

VINCENTIAN CONTEMPLATIONS

Volume III





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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The Robbers' Victim

In the [Parable of the Good Samaritan](#), Christ tells of a man who stopped to care for a victim of a robbery who had been left naked and dying by the side of the road. Others had passed by, averting their eyes. Who, Christ asks us, was neighbor to the robbers' victim? The one who showed mercy.

This parable is a Vincentian favorite as we seek to “go and do likewise”, to form mutual relationships “based on trust and friendship.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) But if we are the Samaritans, the neighbors, who are the robbers' victims?

The Samaritan had no helpline; he was, as far as we know, minding his own business on his journey. There was nobody else around but the man lying in the ditch, and he could have kept walking as others had. Unconscious, the victim did not cry out for help. Called only by his own conscience and his own mercy, he stopped and gave his time, his possessions, and himself. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#)

As Vincentians, though, are we not called to do even more than the Samaritan? Our Rule, after all, says that we are “to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten...” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#) Are “the forgotten” the robbers' victims? How do we find them?

Bl. Frédéric believed that the victims of his time were the people who had been robbed of “the treasure of faith and love” and left so badly wounded that even the priests who stopped to help were turned away by the victims who could no longer recognize them. Frederic believed that we “weak Samaritans” might be able to soothe and comfort them, to welcome them into community, and to reassure them of “the hope of a better world”. [\[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

Who are the robbers' victims in our world? Who do we pass by, from whom do we shift our gaze, at whom do we look without touching? [\[Fratelli tutti, 76\]](#) It is easy to answer the phone, or to send a check – to solve a math problem. And while indeed we should never neglect to care for [the necessities of the body](#), anybody can do those things.

It is only on our home visits, face to face, person to person, that we can truly discover those left on the side of the road, forgotten. It is by setting aside our own plans, and needs, and desires, that we reassure them that they are important. Through our loving presence we show them that God has not abandoned them.

Our visit is proof that even on the side of the road, beaten down, with the world passing by, God sees them. He cares for them, He loves them, and He awaits them.

Contemplate

Am I truly giving myself to the neighbor in need?

Recommended Reading

[A Heart on Fire](#)

The Call to Imitation

Imitation, it is said, is the sincerest form of flattery – a distinction that must be made, because flattery is by its nature insincere. We flatter in order to gain something for ourselves by playing upon another's vanity. The things we say when flattering might or might not be true, but that isn't really the point.

By imitation, though, our praise is expressed with a concrete action; we show through imitation that it is the very habits or actions of another that will lead us to the thing we seek to gain. Think, for example, of children learning to play a sport well by trying to imitate the professional athletes they admire.

For Vincentians, what better way could we find to follow Christ's call to [be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect](#), than to imitate Christ? This, after all, was the very basis of the Society's founding – to go to the poor, just as Christ Himself had done; to show God's compassion and love through our actions. In Aristotelian terms, we "become builders by building". [[Nicomachean Ethics, Book II:1](#)]

Christ, then, is not an object of flattery, but is instead our ultimate role model. He is the God who shared our humanity so that He could "fully reveal man to himself." [[Redemptor Hominis, 8](#)] Yet our humility can cause us to shy away from imitating Christ, seeking instead role models closer to our personal experience. In a similar way, that child athlete, however ambitious, will usually try first to imitate an older friend before swinging for the big leagues. For us, our "older friends" include especially [the saints and blessed of the Vincentian Family](#).

In 1838, one of the first Conferences had been studying [The Imitation of Christ](#), but then began reading *The Life of St. Vincent de Paul*. As Frédéric explained it, our patron "is a model one must strive to imitate, as he himself imitated the model of Jesus Christ." [[Letter 175, to Lallier, 1838](#)] In our day, we also have the holy life of Blessed Frédéric to imitate. Perhaps, as a lay Catholic, he is even closer to us.

The Little Leaguer believes that if he can swing the bat like Ken Griffey, Jr., then he might become a great player on his own. For Vincentians, imitation has a deeper goal, an interior goal. We hope that someday it will be no longer we who love, but Christ who loves through us. [[Rule, Part I, 2.1](#)]

We seek, then, not simply to behave like Christ, but "to empty ourselves of self so that God alone may be manifest". [[CCD XII, 247](#)]

Our imitation, it turns out, is not flattery at all. Flattery will get us nowhere. Imitation of Christ will lead us home.

Contemplate

In what way can I better imitate the life of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam?

Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#)

Christ in the Cellar

Born and baptized in 1786, it was under the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution that Bl. Rosalie Rendu's earliest faith life was born and fed. Little Jeanne-Marie, called Marie by her family, learned from her parents a simple and generous manner. From the youngest age, following their example, she was known to be especially generous and kind to those in poverty, and to the sick.

Only seven years old in 1793, she became suspicious of a new gardener employed by her parents when she noted how they treated him with reverence. Following "Pierre", she observed him saying Mass in the cellar one night, and later threatened to tell everybody who he really was.

Rosalie's parents had hoped to protect their young daughters from the knowledge of the very real dangers of their times. Priests and bishops who refused to take the "Civil Oath of the Clergy" were sentenced to execution. Many of them fled France, and on their way through Confort, a farming village in the foothills of the Alps, the Rendu family sheltered them.

This was a real and serious risk to take, for the death sentence extended beyond the clergy to anybody who might shelter them. Rosalie's mother, forced to explain that "Pierre" was really the Bishop of Annecy, also had to explain to her young daughter why this must be kept secret.

It was in this world of great danger, and with the example of her mother's fearlessness in practicing her faith, that Rosalie prepared for and received her First Holy Communion.

The sacrament was administered in the cellar by the family's pastor, who was himself under a sentence of death. As her friend and biographer, Armand de Melun, would later write, "*There were before the altar a priest, who was preparing himself for martyrdom, and a virgin who promised God whom she was receiving for the first time, to love him all her life in the person of the lowly and the poor.*" [Sullivan, 23]

As Vincentians, our journey towards holiness includes a special "devotion to the Eucharist" [Rule, Part I, 2.2] which we share together, especially on our feast days. [Rule, Part III, St. 9] Perhaps when we partake of Holy Communion, we might call to mind Bl. Rosalie Rendu.

Bl. Rosalie's example of holiness and courage may have become known during her long service as a Daughter of Charity, but it began when little Jeanne-Marie first accepted the Body and Blood of Christ in a candle-lit cellar in a war-torn land.

Contemplate

How can I partake more fully, and make the Eucharist a central part of my Vincentian vocation?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#) – especially Rosalie Rendu

Our Wordless Witness

Our Vincentian virtue of zeal is more than simply enthusiasm or evangelical fervor. It is, as St. Vincent de Paul said, “*a pure desire to become pleasing to God and helpful to our neighbor*”. [\[CCD XII:250\]](#) Zeal, then, requires first our own interior conversion, and then our concrete action.

As the first Rule explained, we must always serve the needs of the poor without regard to whether they are Christian. Even if they are “impious” we should always to speak to them in a way that makes them comfortable, for it is “*by charitable gifts that we prepare the way for spiritual benefits*.” [\[Rule, 1835, Intro\]](#)

Similarly, St. Vincent once advised his missionaries “*show no apparent difference in your treatment of Catholics and Huguenots, so that the latter may know you love them in God*.” [\[CCD VIII:209\]](#) It should be noted that the Huguenots were a Calvinist sect that was fanatically opposed to the Catholic Church, going so far as to kill priests and to destroy churches and relics. Yet Vincent’s advice was to seek their conversion by being “*more reserved in their presence, more humble and devout toward God, and more charitable toward your neighbor so that they may see the beauty and holiness of our religion and be moved to return to it*.” [\[Ibid\]](#)

We evangelize through our works, “*through our witness to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love*.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.2\]](#) As Pope St. Paul VI explained, the Gospel must above all be proclaimed by the witness of our own devotion and action:

“*Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one*.” [\[Evangelii Nuntiandi, 21\]](#)

Zeal, of course, is a necessary part of the evangelical nature of our charitable works. After all, the challenge our founders answered in 1833 was to “show the good of the church in the world”. Distressed by the attacks on the church, Frédéric proposed bearing witness through action, as a group of friends “*who would work as well as talk, and who would thus, by showing the vitality of their faith, affirm its truth*.” [\[Baunard, 65\]](#)

As we seek to grow in holiness, we seek also to draw others to Christ, by [demonstrating our faith through our works](#).

Contemplate

If you were accused of being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#), Part I

The Best Way to Give Help

A central principle of Catholic social teaching, necessary for respect of human dignity and a properly ordered social life, is subsidiarity. [\[CSDC, 185-186\]](#) Naturally, the organization, governance, and traditions of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul reflect this important principle, too. [\[Rule, Part I, 3.9\]](#) How does subsidiarity guide the practice of our Vincentian works of charity?

Councils, the Rule explains, “*exist to serve all the Conferences they coordinate.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.6\]](#) In turn, the work of directly serving the neighbor, remains with the people closest to those served: the Conferences. Yet it is not the entire Conference, or only the officers, that go on home visits, it is the Members, in pairs, on home visit teams.

Placing responsibility for the home visit with the National Council obviously would not be better for the neighbor, not only because that Council is remote, but because, as the Catechism explains, certain organizations “*correspond more directly to the nature of man*”. [\[CCC, 1882\]](#) Personally connecting with our neighbors, forming “relationships based on trust and friendship”, makes us more responsive to their needs, and better able to serve them. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#)

For the Conference, subsidiarity in service of the neighbor is expressed not only by the organization of home visit teams, but by our assumption that the Members who made the home visit have “*special insight into the best way to give help.*” [\[Manual, 24\]](#) We don’t seek to replace that insight with arbitrary, pre-set guidelines. In other words, subsidiarity calls us to give ourselves up to “*the inspirations of the heart rather than the calculations of the mind...not [tying ourselves] down with rules and formulas.*” [\[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

The Catechism explains that subsidiarity means “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it...” [\[Catechism, 1883\]](#) In respect of this, we often illustrate the Society’s hierarchy by flipping it over, with the International Council General on the bottom, with other Councils, then Conferences, then members above, and the neighbor at the very top of our “org chart.”

The neighbor then, the [least among us](#), is the “lowest order” of the Society’s organization, yet also is for us Christ himself. The principle of subsidiarity is our constant reminder that [the last shall be first](#).

Contemplate

How does humility help me to respect subsidiarity – and vice versa?

Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#), especially *Bl. Giuseppe Toniolo*, pp 90-91

Where Charity is Practiced Cheerfully

Commenting on Conference meetings, President-General Jules Gossin wrote that “In France, what even the best men fear most is boredom; and, in that respect, the men of every country are more or less French.” He went on, in his Circular Letter of November 1, 1847, to say that “Boredom is to a Conference what smoke is to a beehive.”

Much of the responsibility for avoiding boring meetings rests on the Conference President and other leaders. Indeed, the Manual stresses that “meetings should not be lengthy” and goes on to suggest ways in which leaders can keep the meetings short, but meaningful. While a tight agenda is important, though, the Manual also explains that “the Conference meets less to conduct business than to celebrate and deepen its unity for essentially spiritual reasons.” [\[Manual, Ch. 2\]](#)

Indeed, this drift towards pure business meetings became a problem in the very first Conference, of which Bl. Frédéric wrote “the session is nearly always concerned with business, it seems long.” [\[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#) As a result, he said, they were losing their enthusiasm, not growing in friendship, and many were becoming discouraged.

In almost all cases, the meetings, the works, and the Conference itself can be rejuvenated with a renewed focus on keeping the Spirit at the center of our meetings, bringing to them once again what our Rule describes as “a spirit of fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.4\]](#)

As St. Vincent reminds us: “Be quite cheerful, I beg you. Oh, what great reason people of good will have to be cheerful!” [\[CCD I:84\]](#) Our laughter not only erases tensions between Members and alleviates boredom, but makes our meetings more welcoming for new and potential Members!

In that 1847 letter, Jules Gossin observed the importance of laughter in Conference meetings, noting that although you don’t go in in hopes of “provoking occasions of hilarity” it is nevertheless the “Conferences that afford the most generous relief to the poor are those in which charity is practiced cheerfully.”

Contemplate

Is there joy and laughter in my Conference meetings? Do I help to foster it?

Recommended Reading

Instead of reading this week, [let's pray together.](#)

Sufficient Graces

Servant leadership is the calling of every Vincentian, and term-limits for Conference Presidents ensure that every three to six years, somebody new will be invited to serve in that role. [\[Rule Pt III, St 2 & 12\]](#) The next time, it might be you. All too often, though, many of us pull back, insisting that we are not the “take-charge” sort; that somebody else should be President. St. Vincent would say that if this is how you respond, you probably are the right person to lead.

In fact, writing about a priest who had “an unimaginable passion for being in charge” Vincent remarked that “*this frame of minds frightened me*” even though he was “*having a hard time finding anyone among the others willing to be a Superior in certain circumstances.*” [\[CCD II:326\]](#)

He went even further in a Conference for the Daughters of Charity, explaining that “*to be ambitious for more honorable offices or duties, leading one to want to become a Sister Servant*” (the superior) is a “*diabolical*” sign of hidden pride. [\[CCD IX:532\]](#) By no means, though, did he teach that we ought to avoid invitations to serve as leaders!

Instead, he taught, to be called to leadership is to be called by God, and that therefore when “*obedience designates us for a leadership position ... we must submit*”. [\[CCD XI:128\]](#) Our Rule explains further that leadership positions “*are always to be accepted as service to Christ, the members and the poor.*” [\[Rule, Part III, St 11\]](#)

When invited to serve, we should always prayerfully discern the invitation, but remember that it is not our own talents or strengths that we are discerning! Rather, we are discerning whether we hear God’s call, whether it comes to us in an invitation from our fellow Vincentians, or in an invitation within our hearts.

