



# 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 Fact Remains

There are some popular sayings we sometimes repeat such as “Facts don’t care about your feelings” or “Facts are facts, whether you like them or not”. Both sayings are quite clever! They also are true, as far as they go, but both really mean the same thing: *Shut up and do what I say.*

A fact does not care about anybody’s feelings, but that’s only because a fact is not a person. In the same way, rocks don’t care about your pain. But we don’t just throw them at people’s heads to make that point. Facts don’t care about your feelings, but we should. This doesn’t mean we must abandon truth in favor of sympathy – quite the contrary!

Blessed Frédéric took great consolation in knowing that “*while defending the truth with all my might, I never offended anyone.*” In our polarized time, this seems like a remarkable thing to say, and it turns out that our times are far less contentious and polarized than Frédéric’s.

Facts don’t care about your feelings. Rocks don’t care about your pain. Yet it can be so easy sometimes, during encounters with the neighbor, to become too focused on the facts. You have been evicted, and a shelter is the best place for you to go right now. That’s a fact. Many of the problems you face are the consequences of your own bad decisions. That’s a fact. Your debts are insurmountable. You need a plan for next month. Money won’t fix your problem. Fact, fact, fact.

It also is a fact, whether we remember it or not, that the neighbor’s problems can feel overwhelming. Some of them may garner nobody’s sympathy. The facts can make people feel very isolated, forgotten, helpless, and small, because facts, like rocks, don’t care about your feelings or your pain.

We do our neighbors no good by simply repeating to them the facts of their situations. The poor, our [Getting Ahead](#) training emphasizes, are experts in their own situation. They have already been hit in the head by their rocks. Like the Good Samaritan, we are not there primarily to focus on the facts; the passersby knew the facts. We are there to pour oil on the wound, to speak in a soothing tone, to offer a smile or a tear, to pause from our own lives and problems and truly share the neighbor’s.

Our virtue of [simplicity](#) calls us to speak not merely truth, but *the* Truth; the One Fact that stands above all others; the Fact that counts the hairs on our heads; the Fact that wipes away all tears; the Fact that transcends all worldly suffering.

Let he who is without challenges, has made no bad decisions, and has never needed help cast the first rock, and let us instead try to build Christ’s church upon it.

We serve in hope, and that’s a fact.

### Contemplate

In light of the facts, how can I best convey hope?

### Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to be Simple](#)

## There is Truly Nothing Better

What does it mean to serve in hope – *serviens in spe*, as our international [logo](#) says? Surely, when we visit a neighbor whose lights have been shut off, who faces eviction, whose cupboards are bare, we (and they) hope for relief from these needs. Thankfully, more often than not, we are able to provide the assistance that is needed. Sometimes, though, the needs are too great, or our resources too limited, and what then?

Thinking back on our own lives, we all can recall times that we narrowly escaped misfortune – the car wreck we walked away from that easily could have been fatal; the illness that was almost accidentally diagnosed before it became untreatable; the unemployment we weathered until finding a job that was better than the one we lost.

“God was with me!” we exclaim with joy. “He answered my prayers!” Surely He was and surely He did, and our joy is not misplaced! Yet when we think it through, we realize that God was also with the ones who don’t survive the crash or the illness, and the ones whose joblessness leads to destitution. He heard their prayers, He loves them equally, His great and universal plan of redemption is for them, too. It is, if we are to take the [Savior’s words](#) to heart, for them *especially*.

This knowledge of God’s special blessings on the poor can ironically make us hesitant at times to even try to offer the true hope, the eternal hope, through our gentleness and our prayers; to allow ourselves to be caught up in the tyranny of the moment, too; to become too discouraged when our own money runs short.

We can remind ourselves that our prayers are the most important part of our home visits, and say them even if only from a sense of habit or duty, but, Bl. Frederic once asked, “*How do we preach resignation and courage to the unfortunate when we feel devoid of it ourselves?*”

Our virtue of [humility](#) is a reminder that everything we have is from God, and everything we do is for His glory. That includes the comfort we may offer, because all comfort comes from God. We don’t ask His comfort on behalf of the neighbor, but together with the neighbor. We ask Him to wipe away our shared tears, to lift the burden not of bills, but of fear from both of us – from all of us.

This is the joy and the challenge of our vocation. It is also the reason that whenever we share our stories with each other, whether in correspondence or in the home visit reports during Conference meetings, our focus must first be on the true hope of salvation, and not, as Bl Frédéric explained in 1838, “*statistical documents where success is defined in prideful numbers. We have to exchange ideas, inspiration perhaps, fears at times, and always hope. These ... communications are like a form of circulation that brings the Society to life. There is truly nothing better.*”

### Contemplate

What inspiration, fear, and hope can I share with my fellow Vincentians?

### Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#)

## From Day to Day

One of the most treasured tenets of our Vincentian spirituality is trust in Providence. When our treasuries run low, we trust in Providence to refill them. When we are not sure of the path to take, we trust in Providence to guide us. But Providence is more than simply a generous donor, or a wise friend, and our trust demands much more from us than simply expecting things to work out well.

In our households and our businesses, we prudently set aside money for “rainy days” rather than spend it all on payday, because we have obligations – bills – that will remain, even if our income does not. But what about the works of the Conference, particularly the assistance we give to neighbors in need? These are not, strictly speaking, obligations, and there is no amount of saving up that will assure we can meet them. As an earlier edition of the Rule explains, our works, *“being entirely optional, should be from day to day; besides, nothing is more Christian than to trust one's self to Providence and to count upon its inexhaustible care when the work is undertaken for God. To make a reserve, to have before us a disposable capital which we never touch, to lay out beforehand a budget as in a relief association, are proceedings essentially contrary to the spirit of our Society.”* [[Rule, 1898, 87](#)]

Our tradition seems almost to defy common sense. Surely it is better to set aside money for those neighbors who will certainly call us next week than to give it all out today! Or perhaps giving all we have to meet today's needs makes the most sense. After all, if a homeless shelter had three vacant beds, who would ever turn away a mom with two kids just to keep those beds open for tomorrow?

The needs presented to us are as unique and unrepeatable as the images of God who present them, and we can never know in advance the best way to help. This is why we are called to [“assess each home visit as a unique encounter and ... not set predefined limitations on the amount of help to be given or the type of help to be given or the number of times to help someone.”](#)

This apparent conflict between prudence and Providence is as old as the Society. As Bl. Frédéric once explained, *“in such a work 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](#)]

To trust in Providence means to abandon ourselves completely to the will of God, and it is from Providence that both donations and the needs of the neighbor are placed before us. [If we have the means, we give generously. When we are poor ourselves, we give what little we have.](#) Money can be saved in a bank, but it isn't money we are trying to save.

### Contemplate

Are there times I let worry about tomorrow's funds obscure the needs before me today?

### Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#)

## Cheerful Givers

[“God loves a cheerful giver,”](#) the Apostle reminds us, and so, we might observe, does every person made in His image. Who wants a guest at their birthday party to grudgingly hand over a gift, sighing under the weight of all the stress of shopping for it? Thankfully, there are few such guests. Instead, the great anticipation of the recipient’s joy at seeing the gift often makes us impatient to see it opened.

