcome also will be His will. In other words, we should [not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself](#). “The will of God,” Blessed Frédéric writes, “is fulfilled from day to day.” [Baunard, 81]

If we confined ourselves to doing only those things whose outcomes we can assure, how limited our charity would be! We would become quickly overwhelmed into inaction, realizing that the poor [will always be with us](#). But Christ, too, [is with us always](#)! We are called to hear Him in the cry of the poor; in them, to see His suffering.

Let us, then, as Frédéric taught, “do all the good we can, and trust to God for the rest.” [Baunard, 81]

Contemplate

Have I ever hesitated to help, because “they’ll only need more help tomorrow?”

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope II: Our Vincentian Spirituality](#)

The Soul of Our Souls

Bl. Frédéric's wife Amelie once said that she had never seen him wake up or fall asleep without making the sign of the cross and praying. In fact, "he never did anything serious without praying." [\[Manual, p.65\]](#) Following his example, Vincentians are people of prayer.

St. Vincent taught that prayer is a "lifting of the mind to God ... to go to seek God in himself. It's a conversation of the soul with God, a mutual communication in which God tells the soul interiorly what He wants it to know and do." [\[CCD IX:329\]](#) But prayer is not a monolog. As much as we may feel we have to tell Him, or ask Him, prayer is also a time to listen.

Vincent explained that there are two forms of prayer: vocal and mental. Vincentians certainly pray aloud and together often: during the opening and closing prayers at meetings; prayers with the neighbor on home visits; and of course, while attending Mass together.

"In every Conference throughout the world and in their personal lives, Vincentians raise their prayers to God, united with the prayer of Christ, on behalf of one another and their masters the poor, whose suffering they wish to share." [\[Rule, Part I, 2.3\]](#)

But we are also called to pray in the second form, mental prayer; silent meditation or contemplation. This mental prayer, St. Vincent explained, can take place in two ways. First, by listening to His word in scripture and seeking to understand its meaning and inspiration for us. Second, through contemplation, in which "the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing but receive what He gives... God himself inspires it with everything it may be seeking, and much more." [\[CCD IX:330\]](#)

We are beggars before God, the Catechism teaches, but also reminds us that "prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours." [\[CCC:2559-2560\]](#) God thirsts for us! He seeks us first and offers us in return the living water.

Through our "life of prayer and reflection," then, we not only seek God, but He seeks us. He touches our hearts and feeds our souls, and just as our souls give life to our bodies, our prayers give life to our souls.

That is why St. Vincent said that "prayer is the soul of our souls." [\[CCD IX:327\]](#)

Contemplate

Be silent, look towards heaven, open your heart, and listen.

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

True Charity is Always Poor

Conferences, following the example of St. Vincent de Paul, are expected to keep detailed and accurate records of contributions, donors, and assistance provided to neighbors in need, and to report them periodically to their Councils. There can be a temptation, looking back on the numbers, to puff up our chests about all the good that we've done, but these reports are only a testament to accountability; they are not a measure of the success, much less the value, of our works.

Writing about the loss of the earliest records of the first Conference in 1835, Bl. Frédéric mused that while those records might have been a source of pride, "God, who wishes that the left hand not know what the right hand has given, permitted us to lose title to what might serve only to bestow on us ridiculous vanity." [[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835](#)]

"Charity," he continued, "must never look behind it, but always before, because the number of its past benefits is always very small, and the present and future misery it solaces is infinite."

In his Circular Letter of 1837, Secretary-General [François Lallier](#) (one of the Society's founders, and a close friend of Frédéric's) sounded a similar note, describing those that "throw at random a few handfuls of money that the poor despise as mere crumbs and are of no avail." [[VHJ, Vol 36, Iss 1](#)]

Works of charity are works of love; we measure their value first in our own transformation; our growing closer to Christ. Through this, we also hope to draw others closer to Christ; "to stir up irresistible questions" by our witness, as Pope St. Paul VI said. "Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them?" [[Evangelii nuntiandi, 21](#)]

Christ Himself recognized that [the smallest of material contributions](#) can be the very largest when they are the most that we can give. And as Our Rule teaches, "our tender interest, our very manner, will give to our alms a value which they do not possess in themselves." [[Rule, 1835 Intro](#)]

Our Conference Annual Reports, of course, are vital documents. They represent our commitment to [accountability](#) - to each other, to our donors, to tax laws, and most importantly to God Himself, who calls us to this ministry. But the totals at the bottom of the page, whether they are large or small, represent only our circumstance, not the degree of our success.

As Lallier explained, we "offer very little, because we are little and because true charity is always poor like those whom it relieves. But we have the charity of the heart that can multiply our mite a hundredfold, and the poor who feel such things welcome us with honour." [[VHJ, Vol 36, Iss 1](#)]

Contemplate

Do I ever feel ashamed when I can't "do more?" Am I tempted to boast about how much we've "spent?"

Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#) – especially Part I

A Conference in Heaven

The Society is united by our three Essential Elements of spirituality, service, and friendship. [[Rule, Part III, Statute 1](#)] Frédéric once remarked that perhaps friendship was “the reason that in Paris we wished to found our little Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and it is also for this reason perhaps that heaven has seen fit to bless it.” [[142, to Curnier, 1837](#)] Like the [Communion of Saints](#), bound together in baptism and in Christ, our Vincentian friendship, bound by charity and friendship, remains unbroken by death.

The very first Rule explained that the Society’s unity “will be cited as a model of Christian friendship, of a friendship stronger than death, for we will often remember in our prayers to God the brothers who have been taken from us.” [[Introduction, Rule, 1835](#)] We continue to honor this tradition, praying at every Conference meeting for our departed Vincentian Brothers and Sisters.

Our primary purpose is to “journey together towards holiness... perfect union with Christ...” [[Rule, Part 1, 2.2](#)] so we have good reason to hope that our departed Vincentians continue to pray for us, as well!

Indeed, while trying to establish a new Conference in Siena shortly before his own death, Frédéric wrote to the pastor, telling him of the many Conferences that had been established around the world, adding also that “we have certainly one in Heaven, for more than a thousand of our Brothers have, during the twenty years of our existence, gone to the better life.” [[Baunard, 394](#)]

We should never forget that one of the [corporal works of mercy](#), alongside feeding the hungry and giving alms to the poor, is to bury the dead. When our fellow Vincentians depart this earth, we should always offer comfort to their families, while also celebrating their entrance into “the better life.” Our [Vincentian Celebrations](#) book includes several ceremonies to help plan these occasions.

We serve in hope! Not merely the hope for material comforts, but the eternal hope that we may be united with Christ and with each other in heaven. And so, we pray with and for each other, including, always, [the departed](#). As confident as Blessed Frédéric’s assurance of a Conference in heaven may have been, he asked his fellow Vincentians, in a will written on his 40th birthday, not to cease in their prayers for his own salvation, saying:

“Do not allow yourselves to be stopped by those who will say to you, he is in Heaven. Pray always for him who loves you dearly, for him who has greatly sinned. If I am assured of these prayers, I quit this earth with less fear. I hope firmly that we are not being separated, and that I may remain with you until you will come to me.” [[Baunard, 386-7](#)]

May we honor our founder with our own unceasing prayers for all our Vincentian brothers and sisters!

Contemplate

Do I pray regularly for departed Vincentians, and ask their prayers for me?

Recommended Reading

[Book of the Sick](#)

The Primitive Spirit

"Ozanam is no longer with us to remind us of our primitive spirit," remarked President-General Adolphe Baudon after Frédéric's death in 1853. [\[Baunard, 407\]](#) Indeed, from the Society's earliest days, Frédéric urged fellow members not to encumber themselves with restrictive or bureaucratic structures, nor to praise ourselves for our accomplishments, which might make us, he explained, "more eager to talk than to act... to forget the humble simplicity which has presided over our coming together from the beginning..." [\[310, to Amélie, 1841\]](#)

He urged his friends to imitate the life of our Patron Saint, "as he himself imitated the model of Jesus Christ." [\[175, to Lallier, 1838\]](#) It is in imitating Christ that we capture the primitive spirit, the spirit that animated the early church. As Frédéric explained, "the faith, the charity of the first centuries ... is not too much for our century." [\[90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

Vincentians seek this primitive spirit by living our Vincentian Virtues, and especially the first three: simplicity, humility, and gentleness. These three, St. Vincent explained, come directly from Gospel teachings, and from the life of Christ. "The first," he further explained, "concerns God; the second, ourselves; and the third, our neighbor." [\[CCD XII:249\]](#)

Vincent often said that simplicity was his favorite virtue. In simplicity, we are dedicated to the truth, because God Himself is truth. In serving the truth, then, we serve both God and the neighbor. In serving the neighbor, Vincent taught, "how careful we must be not to appear wily, clever, crafty, and, above all, never to say a word that has a double meaning!" [\[CCD XII:246\]](#) Simplicity is faith, unencumbered.

Our humility reminds us that "all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace." [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) We act as God's instruments in serving the neighbor, unconcerned with receiving any credit or reward, because all the glory goes to God. Humility is hope, unencumbered.

Finally, we act with gentleness; with a tender love for all of our neighbors, as well as our fellow Vincentians. Gentleness, in our hearts and in our acts, means being kind, being patient, taking no offense when others may return our patience with impatience, our courtesy with rudeness. Gentleness is love, unencumbered.

This simple, humble, gentleness embodies the primitive spirit of the church and of our Vincentian vocation, as it was in the beginning, unencumbered.