Vincentian servant leaders are not commanders or bosses – quite opposite! We believe, as Christ taught, in [the leader as the servant](#), and as leaders we then take the last place, in imitation of Christ, “*who was the natural Master of everyone and yet made himself the least of all*”. [\[CCD XI:124\]](#)

It is not so difficult to step up to leadership when you understand it instead as a call to step down, to be humble and gentle, to serve and not to be served. And since it is God who calls us to servant leadership from time to time, we also needn’t worry about our capabilities, because “*God gives sufficient graces to those He calls to it.*” [\[CCD IX:525\]](#)

Contemplate

Am I open to God’s call to servant leadership, even though I may feel unworthy?

Recommended Reading

[Walking the Vincentian Pathway](#)

The Whole Secret

["My kingdom does not belong to this world,"](#) Christ said to Pilate, when asked if He was "King of the Jews". Indeed, He went on to explain, if it were, there would be armies of angels fighting to free Him from His earthly captivity. In this, Christ modeled for us what St. Vincent de Paul often called "holy indifference" – a detachment from worldly suffering and reward in order that we might better discern God's will.

Before His passion, Christ had already explained that we must "[seek first the kingdom](#)", that same kingdom which is not of this world. We must, like the birds who neither reap nor sow, like the grass that neither works nor spins, let each day's troubles be enough for the day. In short, He calls us to trust in providence.

Where does this leave our neighbors in need? Does trust in providence mean that they are on their own, or that we need not "[give them the necessities of the body](#)"? On the contrary, Bl. Frédéric once cautioned that we must not let our detachment turn into discouragement from our duties! This, he said, was "*the whole secret and the whole difficulty of the Christian life.*" [\[Baunard, 423\]](#)

While we constantly seek to discern God's will in different circumstances, we already know that "*the same authority which tells us that we shall always have the poor amongst us is the same that commands us to do all we can to ensure that there may cease to be any.*" [\[O'Meara, 230\]](#) For the poor, it is we who are called to be God's instruments, providing for their needs as best we can, and by this work, reminding them of God's love and their hope.

Detachment, indifference, or unrestricted readiness is not an excuse to neglect our works of charity but instead is the necessary condition to pursue them tirelessly and selflessly; to [love our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God](#). As we remind ourselves on each home visit, it is Christ we serve in the person of the neighbor; the same Christ who sent us, the same Christ who awaits us.

"We must think," Bl. Frédéric said, "as if we were to quit the earth tomorrow, and we must work as if we were never to leave it." [\[Baunard, 423\]](#)

Contemplate

How can I better offer up my own rewards and my own suffering to God?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Challenges, Young and Old

“But, you say, how can we draw youth to us? We call them eagerly, and no one comes.” So said the President General of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in a Circular Letter. It is an ironic problem for the Society to face, the challenge of recruiting more youth members to join an organization that was founded by 19- and 20-year-olds.

It is an inexorable reality of human life that we all grow older, even if we are Members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. [The founders](#) themselves remained Members for the rest of their lives, long after graduating from the Sorbonne. The photos we have are of white-haired men, not college students.

We always recognize and celebrate longtime Vincentians at our General Assemblies, as we should. Their example of dedication is inspiring. Lest we forget, though, the longest-serving among us, like the founders, began in their youth!

Ours is still - or should be - a Society for young Members. Indeed, our Rule calls on “*Members of all ages*” to “*strive to preserve the spirit of youth*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 3.5\]](#) Doing this does not mean trying to listen to the latest music, learn the latest slang, or [pass ourselves off as young](#). After all, the first Conference, despite its youth, was quite out of step with its own times and fads, but in touch with something more radical, something more disruptive, something deeper, something greater, something...younger.

The young seek what we all seek, because all of us, young and old, have God’s word [written on our hearts](#). As a young Frédéric Ozanam put it, the young have felt “*the hunger for truth crying out*” but have been left empty by “*the barren philosophy of the modern Apostles*” in which they “*have not found food for [their] souls.*”

“The religion of your forefathers appears before you today,” he continued. *“do not turn away, for it is generous. It also, like you, is young. It does not grow old with the world. Ever renewing itself, it keeps pace with progress, and it alone can lead to perfection.”* [\[Baunard, 20\]](#)

It is not enough, then, to “*call them eagerly*”, unless we also “*welcome young Members into all Conferences.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.7\]](#) Their youthful enthusiasm revitalizes the older Members, while the timeless experience of serving the poor deepens the spirituality of the young.

That Circular Letter was not written by the current President-General – although it could have been. It was written by Adolphe Baudon in 1851. It turns out that seeking young members is not only an ironic challenge for the Society - it is an old one.

Contemplate

How can I truly be more welcoming to young Members?

Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#) (especially Chapter 10: A Saint for the Campus)

The Light from Within

Saint Vincent de Paul famously said that it is our vocation to “*set people’s hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love.*” [\[CCD XII:215\]](#) These are inspirational “marching orders”, but what, in a practical sense, do they mean? How do we go about lighting that fire?

As always, our patron teaches that we must focus first on the interior. If we wish to set the world on fire, in other words, we must do so using the fire within our own hearts. When we examine the fire in our hearts, we recognize very quickly that our love, our charity, must be truly all-consuming. This is the love, the charity, that sets the world on fire.

Vincent asks us to examine our charity by its effects. What are the things we do, the ways in which we behave that result from our charity? How will it be known to others (and to ourselves)?

The first thing animated by charity is to [do to others as you would have them do to you](#). How simple that sounds! It is so obviously good as a sentiment that virtually everybody in our culture knows this teaching, from children to the aged, and to one extent or another we measure our acts of kindness by this measure. True charity in our hearts is more than a disposition to kindness. Instead, we cannot help but “to do for our neighbor the good that a person has the right to expect from a faithful friend.” [\[Ibid. 216\]](#)

Another effect of our charity is that we bear with one another. No one on earth is perfect; everybody has imperfections and faults. Vincent calls us to examine our own faults, our own failings, and our own weaknesses first. When we realize how much we need the forbearance of others, we will naturally be more willing to bear with the neighbor, who in no case is more in need of mercy and forbearance than we are. As our Rule says, because we are conscious of our own frailty and weakness, our hearts beat with the heartbeats of the poor, and so we do not judge them. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#)

In charity, we need not learn to empathize, because we simply “*can’t see someone suffering without suffering along with him, or see someone cry without crying as well. This is an act of love, causing people to enter one another’s hearts and to feel what they feel...*” [\[CCD XII:221\]](#)

In charity, our love for the neighbor is for God’s sake, and our love for God is for the neighbor’s sake, [for who loves another has fulfilled the law](#). Charity is the light within us, the source of the flame that lights the world on fire.

Contemplate

How often do I act in charity because I simply cannot act in any other way?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

Infinately Loved

Conference Meetings, the Rule tells us, “are held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity, and Christian joy.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.4\]](#) Like so much that we read in our Rule, this is less a set of instructions about exactly what we must do than it is a description of what a Vincentian, or Vincentian Conference looks like. So, does this describe my Conference? Would an outside observer describe our meetings that way?

Is our attitude towards one another that of family members, brothers and sisters, comfortable in each other’s presence, united in purpose and love? Do we think of our fellow Vincentians as burdens, or do we instead exemplify the old Boys Town motto, “[he ain’t heavy, he’s my brother?](#)”

Our first Rule said that ours would be a “[model of Christian friendship](#)” because of our brotherly (and now also sisterly) love. What would our visitor see in our Conference meetings that might cause him to describe us in this way?

Our spirit of simplicity, following the teaching of St. Vincent de Paul, “consists in doing everything for love of God” and always “saying things simply, without duplicity or subtlety, being straightforward, with no evasion or subterfuge.” [\[CCD XII:246\]](#) Do we say what we mean to one another? Do we welcome our fellow Vincentians’ honesty and frankness? Is the whole dialog of our meetings one of people unafraid to share and unafraid of disagreement? Do we disagree without being disagreeable?

Finally, are our meetings not only joyful, but held in a spirit of “Christian joy”? More importantly, what does that mean? Should our meetings always be filled with laughter and singing? It hardly seems as if they could be – and after all, as Pope Francis teaches in [Evangelii Gaudium](#), “joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty.” But Christian joy, he continues, “adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.”

Fraternity, simplicity, and Christian joy, then, are not merely actions we take, but expressions of who we are as Vincentians, joined in our commitment to each other and to the neighbor, serving in the hope that that we may share the the joy of God’s infinite love.

Contemplate

Do my Conference meetings fill me with Christian joy?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

A Union of Hearts

Subsidiarity, Pope Pius XI taught, is a “*most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy*”. [[Quadregesimo Anno, 79](#)] Indeed, more than ninety years later, it remains one of the four core principles of Catholic Social Doctrine. [[CSDC, 160](#)] Given Blessed Frédéric’s influence on the Church’s social teachings, it should come as no surprise that subsidiarity is and has always been a core principle of the Society, also.

Our Catechism explains that subsidiarity means that “*a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order*” leaving most decisions to the smallest associations, beginning with the family. Subsidiarity, it further clarifies, “*aims at harmonizing the relationships between individuals and societies.*” [[CCC, 1883-1885](#)]

For the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, this means that most of the decisions are made by Conferences, which are “*as close as possible to the area of activity*” and that in this way, “*the Society promotes local initiatives within its spirit.*” [[Rule, Part I, 3.9](#)]

This principle has been recognized since the Society’s earliest days. When Léonce Curnier was starting a new Conference in Nîmes in 1834, he wrote to Frédéric, seeking guidelines that the Paris Conference had followed. In his reply, Frédéric cautioned his friends against tying themselves down with “rules and formulas”, and instead being guided by Providence through the circumstances around them. After all, he explained, “*the end that we set ourselves in Paris is not completely the same as that you set yourselves, I think, in the province.*” [[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834](#)]

In an 1841 Circular Letter written when he was serving as our first President-General, Emmanuel Bailly reflected on the formation of Councils during the Society’s rapid growth, explaining that Councils are “*rather a link than a power*” because from each Conference to the Council General and back, “*there is neither authority nor obedience; there may be deference and advice; there is certainly, above all, charity; there is the same end, there are the same good works; there is a union of hearts in Jesus Christ, our Lord.*” [Circ. Ltr. 14 Jul 1841]

In our social teachings, subsidiarity affirms “*priority of the family over society and over the State*” as the “*first natural society*”. [[CSDC, 209, 214](#)] Our Society was born as a single Conference. The principle of subsidiarity reserves to each Conference great freedom to act according local circumstances, conditions, and considerations. It equally imposes a responsibility to be faithful the Scripture, to our Rule, and to our worldwide network of friends in this One Society.

Contemplate

Faithful to the spirit of the founders, how can I use “creative imagination” to better serve the neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

Ambitious Dreams

Our Vincentian vocation, the Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul reminds us, is “*a vocation for every moment of our lives*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.6\]](#) Our call to serve is more than a call to serve the neighbor, more than a call to attend meetings, but a call to live our faith fully in our family lives, our professional lives, and our participation in our communities.

This was the vocation modeled for us by our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. Throughout his life, Frédéric continued his own home visits as a member of the Society, but also became a widely known advocate for the poor, whose *L'ère nouvelle* newspaper influenced public discussions. He served in the National Guard in 1848 and ran for public office (unsuccessfully) that same year, all in addition to his professorship and his vocation as husband and father.

But for Frédéric, these roles were not separate from his Catholic faith; they were the full expression of a faithful life. His was a vision of “*a community of faith and works erasing little by little the old divisions of political parties*” through lives of witness by people in “*science, the arts, and industry, into administration, the judiciary, the bar*” – our whole lives. [\[Letter 290, to Amélie, 1841\]](#)

In this, he foresaw the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, recognizing that the same friendship that unites us as communities of faith in our Conferences, unites us also with the neighbors we serve, and with all the Conferences in our One Society. But it is not “*exhausted in relationships between individuals but spreads into the network formed by these relationships, which is precisely the social and political community; it intervenes in this context seeking the greatest good for the community in its entirety.*” [\[CSDC, 208\]](#)

Charity is love; the love of God for his own sake, and the love of our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. [\[CCC, 1822\]](#) This is the love we mean we say we serve “*for love alone*” and it is the love we mean in our “*vision of the civilization of love*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2 & 7.2\]](#)

Frédéric envisioned a “*network of charity and social justice encircling the world*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.4\]](#) – a network formed by those resolved “*to become better themselves in order to make others happier*”. His vision calls us, each of us and all of us, to give ourselves fully to God and the neighbor.

“*These,*” he said, “*Are ambitious dreams...*” [\[Letter 290, to Amélie, 1841\]](#)

Contemplate

How can I personally live my faith more fully in every part of my life?

Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#)

The Soul of Liberty

As a young man, Bl. Frédéric Ozanam considered himself, like his father, to be a monarchist, seeing government on earth as an expression of the divine principle of authority. He was inspired especially by the example of St. Louis, King of France, whose monarchy represented “*the sacrifice of a single person for the good of all... which I revere with love.*” [[Letter 77, to Falconnet, 1834](#)]

Following the restoration of the French monarchy in 1813, the Ozanam family returned to France from Italy, where Frédéric had been born. Yet the church, now restored to legality in France, had not fully regained the confidence and trust of the people. Indeed, as further revolutions continued to develop, social philosophies that rejected the church became more popular – not least the philosophy of [Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon](#), whose “technocratic” vision relied on a belief not in spiritual power, but in industry and science.