The beauty of gifts given freely to friends is that they are given completely unconditionally; we don’t consider for a moment whether a friend *deserves* a birthday present, or whether they will repay it. Our goal is only to find the perfect gift. When we receive gifts, we can hardly help but be happy.

If by chance, the shirt is the wrong size or color, or we’ve already read that book, we always know that it’s the thought that counts; it’s the friendship and love that accompanies the gift that we really celebrate. In the same way, St. Vincent teaches, *“God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken but the charity that accompanied it.”* [\[CCD I:205\]](#) It is not the gift, but the giving that matters.

We bring gifts to each neighbor we visit, and giving them unconditionally, and never “taking the attitude that ...recipients have to prove that they deserve it.” [\[Manual, Ch 2\]](#) Those gifts might include help with a bill, or food, or rent, or “any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.3\]](#)

Most importantly, though, we “never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.14\]](#) What makes a birthday gift so special is the thought and care and love that goes into finding it, wrapping it, and giving it. What makes our gift of time and self to the neighbor so special is thought and care and love that goes into answering their calls, visiting them cheerfully, and always helping in the best way that we can.

When we knock on the neighbor’s door it should be with the same joyful anticipation with which we arrive at a party, with gift in hand. Every home visit is an opportunity to remind the neighbor that God has not abandoned them; to bring them the gift of love – the love of God.

Home visits should never be approached as a chore. They are a special grace from God, given to us so that we might see Him, serve Him, and make ourselves the instruments of His boundless love. [It is more blessed to give than to receive.](#)

### Contemplate

“Why,” St. Louise asked, “are our souls not in a continuous state of joy and happiness?” [\[SWLM, A.14B\]](#)

### Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)



## Just Prayers

“The needs were overwhelming,” the home visit team recalled, “And they were beyond what we could provide. So we just prayed.” Have you heard an account like this before? The emotions were high, the needs were great, there was nothing we could do, so...we just prayed.

It's easy to feel as though we've let down the neighbor sometimes. We are the ones who return their calls. We are the ones who listen and understand. And we are the ones who, more often than not, are able to help with that overdue bill, or groceries, or rent, so when we can't, or when the problem isn't really a matter of material assistance, it can seem as if we've fallen short. Instead of offering our alms, we share in their suffering.

And we *just* pray.

Yet no matter the need, no matter the outcome of our home visit, we always pray. It isn't an afterthought, or a rote exercise, or something we fall back on only when things seem hopeless! Our prayers are the most important thing we have to offer.

After all, why do we offer them for each other, or for our friends and family? Vincentians are people of “prayer and action”. [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3\]](#) Bl. Frédéric calls us to “do all the good we can and trust to God for the rest.” [\[Baunard, 81\]](#) However great or little our efforts or our material offerings, our work is never complete without prayer.

We always pray; we never *just* pray. The final balance between our action and our prayer is up to God alone. As St. Vincent reminds us, “*God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken but the charity that accompanied it.*” [\[CCD I:205\]](#)

In our prayers, we place the needs of the neighbors before God in order to assure them that they are not forgotten, that this, too, shall pass. We add our voices to theirs, knowing that God has placed us in the presence for this reason, that He, too, is present on our home visit, and that the hope we offer is not merely the hope of a light bill payment.

Ultimately, both the light bill and our eternal hope are entirely up to God, so how different should our prayers really be on the visits where we *just* pray? Pope Saint Gregory the Great taught that to give what is ours to the neighbor is charity; to give them what is theirs is justice. [\[P.R., Bk III\]](#) In this sense, at least, all the prayers we offer are *just* prayers.

### Contemplate

If I approach each home visit as if I have only prayer to offer, would I pray differently?

### Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

## The Grace of God

“There but for the grace of God go I.” We tend to share this idiom most often when a peer, a friend, or a colleague suffers a misfortune – somebody whose shoes we imagine to be pretty close to our own size, familiar characters who have made the same mistakes we’ve made. Yet it captures both the empathy that is expected of Vincentian home visitors, and the unmerited nature of God’s grace.

Our Rule says that we refrain from judging the neighbor because we are always aware of our own weakness, and that we “seek to understand them as [we] would a brother or sister.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) That isn’t always easy when the neighbor comes from a very different background than we do; when we don’t quite feel like we can relate; when their mistakes are different than ours.

It becomes easy, at times, to feel as if we truly know better because we haven’t allowed ourselves to make the mistakes we perceive in the neighbor’s story. We sometimes struggle to remind ourselves to, as Bl. Rosalie put it, “*love those who are poor, don’t blame them too much. The world says, ‘It’s their fault... If we had suffered as they have... we would be far from their equal.’*” [\[Sullivan, 211\]](#)

The neighbors that call us often have no place else to turn for help; theirs are calls of desperation. Have they made unforced choices that led them to this? Oftentimes, yes. But just as paramedics don’t pause to figure out who caused the accident before working to treat the wounds, Vincentians don’t, as Bl. Frédéric once put it, “*render the suffering classes responsible for their misery*” nor “*fancy themselves exonerated from helping the poor man when they have proved his wrong-doing...*” [\[O’Meara, 324\]](#)

“There but for the grace of God go I.”

God’s grace is “*the free and undeserved help that God gives us*”. [\[CCC, 1996\]](#) *Undeserved*. We, also, are undeserving, just like “The Undeserving Poor” in Bishop Untener’s essay. [\[SiH IV\]](#) Maybe this can help remind us that putting ourselves in the neighbor’s place means sharing their suffering, not imagining how we’d have made better choices.

Yet, it is also we who are called to be God’s hands, His eyes, His ears, and His loving heart; [to love the neighbor as ourselves for the love of God](#); to serve [for love alone](#). We go to the poor not to judge them but to serve them as the embodiment of Christ, [exactly as he taught us](#). We go in [simplicity](#), [humility](#), [gentleness](#), [selflessness](#), and [zeal](#) in witness to our Vincentian charism.

And a charism, our church teaches us, is a very special grace from God. [\[CCC, 2003\]](#) So, while it may be the grace of God that saved us from the neighbors’ circumstances, it is at least equally the grace of God that sends us to sit with them, listen to them, pray with them, and love them - unconditionally.

### Contemplate

Do I always put myself in the neighbor’s place first?

### Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module IV](#) (especially “The Undeserving Poor”)

## Our Sublime Vocation

As members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we are not simply “volunteers”. Rather, ours is a vocation. A vocation is more than a simple set of activities, or membership in a club. The word itself is from the Latin root *vocāre*, meaning to call. Our vocation is a call from God, a sacred invitation to follow a pathway towards [the perfection that He wishes for us](#). It is subordinate to the vocation shared by all lay Catholics; the call to order all of our temporal affairs according to the plan of God. [[Lumen Gentium, 31](#)]

The Vincentian vocation, then, is more than the sum of the actions we take, but that we taken them [for love alone](#). It is more than Conference meetings, and more than [home visits](#). It is “*a vocation for every moment of our lives*”. [[Rule, Part I, 2.6](#)] It is the means by which we pursue the integration of life that Pope Saint John Paul II describes. [[Christifidelis Laici, 59](#)]

If you are a Vincentian, it is because God called you here. You may not have recognized His voice at the time; His words may have come to you from another Vincentian. But it was God who called you here, the same God who calls, again and again, asking for your help; asking for a rent payment, an electric bill, a listening ear, and an open heart. You may not recognize His voice every time, but when He calls you, you answer, and you in turn pass along His call to the neighbor by your wordless witness in living your faith, and [loving the neighbor as yourself](#).

When the tasks seem daunting, we follow St. Vincent’s advice, remembering that in responding to our vocation, “*our Lord will be [our] guidance and [our] guide and [we] can do all things with Him*.” [[CCD I:589](#)]

This is, as Frédéric put it, “*the sublime vocation God has given us*.” [[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835](#)] It is the vocation to which God has called us, the vocation in which we are blessed to encounter Him, the vocation that each and every one of us should be offering to “*to all those who seek to live their faith loving and committing themselves to their neighbor in need*.” [[Rule, Part I, 3.1](#)]

It is certainly true that all of our actions as Vincentians are voluntary, but volunteering is something one does; Vincentian is something we *are* by virtue of our sublime vocation.

### Contemplate

When recruiting new members, do I focus only on the work, or consciously share God’s call?

### Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#)

## Come, Holy Spirit

Four hundred years ago, on the feast of Pentecost 1623, Louise de Marillac, known then as Mademoiselle LeGras, knelt in prayer at her parish church, [Église Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs](#). Her husband was very ill, and unemployed. Her son was troubled. She blamed herself for these burdens, because she had never fulfilled her “first promise”, made when she was a teenager, to become a Capuchin nun. She felt all of her misfortunes traced back to this failure.

It didn't matter that the decision not to become a nun had not been hers, but her spiritual director's. Distraught, she was considering leaving her husband in order “*to have greater liberty to serve God and my neighbor.*” [SWLM, 1] She was wracked with doubts and uncertainty about her future, and even doubted the immortality of her soul. And so she knelt in prayer, alone with her thoughts, offering her cry of suffering to God.

[Blessed are the poor in spirit](#), we are taught, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It was at this lowest moment that she received what she called her *lumière*, her light, and her “*mind was instantly freed of all doubt.*” [ibid] It was the light of the Holy Spirit that assured her that day, that eased the burdens weighing her down, that brought the hope and peace of God to her.

She would go on to care for her sick husband for two more years before being widowed. In the meantime, she would endure hardship and relative poverty. It would be ten years before, along with St. Vincent, she would found the Daughters of Charity, finally fulfilling that “first promise”.

But it wasn't the founding, nor her many later works, in which she found her peace, it was in the hope and the light of the Holy Spirit, received in the depths of her sorrows.

Our neighbors cry out to us on days much like Louise's. Like her, it is temporal crises that have often driven them to despair and left them in isolation and doubt about their futures.

[Blessed are you who are now weeping.](#)

In their dark night of the soul, God answers. He sends us to prove His love, and to bring His hope. At each Conference meeting we pray, “Come Holy Spirit, live within our lives.” Let us add, in our hearts, “Make me the bearer of Your light. Let me be, for the neighbor, their *lumière*, so they will know that whatever happens tomorrow or next week, You are with them, and so am I. Help me to bear the light of hope.”

### Contemplate

Do I pray for the light of the Holy Spirit, for myself and for the neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[Praying with Louise de Marillac](#)

## A Seamless Garment

In Blessed Rosalie's time, every working-class family with three or more children was registered with the Bureau of Public Assistance; it was simply assumed that in the conditions of the times, they would not be able to support themselves. Work was often disrupted by revolutions which shut businesses down, or by epidemics that both shuttered businesses and ended lives. A man's death could leave his widow and children in complete destitution.

In the midst of this, Rosalie and the Daughters of Charity worked both tirelessly and cheerfully to bring food, medical care, and more to the homes of the poor. Rosalie, it was said, would not leave those homes without having also helped with some housework.

Mentored in our earliest days by Rosalie and the Daughters, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul carries on this tradition, meeting and befriending our neighbors in their homes and seeking ways to provide for their needs. Also, like Rosalie, this can lead us beyond the home visit.

After all, if her husband had died, leaving her penniless, the widowed mother of Rosalie's time would have to go outside the home and find work to support herself and her children, but then who would care for the children? The Daughters could have simply kept bringing more bread, but instead, Rosalie founded the Saint-Marcel Day Nursery to care for newborns while their mothers worked. She saw that this would do more than provide food, it would remove a barrier to their own self-sufficiency – a barrier over which the widows themselves had no control. The women even paid 15 of the 55 *centimes* that the childcare cost per day.

By respecting the dignity of the widows and the duty of people to work, and continuing to walk in friendship with the neighbor, Rosalie modeled for us both our Catholic Social Doctrine and our Vincentian vocation.

It is no wonder that the young men who founded the Society would follow this example, as well, creating an apprenticeship program for young men in Paris shortly after the very first Conference was founded. It was in the course of their home visits they saw a way to break the cycle of poverty among young men who had no fathers to guide them into a trade.

It turns out that “systemic change” is only a new phrase, not a new idea. After all, who would [sew a new patch to an old cloak](#)? All of our works grow naturally from the knowledge we gain by [climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret](#). Systemic change may be beyond, but it is inseparable from the home visit, part of a seamless garment, rooted deeply in both our tradition and our home visit.

### Contemplate

What barriers can I help to remove from the neighbor's path?

### Recommended Reading

[Seeds of Hope](#)

## Sacred Images

In expanding upon the principle that “*no work of charity is foreign to the Society*”, the Rule goes on to say that these works include “*any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity...*” [[Rule, Part I, 1.3](#)] Human dignity is at the heart of what we do, as it should be. After all, the first of the four permanent principles of Catholic Social Doctrine is “*the dignity of the human person.*” [[CSDC, 160](#)]

What do we mean by dignity, though? What does dignity call us to do, exactly? In all of her writing, St. Louise used the word dignity most often in speaking of the Blessed Mother, whose “*dignity ... unites her to her Son*”. [[SWLM, 785](#)] Yet she also speaks of the “*dignity of suffering*” [[SWLM, 775](#)] and the dignity of the Eucharist, which, she says, “*should make us realize our powerlessness to prepare adequately to receive Him.*” [[SWLM, 822](#)] In each case, dignity represents a worthiness, or a nobility.