"For God is especially pleased," Frédéric wrote, "to bless what is little and imperceptible: the tree in its seedling, man in his cradle, good works in the shyness of their beginnings." [\[310, to Amélie, 1841\]](#)

Contemplate

How can I unencumber the primitive spirit in my service and in my Conference?

Recommended Reading

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

To Give and Receive with Joy

There is an old saying about gift-giving, that “it is the thought that counts.” In a similar way, the assistance, or gifts, that we offer to the neighbor must be more than “appeals from below,” but instead gifts of true love, of putting the needs of another before our own.

As so often is the case, Blessed Frédéric offers us a [wonderful example](#). On New Year’s Day of 1852, Frédéric was unable to relax and enjoy the day with his family, unable even to eat the candies his beloved daughter Marie offered him. He couldn’t stop thinking of the young family that had sold their chest of drawers, the young mother’s treasured family heirloom, so that they could pay other bills.

When he told his wife Amélie of his desire to bring them the chest as a gift, she reminded him that the husband, suffering some health issues, might not be able to work in coming weeks, and it would be more practical to give them the money that would have purchased the chest in smaller amount in coming weeks.

Although he first agreed that this was indeed practical, he remained unconsoled, explaining to Amélie that even a fraction of what they’d spent on their own amusement and gifts could have brought true joy to that poor family. She agreed, and urged him to go.

Frédéric left his home, purchased the family’s chest, and along with a porter he’d brought with him, delivered it to them. When he returned home, all sadness had left him; his face was glowing with his own joy.

When we make our home visits, we often help the neighbor to prioritize needs, so that we can care for the most urgent of them first. Like Frédéric, sometimes we need to remind ourselves that the most urgent needs are not always material; that when we are refreshed by joy and by love, our burdens become lighter.

We are called to form relationships based on trust and friendship with the neighbors we serve; not coldly assess the books, but to seek their good, even before our own. In doing so, we will receive in joy exactly what we give.

It is truly [better to give than to receive](#), and better still to be a [cheerful giver](#). [With joy we will drink the waters of salvation!](#)

Contemplate

How can I bring not just *assistance*, but joy to the neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[The Gospel of Luke](#)

Behold, I Make all Things New

Vincentians serve in hope! Not merely the hope of a paid light bill, but the hope of Christ's promise, the hope of new life, and the hope of a church that "is ever renewing itself..." [[Ozanam in Baunard, 20](#)]

The neighbors we serve often lack hope – any kind of hope. Burdened with material needs, with worries for their children and for their future, it is difficult to offer eternal hope when, as Mahatma Gandhi once explained, "[To them God can only appear as bread and butter.](#)"

In our empathy for the neighbor, it can be all too easy for us at times to feel overwhelmed, burned out; to share the neighbor's despair rather than the Savior's hope. Our neighbor's continuing struggles weigh us down, and we allow ourselves to forget the great power of love over even the greatest forms of deprivation.

Whatever resources our Conference has, however great or small, we offer freely and generously. And when we offer food to the neighbor who can only see God as bread, remember that Christ offers Himself to us in bread. All of the material assistance we give is foremost a sign of Christ's love. In that love, we welcome the neighbor into communion with us, and with the God who sent us.

It is [for love alone](#) that we continue, through home visits, through special works, and through systemic change programs, to walk with people out of poverty. It is for love alone that we can say, "this relationship does not end when we pay the bill this week. You matter."

There is never a need to be frustrated, or to wonder why [the land will never lack for needy persons](#). As St. Vincent taught, it is through our humble devotion to God and our charity toward the neighbor that they might see the beauty and holiness of our faith. [[CCD VIII:208](#)] The needs we seek to alleviate may be of this earth, but hope we bring is not.

We gather on our home visits in His name, and He, [as He promised](#), is there with us. He is there in the suffering of the neighbor, and He is there also in the prayer and in the hope that we offer, wiping away all tears, saying "[Behold, I make all things new.](#)"

Contemplate

How can I better share hope?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

The Opposite of Selfless is Self

The Rule informs us that the Vincentian virtue of selflessness is “dying to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice; members share their time, their possessions, their talents and themselves in a spirit of generosity.” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) To share generously is surely virtuous behavior, but as St. Vincent always emphasized, it is the internalization of virtue that is most important.