It was a group of young Saint-Simonians who would challenge Frédéric and his Catholic friends to “show the good of the church” in 1833. In answer to the challenge, they would choose to serve the poor as Christ did – with love and friendship; “*not only as an equal, but as a superior.*” [[O’Meara, 229](#)]

This continuing work pointed Frédéric towards the best alternative to Saint-Simonianism and its more revolutionary successors. He saw how important it was “*to make equality as operative as is possible among men; to make voluntary community replace imposition and brute force...*” [[Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836](#)]

For Frédéric, liberty was much more than a political slogan, it was a gift from God. Indeed, as he wrote to a political ally who was an unbeliever, “*I believe [our] cause to be more ancient and, therefore, more sacred*” Liberty, equality, and fraternity, he explained, did not come from the revolution of 1789, but from Calvary. [[Baunard, 301](#)]

As our church teaches, “*Man can turn to good only in freedom, which God has given to him as one of the highest signs of his image.*” [[CSDC, 135](#)]

Because it was best able to preserve equality and liberty, Frédéric concluded that “*democracy is the natural final stage of the development of political progress, and that God leads the world thither.*” Therefore, he asked, “*are not the men of the Church and the men of the people to be found side by side at the foot of the tree of liberty?*” [[Baunard, 281](#)]

Liberty is both a gift from God, and a pathway to His truth, and so, as Frédéric said, “*Christianity will be the soul of Liberty.*” [[Baunard, 290](#)]

Contemplate

Do I celebrate liberty as a gift from God, for me and for all?

Recommended Reading

[Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam](#)

Seeking Help from the Neighbor

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a Vincentian favorite. In Christ's command to "[go and do likewise](#)", we hear the call to our lay vocation: to tend to the helpless, the hungry, the sick, and the lonely with acts of both corporal and spiritual mercy.

For Frédéric, the robber's victim represented all the "humanity of our days" which had been robbed not only of its possessions, but of its "treasure of faith and love" by the "cutthroats and robbers of thought". [[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835](#)] In Frédéric's retelling, the priest and Levite had not passed by, indifferent to suffering. Shaped by his own experiences with widespread rejection of the church, the priest and Levite had instead been rejected by the traveler, who did not recognize them as helpers.

Because of this, the task of tending to the wounds of "the great sick one" was left to us, "weak Samaritans" whose task was not only to tend to [the necessities of the body](#), but to offer "words of consolation and peace" so that he might return to the church. In this interpretation, Frédéric echoed the commentary of St. Augustine, who had taught that the innkeeper represented the church. [*Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II]

We can hear this idea repeated in Frédéric's later essay on "Help Which Honors", in which he explains that to give material help only, without our love and friendship, is humiliating. Instead, we honor those in need by offering those things that we may need ourselves – a handshake, consolation, kind words. "Help then becomes honorable," he said, "because it may become mutual." [[O'Meara, 229](#)]

When you consider it this way, it would seem that when we "weak Samaritans" crouch down at the side of the road to offer our help, we also are seeking help from the victim, in whom we see the suffering Christ. [[Rule, Part I, 1.8](#)] Our service to the neighbor, given freely and generously, is a means to the end of our own growth in holiness. We grow closer to Christ by serving Him.

After all, the question Christ was answering with the parable was about [what we must do to inherit eternal life](#). How could we do anything but to "go and do likewise"?

Contemplate

Do I feel gratitude to the neighbor for drawing me closer to Christ?

Recommended Reading

[15 Days of Prayer with Bl. Frédéric Ozanam](#)

Grateful Friends

One of the four permanent principles of the church's social doctrine is solidarity, which is a "common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity." [CSDC, 192] Whatever may separate us on the surface, each of us is created in God's image, and meant to live in community. Solidarity reminds us that we are all dependent and interdependent upon each other.

As Vincentians, we often encounter those who are deprived materially, and who, because of their deprivation feel separated, forgotten by the rest of society. It isn't only that they cannot afford "the finer things in life," but that over time, they begin to feel those things are not really meant for people like themselves.

At the same time, there is nothing easier for people of means to say, in all sincerity, that money doesn't matter to them, or to find their lives empty despite material comforts. Whatever our station, it is easy for us to allow our circumstances to separate us from others, and thus from God's plan.

It was one of Bl. Rosalie Rendu's great insights that the "poor rich...are more to be pitied than we think; they have griefs and trials that the poor know nothing about. If the poor knew what those poor rich often have to suffer, they would not envy them as they do." [O'Meara, 33]

The "poor rich", many of whom Rosalie found "would be so glad to help the poor, if they knew how to go about it", became, through "the luxury of her sympathy", friends to the poor. [Ibid, 35]

It was said that in Bl. Rosalie's parlor, awaiting her wise counsel, the rich and poor sat side by side on the straw chairs, with no rank or status separating them. To each she offered her love, and from each she asked for help.

Indeed, as Pope Saint John Paul II teaches, our exercise of solidarity "is valid when its members recognize one another as persons", the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor together, each of us and all of us pursuing the good of the other. [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 39]

In living and fostering the moral virtue of solidarity, Bl. Rosalie became known as "the Good Mother of All". More than 50,000 Parisians turned out for her funeral procession in 1856, and the people of Paris donated a tombstone which stands as a tribute to "the Good Mother" and a monument to solidarity from her "grateful friends, the poor and the rich".

Contemplate

How can I be a more "grateful friend" in all my social interactions?

Recommended Reading

[A Heart on Fire: Apostolic Reflection with Rosalie Rendu](#)

Let Us Go to the Poor

After a year of debate with the Saint-Simonians in the Conference of History, defending the Catholic faith, Frédéric Ozanam and his friends were confronted with this challenge: “Even you, who pride yourself on your Catholicity, what are you doing to show the vitality and efficacy, to prove the truth of your faith?” [\[Baunard, 64\]](#)

It was a challenge Frédéric took to heart; it affected him deeply. After all, he said to his friends, having spent an entire year in vigorous debate, proclaiming the truth, defending the church; for all the educated arguments, for all the passion, “have we made one single conquest for Jesus Christ?” [\[Ibid, 65\]](#)

The Society was not founded to answer a challenge to feed or clothe or go to the poor. That was the answer to the challenge. The challenge was to prove the truth of our faith. Ozanam, man of letters, academic, brilliant speaker and debater, realized that words alone were not enough to do this, that we must act.

Today, we continue the timeless tradition of the home visit, responding to calls for help from our neighbors in need. But is there even more we could do – not just to alleviate suffering, but to prove the truth of our faith?

In so many of our communities, we see the homeless – asleep on a bench, huddling in a doorway, zealously guarding their few possessions. Are they the ones, in need and forgotten, that our Rule directs us to “seek out and find”? [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#) Do we hold ourselves back at times because we fear our outreach will be unwelcome, since we know we cannot alleviate all of their needs?

We are created to live in community. The greatest need of all people is to be part of a community, and there is none greater than the community of Christian faith. Whatever material offering we may have for the homeless, there is nothing greater we can give than our hearts, our friendship, a simple smile, and a greeting. All people are buoyed by human connections, but especially those who are most often treated as invisible.

It is we who are first evangelized by our encounter with Christ in the person of the poor. And it is we who are challenged to imitate Christ in this encounter; to prove the truth of our faith, just as Frédéric and his friends were once challenged to do. It was not, and is not easy, but the best proof of our faith remains unchanged: “We must do what is most agreeable to God. Therefore, we must do what Our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the Gospel. Let us go to the poor.” [\[Baunard, 65\]](#)

Contemplate

Where can I go to “seek out and find” the poor??

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Our Few Visible Hours

“*Vincentians*,” our Rule reminds us, “*should never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.14\]](#) Yet, faced with the overwhelming needs that some of our neighbors present to us, we sometimes ask ourselves how this can possibly be. How can my time, my limited talents, my simple words of compassion, possibly ease these great burdens?

Consider these words, written in appreciation of a Vincentian who was dedicated to visiting the homeless in his community – in parking lots, in food lines – meeting them where they were. Because of his attention to their words, their persons, she said, “*We get to breathe different when he’s around because we know he cares. [He is] a sign of relief for the few visible hours we have. Our gratitude for him taking the time with us gives hope to a lot of us who have no one to depend on. Some stand straighter with more confidence and willingness to take on the challenges of the day or sometimes the week.*”

No work of charity is foreign to the Society. That is because, as important as they are, utilities, rent, and even food are only the works, not the charity. Our presence and our love will always be more important than our works because our presence and our love are the reason for the works.

We are created as social beings. We can’t live or develop our own potential without our relationships with others, because our relationships with other people are representative of our relationship with God. [\[CSDC, 110\]](#) The material deprivations of poverty and homelessness can be relieved, and should be relieved, but our “*passion for the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) calls on us to offer our hearts along with the bread.

Our ministry is person-to-person, equal-to-equal, an encounter, not a transaction, because “*something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person*”. [\[CSDC, 144\]](#) That glory shines, if we choose to see it, not only during those precious “few visible hours” of the lonely, the suffering, or the deprived, but in every precious, visible hour that all of us share together on this earth.

Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Give a man your heart, you invite him to the feast.

Contemplate

How can I better form relationships based on trust and friendship with the neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[The Rule, Part I, 1.1 - 1.12](#)

Unique and Unrepeatable

Vincentians “*do not judge those they serve.*” [[Rule, Part I, 1.9](#)] This simple admonition is readily accepted by members of the Society, given that all Christians are [called to stop judging](#). But human nature being as it is, it can be difficult to practice non-judgmentalism when we find ourselves in a circumstance which seems to call for judgment.

“Everyone,” C.S. Lewis once said, “*says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.*” [[Mere Christianity](#)] In a similar way, being non-judgmental sounds quite good in theory, but then we encounter the neighbor who has blown every penny of his tax refund on a vacation, and now needs help with rent; the neighbor who has bought food for his five dogs but needs our help to feed the kids; or the neighbor who paid the cable bill and now can’t pay for electricity.

“What were they thinking?” we ask ourselves, allowing ourselves in that moment to believe that we know best. More often than not, though, the measure by which we measure is merely ourselves, our own experiences and circumstances. It becomes easy to assign blame when we lose sight of the different experiences and circumstances that shape each of us, as if the person with one leg should be expected to keep pace with the sprinter, or the person with no hope to make plans for the future.

Our Manual explains that our “*nonjudgmental attitude excludes assigning guilt or responsibility for a person’s needs or problems.*” [[Manual, 62](#)] As Blessed Rosalie also taught, we must “*love those who are poor, don’t blame them too much...It is with such words that we dispense ourselves from the very strict obligation of charity.*” [[Sullivan, 211](#)]

The astrophysicist Carl Sagan once said that “[If you want to bake an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.](#)” In this witty saying, he captures the similar truth that on one home visit (or many) we cannot fully know each neighbor’s “whole story.” We cannot know all of the obstacles they have faced, nor all the victories they have won.

On our home visits, we are called to judge the need, not the person, always with a view towards helping in the best way possible. The only way to do this is, as St. Vincent reminds us, is 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... even though intelligence and human prudence tell us the contrary.*” [[CCD II:638](#)]

Each of us is created in God’s image, [unique and unrepeatable](#), formed throughout our lives by the people that surround us. May it be our love, not our judgment that helps form our neighbors – and ourselves.

Contemplate

Are there things that sometimes cause me to jump to a quick judgment of the neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[A Heart on Fire: Apostolic Reflection with Rosalie Rendu](#)

A Very Mysterious, Excellent Way

During its first two decades, within the short lifetime of Bl. Frédéric, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul expanded rapidly, with Conferences established across France, throughout Europe, and even around the globe in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Only four years after the founding, Frédéric remarked that “*our little Society of St. Vincent de Paul has grown large enough to be considered a providential fact*”. [[Letter 160, to Lallier, 1837](#)]

It would be a natural human instinct to take great pride in this growth, to shout out to the world about how great the Society had become! Frédéric instead advised that, rather than take pride in this, we should “*seek to develop the spirit of humility. Grass grows rapidly, but it does not cease on that account to be insignificant; it does not say because it covers much ground, I am the oak.*” [[Baunard, 396](#)]

In a similar way, we should avoid developing pride in the annual reports of our Conferences and Councils. We are of course required by tax laws and by basic accountability to our benefactors to offer such reports, and as the old Texas saying goes, “it ain’t bragging if you can do it.” This may be true for worldly accomplishments, but the virtue of humility reminds us “*that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1](#)]

We can no more take personal credit or pride from the numbers in our reports than a child can take pride in eating the meal his parents have provided. Humility calls us to accept our gifts with gratitude, with love, and with joy.

All our gifts, the ones we receive and the ones we give, are from God. Even the very founding, organization, and growth of the Society is from God alone. As St. Vincent explained to the Daughters of Charity in 1648, “*There can be no doubt whatever that it was God who established you. It wasn’t [Louise]; she didn’t think of it. As for me, alas! it never occurred to me... it’s God himself who has brought you together in a very mysterious, excellent way...*” [[CCD IX:358](#)]

As we assemble our reports and share them with our parishes and benefactors, we should always do so with “*gratitude for having been chosen, frail and weak as we are, as instruments of so great an enterprise. It especially remains for us to render ourselves worthy.*” [[Letter 205, to Athaud, 1837](#)]

After all, to say that the Society is “providential” is precisely to say that it is not our doing.

Contemplate

Do I know, deep in my heart, that all my works of charity are works of God alone?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Independent of My Will

St. Vincent taught that we are called to submit entirely to God's will; indeed, to make His will our own. Even when we seek to discern the best way to help each neighbor, we are called to fulfill God's will – to make our feeble human judgment His instrument in that particular circumstance.

Sometimes it is easy to know His will, because He stated it explicitly: [go and do likewise](#), [I have given you a model to follow](#), [serve the least of us](#), [turn the other cheek](#), [do unto others](#), etc. We can further learn God's will by the example and words of our Vincentian Saints and Blesseds.

But ours is a “vocation for every part of our lives”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.6\]](#) How can we know His will when it seems less obvious? Are we in the right place? Are we in the right jobs? As a young man, Blessed Frédéric asked himself such questions, wondering whether “*exterior circumstances*” might be a sign of God's will that he should not ignore, for “*a crowd of circumstances independent of my will assail me, pursue me, turn me aside from the path I have laid out for myself.*” [\[Letter 67, to Falconnet, 1834\]](#)

There is a short answer, of course: prayer. In prayer we place our needs before God, we ask for Him to make His will known to us. Yet prayer itself requires first that we trust in Divine Providence, that we are willing to accept that “*He knows what is good for us better than we do, what He sends us is best, even if it is disagreeable to nature and contrary to our wishes,*” as St. Vincent once explained. [\[CCD VII:255\]](#)

St. Vincent taught that we should accept everything that happens in this world, good and bad, “*because God wills it, since He sends it ... peace of mind will be one of the many great benefits that will result from [this].*” [\[CCD VI:493\]](#) Our doubts are removed, in other words, when we choose to remove them, to face life with what Vincent often called “holy indifference”, [letting the day's own troubles be enough](#).