How often are the poor expected to demonstrate their “worthiness”? How often are they called to shuffle into an assistance office, fill out a form, take a number, or many other indignities. As Vincentians, our respect for the dignity of all persons demands of us that we “*never adopt the attitude that the money is [ours], or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it.*” [[Manual, 23](#)]

The greatest commandment reminds us [to love our neighbor as ourselves](#), and not just the victim on the side of the road, not just the homeless, not just the single mother, not just the most sympathetic, but rather “*everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self... a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception and of actively helping him when he comes across our path.*” [[Gaudium et Spes, 27](#)]

In an essay on Christian charity, Frédéric Ozanam compared the ancient paganism to Christianity. They had, he conceded, better understood how to enjoy themselves, and had constructed vast stadiums to do so. We, on the other hand, “*understand what constitutes human dignity, what lasts as long as life endures.*” [[Baunard, 322](#)]

Each person is created fully in God’s image, the *imago Dei*, unique and unrepeatable, the “*sacred images of that God whom we do not see*”. [[Letter 137, to Janmot, 1837](#)] They are already worthy, and already deserving. As with the Body of Christ, received in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as Louise teaches, it is we who must prepare to receive them, to serve them, and to honor them.

### Contemplate

Do I sometimes feel the neighbor must “prove himself” to me??

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## Dropping Pebbles

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” [Christ said](#), “and to God the things that are God’s.” With these words, Jesus answered His doubters’ attempt to find contradiction in His teachings, but also gives us some wisdom to carry with us on our home visits. After all, the neighbor we serve is made in the image of God. What is it, then, that is the neighbor’s due? What belongs to him?

Naturally, we are called for assistance with material needs, and seeking to meet those needs is the most basic of our works. To pay the light bill, the water bill, the gas bill; to assist with car repairs or rent; to provide food; all these things and more we do gladly, and the reward of these works is immediate, both for the neighbor, whose urgent needs are met, and for us, who feel fulfilled by offering this service. Faith without works, as we know, is dead, and these are our works, performed for the love of God alone.

Yet at the same time, and much more importantly, we are called to bring God’s love to the neighbor. To reassure them, by our kindness, our presence, and our prayers, that they are not forgotten. We are called to help them find their own way to God, to seek “the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.” [\[Rule Part I, 2.5.1\]](#)

Each bill we pay is, in a sense, merely a Caesar that must be paid; a Caesar who will never really be satisfied. Payment provides temporary relief, but not “eternal happiness”. And it sometimes happens that the neighbors have material needs that are so overwhelming that there is no chance we can meet all of them, or they struggle with illnesses or addictions that are simply not within our power to heal.

What then?

Each measure of kindness that we pour out, each prayer we offer, each bit of ourselves that we bring along and leave behind on our visit is a sharing of God’s love. It may not give us the same sort of immediate satisfaction that a repaired car might give, and it hurts our hearts to know that neighbor may continue to suffer in ways we cannot help, but it is in our acts of love, our presence, our sitting, and our listening, that we give them what is truly theirs: their dignity, and their hope.

We may never know how far in the pond the ripples may spread and grow from the pebble of kindness that we drop, but it isn’t for us to know. It is for God to know. It is for us to let go of the pebbles, to “*do all the good we can, and trust to God for the rest.*” [\[Baunard, 81\]](#)

### Contemplate

Do I sometimes seek to measure success only by the bills we pay?

### Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

## A Culture of Love

In 2018, a set of seven “Cultural Beliefs” was incorporated as Statute 2 in Part III of [our Rule](#). Because the Society has always been governed by both the Rule and tradition, the Cultural Beliefs were not really new, but by articulating and adopting them as part of our Rule, we solidified their place as a fundamental aspect of our practices.

We often hear phrases about cultures: a culture of success, a culture of poverty, a culture of life, and so on. What unites cultures is a shared set of beliefs, whether written or unwritten. In our work, we often encounter people in poverty, especially generational poverty, in which there is an underlying belief that this is simply the way things are. After a certain amount of time without having money for things, you begin to internalize the idea that maybe a nice home, a new car, a better job, or even a cup of coffee at Starbucks are not just expensive, but they are simply not *for* people like you.

When we hold beliefs closely, unconsciously, deep in our hearts, they affect the way that we behave. Part of the foundational culture in the United States has always been a hopeful boldness; the same belief that enabled our forebears to load up the covered wagon and set out to cross the great plains on foot also led our great explorers to climb into a rocket and hurtle through space to walk on the moon. It's the epitome of a cultural belief: if we believe it, we can do it.

And so, in serving the neighbor, we bring with us our beliefs: belief in Jesus Christ, belief in His saving power, and belief in the full worth and dignity of every single human person. By serving in hope, we give permission to hope, sometimes to people who have fallen into despair. We believe in our neighbors.

Importantly, “hope” is not simply a trite, feel-good slogan, it is one of the three theological virtues, inseparable from the other two, just like our three Essential Elements, through which we live the Theological Virtues: we serve in hope, we pray in faith, and in friendship we love one another and the neighbor.

In remarks to the General Assembly in 1837, Bl. Frédéric expressed our Cultural Belief in One Society and at the same time explained how the Essential Elements unite us, saying “*The distances that stand between the most loyal of friends do not separate the Christian spirits or wills that come together to love one another, to pray, and to act...*”

A culture is built and fed by beliefs. We believe in one God, in one Society, and in building a [civilization of love](#). May we build our civilization of love by welcoming all into our culture of love.

### Contemplate

How can I better ensure that my actions always follow my beliefs?

### Recommended Reading

[Building a Civilization of Love](#) in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church



## United in Works and Prayers

In letters to friends and family, Frédéric Ozanam always assured them of his prayers, and frequently closed by asking for their prayers in return. Sometimes, this was a simple and sincere sign-off of “pray for me”, but often he asked for very specific prayers.

“*Pray for me to be wise*”, he asked his mother; “*pray to God for me so that I may get through so important and unusual an event...*” he asked a friend; “*pray, pray for us who begin to man the barricades...*” he asked his cousin, Ernest Falconnet; and “*pray for me who does not yet know where I am bound*” he asks his friend Léonce Curnier. [[Letters 207, 398, 44, 107](#)]

Always in his prayers and his requests for prayers is Frédéric’s deep sense that prayer is the most essential bond of love and friendship, the bond that unites friends with each other and with God. For Frédéric it was the shared prayers of the Conferences scattered across France, offered in unison on feast days and other celebrations, that kept them “*intertwined despite distances*”. [Letter 113] Indeed, he defined our cultural belief in One Society when he said that “*united in works and prayers and the strength of this union would be very great.*” [[Letter 135](#)]

Prayer is at the center of Vincentian friendship, and neither ceases upon death. As our 1835 Rule pointed out, ours is even “*a friendship stronger than death for we will often remember in our prayers to God the brethren whom we have lost.*” [[1835 Rule](#)] Our Rule today continues to confirm for us that prayer is “*the basis of friendship*”. [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)]

Through prayer we are connected to one another and to the whole Communion of Saints, among whom we count our own dearly departed. “*Let us consider,*” Frédéric consoled his friend Perrière, “*that our beloved dead do not forget us any more than we forget them, that they think of us, love us, pray for us, that perhaps they walk with us as invisible guardians*”. [Letter 1353]

Like every aspect of our friendship, our prayers also extend to the neighbor. We pray before home visits for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our acts of mercy, we offer up the neighbor’s needs in prayer during the visit, and in “*every Conference throughout the world and in their personal lives, Vincentians raise their prayers to God, united with the prayer of Christ, on behalf of one another and their masters the poor, whose suffering they wish to share.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.3](#)]

To ask for prayer is a prayer itself, through the intercession of our friends. Let us never cease praying for and asking for prayers of one another and the poor constantly, bearing witness to Vincentian friendship, united in Christ’s love.