True selflessness is more than simply sharing. As St. Louise explained, in order for our service to be pleasing to God, it must proceed from a good heart, with no thought to our own pleasure in giving, or to our own reputations. Without this self-denial, “our actions are empty noise. In them there is only self-love; and such self-love banishes the pure love of God...” [\[Sp.Writings, 536\]](#)

Bl. Frédéric echoed this notion of self-love driving out God’s love. He explained that there are two kinds of pride: to be overly satisfied with ourselves, and to be consumed with our own shortcomings, even to the point that we fail to act because we believe ourselves inadequate. “Thus,” he wrote, “love grows weak and self-love hides beneath this trumped-up austerity of our regrets.” [\[160 to Lallier, 1837\]](#)

Recall that our Rule says that selflessness begins with “dying to our ego.” *Ego* is the Latin word for *I*. We die to ourselves. As the Apostle declared: “[I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.](#)”

The opposite of *selfless*, then, is not *selfish*, but *self!*

Our success, our money, our comfort, however great or small, are God’s gifts to us. As [the story of the rich young man](#) illustrates, it can be devastatingly difficult to give them away; so difficult, in fact, that even Christ’s disciples wondered how anybody could make it to heaven.

But beyond our possessions, our very selves are also God’s gift, and also are meant to be given away. Selflessness, as St. Louise expressed it, is to give “Him my full consent to operate in me by His power whatever He willed to see accomplished.” [\[Sp. Writing, 270\]](#)

Virtue begins with doing but ends with being. By emptying ourselves of self, we empty ourselves also of the doubts that can keep us from doing God’s will. We cannot will ourselves into heaven. We can only seek to make God’s will our own, and for [God all things are possible](#).

Contemplate

What am I hanging onto? What am I keeping to myself?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Thy Will Be Done

We often use the word “discernment” simply as a synonym for decision-making, with an added sense of prayerful consideration. While this captures part of the meaning, discernment could also be considered the opposite of decision-making. When we discern, we seek not our best option between two choices, but true insight into God’s will in the situation. But how can we do that?

A friend of mine once asked a fellow Vincentian who was explaining the constraints of his Conference guidelines, “Is that how you will explain it to St. Peter?”

Discernment, he was suggesting, isn’t so much the actual decision, but the process by which we arrive at it. In this, he echoed St. Ignatius of Loyola, who argued in the *Spiritual Exercises* that to make the best choice, we should always [“consider what procedure and norm of action I would wish to have followed in making the present choice if I were at the moment of death.”](#)

In other words, while the decision itself is important, how we go about making it is even more important. Recall St. Vincent’s teaching that “God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken but the charity that accompanied it.” [CCD I:205] How, then, can I share the love of God (charity)? How can I do God’s will, not mine? In this way, all choices become a single choice; a choice by which we are called to live our whole lives.

Father Hugh O’Donnell’s definition of [Vincentian Discernment](#) cuts to the heart of it: “Discernment is a prayer-filled process through which each of us can discover the difference between what is my will and what is God’s Will.”

At the heart of it, discernment is meant to lead us to the discovery of God’s plan – for us, for our lives, and for our Vincentian organizations. To help us, we often follow [the process](#) that Fr. O’Donnell explained, which begins with what St. Vincent called “unrestricted readiness.”

In unrestricted readiness, we set aside our anxieties about whether we are right, how we will convince others, or even about how things will turn out. Instead, we enter into discernment with both our minds and our hearts wide open to accepting God’s will.

Simple decision-making is about closing off all choices but one. Discernment is about opening ourselves to the one true choice.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes let my own biases or pride blind me to God’s will for me and for my Conference?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Discernment](#) and [Apostolic Reflection](#) by Rev. Hugh O’Donnell, CM

The Best Way to Help

“In appearing again before you after the great events that have taken place,” Frédéric said in a classroom lecture in 1848, “I am happy to say that, looking back over six years of lectures, I do not recollect one word which I shall have to unsay today.” [\[Baunard, 261\]](#)

For a man of so many words, both written and spoken, to be able to say this is testament to our founder’s embodiment of the virtue of [simplicity](#) - frankness, integrity, genuineness. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) Always saying in the first instance exactly what we mean relieves us of the need to “walk back” statements we have made.

In serving the neighbor, we should never avoid frankness; frankness builds trust. At the same time, we are called to act always with [gentleness](#), and to judge the need, not the person. Vincentians “do not judge those they serve.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#)

Imagine a neighbor who just can’t seem to hold on to a job for very long, and constantly calls for more assistance. Would it be truly honest, truly simple, to say, “we can’t help you anymore”? After all, if the same neighbor were to call next year, having fallen a little short despite keeping a new job for a year, wouldn’t you need to “unsay” that statement in order to help again?

For that neighbor who can’t hold on to a job, we rarely know the reason, although we might suspect. But as St. Vincent reminds us, “Suspicious are often deceiving.” [\[CCD IV:85\]](#) Rather than walk away, or make an accusation based on our suspicions, why not ask, “Why do you think you are having trouble keeping jobs, and how can I help?”

It is rarely true that we really *can’t* help, but it is often true that we are not sure *how* best to help. Rather than avoid this truth, perhaps simplicity and friendship call us to explain that we are struggling to find the best way to help. By being honest, we keep the door – and our hearts – open; we show our trust, and hope for trust in return.