It is easy to confuse seeking God's will with seeing the future, rather than “*go[ing] in simplicity where merciful Providence leads us, content to see the stone on which we should step without wanting to discover all at once and completely the windings of the road.*” [\[Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836\]](#)

Our lives are often better understood in reverse, like the early chapters of a mystery novel whose clues we understand only when going back to re-read them after we begin to surmise the conclusion. Despite his youthful doubts, Frédéric would later write that he had become “*more than ever convinced of my vocation, a conviction reinforced by all the events of recent years.*” [\[A Heart with Much Love to Give, 144\]](#)

The certainty that we are where God wills us to be is perhaps less important than the comfort of knowing that it cannot be otherwise, which enables us to trust that “*you are serving God very effectively where you are. If it does not seem so to you, all the better.*” [\[CCD IV:364\]](#)

Contemplate

Am I uncertain of God's will, or am I distracted by my own will?

Recommended Reading

[Amélie Ozanam, A Heart with Much Love to Give](#)

Experts in Their Own Situation

To “offer humble advice” is a natural part of the home visit. [\[Manual, 2.1\]](#) Bl. Frédéric even listed “good advice” among the things we offer to the poor that we may ourselves one day stand in need of, rendering our help mutual, and therefore honorable. [\[O’Meara, 229\]](#)

Yet, at the same time, we are cautioned to “not be quick to advise” and to offer advice only when it is “wanted and appropriate”. Above all, we must never make our assistance dependent upon the neighbor taking our advice. [\[Conference President Handbook, 35\]](#)

To offer advice humbly is to acknowledge that we do not necessarily know what’s best; that ours is only an opinion based on our own experience. In the course of building “relationships based on trust and friendship” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) we will learn more about the neighbor’s experience, but they will always remain the experts on their own situation.

Advice between friends is always better received than advice from a stranger. Yet even between friends, advice must be given humbly. As Frédéric once described his own advice in a letter to a friend, “they are not counsels, for I am not capable of counseling anyone; they are reflections I have had, and I pass them on to you for you to do whatever you wish.” [\[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

The poor, like any other friend, are free to do whatever they wish with our advice, and that can’t be a condition for continued assistance. After all, what if they took our advice and it turned out badly for them? To offer advice humbly is to accept that this is entirely possible, and that it is therefore just as reasonable to reject our advice as to take it.

Frédéric once described the poor as “*beaten souls, who always receive us the same way, always with the same reserve at the end of a year as on the first day, who are very careful not to contradict a single thing we say, but who for all that change none of their ways.*” He went on to explain that this is one of the very reasons that we choose to assist them, even though “*we could go to others who would listen and understand!*” [\[Letter 107, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

We sometimes talk about the poor becoming “dependent” on our assistance, but we should also be mindful that they can just as easily become dependent on our advice, particularly if we demand that they follow our advice as a condition of our assistance.

The poor are and always will be the experts in their own situations. Advice offered humbly is not an expression of expertise, but of love and encouragement as neighbors develop their own solutions, while we walk alongside them as friends.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes become impatient with neighbors who do not take my advice?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module VII](#)

Our True Friends

When we think back to the times in our lives when we have needed some help, or advice, or a shoulder to cry on, those are the times we learned who our true friends were. If we were blessed already to know who our true friends were, those are the ones we called to help, to advise, or to offer their shoulder.

Of course, we know there are certain things you can ask only of a friend – when you are in an embarrassing predicament, your true friend is the one who will not only help, but will do so without laughing (at least not until you can both laugh about it later).

Blessed Rosalie once wrote back to a friend who had asked her for a favor so she could thank him for the request, 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.” [\[Sullivan, 237\]](#)

And isn't this how we react to requests from our friends, too? We might not say the words, but inside we are proud and grateful to be the ones who are trusted to help, and to share the burden. We also share our friends' secrets; the troubles they will only confide in their closest friends. Bl. Frédéric wrote about home visits, explaining that when we visit the neighbor, “we share the lonely secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind”. Just like any good friend, we listen and we keep those secrets, without being asked.

Our Rule calls us to “form relationships based on trust and friendship” with the neighbors we serve. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) The neighbors who have called us, who have asked us for help, even though it may have been embarrassing for them to do so, have taken the first step of friendship. By confiding in us their stories, their secrets, and their struggles, they have treated us not only as friends, but as true friends; the closest of friends.

There are times when our Conferences may be short on money and may not be able to offer the material help that the neighbor needs, but that is never a reason not to visit. If we truly believe that “giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.14\]](#) then our treasuries are always full!

The friendship we share with each other, we are bound to share also with the neighbor, welcoming them into our community of faith. After all, our true friends are the ones who ask for help.

Contemplate

Have I inadvertently withheld my friendship from a neighbor, focusing too much on the “transaction”?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic Of Charity](#)

Working for God's Sake

Studying the words of our Vincentian predecessors helps to remind us of the challenges we share, and the spirituality, traditions, and friendship that bind us to them and to the poor. For example, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some members of the Society in the United States began to adopt a term for home visitors: *the friendly visitor*, a term that captures what our Rule now calls establishing “relationships based on trust and friendship” with the neighbor. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#)

The *Proceedings of the National Conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul*, held in Boston in June of 1911, contains numerous accounts of the importance of this personal and spiritual connection which remains at the heart of our Vincentian vocation.

In a talk about our works of love, Fr. Hugh Monaghan of Baltimore explained the importance of each member committing at least an hour a week to the work of visiting families, bringing gentleness, patience, and perseverance to those visits, so that the family may “realize that there is someone interested in them, someone who does care when things go wrong, someone who makes their joys and sorrows his own.” [\[Proceedings, p.77\]](#)

What greater gift could we bring than to reassure our neighbor not only that while we are there, they are the most important people in the world to us, but that when we leave, their troubles are also our own? If it takes one month, or six, or even ten years to make a difference in a neighbor’s life through our friendship, Fr. Hugh said, we will have “accomplished a work of charity greater, by far, than could be represented by any amount of money.” [\[Ibid, p.77\]](#)

It was in this spirit of friendship and mercy, also, that James Dougherty of New York explained our obligation to get to know the neighbor ourselves, not to rely upon, or contribute to shared databases (“card catalogs”) to determine a neighbor’s worthiness for assistance. Pointing out that our mandate to perform works of corporal mercy does not include any “conditions as to the character of the needy”, Daugherty went on to explain that many in need would “rather die than expose their condition”, which obliges us, in respect of their dignity, not to share their names and stories. [\[Ibid, p.119\]](#)

We cannot understand Christ’s reminder that [the poor always will be with us](#) apart from his admonition that our treatment of the poor [will be judged as if done to Christ Himself](#). How we serve the poor is not a measure of our efficiency, but a measure of our love and of our faith.

Today, as in 1911, “we are apt to allow ourselves to get into a rut and forget the spiritual side of the work”, but to be friendly visitors is to “bear the fact constantly in mind that we are working for God’s sake. Do this and note the effects in our work among the poor.” [\[Proceedings, P. 118\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I always seek to make the neighbor’s joys and sorrows my own?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

Saints Among Us

After the death of St. Louise de Marillac, St. Vincent de Paul gathered the Daughters of Charity together for two conferences in remembrance of their “dear mother.” He asked them to share their memories of the virtues they had observed in St. Louise, and that they would choose to imitate.

Among the virtues they recalled was Louise’s love of poverty, her insistence that “*We are the servants of the poor; therefore, we must be poorer than they are.*” [\[CCD X:572\]](#) This was of a piece with her great humility, by which she felt called to perform the most menial of labor in the house before asking one of the Daughters to do it.

When a loved one dies, we are sometimes left to sort through their belongings, some of them long forgotten in a basement or attic, some kept close at hand until the end. While these things may remind us of memories, both happy and sad, it’s the memories we treasure most; the little bit of the spirit of our dear departed that we carry within ourselves.

In a similar way, it is not the material assistance that is most important for us to give to the neighbors we serve, but the gentleness that penetrates their hearts, the kindness and patience we offer, and the [love](#) that brings us to them.

For us to grow in holiness together, we should always try to see and imitate the holy example of our fellow Vincentians, not only after they have died, but while they are among us, praying with us, and serving Christ in the person of the poor. Who is the member in your Conference who has never once seemed impatient or angry with anybody? Who is the one who nearly weeps at every home visit report she gives? Who is the first to ask about your troubles, and offer his prayers for you?

[Seek first the Kingdom](#), Christ teaches us. Neither our lives nor our Vincentian ministry are best measured by the sum total of the belongings we accumulate. St. Louise left behind almost no material possessions, but her example of virtue and holiness still lives, ready to be shared by all members of the Vincentian Family today. Through her intercession, may we share in her spirit of poverty, her great charity, and her selfless devotion to God.

These alone are enough.

Contemplate

Which of my fellow Vincentians can I grow in spirit by imitating?

Recommended Reading

Let’s listen to a song this week: [These Alone Are Enough](#)

Our Inheritance and Legacy

In studying our own genealogy, we first catalog the names and dates and places of our ancestors. Our understanding and our love for them truly comes alive, though, when we find photographs, objects they owned, and best of all, words that they wrote. In a similar way, the portraits, relics, and words of our Vincentian saints and blessed help us to understand and fulfill our place in our shared Vincentian Family.

A treasure trove of St. Vincent's words is contained within the fourteen(+) volume [Correspondence, Conferences, and Documents](#), from the mundane, such a real estate transactions, to the personal, revealed in letters that were intended originally only for one recipient, to the conferences in which he gave spiritual lessons to his followers. While Vincent himself did not want his conferences recorded, designated note-takers recorded them surreptitiously anyway, realizing that the words of this holy man would feed generations who succeeded them.

Coincidentally, we also see Christ admonishing people more than once in the gospels not to tell anybody of some of His particular words or works - yet there they are, written in the gospels.

Bl. Frédéric Ozanam's words are collected for us (in English) in a volume called [A Life in Letters](#), with translation of more of his work currently underway. It was Frédéric who said that we owe to our patron "a two-fold devotion... imitation and invocation." He argued that we could escape our personal imperfections "appropriating the thoughts and virtues of the saint". [\[Letter 175, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

How, after all, do we truly imitate Vincent's example without his words, his teaching, his very personality that is visible to us in the collections of his words? Vincent's insights were meant not only for 17th Century France, but are, as Frédéric put it, "for all lands and for all time." [\[Bauard, 275\]](#)

It has often been observed that the third generation of a wealthy family is the one that tends to squander that wealth; no longer appreciating the work that it took their ancestors to earn it, they no longer are inclined to work themselves.

"The poor," St. Vincent taught, "are our inheritance." [\[Gallican Church, Vol.2, 8\]](#) Through the words preserved for us, we receive from his spiritual estate our way of seeing, serving, and loving them, so that we will be better able to pass this along to future generations of our Vincentian Family.

Contemplate

How often do I pause to study the words of our Vincentian saints and blessed?

Recommended Reading

[Frédéric Ozanam, A Life in Letters Letter 90](#)

Falling Forward

There is a commonly used exercise in corporate training events called a “trust fall”. In it, one person stands with his back to the others, with arms crossed and eyes closed, then simply falls backward from a platform, trusting his team members to catch him. The point is not to overcome a fear of falling, but to build trust that you will be caught before crashing to the floor.

In a similar way, St. Vincent teaches us to “*abandon all that we love to Him by abandoning ourselves to all that He wishes, with perfect confidence that everything will turn out for the best.*” [CCD VIII:298] To abandon all that we love seems to be a very demanding call, but it is the same one [to which Christ calls us](#).

As Vincentians, we are called to abandon ourselves to His will by hearing the cry of the poor whose calls often [interrupt](#) us, demanding that we abandon our plans for that evening, or our precious free day, or an activity we enjoy, in order to serve Christ in their persons.

Indeed, we are called to share not only our time, but our talents, our possessions, and ourselves. [Rule, Part I, 2.5.1] You might even say that we are called to share, to abandon, “all that we love” to God in the person of His poor. Sometimes, we pat ourselves on the back too quickly when we pay the bill, and sometimes we wallow in regret too deeply when our whole Conference treasury is not enough.

But the home visit is not a math problem – it is an encounter with Christ, and an opportunity to imitate Christ. We don’t know, before the visit, whether we have the means to meet the material needs that will be presented to us. All that we know is that Christ is calling, and we must answer – it is the call, and the will, of God. So, if we begin our works of charity with the understanding that we are doing God’s will, then we must accept that the outcome of those works also will be His will.

We serve not with resentment for what we have given up, nor with regret that we haven’t been given enough, but with the joy of knowing that we are serving Christ [exactly as he asked us to do](#), with exactly the gifts we have been given to share.

We serve in hope not that the light bill will be paid, but in the hope of eternal union with Christ and with the neighbor, trusting that the gifts we have been given are enough. We serve in hope, we serve in faith, and we serve in love.

We don’t fall backward, but forward, our hearts and our eyes open, and our arms spread wide. Our whole vocation is a “trust exercise” – trust in Providence.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes place more trust in myself than in Divine Providence?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Breathe Deeply

The word “spirit” has its roots in the Latin verb *spirāre*, meaning “to breathe”. If we think, then, of the Holy Spirit as the breath of God, it seems easier to open ourselves to that spirit, to the [wind upon the waters](#), and the [breath of life](#). When we feel ourselves filled and moved by the Holy Spirit, we are literally inspired.