### Contemplate

What Vincentian friend or neighbor can I pray for today?

### Recommended Reading

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

## Chosen as Friends

Childhood friends, friends from school, friends from the neighborhood, teammates, Army buddies, work friends, Facebook friends, new friends, and old friends – we all have many lists of friends, and many ways of forming friendships. But when you hear the word “friend” whose face comes to your mind first? Is it a friend you see often, or a face from long ago whose bond of friendship has not been weakened by the time and distance that separate you?

Frédéric Ozanam once explained friendships can be strengthened by both words and actions. Words, by letters or emails, allow us to share our thoughts and share ourselves with each other even when we are far apart from our friends, but he went on, “*there are bonds stronger still than words: actions.*” *Nothing can draw friends closer than to eat together, travel together, or work together.*”

Indeed, remember that school trip, and how much closer the group became? Or studying together for a class, going out to dinner, having a backyard barbecue? Each time we build memories of a shared experience and grow closer to our friends.

“*But if purely human acts have this power, moral acts have it even more, and if two or three come together to do good, their union will be perfect.*” [\[Letter 142, to Curnier, 1837\]](#) This is the special character of friendship that we form in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul; the friendship that we call an Essential Element of the Society – a friendship that is strengthened by the other two Essential Elements.

After all, what better moral acts could we perform together than to serve Christ in the poor, and to seek holiness together? Indeed, we are called very specifically to share our service, to visit the poor in pairs. Our Rule also reminds us that during spiritual reflections at our meetings “members are always invited to comment as a means of sharing their faith.” [\[Rule, Part III, St. 7\]](#) We receive by giving first of ourselves – to each other in reflection and prayer, and to the neighbor in service.

We cannot truly understand or live our Vincentian friendship apart from service and spirituality. These are the friends with whom we have walked together, seeking, and finding Jesus Christ. Sitting with Him. Listening to Him. Praying with Him. Working to ease His burdens.

It is [not we who chose](#) the neighbor, any more than it is we who chose Christ. The neighbor chose us when he made the call to our Conference help line. And when go to him, when we sit with him, two or three of us together, we also will have in our midst the greatest Friend, [just as He promised](#).

### Contemplate

In what ways have I seen my Vincentian service strengthen my friendships with fellow members?

### Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations II](#)

## Our Most Earnest Study

As Christians, we are called to perfection, which we seek to attain through formation. We are formed in mind, body, and spirit in a lifelong process of attaining the fullness of our humanity, revealed to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the Society, we recognize four different dimensions of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and ministerial. These four overlap with each other, of course, but the one that can be easiest to neglect is our intellectual formation.

Intellectual formation encompasses training and skills development, such as poverty research and servant leadership training, but at its core, intellectual formation has to do with our efforts to understand our faith traditions and our church's teachings. We do this through reading our Rule, Holy Scripture, and the writings of our own saints and founders, just as they did before us, but above all to focus on the life and words of Jesus as our model for a life of holiness.

Indeed, one of the books held dear by Vincent, Louise, and Frédéric was *The Imitation of Christ* written by Thomas à Kempis in the 1420s. St. Vincent recommended the use of this book in personal retreats, suggesting taking short readings from it and “*stopping to reflect a short time on each sentence.*” [\[CCD I:373\]](#) In offering spiritual direction to one of the priests of the mission, he advised him especially to “*read Chapter XV of the third book of the Imitation of Christ. You will see there that not every desire, however good, is always from the Holy Spirit and that you are far from the indifference or resignation that it teaches.*” [\[CCD VI:146\]](#) Much of this letter, and other writings of Vincent, reflects the thoughts of Kempis.

For her part, St. Louise considered the *Imitation*, along with St. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* and their Rule to be “*the books necessary for the Daughters of Charity*” which should be read monthly. [\[SWLM, L.383\]](#)

And in the early days of the Society, the *Imitation* remained a central text for study and reflection in conference meetings, and for personal reflection. As he noted once, he “*had taken the precaution of reading a certain chapter in the Imitation*” in order to guard against putting too much stock in compliments, even from greatly respected people; to remind him of his humility. [\[Baunard, 87\]](#) In 1838, the conference began reading, “*in place of the Imitation, the Life of St. Vincent de Paul, so as to better imbue ourselves with his examples and traditions.*” [\[Letter 175, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

Today we have, in addition to Vincent, the life and words of Bl. Frédéric to read and to imitate, but even 600 years after they were written, the words of Thomas à Kempis have as much to offer us as they had for Vincent, Louise, and Frédéric. “*Let it be our most earnest study,*” wrote Kempis, “*to dwell upon the life of Jesus Christ.*” [\[Imitation, I, I, 1\]](#)

### Contemplate

What great Christian books can I incorporate into my intellectual formation?

### Recommended Reading

[The Imitation of Christ](#)

## The Mysterious Voice from Within

Of our five [Vincentian Virtues](#), the one that first comes to mind in considering the life and works of our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, is [humility](#), which our Rule teaches us is “*accepting the truth about our frailties, gifts, talents, and charism, yet knowing that all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1](#)]

As a young man, he clearly recognized the blessings with which he had been bestowed, saying that “*There does not exist perhaps in the vineyard of the Eternal Father, a single vine to which He has given so much care and attention*”. Recognizing his own many gifts, he also recognized his obligation to share them for the benefit of others, to answer the call of “*the mysterious voice from within*”. And yet, while he “*recognized God’s gift*” he believed himself “*incapable of willing or of acting*”. [[Baunard, 98-99](#)]

At the Sorbonne, Frédéric certainly made great use of his formidable intellectual gifts. He quickly earned a reputation for his bold defenses of the faith in the face of attacks from students and professors alike. He was a skillful debater, unafraid in offering arguments that at times caused even his professors to rethink their own arguments.

And yet, when challenged in the Conference of History to show the good of the Church, Frédéric did not leap to impassioned argument. One of his chief goals in that debating club had been to win over the unbelieving students to the faith, and yet, when directly asked “*what are you doing ... to prove the truth of your faith?*” he had no ready answer. [[Baunard, 64](#)] Surely such a brilliant debater could have launched a devastating argument; in modern parlance, he could have “owned” the Saint Simonians.

Instead, he and his friends left in silence. They could see not that their arguments had been defeated, but that words alone were not sufficient. Indeed, words had so far seemed counterproductive. Rather than rely upon their own intellect to show the good of the faith, they saw instead that they had to humbly follow upon the example of Jesus, and use their gifts to serve His poor.