The best way to help is not always financial, so we “should never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.1\]](#) And there is no better way to offer our love than with simplicity.

Contemplate

How can I be more *simple* in talking to my neighbors in need?

Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to be Simple](#)

Small Things Compose Great Things

Today's Society of St. Vincent de Paul, with nearly a million members worldwide, may fairly be said to have fulfilled Blessed Frédéric's vision of a "network of charity and social justice encircling the world." [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) Let's pause to consider, though, that it is neither our combined strength, nor less our loud voices that impact the world, but our small and humble acts, [performed by two or three in His name](#), which quietly bear witness to the power of God's love.

From the earliest days, Frédéric recognized the importance of small Conferences, observing that rapid growth had caused the first Conference "lose in intensity what [it gained] in expansion." He said the meetings were "nearly always concerned with business" and seemed long. [\[90. to Curnier, 1835\]](#) Of course, he did not propose to reduce the number of members, but to increase the number of Conferences; Conferences small enough to serve personally, and to grow together in holiness, as friends.

Perhaps he was unconsciously aware of the now well-observed psychological phenomenon of "[diffused responsibility](#)," in which the more people are present, the less responsibility each one feels to offer help, even when help is desperately needed. Vincentians are called to form relationships based on trust and friendship; to see in our neighbors the face of Christ; to serve them, person to person, [for love alone](#).

Our Conferences are first and foremost communities of faith, not administrative subdivisions of a Council that commands them. On the contrary, it is the Council that exists to support the Conference, so that each Conference can do its work, as Frédéric put it, "by your own strength, under the inspirations of your heart, under the influence of local circumstances..." [\[90. to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

For its part, the Conference supports its members, who "meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action." [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3\]](#) Members, in turn, see and serve the poor, each of them individually. It is the home visitors, not the Society writ large, who are assumed to have special insight into the best way to help.

There is, as the saying goes, strength in numbers, and we can rightly be proud of the great and providential presence of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul around the world. But as Thomas Paine once said, "*Tis not in numbers, but in unity, that our great strength lies.*" [\[Common Sense\]](#)

Indeed, our unity is expressed not in numbers, but in faith, in friendship, and in service. As our Rule says, "In every Conference throughout the world and in their personal lives, Vincentians raise their prayers to God, united with the prayer of Christ, on behalf of one another and their masters the poor, whose suffering they wish to share." [\[Rule, Part I, 2.3\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I always accept my personal responsibility to serve, no matter how many other people are around?

Recommended Reading

[Ozanam's Letter 90](#)

For Love Alone

In describing the Vincentian Vocation, our Rule says that our “ideal is to help relieve suffering for love alone.” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) Many, if not most Vincentians are first drawn to the Society by the desire to *do* something; to love God, as St Vincent put it, “with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.” [\[CCD XI:32\]](#)

Relieving suffering, we think, is an end in itself; to serve those in need without discrimination or judgment; to give of our time, our possessions, our talents, and ourselves. So, what does it mean to do all this for love alone?

St. Paul teaches that of the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – the greatest of these is love. So that, even as the [Letter of James](#) asks us not to “forget the necessities of the body” because “faith without works is dead,” Paul declares that even “[if I have faith enough to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own ... but do not have love, I gain nothing.](#)”

The apostle here strips away nearly everything but love.

It’s important to understand that in the Greek, the scriptures use several different words for love. The one Paul uses here is *agape* - the love of God. This love is not an emotion; it’s an act of will. Of putting the needs of another before our own. Agape sometimes also is translated as “charity.”

Bl. Frederic once contrasted philanthropy (simply giving away our possessions) with charity saying: “Philanthropy is a vain woman for whom good actions are a piece of jewelry and who loves to look at herself in the mirror. Charity is a tender mother who keeps her eyes fixed on the infant she carries at her breast, who no longer thinks of herself, and who forgets her beauty for her love.” [\[90. to Curnier, 1835\]](#) What purer image of charity could there be than the self-giving love of a mother?

Our [catechism](#) defines charity as “the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his sake alone, and our neighbor as ourselves, for the love of God.”

As it happens, Jesus once said something quite similar. We call it the greatest commandment, so it should be no surprise that Vincentians are called to live that commandment.

If we seek to relieve physical suffering alone, or, [as Frederic put it](#), we “appeal to men from below, taking heed of their material wants only,” we will often be disappointed; we will often come up short. But the love of God is in endless supply, and as St. Paul assures us: [love never fails](#).

Contemplate

How can I grow closer to the ideal of serving for love alone?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

Forever a Beautiful Tree

We can sometimes feel frustrated, even guilty, when our works don't seem to achieve the results we'd anticipated, forgetting for a moment that we are called to serve our neighbors [for love alone](#). We can take solace and learn from the example of St. Louise de Marillac, who also was often burdened by feelings of shame and anguish at coming up short in her works.