The founders of the Vincentian Family received a special grace from God, a charism. For St. Louise, her inspiration began following a period of great doubts, a dark night of the soul in which she began to doubt even the immortality of her soul. On the Feast of Pentecost, 1623, which commemorates the descent of the Spirit on the apostles, Louise prayed and felt herself suddenly relieved of all her doubts. [\[SWLM A.2\]](#)

This experience was so powerful that she wrote down all that she believed the Holy Spirit had spoken to her and carried that piece of paper, the account of her lumière (“light”) folded in her pocket for the rest of her life. It remains in the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity to this day.

The great peace that she instantly felt was threefold: first, that she would receive a new Spiritual Director (which would turn out to be St. Vincent); second, that she would one day fulfill her “first vow” to live a consecrated life in service of the poor; and third, that as long as she had her belief in God, the rest would be assured.

Importantly, nothing really changed in her daily life. She wouldn’t meet Vincent for another two years, the founding of the Daughters of Charity, in which she would live her religious vocation, was eight years away. In other words, she received a great interior peace solely through the movement of the spirit; not through an external event or change in her circumstances. Nothing that had been troubling her was resolved, but her heart had been changed.

The light she carried with her from that day forward helped her to see in the people and events of her life the Providence and Will of God; to further discern her charism – our charism – to serve Jesus in the poor and in each other.

Louise, “aware of [her] own brokenness and need for God's grace” [\[Rule, Pt. I, 2.2\]](#) opened herself to the working of the Holy Spirit, exactly as we are called to do. Just as we breathe out only in order to breathe in again, we empty ourselves of self not to remain empty, but in order to be filled by God. And to be inspired, we breathe deeply.

Contemplate

How can I be more open to be moved by the Holy Spirit?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

In the Vincentian Tradition

The Catholic Church teaches the importance of tradition in addition to Scripture. It is through tradition that the divine revelation is passed along from the Apostles to us. Tradition and Scripture “form one sacred deposit of the word of God”. [\[Dei Verbum, 10\]](#) It should be no surprise then, that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is governed by both the Rule and by the traditions of the Society. [\[cf Rule, Part II, 7.4\]](#)

The Rule, of course, has been revised from time to time over the past 187 years, often in order to incorporate accumulated traditions into the Rule itself. One of the changes made to Part III of the Rule in the most recent revision (in 2018), was to slightly change the wording of Statute 7 to allow Conferences a little more flexibility in conducting their meetings, specifically so that they might have meetings wholly dedicated to spiritual reflection, but not necessarily including the “business” items of the agenda every week.

After all, “*the end of the Society is especially to rekindle and refresh ... the spirit of Catholicism,*” Bl. Frédéric wrote, explaining further that “*fidelity to meetings, and union of intention and prayer are indispensable to this end*”. [\[Letter 182, to Lallier, 1838\]](#) In other words, while our home visits are the primary means to our growth in holiness, we cannot achieve that growth without meeting together regularly in prayer and reflection.

The Manual further explains our Rule and is one of the best resources for understanding our traditions. In the case of the meeting agenda, for example, the Manual makes clear that “Every Conference meeting includes a spiritual component that promotes active participation and discussion.” [\[Manual, p. 18\]](#) While there is not a prescribed form for the spiritual reflection, both the Rule and Manual explain that the center of it is discussion and sharing between members.

Writing about the meetings of the first Conference, Bl. Frédéric related that they were reading and discussing *The Imitation of Christ*, and the *Life of St. Vincent de Paul* in their meetings, for example. [\[Letter 175, to Lallier, 1838\]](#) More recently, using tools such as the [Spirituality of the Home Visit](#) booklet, many Conferences have begun using home visit reports as the basis for their reflections. In this way, all members, not just the visitors, benefit from the visitors’ experience. In turn, by adding their own insights, they enrich everybody’s growth.

Through our spiritual reflections, we seek to explicitly connect our service, spirituality, and friendship. This is one of our most precious traditions, if we believe, as Bl. Frédéric did, “*that visiting the poor should be the means and not the end of our association.*” [\[Letter 182, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

Contemplate

How can I better foster shared growth in holiness in my Conference?

Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#)

Enough

We are called to see the face of Christ in those we serve. In imagining His face, it is easy to imagine the [peaceful face](#) portrayed in so many great [works of art](#) over the years, or [the glorified Christ](#), or even Christ crucified on a [clean cross](#) at the front of our churches.

Which Christ, then, are we called to see? Christ, our Lord, risen in glory? Jesus of Nazareth, carpenter? Jesus the condemned, bloodied, and humiliated? For St. Vincent, the great lesson of the incarnation was that “*Since Christ willed to be born poor ... he made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty.*” [\[Manual, 54\]](#) Through Vincent’s vision, we are called to see the carpenter, the unemployed, the single mom – all those neighbors who so regularly call our Conferences for help. He is there.

Blessed Frédéric’s vision reminds us that in the poor before us “*we can put finger and hand in their wounds and the scars of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads...and we should fall at their feet and say with the Apostle, 'Tu est Dominus et Deus meus.'*” [\[Letter 137, to Janmot, 1837\]](#) We serve Him, and we also share in His suffering.

Who is Frédéric’s Jesus in our neighborhoods today? In whom can we see Christ’s scars? Who is wrapped in tattered clothing, wounded, unwashed; who sleeps in the cold, and on the street? From whom is it sometimes easier to turn away?

Do we “[speak] about them with euphemisms and with apparent tolerance”? Do we “look at those who suffer without touching them”? [\[Fratelli Tutti, 76\]](#) Do we offer them our prayers but not our hearts, wishing them to [go in peace, but not providing for their needs](#)? Are we sometimes paralyzed into inaction not by lack of charity, but by the fear that their needs are too great for our efforts?

As he walked towards Golgotha, Jesus stumbled under the weight of His cross. Veronica stepped forth, offered Him a cloth with which He wiped away the blood, sweat, and tears, and then continued on His way. Should she have held back, knowing she could not save Him from the cross?

There is not a Jesus of Frédéric or of Vincent. There is only one, and if we seek to see and to serve Him, we must remember that our smiles, kind words, handshakes, consolations, and prayers [\[O’Meara, 177\]](#) are not an extra thing for the neighbor without electricity, they are the most important thing we offer – especially to the neighbors who have nothing.

[Do not be afraid](#). As He promised [He will be with us to the end of the age](#).

Contemplate

Do I believe in my heart that my friendship, prayers, and love are enough?

Recommended Reading

[500 Little Prayers for Vincentians](#)

Something of the Glory of God

Our Rule tells us that our “journey together towards holiness” is made primarily in four ways: visiting the poor, attending our Conference meetings, praying, individually and communally, and transforming our concern into action. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

Our visits to the poor are the central and founding activity of the Society; the activity that defines our particular way of being Christian. We don’t make our visits alone. Yet the visit itself is not our primary purpose. As Blessed Frédéric explained, “*visiting the poor should be the means and not the end of our association.*” [\[Letter 182, to Lallier, 1838\]](#) Our calling to see Christ’s face in the poor whom we visit is not a practical tool to facilitate material assistance, it is a reminder of [Christ’s own teaching](#).

Few Conferences are small enough or busy enough that every single member has the opportunity to visit the poor every week, but that doesn’t mean growth in holiness is limited only to the home visitors! Instead, this is one reason that “*Conferences meet regularly and consistently, usually weekly, but at least every fortnight (twice a month).*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3.1\]](#) By meeting to share our encounters with the poor, we enable all the members of our Conferences to grow closer to Christ at every meeting.

We open and close our meetings with prayer, share in spiritual reflection, and support each other in our work. Our meetings “are held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.4\]](#) Beyond the Conference meetings, we also seek to live individual lives of prayer, believing, as St. Vincent taught, that beginning our days with prayer, our “*mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day.*” [\[CCD IX, 29\]](#) We pray the rosary together, and celebrate Mass together, especially on our [Vincentian Feast Days](#).

Finally, true to the spirit of our Patron Saint, we seek to transform our prayer into action, our contemplation into effective love. This commitment is the fruit of the relationships we form with the neighbor and with each other. It is the [zeal](#) with which we pray for, and work for “*the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#)

We journey together towards holiness because God creates us as social beings, whose relationship with God is reflected in our own social relationships. [\[CSDC, 110\]](#) United with each other and the poor, we recognize that “*something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person.*” [\[CSDC, 144\]](#)

The four aspects of our shared Vincentian journey are not separable. Through them, “*we strive to develop a three-fold relationship with God, the poor and one another.*” [\[Rule, Part III, St. 5\]](#)

Contemplate

To which of these four things (visits, meetings, prayer, action) can I seek to more fully dedicate myself?

Recommended Reading

[Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Chapter 3](#)

He's Right Over There

Vincentians are people of prayer – it is central to our vocation. Equal to it, though, is our commitment to go out and *do*. In the doing, we receive God's transformational grace; we grow closer to perfect union with Christ by serving Him [exactly as he has asked us to do](#), in the person of the poor.

St. Vincent once offered an interesting analogy for the balance between contemplation and action, likening it to the dove that eats its fill, then chews more food only in order to feed it to the little birds. In the same way, he said, we “*gather light and strength for our soul in meditation, reading, and solitude on the one hand, and then to go out and share this spiritual nourishment with others.*” [[CCD XI:33](#)]

Yet we also acknowledge the truth that it is really we who receive. And so, our person-to-person service becomes mutual, as Frédéric taught that it must be. From us, the neighbor receives not only some material relief, but the assurance that God has not abandoned or forgotten them; that He loves them so much he sends us to listen and to pray with them. We, in turn, receive a true revelation and a conversion of our hearts.

In the life of St. Vincent, we note several important moments of conversion, transforming him from the young, ambitious priest seeking benefices and connections, to the humble servant of the poor. In 1617 especially, when he received the confession of the poor farmer in [Gannes](#), and later that year encountering the poor farming family in [Châtillon](#). Like most of us, he was not converted in a blinding flash on the road to Damascus. Instead, through a series of experiences, some of which he may not have even noticed at the time, his heart was turned fully towards Christ.

Spiritually, he had been influenced strongly by the teaching of several mystics, especially Benet of Canfield, whose [Rule of Perfection](#) would be echoed fifty years later in the *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*. Yet he could be somewhat dismissive, at times, of mystic visions of God.

What Vincent came to understand viscerally through his own encounters with the poor is that if you wish to have a vision of Christ, well, *he's right over there!* He is asking for food, or shelter. He is begging to be seen. If you want a revelation of His will, listen; listen with your ears, your eyes, and your heart to the cry of the poor.

We give our time, our talents, our possessions, and ourselves; we serve the will of God and of the poor in providing material assistance and prayer. When we do so, two or three of us together, the Christ who sent us is, as He promised, there with us, making every encounter a moment of revelation and conversion if we seek it.

Contemplate

When did I last see Christ, and what did He reveal to me?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

Practice Makes Perfect

When we become Vincentians, whether as active or associate members, one of the things we promise is to live our Rule. This is, of course, a promise we should make only after reading it! Although our Rule is relatively brief, it's still a little long to memorize. So, in order to live it, we need to reread it from time to time, by ourselves and with our Conferences. It seems like a tall order to live by some lengthy set of instructions, and few people are naturally inclined to try to do that. But the Rule, in its essence, is not a lengthy set of instructions at all. There are some specific instructions, such as how to elect a president, and how long the term of office is, but the Rule is primarily a spiritual document.

Like the rules of various religious orders, it is meant less to *prescribe* a long list of actions and behaviors, but to *describe* what a Vincentian looks like. For example, the Rule tells us that Conferences meet “*in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity, and Christian joy.*” [\[Rule, Part III, St. 8\]](#) That's it. One sentence. It doesn't go on to describe the specific steps we must take to live this part of the Rule, so how do we know if we are living it? One way to measure this is to ask ourselves whether a visitor to our Conference write the words above to describe our meetings. Would we describe our own Conference meetings with these words?

To live our Rule means not only to do the things, such as our home visits and other person to person service, but to truly internalize our spirituality, our traditions, and [our virtues](#). If I have to remind myself from time to time, to be patient, gentle, kind, and understanding, that's okay. At some point, I will no longer just be *acting* gently, but I will *be* gentle; I will no longer be doing Vincentian things, I will be Vincentian.

We promise to live our Rule, and Vincentians keep their promises! We can only do this fully by reviewing that Rule from time to time, and asking ourselves, “Do these words describe the way I act as a Vincentian? Do they describe my Conference?”

Do I “serve the poor cheerfully”? Do I “form relationships based on trust and friendship”? Do I help the neighbor “to feel and recover their own dignity”? Do I “never forget the many blessings I receive from those I visit”? [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8ff\]](#) We reread to remind ourselves, so that we can practice, and become better.

To be a Vincentian is to have a particular way of living our faith, and to pursue our primary calling as Christians, as Catholics, and as Vincentians: [to be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect](#). And we all know the old saying: practice makes perfect.

Contemplate

What parts of the Rule describe me and my Conference? What parts do not?

Recommended Reading

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

Our Long-Term Vision

Our Manual explains that Vincentians “trust in Providence” in our works and in our lives. [\[Manual, p. 63\]](#) We understand this to mean, as Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount, that we should not worry about tomorrow, that we should let the day’s own troubles be enough. [\[Matthew 6:25-34\]](#) But how do we *live* this belief in our Conferences?

In one sense, it would seem that trust in Providence is a call to passivity – just sit back and let God take care of it! Yet neither Jesus, St. Vincent, nor Bl. Frédéric suggest anything of the kind. While assuring us that God knows of our needs and will provide, Jesus reminds us to “*seek first the Kingdom*”, which he contrasts to the flowers God cares for, though “*they do not work nor spin.*” [\[Ibid\]](#)

St. Vincent was a man of action, who famously called his followers to love God with the strength of their arms and the sweat of their brows! [\[CCD XI:32\]](#) We begin with discerning the will of God, then acting upon it, trusting in Him to provide us with what we need. We already know that serving the poor is the [direct, expressed will of Jesus Christ](#). Waiting to act on that, when you think about it is, at least to a degree, a failure of trust.