It was the same thing taught by St. Vincent de Paul, who had two hundred years earlier advised one of his missionaries to be “*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.*” [[CCD VIII:209](#)]

Our gifts are sufficient if we use them as God wills, for the benefit of others and the glory of His name, “*without thinking of any reward or advantage for [ourselves].*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] The Society’s very founding was an act of humility. How can we do otherwise?

### Contemplate

What personal ambition or desire is the “mysterious voice from within” calling me to set aside?

### Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#)

## Rejoice in God Always

In our works of charity, we come to know many neighbors whose circumstances seem so overwhelming that they begin to overwhelm us, too. It weighs on us, and we begin to suffer from what some call “compassion fatigue”, a sort of despair that perhaps what we do is simply not enough.

Our Rule reminds us that “*in the poor [we] see the suffering Christ.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#) If we stop right there, it’s no wonder we despair. Yet every week at Mass, as we ponder the crucified Christ, there above the altar, we find peace in the reassurance of His great promise. On the cross, Jesus suffered unimaginably. Our very word in the English language for unbearable pain – excruciating – comes from the Latin *ex cruce* meaning “from the cross”. Yet to meditate upon that image brings us sadness but joy; not despair, but hope.

That is because the faithful see the cross with hope-tainted eyes. We know Christ’s story does not end on that cross, and because of that, neither does ours. The cross is suffering, yes, but it is also redemption, it is also glory, it is also hope.

So, as we are called to see the suffering Christ in the neighbor, we also are called to see Him with the same hope-tainted eyes with which we gaze upon the crucifix. Both the neighbor’s troubles and our own will surely pass, and there is never a time that we should not, as Blessed Frédéric’s father advised him during a time of great sadness, “*Gaudete in Domino semper.*” (Rejoice in God always.) [\[Letter 160, to Laller, 1837\]](#)

To be sure, it is important to [share the tears](#) of the neighbor, but not without also sharing the hope of Christ. We can express our sympathy in no more sincere way than to share a tear, to bear with us part of the sadness, stress, or sometimes even anger that the neighbor may be feeling. This is, as St. Vincent once explained, “an act of love.” [\[CCD XII:221\]](#)

But to share only the despair is not our calling. “*Help honors,*” Blessed Frédéric wrote, “*when it may become mutual.*” [\[O’Meara, 229\]](#)

Vincentians serve in hope. Not merely the hope of paying a bill, because there always will be another bill. We serve in the eternal hope, “*the great hope that cannot be destroyed*”, and we “*can always continue to hope, even if ... there seems to be nothing left to hope for.*” [\[Spe salvi, 35\]](#)

In suffering there is redemption, in the neighbor there is God, and in hope there is joy enough to share.

### Contemplate

Why do I find it difficult to “rejoice in God always”?

### Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

## Justice, Charity, and Subsidiarity

One of the oldest traditions of the Society is our embrace of subsidiarity as our standard of operation. By this, we mean that Conferences and Councils have great freedom of action, empowering them to pursue local initiatives to help the poor spontaneously and effectively, without the burden of excessive bureaucracy. [\[Rule, Part I, 3.9\]](#) Bureaucracy, after all, is the hallmark not of Christian charity, but, as the word itself suggests, of what Bl. Frédéric referred to as “*the assistance bureaus*”. He explained that Conferences should instead keep in mind that each city “*has different needs ... and provides different resources*” and not “*tie [themselves] down with rules and formulas.*” [\[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

It only stands to reason, then, that it cannot be a remote Council that dictates the works of the Conferences, for it could have little basis to do so outside of “rules and formulas.” Councils instead exist not to supervise, but “*to serve all the Conferences they coordinate.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.6\]](#) As Emmanuel Bailly explained this relationship in an 1841 Circular Letter, Councils are “*rather a link than a power*” and in that link from Conferences to Councils 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]

Subsidiarity, then, works hand in hand with our Vincentian friendship, and our Cultural Belief in One Society. We are united by our Rule, by our Catholic faith, and by the celebration of our diversity in the many communities where we serve. We respect the Conferences’ determination of the best way to serve their communities in much the same way as Conferences are called to assume that the home visit team has “*special insight into the best way to give help.*” [\[Manual, 24\]](#)

Subsidiarity, of course, also is one of the four permanent principles of Catholic social doctrine, necessary to recognizing the dignity of the human person. It extends not only from Councils to Conferences, but to the neighbor, reminding us that it “*gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community*”. [\[CSDC, 186\]](#)

This is one reason why, rather than dictating solutions for the neighbor, “*Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.10\]](#)

At times, it seems easier to simply dictate to others rather than allow them to make their own decisions, but subsidiarity calls Councils to respect the judgment of Conferences, Conferences of members, and members of neighbors. Subsidiarity, being rooted in respect for the dignity of the human person, is a measure of both justice and charity.

### Contemplate

Are there times I become frustrated because I believe that “I know what’s best” for others?

### Recommended Reading

[The Rule, Part I](#)

## Doing More

There is an old saying that nobody, on his deathbed, ever said “I wish I had spent more time at the office.” Yet in a famous scene in the movie [Monsieur Vincent](#), St. Vincent, near his own death, tells the queen that he has done nothing in his life. She asks then, if he has done nothing, what should the rest of us do? St. Vincent de Paul replies, “More.”

Vincent’s life’s work, though, was not a job! Likewise, for us, our work of charity is not a job, nor are we simply “volunteers”. Instead, ours is a vocation; it isn’t what we do, it is who we are. There is no question of “clocking out” for the day, for ours is a “*vocation for every moment of our lives*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.6\]](#)

A vocation is a calling; the word itself comes from the Latin *vocāre*, meaning “to call”. Every person is called; our church teaches, to the common vocation “*to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father’s only Son.*” [\[CCC, 1877\]](#) This common vocation takes a personal form, leading each of us to our particular road toward [the perfection to which Christ directs us.](#)

Our road is the Vincentian pathway. It leads us to Christ; it is [our way of being Catholic](#). We sons and daughters of St. Vincent are called by his example to “*love God...with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.*” [\[CCD XI:32\]](#) With these words, Vincent recalls that labor is the common lot of mankind since being cast out of Eden, sentenced [to eat bread only by the sweat of our brows](#), but as Blessed Frédéric Ozanam put it, this “*applies as much to the nourishment of the soul as of the body.*” [\[Letter 6, to Materne, 1829\]](#)

Ours is not a job for pay, but a labor of love – to serve Him in the poor, the hungry, the lonely, and the desperate; to dry their tears, to offer our hearts, and to share with them this great hope that lights our path. “*That is what is proposed to us, the sublime vocation God has given us.*” Frédéric said. “*Would that we were a little bit worthy of it and bent easily to its burden.*” [\[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

We needn’t be ashamed that we tire, from time to time, at the labor required to visit the poor, to stock the pantries, to answer the calls, to talk to the landlords, and even to fill out the paperwork, but let us always remember the Savior’s call to “[Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.](#)”

And let us also ask Blessed Frédéric to pray for us, as he did for his brothers, “*that you may know your vocation and will not fail in the courage to follow it...*” [\[Letter 387, to his brother Charles, 1842\]](#) In becoming Vincentians, we answered His call, and each time the Conference helpline rings, He is calling us again.