Louise had many great gifts – artistic and intellectual, she was a natural leader and great organizer whose imagination in works of charity seemed unbounded. Louise once served as president of the Confraternity of Charity at her own parish, Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. She had a deep religious devotion, formed in her earliest years. Yet still, she sometimes fell into despair when she did not achieve all she had set out to do.

In was in one such instance that Vincent reminded her not to "think that all is lost because of the little rebellions you experience interiorly. It has just rained very hard and is thundering dreadfully. Is the weather less beautiful for that?" [\[CCD I:62\]](#) In other words, we serve God first, before and above our goals. And if we seek to make His will our own, we should never despair. After all, God [causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust](#).

It was her "[lumière](#)" of 1623 that led Louise to Vincent, and that reassured her of her calling to religious life. She wrote down that divine vision and kept it in her pocket throughout her life. No doubt it reminded her from time to time of the peace that had washed over her that Pentecost Sunday and reassured her that God "had a plan...from all eternity, for [her] soul." [\[Sp. Wri. 691\]](#)

When we are open to it, each of us has such moments of conversion in our lives; a time when God speaks, or winks, or gives us a glimpse of His plan for us. Going back to re-read them can ease the frustrations we sometimes feel along our path, giving us peace, and reassuring us of the great hope in which we serve.

Our formation is a lifelong process, and along the path we will sometimes falter. Through wealth and poverty; as wife, mother, widow, and servant, Louise devoted her entire self to the will of God, growing in peace at every step. In turn, she became a wise teacher, and model of holiness, to many others.

"Oh! what a tree you have appeared to be today in God's sight," declared Vincent, "since you have borne such a fruit! May you be forever a beautiful tree of life bringing forth fruits of love, and I, in that same love, your servant." [\[CCD I:46\]](#)

Contemplate

What is my *lumière*? Am I a gentle voice, reassuring others to trust in providence?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Louise de Marillac](#)

Better Things to Do

“I’m too busy” is a thing we sometimes say when we really mean that this activity or that person is just not important enough to us. As Vincentians, we have come to learn that this can never be the answer when we are [interrupted](#) by a call from the neighbor.

It’s a lesson many learn as parents. We might enjoy nothing more than to watch our favorite team play on TV, but if it conflicts with the ballet recital or the Little League game, well...we can check the score later.

It’s never really a matter of time; it’s a matter of priorities.

Like parenthood, our calling as Vincentians is “a vocation for every moment of our lives.” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.7\]](#) Our moments, and how we spend them, are driven by love, not by the schedules we’d planned. That’s easy to remember when it is your child tugging at your sleeve, but it sometimes slips our minds when it is a neighbor in need interrupting dinner.

This was the exact point St. Vincent made when replying to one of the missionaries who had apologized for sharing his troubles. “Brother,” Vincent replied, “have no fear that you’re bothering me. You should realize that someone appointed by God to serve others is no more put out by the demands made on him than a father would be in regard to his children.” [\[CCD XII:392\]](#)

It is not that we view the neighbor as a child, but rather that we always remember we were called first by God, and that He calls us from time to time in the person of the neighbor in need. We don’t have to make time for our neighbors, because being Christ to us, the time is already theirs.

None of this is to say that we are not allowed to get tired! St. Vincent constantly reminded his followers not to allow their zeal to make them do more than they were able. [\[CCD II:375\]](#) More importantly, as he once told St. Louise, we must rest to regain our strength, because even if we don’t need it, the neighbor in need does. [\[CCD I:392\]](#)

In our memories, the joy of the ballet recital or the Little League game entirely wash away whatever else we thought was important at the time. We can clearly see that there were no better things to do; that we received a greater gift than we ever could have given.

In a similar way, we [thank God for the blessings we receive from those whom we visit](#). In the fullness of time, in union with Christ and with each other, we will rejoice in the memory of every interruption.

Contemplate

Where is the neighbor in my list of daily priorities?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#) (especially *Vincent, Father of the Poor*)

Those Irritating Questions

The introduction to the original Rule in 1835 reminded members, following the model of St. Vincent, to “banish political discussions forever from our meetings” avoiding “those irritating questions which divide mankind” so that we can remain united in the ministry of charity. The Society, it declared, “is all charity; politics are wholly foreign to it.” [\[Rule, Intro, 20-22\]](#)

It is a reassuring reminder that however we may feel politics divides people today, it has always been so, but the example of our forebears in the Vincentian family shows us the way to be uniters, not only within our Conferences, but in our society at large.