Similarly, writing extensive and detailed assistance guidelines meant to cover all circumstances is an example of “treading on the heels of Providence” to use one of Vincent’s often-used phrases. Rather, we should be guided by Frédéric’s teaching, that in works of charity “*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.*” [\[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

Trusting in Providence means trusting that when we seek to do God’s will, the outcome of our works also will be His will. God provides, but he also knows what it is that we need, even when we do not. We can and should plan ahead – fundraising is part of that – but God calls us first to provide for the neighbor before us, for the troubles of *their* day, not for our treasury balance tomorrow.

Trust in Providence presents us with one of the ironies of our vocation. Letting today’s troubles suffice, without a thought to tomorrow, would seem to be very short-sighted. Yet by doing this, we fulfill God’s will, seeking His eternal kingdom, which is the longest-term vision we can possibly have.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes let my worries for the future drown out the cry of the poor today?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations II](#)

My God, I Give You My Heart

Our Rule repeatedly emphasizes the importance of prayer to our vocation. We pray often, the Rule reminds us. We live “a life of prayer and reflection, both at the individual and community level” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] Prayer is central to our lives and to our vocation. So, as in all things, we must ask: what does St. Vincent teach us about our life of prayer?

In a general audience in November 2020, Pope Francis expressed four characteristics of prayer, given to us through Christ’s example. [[General Audience, 4 Nov 2020](#)] The first of these is the primacy of prayer; prayer is “*the first desire of the day*”. We listen, we encounter God from our first moment of consciousness.

Similarly, St. Vincent de Paul urged that we should “*always do whatever you can so that, prayer being your first occupation, your mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day.*” [[CCD IX:29](#)] Vincent himself began each day with “mental prayer”, interiorly seeking God’s guidance. The Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission would later incorporate this practice for all the priests and brothers of the mission.

We are only human, and it is easy to seek coffee first – to try to physically jolt ourselves into the energy we need to get up and to get going. But how full are our hearts when we open them instead, first thing each day, to God? Caffeine may well make our hearts beat faster, but prayer will make them beat more insistently, more persistently, more patiently, and more purposefully.

Coffee doesn’t give us the empathy to understand the neighbor as we would a brother or sister. Coffee doesn’t help us to form relationships based on trust and friendship. [[Rule, Part I, 1.9](#)] Coffee is indeed a joyful way to help us greet the day, but coffee is only physical. It warms us from the outside in.

Prayer fills us from the inside out, from where God touches us most deeply so that His love may take root and grow to where we can share Him and His love with all those we encounter. But first, and to start each and every day, we must open our innermost hearts to Him.

On awaking, his biographer Joseph Guichard said, St. Vincent would begin each day by crossing himself and saying, “*My God, I give You my heart.*” May we follow his example, not only in our words, but in our devotion, our practice of prayer, and in our hearts – every day.

Contemplate

As a Vincentian, a Catholic, a Christian, how do I greet each day?

Recommended Reading

[500 Little Prayers for Vincentians](#)

On Our Way

One of the central activities of the Conferences and Councils of the Society is formation. Because we often use this word as a synonym for “training” we can begin to think of it as an isolated event, something to check off on a list when we join the Society or enter into specific positions. But formation is not a single event – it is a lifelong journey of becoming...of becoming what?

As Vincentians, we have chosen a specific [way of being Catholic](#), and this way, this vocation, forms us. The [Foundation Document on Vincentian Formation](#), adopted by the Society more than twenty years ago, suggests four different dimensions of formation, closely mirroring the areas outlined in [Pastores dabo vobis](#), an apostolic exhortation on the formation of priests.

Our human formation, the basis for all formation, begins with our actions, which are shaped by our virtues. We become by doing, we build habits of virtue in order to become virtuous. For Vincentians, these include the [Cardinal Virtues](#), the [Theological Virtues](#), and our [Vincentian Virtues](#).

Our spiritual formation has to do with the transcendent aspect of our nature; the aspect in which we are truly made in God’s image. Our spiritual formation reminds us that we are created to live in community. The model of the Holy Trinity reminds us that the eternal life is a shared life, and that our path to it is also shared. As Vincentians, we pray and reflect together often. Our spiritual reflections and prayers in each Conference meeting are a vital part of our ongoing formation. Our individual prayers, retreats, Mass - and prayers shared with the neighbor are all part of our spiritual formation. We journey together towards holiness. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

Our training falls within our intellectual formation. The efforts we make to learn the practical aspects of our vocation, to learn about poverty, and about specific works and programs. But our intellectual formation also demands that we take the time to read about our heritage, the words and deeds of our saints and blessed, as well as to devote time to personal study of Holy Scripture.

Finally, ministerial formation comes from a commitment to our vocation as mission, accepting our service as a means to our growth, and remaining open to all ways to serve, including servant leadership.

Our particular way of being Catholic, our particular process of becoming, is our Vincentian vocation. We follow, in every part of our lives, our Vincentian pathway towards becoming what Christ calls us to be, [“perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”](#)

Contemplate

In what way was I formed today? How did I grow closer to holiness?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Close Enough

There's an old joke, when a task is incomplete or incorrect, that "it's close enough for government work!" There is no comparable joke for charitable works, because we have the highest standard possible: we are called to do God's will as best we can discern it. How can we best help this family? What is the best decision for the Conference? Through prayer and discussion, we come to a consensus that we hope reflects God's will.

It is true that to begin works of charity, offered [for love alone](#), requires very little discernment because Jesus very specifically told us His will that we should [love the neighbor](#), and [serve the least among us](#)! Yet we know that in the course of these works, as we walk our Vincentian pathway, we encounter more questions along the way. We are never really done with seeking God's will.

Our prayers, individually and together, draw us closer to Him. We offer praise and thanks, and place our needs before Him, but, as Jesus prayed, "[not as I will, but as you will](#)." We seek His will in the answers to our prayers. In our Vincentian friendship, we seek to be of one mind and one heart, "following the example of the blessed Trinity." [\[SWLM, 771\]](#) We seek to do His will by imitation.

The Society's primary purpose is our own growth in holiness, towards "perfect union with Christ". [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) That isn't limited to the works of the Conference, because ours is a "vocation for every moment of our lives". [\[Rule, Part I, 2.6\]](#). Both as Vincentians and as Catholics, we are called to discern God's will for the spiritual journey through our lives.

In between all our talking and doing, we must also stop to listen, to try to hear that tiny whisper in the storm. We must look back upon the events and people in our lives and "re-read" those moments that changed us. We may accept a loss or misfortune as God's will, but that is only one step. Placing ourselves silently in God's presence, we also look back to see where that misfortune led us – something we could only know by looking back.

Little by little we move closer to knowing and doing His will and doing it fully. It isn't the gist of God, it's the will of God. If that seems very specific, that's only because it is. God's will is for each of us, very specifically, because He loves each of us very individually.

To seek and to do His will is nothing more than to love Him back, and when we truly love Him, we are close enough for charitable work.

Contemplate

Consider a moment of conversion in your life. How did it change your heart, and your path?

Recommended Reading

[A Heart on Fire – Apostolic Reflection with Rosalie Rendu](#)

A Persevering Fidelity

As Vincentians, our primary purpose is our own growth in holiness. Achieving this is very closely tied to another core tenet of our spirituality, which is that our *“ideal is to help relieve suffering [for love alone](#), without thinking of any reward or advantage for [ourselves].”* [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] It only stands to reason that our ideal is also the greatest commandment, Christ’s express will that we [love the neighbor as ourselves](#), for the love of God.

Saint Vincent de Paul once explained to the priests of the mission that in order to do this, we must make our intentions clear at the start. He suggested this prayer, which members of the Society might also consider offering before each home visit: *“My God, I’m going to do this for love of You; for love of You I’m going to stop doing this thing in order to do something else.”* [[CCD XI:284](#)]

Making this good intention, he said, is much like saying the words of the sacrament of Baptism – it isn’t the water that baptizes the child. Water is only matter; the prayer is the form. In a similar way, our charitable works, by themselves, are only matter if not expressly offered for the love of God alone.

There are many temptations that can distract us from this. Vincent described five vices that act contrary to [our virtues](#): *“(1) mere human prudence; (2) the desire for publicity; (3) always wanting everyone to give in to us and see things our way; (4) the pursuit of self-gratification in everything; (5) attaching no great importance to either God’s honor or the salvation of others.”* [[CCD XII:254](#)]

So, for example, although we owe an accounting of our works to our donors, we can sometimes get too caught up in the narrative of our great successes, and even begin to see our works as achievements, forgetting *“that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.”* [[Rule, Part I, 3.14](#)]

Fr. Corpus Delgado, C.M., in a conference on St. Louise de Marillac, shared this great insight from her example: *“To follow Jesus the Crucified Lord is to learn little by little that success is not one of the names of God, and that in our vocation and in our service, we are not asked for percentages of effectiveness but a persevering fidelity.”* [CEME, Salamanca, 2010]

The home visit isn’t about the light bill, or the rent, or the groceries. If it were, we could leave those things at the doorstep. It’s about the love of God and the neighbor, which perhaps can’t be measured or reported but is exactly the thing that can lead to our growth in holiness, so that it is no longer we who love, but Christ who loves through us. [[Rule, Part I, 2.1](#)]

Contemplate

Do I make my intention clear to God before each work of charity?

Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#)

Pray, Pray Again

In advising a young priest who was departing to become the Superior of the Agde Seminary, Vincent offered guidance that was both deeply spiritual and profoundly practical - advice that remains pertinent to those in servant leadership in the Society today. [\[CCD XI:310-316\]](#)

He urges the new leader to focus on imitation of Christ, discernment of God's will, and especially on the virtue of humility. Indeed, it is Christ's humility that Vincent holds forth as an example to imitate. Christ, as leader of His disciples did not "lord it over them", despite, in fact, being the Lord! He taught us that he had come not to be served, but to serve.

Vincent contrasts this very basic tenet with those who that you have to "make it clear you are Superior." Instead, he emphasizes that the superior should live just like the others, and always seek God's will in prayer and meditation, rather than rely on his own personal judgment. Observers should not be able to tell by watching how we live, which is the leader.

Again and again, he comes back to humility, and to imitation of Christ's humility: The superior does not take personal satisfaction in the works or successes of the company, instead always attributing them to God. He does not offer his words of advice or make decisions without recourse to prayer and meditation to God. He asks God to tell him the needs of the others and to guide him in serving them.

No matter how dedicated we may feel that we are in our prayer lives, Vincent's words here remind us how much more room there is for prayer and meditation – and how very practical this advice is. For those times when, even subconsciously, we think "this problem is not important enough to bring to God," Vincent reminds us, echoing the Sermon on the Mount, that [God counts even the hairs on our head](#). Not to bring our "little things" to Him more regularly is, in a sense, to deny the great humility of God's incarnation in Christ; it is to elevate our own judgment in place of God's.

As servant leaders, we should marvel each day that Providence led us to this place and to this role and pray that we are giving back to heaven all that we have been given. Perhaps this, from St. Vincent, should be one of our daily prayers:

"Lord, what have I done to have such a ministry? What works of mine correspond to the responsibility being placed on my shoulders? Ah, my God, I'll spoil everything if You yourself don't guide all my words and works!"

Contemplate

How often do I pray for God's guidance in all of my decisions and all of my works?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

At the Top of the Stairs

“*The little Society of St. Vincent de Paul is alive and growing,*” wrote Bl. Frédéric, “*the extraordinary needs of this winter have reinvigorated the activity of our almsgiving.*” [Letter 224, to Lallier, 1840] This was, he said, the way in which they strove to keep the fire of Christian brotherhood burning. But for this seven-year-old Society, “almsgiving” had already expanded to include the kind of works we now describe as “systemic change”.

Frédéric went on to explain that a “*great many of our members have volunteered to help young ex-prisoners, and the excellent La Perrière is engaged in establishing preventive assistance.*” [ibid] Not content only to serve the needs of those already hungry and in poverty, the Conference at Lyon was working to help ex-prisoners make their way back into society and setting up other programs to help people avoid poverty in the first place. This only makes sense – as the old saying goes, we fight poverty, not the poor. So why would Vincentians not try to head it off at the pass?

Such approaches do not contradict our mission of person-to-person service, of seeing and serving Christ in the poor whom we visit. On the contrary, it is our home visits that give us the insights necessary to determine what sort of programs are most needed in our own communities. That is why the Rule explains that the “*Society should work not only with individuals in need but also with families and communities.*” [Rule, Part I, 7.9] Special Works and Systemic Change are, and have always been, the natural outgrowth of the home visit, and the regular practice of the Society. [Manual, p. 5]

Social scientists may do their studies, and offer insights in their publications, but it is as true today as it was in Frédéric’s time that “*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, sitting by his bed side, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind.*” [Baunard, 279] We are called not to simply drop the groceries at the top of those stairs and walk away, but to gain from our neighbors the knowledge Frédéric described, and put it to use [beyond the home visit](#).

“*There is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice,*” St. Vincent wrote, “*or that permits us to do more than we reasonably can.*” [CCD II:68] Charity and justice go together in our church’s teaching, our Patron’s spirituality, and our founder’s example.

Justice places its demands on each of us and all of us, not just the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. And while justice and charity are inextricably bound together, Vincentians remain especially committed to solve those problems that we understand uniquely through the eyes of our neighbors, always “[*making*] *charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.*” [Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836]

Contemplate

My Conference serves many individual needs. Can I add them up to a wider problem we can address?

Recommended Reading

[Seeds of Hope](#)

A Simple Aspiration

We celebrate the great vision of our primary founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam who, along with six others, started that first Conference which has since grown to literally encircle the world, as he had envisioned. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.4\]](#) Lest we confuse vision with ambition, though, Frédéric's oft-stated goals for himself and the Society were simply to become better, and to do a little good. On its face, this may seem to be a contradiction. After all, how does one reconcile a vision of charity and justice sweeping across France and the world, restoring the church, and making the world better with the humble personal aspiration simply to do a little good, or to become better?