## Contemplate

How can I seek to do “more”?

## Recommended Reading

[Walking the Vincentian Pathway](#)

## The Image of God

The first of the four permanent principles of our Catholic social doctrine is the dignity of the human person. [CSDC, 160] What does that mean for us as Christians and as Vincentians? The word dignity comes from the Latin *dignus*, meaning “worthy”. In the normal interactions of life, we may not naturally apply this idea to everybody we know. We tend to apply terms like “dignitaries” or “worthies” mainly to a special few who have proved themselves in some way.

Yet our belief in the dignity of the human person – of every human person – derives from our belief that we are made in God’s image, each of us and all of us: “[God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.](#)” He didn’t create only one of us, or only some of us, in His image. We all are worthy.

We can remember this more easily when we think of our family members and close friends. They needn’t prove their merit in any way for us to know, deep in our hearts, that they are worthy. We believe this not because of anything they have done to earn our esteem, but simply because we love them.

Vincentians are called to see the face of Christ in our neighbors; we are called to serve them [for love alone](#). Our love is the reason we never adopt the attitude that the assistance we offer is our possession, or that the neighbor has “*to prove that they deserve it*”. [Manual, 23] We are serving the God whom we love, and just like our family and friends – even more so – we already know that He is worthy.

This is why Christ offered the Greatest Commandment to us in two parts. They are alike, He said, and the “whole law” depends on them: [to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and to love the neighbor as ourselves](#). Our love for the neighbor cannot be separated from our love for God because the neighbor – each neighbor, every neighbor – is the very image of the God who created us.

In poverty and in wealth we have a tendency to measure our worth by the things we possess, or by the things we lack. We can begin to believe we are more worthy because we have a nice job, home, or car, or we can begin to believe we are less worthy because we are unemployed, addicted, or homeless. Neither is true, but both can separate us from God. The bread we bring to the hungry belongs to them already, because God did not create anybody so that they should starve, but it is in the bringing, not the bread, that we reassure the ones we love that they are indeed loved, and that they are worthy. It is how we “[*help*] them to feel and recover their own dignity”. [Rule, Part I, 1.8]

In a similar way, God’s gratuitous presence and love assures us that we are worthy, too. At the heart of our vocation is love. At the heart of our love is God.

### Contemplate

Do I approach every home visit as if it is worth my time and effort?

### Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#) (especially “Home Visits in the Vincentian Tradition”)



## From This Day Forward

On milestone anniversaries, married couples sometimes renew their vows, not as a way to atone for falling short of them, but as a way to celebrate their fidelity by refounding their marriage, beginning anew in different circumstances, but with the same commitment. In a similar way, Members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are called to “*annually renew their promise of service to the members and to the poor*”. [Rule, Part III, St. 4] It only makes sense that we would so celebrate our “relationships based on trust and friendship” with the poor. [[Rule, Part I, 1.9](#)]

And so, individually and collectively, we begin anew once every year, celebrating what has gone before, and recommitting ourselves to serve not only as we have, but in new ways, “striv[ing] for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions.” [[Rule, Part I, 1.6](#)] This has always been the way of the Society.

In 1848, following a revolution, a second failed revolution, and in the midst of a cholera epidemic, the Society faced greater needs among the poor than ever before, and along with the poor, faced new societal challenges. Addressing his fellow Vincentians, Bl. Frédéric asked “*Is it enough to continue to do the little which we have been accustomed to do? When the hardships of the time are inventing new forms of suffering, can we rest satisfied with old remedies?*” [[Baunard, 274](#)]

By no means was he advocating throwing out tradition. On the contrary, he was calling on the members to do all they had done before and more: to be more inventive, to seek out even the poor who did not call for help. In the wake of a failed revolution, after all, there were many who didn’t wish to draw any sort of attention to themselves. Our Rule continues to call us to this very commitment, not to simply wait for the phone to ring, but “*to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten, the victims of exclusion or adversity.*” [[Rule, Part I, 1.5](#)]

Our annual recommitment, like a renewal of marriage vows, is first a celebration of our growing closer to Christ, of serving Him exactly as He calls us to serve – in the poor, the sick, the lonely, the least among us. With great joy, we acknowledge, as our regular [Conference Meeting prayers](#) remind us, “the many blessings which we receive from those whom we visit.”

Second, again like the married couple renewing their vows, we promise not to take our spouse for granted, but instead to proactively seek new ways to serve the neighbor, not for our own sake, but for love alone.

After all, we, the church, are Christ’s spouse, and the poor, to us, are Christ.

### Contemplate

How can I better serve and better love the neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#)

## This Gentle Word

One of the four permanent principles of our Catholic Social Doctrine is solidarity. [\[CSDC, 160\]](#) This word is often used in secular contexts to signify shared interests or goals within a group, for example among workers as in a labor union. It is also used to signify common interests between different groups, united on a particular interest or goal. For us as Catholics, this captures one sense of the term, but in a much narrower way than we are called to understand and live the principle of solidarity.

Our church's social teaching begins with our foundational belief in the dignity of the human person, each of us made in God's image, unique and unrepeatable. We are called by Jesus to pray to "Our Father" just as He does, uniting us as a human family; not symbolically, but truly as sisters and brothers, children of the one God.

And while our principle of solidarity, like the more commonly used phrase, does indeed refer to shared interests and goals, it is our interests and goals that distinguish solidarity in the Catholic view. Our common interest is our common origin as God's precious creations, and our shared goal is our shared calling towards union with God in eternal life, and we share these interests with all people.

Our solidarity then, as Pope St. John Paul II explains, must be more than "a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far", and instead calls us to complete commitment to the good of all, and of each individual, "because we are all really responsible for all." [\[Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 38\]](#) When any member of our family suffers, we suffer.

Solidarity calls us to truly love the neighbor, "even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her". [\[Ibid, 40\]](#) In this, as in all things, we have Christ's example, as St. Vincent once explained: "*Friend, He said to Judas, who handed Him over to His enemies. Oh, what a friend! He saw him coming a hundred paces away, then twenty paces; but even more, He had seen this traitor every day since his conception, and He goes to meet him with this gentle word, 'Friend.'*" [\[CCD XII:159\]](#)

Solidarity calls us to follow Christ's example fully, to "*be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for the brethren*", even if an enemy. [\[Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 38\]](#)

This is a call we are not likely to face with the neighbors we serve, but we are called, as Bl Frédéric once said, not to give our lives all at once, but in all of our actions, a little bit each day, to "smoke night and day like perfume on the altar." [\[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#) May our sacrifice be known by "this gentle word, Friend."

### Contemplate

Do I see my service in the Society as a willing sacrifice?