In Frédéric and Rosalie’s time, “divisiveness” in politics meant a great deal more than memes, podcasts, and insults. Often, politics meant taking up arms, manning the barricades, and overthrowing the government. In the midst of revolution, it was perhaps easier for them to see how picking a side could only shut them off from caring for people in great need.

Bl. Rosalie made this clear, declaring, on threat of arrest for aiding the wrong side of the revolution, “I am a Daughter of Charity. I do not have a flag. I go to the aid of the unfortunate wherever I encounter them ... I promise you, if ever you, yourself, are being pursued and you ask me for help, it would not be refused you.” [\[Sr. Rosalie, Sullivan, 168\]](#)

To be sure, both our church and our Rule encourage us as individuals to be involved in politics, and to “bring Christian values to political matters.” Indeed, Frédéric himself served in the National Guard and once ran for a seat in the legislature. But the Society itself does not identify with any political party, nor discriminate among those in need based on political opinions. [\[Rule, Part I, 7.8 & 2.4\]](#)

As a “voice for the voiceless,” we advocate not for a party, but for justice; as Vincentians, we seek “to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.” [\[Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836\]](#)

Our commitment to an apolitical approach to works of charity requires both courage and humility; the acceptance that no matter how strong our personal feelings may be, we are called first to [render unto God what belongs to God](#).

Contemplate

Are there “irritating questions” I need to let go in my Vincentian relationships and works?

Recommended Reading

[The Frédéric Ozanam Story](#)

The State of the Angels

There is an old saying, perhaps originating with the Greek philosopher [Heraclitus](#), that we should “expect the unexpected.” Practicing what St. Vincent termed *holy indifference*, we instead are reminded to *accept* the unexpected.

This word Vincent used, indifference, carries with it a connotation of apathy, or lack of interest. Certainly, our patron was not calling us to apathy! Rather, he taught that we must be willing, at all times, to accept what God gives to us, without anticipating, or running ahead of His providence.

It is difficult for our human nature to concede a lack of control. It is perhaps especially difficult for Vincentians, who seek to love God “with the strength of our arms.” We want to plan things out, to set measurable outcomes that we can use to gauge our success. These are wonderful instincts, and perfectly fitting in the context of things like business or fitness goals, whose nature is thoroughly worldly.

But God’s work is not a business plan. It is through holy indifference that we let go of the goals that are driven by our own desires so that we may accept and serve only what God wills. As always, Christ gives us the model to follow, praying to be spared His crucifixion, saying “[not my will but yours be done.](#)”

This is not to say that we should make no plans! Indeed, it was Vincent who pointed out that the people of Châtillon were “practicing great charity, but it is not well organized.” [\[CCD XII:383\]](#) We organize and plan to do good as God wills, but the outcome is simply not up to us. If it were, then the cloth Veronica offered to Christ would surely have spared Him the cross.

“Planning is good,” St. Vincent said, “when it is submissive to God, but it goes to excess when we are eager to avoid whatever we fear; when we trust more in our precautions than in God’s Providence.”

Our planning goes to excess, he went on, “when we hope to accomplish much while anticipating His orders with our disorder which causes us to adhere to human prudence rather than the Word of God.” [\[Gettemeier, L. DC, VHJ, Vol. 19\]](#)

How many times have we seen in retrospect that what we thought was bad led to a greater good? We are indifferent when God’s will becomes our own, when we accept both good and bad, when we serve for love alone. Although “nature grumbles against it”, [\[CCD I:212\]](#) indifference is “the state of the angels” who are “always ready to do the Will of God, either in heaven or on earth”. [\[CCD X:564\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I seek my own goals, or God’s?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#) (especially *Putting Out into the Deep*)

Save Space for the Neighbor

The spiritual dimension of our [Vincentian formation](#) is based on the understanding that we are created to live in community, to grow in faith together. This is why we always visit the neighbor in pairs, and this is why we share reflections on our service and our faith at our Conference meetings. We are a community of faith, growing closer to one another as we grow closer to Christ.

Just as the example of the Holy Trinity shows us that the divine life is a shared life, we see that our pathway to that life also is shared. “Following the example of the Blessed Trinity,” St Louise said, “we must have but one heart and act with one mind as do the three divine Persons.” [\[Sp. Writings, 771\]](#)

In our Conferences, we fill our meeting rooms, however few or many we may be. We build true Christian friendships, where “the strongest tie, the principle of a true friendship, is charity” as Blessed Frédéric wrote. [\[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

Charity, the Catechism reminds us, is not merely to give things, but to “love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.” [\[Catechism, 1822\]](#) Charity is not our practice, but our gift; a love “which multiplies itself, which is present in many places at once, and whose intensity is increased in the measure that it gains in extension.” [\[Letter 107, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

Our community of faith, then, is not meant to be a gated community! Just as we welcome new members to share in our works, our prayer, and our friendship, so our Rule reminds us to “establish relationships based on trust and friendship” with the neighbor. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) It is vital to offer our material assistance, [our works](#), but ultimately we seek to serve [for love alone](#). [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

We Catholics have a habit, when Mass is sparsely attended, of spreading out to all four corners, from entrance to altar, from aisle to aisle, with ten feet and two pews between us. You could call it “Catholic distancing”, or you could see it another way: we fill the church as best we can, but always save space for more to join us, not in the back, but in our midst.