In Frédéric's estimation, the Society's rapid growth was not the work of its members, least of all himself, but had grown so rapidly only through Divine Providence, through which it also had "*been allowed to do a little good*". [\[Letter 141, to Ballofet, 1837\]](#) He understood, exactly as St Vincent had repeatedly taught, that any success we may have, or that our Society may have, is entirely the work of God, not ourselves. Indeed, the whole point of the work is not the earthly result, but our own growth in holiness; our "becoming better."

While their works, as Frédéric hoped, may indeed "[erase] little by little the old divisions of political parties" and "make it a moral country", it won't because of a grand strategy, but because the members seek "to become better themselves in order to make others happier". [\[Letter 290, to Amélie, 1841\]](#)

Remember, we seek "to help relieve suffering [for love alone](#), without thinking of any reward or advantage for [ourselves]". [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) If the world changes, it changes – that's up to God. We're called to serve [selflessly](#), to "*do all the good we can, and trust to God for the rest.*" [\[Baunard, 81\]](#) To become better, then, is not a matter of earning accolades; it is something we do for others, and for God.

Indeed, as Frédéric once advised his friend Ernest Falconnet, "*it would be a thousand times better to languish in obscurity for half a century, edifying others with a spirit of resignation and doing some little good, than to be intoxicated for a few brief months with worldly pleasure*". [\[Baunard, 349\]](#)

Ours is "a vocation for every moment of our lives". [\[Rule, Part I, 2.6\]](#) We seek to do a little good, to become better, because, as Frédéric wrote, as "*a Christian, a believer in God, in humanity, in country, in family, never forget that your life belongs to them, not to yourself*". [\[Baunard, 349\]](#)

It may seem a simple aspiration, to become better, but simple does not necessarily mean easy. We grow in holiness together, each of us and all of us, seeking to fulfill God's will by doing a little good, and there can be no greater aspiration than that.

Contemplate

How can I become better, and do a little good, today?

Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#)

The Heart of the Matter

There are times when the demands of serving the neighbor can weigh heavily on us, sometimes because there are so many calls to answer, and sometimes because our efforts often seem to be in vain; the poor remain poor, the struggling continue to struggle. We are called to serve in hope, but how do we raise our own spirits? How do we return to what Bl. Frédéric called “*the rays of charity which at the beginning came sometimes to illuminate and warm our souls*”? [[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835](#)]

Our own physical rest and health, of course, is not only for our own benefit. As St. Vincent once explained to St. Louise in telling her to get some rest, “*Increase your strength; you need it, or, in any case, the public does.*” [[CCD I:392](#)] And as our Rule reminds us, “*Vincentians are available for work in the Conferences only after fulfilling the family and professional duties.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.6](#)]

Resting our bodies is often enough to restore our energy, but not necessarily our zeal when we feel weighed down by the feeling that our work is not accomplishing enough; when the neighbor continues to struggle, no matter how much we help. It is at these times that it becomes most important to reflect deeply upon the nature of our works, and the purpose of our Society.

We are not the Society of Rental Assistance or Food Pantries. We serve in hope not only of offering some material relief, we serve in the hope of eternal life in Christ, and we visit the neighbor to share that hope through our friendship, our prayer, and our love.

In the history and traditions of the Society, and of the whole Vincentian Family, our visits have been not only to the poor in their homes, but to hospitals and prisons. As Chaplain of the Galleys, St. Vincent de Paul brought prayer, and hope, and the love of God to thousands of prisoners without freeing a single one. For the rest of his life, he could hardly speak about the galley prisoners without weeping.

The emotional burden we carry with us from sharing our neighbor’s suffering is part of our expression of love, and we can take great solace in knowing that we truly lighten their burdens by sharing them. And just as we share the neighbor’s burden, we pray that the neighbor may share our hope. We visit to show them that God has not forgotten them; that they too may share in the hope of everlasting life.

Knowing this hope in our own hearts, serving in His name and for His sake, may our hearts not be burned out, but on fire, and our souls “*in a continuous state of joy and happiness*”. [[SWLM, A.14b](#)]

Contemplate

Do I always seek first to offer the suffering of the neighbor to God, and the love of God to the neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#)

To Boldy Go

The bold, five-year mission of the starship Enterprise was “[to seek out new life and new civilizations](#)” on “strange new worlds.” Vincentians, though constrained to our same old world, and not limited to a mere five years, are similarly called “to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten” in our mission of charity. [[Rule, Part I, 1.5](#)]

Our hands are full, it may seem, just answering the calls for help that arrive unannounced; our treasuries may strain to meet the needs presented to us. So why would we go around trying to find more? After all, don't our neighbors find us, just as we receive donations, through God's providence? Of course! But recall that trust in Providence is not a mandate to be merely passive. As Blessed Frédéric once wrote, “*Providence does not need us for the execution of its merciful designs, but we, we need it and it promises us its assistance only on the condition of our efforts.*” [[Letter 135, to Bailly, 1836](#)]

What greater or more important effort could we offer but to seek out those in need – especially the forgotten? After all, as both Moses and Jesus remind us, [the land will never lack for needy persons](#) and [the poor will always be with us](#). The most needy may be forgotten by their neighbors and by society, but they are not forgotten by God, their Creator. It is exactly that message, that hope, that we are called to share on our home visits.

It is our respect for the dignity of every person that should motivate us to seek them, to find them, and to share God's love in the form of bread, in the form of help, and most importantly in the form of our presence and love. We can never let the fear of a depleted treasury stop us from seeking out those most in need, because we know that “giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.” [[Rule, Part I, 3.14](#)]

God does provide. He provides generously and lovingly. It is the will of God that our neighbors in need call us, and the will of God that enables us to help them. But as St. Louise reminds us, we must “*never take the attitude of merely getting the task done.*” [[SWLM, A.85](#)] We are not the Society of Bill Payments, we are the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, following the example of our Patron, as he in turn imitated Christ.

We are called to see the face of Christ. He is out there; not on a strange new world, but perhaps on a park bench, perhaps in a darkened apartment, perhaps in a hospital or prison. The world may have forgotten Him, but we hear His cry, and seek Him, unafraid.

Contemplate

Where can I go to find Christ, and how can I serve Him best?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Spiritual and Religious

Perhaps you have friends who say “I am spiritual, but not religious.” For Vincentians, our spirituality is not only religious, it is our very special and specific way of living our Catholic faith.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that there are many and varied spiritualities that have been developed throughout history, and that “*the personal charism of some witnesses to God's love for men has been handed on... so that their followers may have a share in this spirit.*” [CCC, 2684] For us, that “*refraction of the one pure light of the Holy Spirit*” is the charism of St. Vincent de Paul.

Unlike many well-known saints, Vincent never wrote a treatise about his spirituality; there is no Vincentian [Summa Theologica](#), [Introduction to the Devout Life](#), or [Spiritual Exercises](#) for us to study. We can learn a great deal by reading the words he spoke in conferences and letters, but more importantly, we learn through his example, his actions, passed down to us through more than 400 years of Vincentian Family tradition, and especially through our primary founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam.

It seems only right that our spirituality is learned first through action. After all, as Vincent once said, we must “*love God...with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows*”. [CCD XI:32] Two hundred years later, Frédéric would found the Society by declaring “*Let us go to the poor!*” [Baunard, 65]

Ours a spirituality of action, of doing, of serving. At the same time, we pray “*both at the individual and community level*” with our own lives “*characterized by prayer, meditation on the Holy Scriptures and other inspirational texts and devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary*”. [Rule, Part I, 2.2] Our prayers always include reflection on our service, reminding us, as Frédéric put it, that “*visiting the poor should be the means and not the end of our association.*” [Letter 182, to Lallier, 1838]

We trust in Divine Providence, in the love and the abundance of God. We do not worry about running out of resources – everything that is given to us belongs to the poor already, and “*members should never adopt the attitude that the money is theirs, or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it*”. [Manual, 23] We trust, with Frédéric, that to do works of charity, “*it is never necessary to worry about financial resources, they always come.*” [Letter 121, to his mother, 1836]

Finally, and most importantly, we see, we serve, and we love Jesus Christ in the person of the neighbor whom we serve. As St Vincent taught, “*you go into poor homes, but you find God there.*” [CCD IX:199] As Frédéric taught, the poor “*are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise shall we not love Him in [their] persons?*” [Letter 137, to Janmot, 1836]

Through these actions, we grow closer to Christ. This is our spirituality. This is our religion.

Contemplate

How often do I share my Vincentian spirituality with other Catholics?

Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#) (especially 3.2, Vincentian Spirituality)

Only Visiting

When we think back on our experiences visiting the homes of our neighbors, we are justly proud of the many times that we “solved the problem”, often with a little money, or some food; sometimes with advice and encouragement. We may not always change the lives of the poor, but we can often check off one problem from the list, and share in their happiness at that. But this is not always the case.

Sometimes it seems that there is nothing we can do; the problem is too big, or the situation too complex; we don’t have money, or the expertise, or it’s just...too much. Often, we know this before we even schedule the visit. So why do we go?

St. Vincent taught about affective love and effective love. Effective love is not emotional, it is active. It is an act of will, to provide for another – to give them the things that they need. This is the love we think about when we commit ourselves to serving [for love alone](#). [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] So what happens when “effectiveness” is off the table?

Think, for example, of the neighbors we visit who have no homes, who live on the streets or in the parks, and who suffer from all of the health and wellness problems that often accompany long-term homelessness. In severe weather, we may sometimes be able to offer a shelter that will prevent death. We may be able to provide clean clothes and some food, and then...we send them off again.

Effective love, though, does not come at the expense of affective love. When we sit with the suffering, perhaps especially those who are suffering what we can barely comprehend much less alleviate, we may sometimes find ourselves overwhelmed with emotion. We try to choke it back, certain that we can be more comforting if we can remain more placid. But affective love, Vincent taught, “proceeds from the heart” making us “continually aware of the presence of God”. [[CCD IX:372](#)]

It is in your silent tear that you share the burdens and the pain of the neighbor. For so much of their lives, these suffering people are unseen by so many who avert their eyes when walking past. When we see them clearly enough to shed a tear, they know that tear is “an act of love, causing people to enter one another’s hearts and to feel what they feel”. [[CCD XII:221](#)] We share both God’s love and our own.

Ours is a ministry of doing, but it is first and always a ministry of loving presence. Just as Christ shared in our suffering, that we might suffer no more, we share the neighbor’s burdens that they might know the promise of His kingdom, where [He will wipe every tear from our eyes](#).

After all, [this world is not our home](#). We are only visiting.

Contemplate

Do I fully open my heart to both tears and joy with the neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations II](#)

A Ministry of Presence

It is a deeply ingrained tenet of our charism that Vincentians are *doers*. We don't just talk about serving, we serve. At the same time, we must always remember that we are not called to action for action's sake, but for our growth in holiness. The more selflessly we serve, the more it benefits our own souls – the central irony, you might say, of our vocation.

It is easy to seek ways to more “efficiently” distribute assistance, either because the needs are truly great, or because we have personally become tired, but whatever the reason, when we turn our focus to the groceries or the light bills, we lose sight of Christ's face.

In the earliest days of the Ladies of Charity, there was a proposal that the ladies might find somebody else to cook the food to be brought to the Hôtel-Dieu, but Vincent could see that once we parcel out part of our charitable works, an unfortunate chain of events is likely to follow, because when we relieve ourselves of the obligation to cook, “you will never again be able to restore this practice”; if you hire out the work, it will become too expensive, soon you will conclude that whoever cooks the food should deliver it, and “in this way your Charity will be reduced to failure”. [\[CCD I:70\]](#)

The Ladies were not managing a hospital cafeteria, they were bringing the love of God – the literal meaning of the word “charity” – to the suffering poor. It was their presence, members of France's upper class, welcoming the poor into this great community of faith, reminding them that God had not forgotten them, that was the real work they were called to do.

And so it remains for us today. From time to time, circumstances may require us to compromise on our person to person service, meeting virtually or by telephone, but this will always be a compromise, a half of a loaf – better than no loaf at all, as the saying goes, but never equal to the whole loaf. We are called to “grow more perfect in love by expressing compassionate and tender love to the poor and one another.” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) Officers at all levels of the Society are especially expected to “visit the poor as often as possible.” [\[Rule, Part III, St. 12\]](#) We recognize, as Bl. Frédéric said, “that visiting the poor should be the means and not the end of our association.” [\[Letter 182, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

Vincentians serve [for love alone](#), in the “hope that someday it will be no longer they who love, but Christ who loves through them”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.1\]](#) Anybody can deliver a pot of soup, but we're not Door Dash, we're the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and ours is a ministry of presence.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes let my focus on the material needs cause me to lose focus on the person?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

Hearts Filled with Joy

The primary purpose of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the spiritual growth of its members. We seek, by serving the poor, to see His suffering and to grow closer to Him and welcoming the neighbor into His love. All this suffering serves a purpose in God's plan, but that does not mean we serve in sadness!

Vincentians receive many dimensions of God's grace as a result of our home visits, but perhaps the most important dimension is *joyful grace*. We are like children who have just cleaned up their rooms without being asked, racing to tell our parents what we have done! We are bursting with pride not only because know this will please our parents, but because in the course of our cleaning we saw for ourselves that it was good.

Similarly, we have sat in the pew and listened to the words of Gospel of Matthew many times, and many times we have nodded along as Christ explains the [Judgment of Nations](#). It all makes sense – serve the least among us, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger...probably most of us can recite it by heart. But as Army General Norman Schwartzkopf once said, "You almost always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it."

And so we are filled with joy as we fulfill God's will through our works. But our hearts are doubly filled with this joyful grace of God as we realize that we have encountered Christ Himself – exactly as he told us we would.