Contemplate

How can I better “save space” and welcome the neighbor into a community of faith?

Recommended Reading

[Face of Holiness](#)

From the Fullness of Our Hearts

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a rash of people across the country who swore they'd seen the late Elvis Presley filling his gas tank or eating in diners. Some perhaps really imagined they'd seen him, while others just wanted to sell their story to the tabloids.

By contrast, Vincentians are called not to *imagine* Christ, but to see Him, and to serve Him exactly as [He asked us to do](#). "There's no need," St. Vincent taught, "to represent Him to yourselves by certain mental images: it suffices for you to believe, since faith teaches you this." [\[CCD X:473\]](#)

Or, as St. Augustine taught, "faith means believing what you don't yet see, and the reward of this faith is to see what you believe." [\[Sermon 43\]](#) The reward of our faith can be seen on every home visit. If we go to the poor ten times a day, ten times a day we will find God there! [\[CCD IX:199\]](#)

If we believe what we profess, if we truly "see Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ" [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5\]](#), we will describe our neighbor with words that honor our encounter with the true embodiment of Christ.

One way to check whether our words truly express this belief, is to replace the "Christ" in "Jesus Christ" with our word. For example, "Jesus Brother", "Jesus Neighbor", or "Jesus Friend" not only make sense, but are comforting to say. All of these are words Christ Himself used.

By contrast, "Jesus Client", "Jesus NIN", or "Jesus FIN" are quite unsettling to hear! After all, the Greatest Commandment is not to "love our client as ourselves." Jesus did not tell the disciples He no longer called them servants, but FINs. He did not ask the young lawyer, "[Who was the NIN?](#)"

Indeed, that question would have made no sense, given that the answer was not "the one in need", but "the one who showed mercy." To have a neighbor, you have to be a neighbor. To have a friend, you have to be a friend. To have a brother or sister, you have to be a brother or sister. Our relationship with the neighbor is mutual, respecting and promoting their dignity, and serving Christ in their persons.

Elvis has left the building, but [Christ is with us always, to the end of the age](#). We are "serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor," St. Vincent said, "And that is as true as that we are here." [\[CCD IX:199\]](#)

This is what we believe in our hearts, and [from the fullness of our hearts, our mouths speak](#).

Contemplate

Could the words I use to describe the neighbor also be used to describe Christ?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#)

Proof of Friendship

All of us have had many friends in our lives: childhood friends, work friends, teammates, Army buddies, fishing buddies, maybe you even have a “BFF”. Still, when we hear the word “friend” one or maybe a few come to mind first.

Often, we become much closer to people when we have a shared experience. From the examples above, the friends you sweated with on the practice field become much closer friends. Talking, or writing, to each other draws us closer. We share little pieces of ourselves – we give to each other.

So why do some friends stand out? Is it the friend who really bailed you out of jam? The one who stood by you when nobody else did?

Christ, after all, tells us that there is [no greater love than to lay down one's life for your friends](#) – the very gift he gave to us! “Can we have a better friend than God!” said St. Vincent, and consequently, “Must we not love all that He loves and, for love of Him, consider our neighbor as our friend!” [\[CCD XI:39\]](#)

Friends help us, friends give to us, but (short of giving their lives) what are the greatest gifts they can give? We might remember that friend who got out of bed in the middle of a rainy night to come drive us home when we got stranded, but have you stopped to consider that the reason he did so was not that you were stranded. After all, how would he have known?

The reason your friend helped you is that you asked. The reason you asked, is that you knew only a friend would help. Bl. Rosalie once responded to a request for a favor by saying “I cannot tell you how you please me in giving me the opportunity to do something for your interests. Always act this way with me, without any hesitation. It is the proof of friendship that I hope for.” [\[Sullivan, 237\]](#)

The greatest favor we offer our friends is to ask for their help. In his will, written on his 40th birthday, Blessed Frédéric asked of the Society for the greatest of help: their prayers. “If I am assured of these prayers, I quit this earth with less fear. I hope firmly that we are not being separated, and that I may remain with you until you will come to me.” [\[Baunard, 386\]](#)

“The entire Society,” the Rule tells us, “is a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3\]](#) And this community extends to the neighbors we serve; the ones who offer us proof of friendship: they ask for our help.

Contemplate

How can I be a better friend?

Recommended Reading

[Book of Prayers by Frédéric Ozanam](#)



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