We go to the homes of the poor and, as Vincent explains, we "find God there!" [\[CCD IX:199\]](#) This is a source of wonder not because it is so surprising, but precisely because it is not. Christ's word is fulfilled through our actions and our hearts are filled with joy!

When we think about finding new members to join with us in our Conferences, or to form new Conferences, extending this worldwide network of charity, no "recruiting pitch" should be necessary. We have been in the presence of a loving God and have in turn shared His love with others. This joyful grace fills us to overflowing – why would we not want that for all of our friends? Why would we not invite them to share in our joy? Why would we keep it to ourselves?

Contemplate

Do I hesitate to share this great joy of God's grace with my friends?

Recommended Reading

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

Between Vincent and Francis

Writing to his friend Auguste Materne, a 17-year-old Frédéric Ozanam tried to sum up his good points and his bad points. The bad side he reduced to “*four predominant faults: pride, impatience, weakness, and an extreme meticulousness*” which he went on to explain in more detail, then closed with an odd self-assessment: “*Add to these faults that of despising the neighbor a little too easily and you have my bad side.*” [[Letter 12, to Materne, 1830](#)] Less than three years before founding the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, whose members are dedicated to loving and serving our neighbors, this man, this role model of holiness, admitted to “*despising the neighbor a little too easily*”?

The younger Frédéric recognized his own pride and impatience, which sometimes led him to intolerance. He concluded that he thought he “*could become either a very wicked or a very virtuous man.*” Ozanam’s frankness may be a reminder that each of us has a saint within us, struggling to be set free from our human weaknesses, whatever they may be, and in order to achieve the holiness we seek, we all need help. As our Rule puts it, “*Vincentians are aware of their own brokenness and need for God’s grace.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)]

Frédéric, whose [beatification](#) attests to the holiness he ultimately attained, found the grace to go beyond his own brokenness in the very place that we may find it, too – in the Society he founded for this very purpose. Indeed, only nine years after delineating his own weaknesses, he would write to Father Lacordaire, saying “*I greatly fear to lose in useless efforts time I could more modestly and surely employ for my salvation and the service of the neighbor.*” [[Letter 211, to Lacordaire, 1839](#)] His impatience had reversed itself, and he now urgently sought to serve the neighbor.

Each of us, Frédéric wrote, “*carries within his heart a seed of sanctity*”. [[Letter 137, to Janmot, 1837](#)] It is in the poor that we see God, and are able to serve Him and thus grow closer to Him; to nurture that seed. This is both the lesson of Frédéric’s life, and the example he leaves for us; an example of holiness attained, but more importantly, an example of growth in holiness.

Beyond even that, Frédéric shows us how to grow in holiness together, asking his fellow Vincentians to “*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.*” [[Baunard, 386](#)] In return, Léonce Curnier would say after his lifelong friend’s death that “*I never think of Frédéric without an inclination to invoke his assistance... I seem to see him in Heaven between St. Vincent de Paul and St. Francis de Sales, whose faithful disciple he was.*” [[Ibid, 406](#)]

May we continue to serve Christ, and to pray for each other’s salvation. Pray for us Blessed Frédéric!

Contemplate

Do I always pray for my fellow Vincentians, living and dead, and ask also for their prayers?

Recommended Reading

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

Accompanied by Justice

“*There is no act of charity,*” St. Vincent once wrote, “*that is not accompanied by justice...*” [CCD II:68] We so often see the words “charity” and “justice” used together that we perhaps don’t often think enough about what these words mean, and what they mean for us to do in practice.

We know that charity, [the greatest of the theological virtues](#), is love, and that our acts of charity are in turn the means by which we express and live this virtue: loving God and neighbor. [CCC, 1822] But justice seems like a harder word, doesn’t it?

Our human justice, the legal system, seems focused mainly on punishment, and when we think of God’s justice we may think mainly of the Final Judgment. Yet it should be clear that St. Vincent is not asking us to pass judgment on anybody, much less to punish them. Nor is Frédéric, when he calls upon us to “*to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.*” [Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836]

Taken in context, Vincent’s letter was to a missionary regarding a large donation that had been sent to him to support the religious, reminding him to “*use none of it for any other purpose under any pretext of charity whatsoever.*” [CCD II:68] In other words, taking what belongs to somebody else, even to help the poor, cannot be an act of charity because it is unjust.

In a similar way, Frédéric was calling to “*to make equality as operative as is possible among men; to make voluntary community replace imposition and brute force; to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.*” [Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836] It’s the Christian duty, in other words, for those who have much to give it away of their own accord. It is not our duty to try to force them. And if what each of us can spare is not enough, then we dig deeper, beyond what we think we can spare.

We sometimes say of convicted criminals that “they got what they deserved!” That is justice, but all persons deserve certain things. After all, God did not place us on the earth, living in community, so that some of us might starve. As John the Baptist preached, [for the man who has two coats, one belongs to him, and the other belongs to the man with no coat](#). Having “two coats” was a sign of wealth 2000 years ago, but each of us can ask ourselves today “what is my second coat? To whom does it belong?”

As Pope Saint Gregory the Great explained, when we give “*necessaries of any kind to the indigent, we do not bestow our own, but render them what is theirs; we rather pay a debt of justice...*” [P.R., Bk III] Giving our time and ourselves is charity. Treating the poor with dignity is justice. Assisting them with money donated for that purpose is justice. That is why “*Conference members should never adopt the attitude that the money is theirs, or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it.*” [Manual, 23]

Contemplate

What is my “second coat”? To whom does it belong?

Recommended Reading

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

What's the Difference?

Speaking about the home visit in 1834, Blessed Frédéric said that it *“is one of the best rendered charities and one that produces the best results, above all, in these times when help is generally dispensed with such culpable indifference...”* [Unpublished] It's useful to recall that the home visit was not the first or the only form of assistance to the poor in Frédéric's time, just as it is not the only form of assistance in our own time.

Take a number. Have a seat. Fill out this form. Let's see if you qualify. I'll ask the committee for approval. These impersonal words and actions accompany so much of the material assistance available to our neighbors in need from various agencies they approach, hat in hand, sometimes taking time off work that they can hardly afford to take.

St. Vincent once mused that *“there is great charity, but it is badly organized”*. [\[VHJ 26.1\]](#) In our day, this observation seems at times to have been turned on its head, as the poor are drowned in “organization” when seeking whatever assistance may be available. As John Boyle O'Reilly so memorably put it in his 1886 poem, [In Bohemia](#):

The organized charity, scrimped and iced,
In the name of a cautious, statistical Christ;

“Under the guise of being politically correct or ideologically fashionable,” Pope Francis says, *“we look at those who suffer without touching them.”* [\[FT, 76\]](#) Material assistance doled out impersonally, or indifferently as Frédéric put it, is like exercise on a treadmill. Your body may be served, but you will not have gotten anywhere.

The home visit brings with it the understanding of a friend, the welcoming smile, and *“to the bread that nourishes, it adds the visit that consoles”*. [\[O'Meara, 229\]](#) Far from “culpable indifference”, we *“must never take the attitude of merely getting the task done.”* [\[SWLM, 773\]](#) Instead, as our Rule demands of us, we give generously of our time, our talents, our possessions and ourselves. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#)

We're not called only to write checks. We're called to love our neighbor. That's the difference.

Contemplate

Are my home visits more like an interviews, or conversations?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module VII](#) (with your Conference!)

The Journey Together

“*Vincentians*,” the Rule reminds us, “*are called to journey together towards holiness*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] We repeat this often among ourselves, perhaps sometimes at the risk of treating it as a mere slogan. It is good to consider more deeply from time to time exactly what we are saying, and more importantly to ask ourselves: what is holiness? In what special way are Vincentians called to it?

Our church, of course, teaches that all of us are called to holiness, not just a few of us, not just the clergy or other religious – all of us, whatever our state in life. [[LG, Ch V](#)] Because of the great variety of gifts and talents we are given, we may walk different paths towards the perfection to which Christ calls us, and for members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, this vocation is our special way of being Catholic, our special pathway to holiness.

But what, exactly, is holiness? The Church officially declares the holiness of men and women through beatification and canonization. These blessed people stand for us as role models and intercessors. Yet part of these ecclesiastical processes is a requirement for performing miracles. Does the “universal call to holiness” then require each of us to perform miracles? That would seem to be a fairly high bar!

Pope Francis assures us that there are “saints next door”. Perhaps you have met a few of those gentle souls whose kindness seems almost to touch you physically when you are in their presence. Perhaps this example of the virtue of gentleness is a small glimpse of the “heroic virtue” the church recognizes in our martyrs and saints. Can we journey towards holiness by living [our virtues](#) “heroically”? Can we be role models?

Yet, there is another aspect of holiness, and an important one, which is that “no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual.” Indeed, we “are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people.” [[GetE, 6](#)] We not only are made to live in community, but to lead each other to holiness through community. This is why we understand our Conferences to be “genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action.” [[Rule, Part I, 3.3](#)] We grow in holiness not only by sharing one another’s presence and prayers, but by sharing the work, and reflecting together on God’s presence in the poor.

This, perhaps, is the special call to holiness the Society helps us to follow – that we may not only lead each other to holiness, but, through our works and our love, help to welcome all people to God’s saving plan, one person, one neighborhood, one community at a time.

Contemplate

How do I grow in holiness within my Conference? Within my larger community?

Recommended Reading

[Gaudete et Exsultate](#)

Just Vincentian Enough

“Well,” we sometimes admonish ourselves when an idea we’re discussing doesn’t seem quite right, “that’s not very Vincentian.” The phrase is a simple reminder of who we are, and how we act. It needs no further explanation. After all, our Rule finds it sufficient to say that “Visits to the Poor are made in a Vincentian Spirit”. [\[Rule, Part III, St. 8\]](#) The very word Vincentian carries with it a depth of meaning that conveys so much more to Members than it does to anybody outside the Society.

It isn’t that the Rule never explains what it is to be Vincentian. Throughout it, we read things such as “Vincentians feel called to pray together”, “Vincentians strive to seek out and find those in need”, “Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully”, “Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship”, “Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit”, and, of course, “Vincentians serve in hope.”

It turns out that our little word, Vincentian, is a very big thing. So big that if we were to make a list of all the characteristics and actions of Vincentians from our Rule and Manual, and treat as a list of instructions, it would be overwhelming.

In a similar way, if we were to make a list of all the times Jesus says things like “[go and do likewise](#)”, “[as I have done for you, you should also do](#)”, “[do this and you will live](#)”, “[love your enemies](#)”, or “[whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me](#)”, we would have an even longer list!

The good news is that these lists are not in conflict; Vincentian spirituality is Catholic spirituality. To be Catholic, and to be Vincentian, is not to carry these lists only in our books, but in our hearts, and in our actions. We know that to be Vincentian is always to err on the side of compassion, even though those words are not in the Rule.

Challenged by the Pharisees to pick out the greatest of the commandments, Jesus responded with an entirely new commandment, in two parts: “[You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.](#)” He was not dismissing the Ten Commandments, but was instead answering the “why” of those commandments.

Few Vincentians have the Rule memorized, and although we try to live it fully, most of us will fall short from time to time. That doesn’t make us any less Vincentian, as long as we remember the “why”. Our “ideal is to help relieve suffering [for love alone](#),” and that is just Vincentian enough.

Contemplate

In serving, is my foremost motive always love of God and neighbor?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#)

The First Bloom

When we hear the expression “from the heart” we understand it to mean that the speech or action is both emotional and sincere; it is powerfully felt, so much so that the action it inspires cannot be resisted. When we open our hearts, we invite others in so that they may know us more deeply. When we are sad, our hearts are broken; when happy, they fill with joy.

St. Vincent often expressed his own love, sympathies, and joy by speaking of his heart, once saying to his beloved friend St. Louise that “*my heart is no longer my heart, but yours, in that of Our Lord, Whom I desire to be the object of our one love.*” [\[CCD I:172\]](#)

Our hearts are moved by each other, moved by pain, moved by joy, and moved by love most of all; the love of family, of friends, of romance – and the greatest of all loves, *agape*, the love of God. “*That is because,*” Bl. Frédéric once explained, “*the human heart easily allows itself to be captured by love and there is always much love there where there is much faith.*” [\[Letter 145, to Velay, 1837\]](#)

Just as our hearts seek one another and seek God, He also seeks us. His love comes first, unbidden and gratuitous; he is, as St. Catherine of Siena said “*crazy in love*” with us. [\[Dialog 153\]](#) This is the love that truly fills our hearts. It is the love that Frédéric said “*which gives itself without diminishing, which shares itself without division, which multiplies itself, which is present in many places at once*”. [\[Letter 107, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

When we visit the neighbor, seeking to learn what Frédéric called “*the secret of his lonely heart*” [\[Bauard, 279\]](#), we can really only do so by “*servicing them from the heart*” as St. Louise taught. [\[SWLM, a.85\]](#)

Our first Rule, in 1835, explained that Members share a friendship that “[will make of all our hearts one heart](#)”. Our vocation calls us to share that friendship not just with each other, but with the neighbors we serve; to share our hearts, and the love of God within them. As was said at the Society’s National Assembly of 1911, “*were we to search carefully, we would find in this world, more hungry hearts than hungry stomachs... Humanity is made up of hearts, and hearts need sympathy more than material aid.*”

This is the great lesson of our patron, and the reason Frédéric said in the first annual report that ought to model not only his works, but “*the manner in which he understood his works. Charity does not consist so much in the distributing of bread as in the manner it is distributed.*” Vincent’s life, he said, “*is a life to be carried on, a heart in which one’s own heart is enkindled*”. [\[Letter 175, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

In this, may we each have, as Vincent wished for Louise, “*a young heart and a love in its first bloom for Him Who loves us unceasingly and as tenderly as if He were just beginning to love us.*” [\[CCD I:408\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I let the neighbor in to my open heart?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)



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