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## Our Eucharistic Home Visit

The evangelical model of the home visit may be likened to the Last Supper, with Christ as the visitor, and the disciples – and ourselves – as the neighbors. Hungry, the disciples greeted Christ, who first demonstrated His love by humbly serving them, washing their feet, then by breaking their bread, and pouring their wine.

And then He prayed for them, that the Father might welcome them as He welcomes His own Son. In a way, we might say that He saw Himself in us, just as we are called to see Him in the neighbor.

On the home visit, the first act of evangelization occurs when the neighbors open their door, “because, in them, Vincentians see the face of Christ.” [\[Manual, 48\]](#) The poor are our evangelists, not by their own intent, but by God’s design. They call us, they invite us in.

We, in turn, evangelize first by serving humbly, in the model of our Savior. As St. Vincent instructed the missionaries going to serve even the most anti-Catholic people, we seek to be “*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.*” [\[CCD VIII:209\]](#)

“*The visited, as well as the visitors, edify one another,*” as Bl. Frédéric explained, “*living in the unity and under the shelter of the mantle of St. Vincent de Paul.*” [\[Baunard, 123\]](#)

We evangelize first and always through our “wordless witness”. Each visit, each act of service, is a washing of the feet, which asks the neighbor to receive Christ as servant. When we move to words, they are the words of prayer, offering the needs of the neighbor to God, and asking for His blessings upon them, just as Christ prayed for us to be welcomed into the kingdom.

Jesus calls each of us to [take up our cross](#) and follow Him. In the Eucharist he gives us a model to follow. As Mahatma Gandhi once said “*There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.*”

Because His love was “inventive to infinity” [\[CCD XI:131\]](#) Jesus becomes the bread that feeds us in the Eucharist. On our home visits, we are blessed in turn to share Him with the neighbor in the form of our bread, our time, our service, and ourselves.

### Contemplate

In sharing the “bread” of assistance, do I seek always to truly share myself?

### Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

## Let Us Open Our Hearts

When we think about the meaning of [friendship](#), particularly as one of our three Essential Elements, we could hardly have a better role model than Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. Friendship was so central to his life, and to the founding of the Society, that two of his biographers chose to highlight this in the titles of their books: *The Great Friend*, by Albert Shimberg, and *My Friend Ozanam*, by Pere Lacordaire.

Shimberg says of Frédéric that he “*had a genius for friendship, which was for him a communion of spirits, a meeting of minds. He poured out his heart in letters to his friends, was happy when they were happy, shared their disappointments and griefs, let them share his joys and sorrows, gave them counsel and asked for theirs. Above all, his friendship was an apostolate. He prayed with his friends; in life and after death he asked for their prayers.*” [\[Shimberg, 313\]](#)

In Frédéric’s words and actions we see friendship’s intimate connection to both service and spirituality, and it is through this connection that it becomes essential – the essence of the Society. In addition to praying for and with one another, he wrote, “*the strongest tie, the principle of a true friendship, is charity, and charity could not exist in the hearts of many without sweetening itself from outside. It is a fire that dies without being fed, and good works are the food of charity.*” [\[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834\]](#)

This particular character of friendship in the Society is the means by which we arrive at consensus in our decision-making. We trust one another enough to be honest – to speak with simplicity. Indeed, honest disagreement between friends can only strengthen the friendship. “*Let us dare to contradict each other sometimes: truth and concord will end up by banishing strife,*” Frédéric wrote to Auguste Materne. “*Let us open our hearts and discuss things with wisdom. Our friendship will only become firmer.*” [\[Letter 11 to Materne 1830\]](#)

And so it always should be in our Conference meetings. No member should ever feel unable to express disagreement, and no other member should take disagreement as an affront. We are joined together with the common purpose of growing in holiness by serving Christ in the neighbor. It is through the [simplicity](#) born of friendship that we reach consensus and alter our plans for the better. Without spirituality, our service is merely work. Without friendship, we won’t “*journey together towards holiness...*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

It was in all three essential elements that Frédéric wished us to grow. May we share in his hope that “*as each of us grows older, may we also grow in friendship, piety, and zeal for good!*” [\[Letter 157, to Le Taillandier, 1837\]](#)

### Contemplate

Is having and being a friend always at the center of my Vincentian service and spirituality?

### Recommended Reading

[The Frédéric Ozanam Story](#)

## In the Vincentian Spirit

Because it is the heart of our vocation, and our primary means of serving the neighbor, Conferences and Councils offer [training](#) for the home visit. As important as this training is, it really comes down to one thing. As our Rule puts it “*visits to the poor are made in a Vincentian spirit*”. [\[Rule, Part III, St. 8\]](#)

It is important to note that the statute quoted above doesn't actually say “home visit”, it only says “visits to the poor”. This is important to keep in mind, because as central and indispensable as the home visit remains, there always have been other Vincentian encounters. And just as the home visit is the source of all of our other works (systemic change, special works, advocacy, and more) the spirit, and spirituality of the home visit must be a part of every Vincentian encounter.

We cannot visit the homeless in a home, yet we bring the same humble, kind, patient deference to the encounter that we would when entering a neighbor's home. When people visit our food pantries, we are not clerks in a store, but servants of Christ, who is hungry. When shoppers, rich or poor, patronize our Thrift Stores, we offer more than retail “best practices”, we offer our hearts.

While it may be only Active or Associate Members who go on home visits, volunteers and staff of the Society also encounter the neighbor in the course of our many works. They often are the only face of the Society some people will ever see. This is why we do not jealously hold onto the word “Vincentian” only for Active Members. All of us who do the work of the Society are serving Christ in serving the neighbor. All of us are Vincentians.

From the earliest days of the Vincentian Family, the priests of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the Confraternities of Charity sought out the poor wherever they were – in hospitals, in the streets, rowing the galleys, or in prisons. To serve them, they enlisted help from others throughout society. Indeed, this was the origin of the Daughters of Charity, formed from poor farm girls who assisted the mostly upper-class Ladies of Charity.

Just as Members bring our Vincentian spirit to every home visit, our Vincentian spirit grows as a result of them. The Vincentian spirit animates everything we do, every encounter we have; it is meant to be shared not only with the neighbor, but with each other. Not all volunteers will become Members, not all employees will join Conferences, but then again, not all Members will become Popes or Saints... but John Paul II did.

Our Vincentian Pathway has many starting points, and many routes, but on each of them we will find Vincentian encounters, and all of them lead us to Christ.

### Contemplate

Do I welcome volunteers and staff to prayer, reflection, and training with the Members?

### Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#)

## Our Universal Mission

At the heart of Vincent's charism was a deep passion for the universal mission of the church. It was, after all, his taking of the general confession of the old man at Gannes, followed by his homily at Folleville which marked the beginning of the Congregation of the Mission. That, and every mission that followed, was designed to feed both body and soul, to nourish both individuals and communities.

With the founding of the Confraternities of Charity, the missions also included the foundation of a new Confraternity in each town visited, involving the laity in both the initial, and more importantly, the ongoing corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The people, rich and poor, could live their faith through their actions, and to encounter Christ in each other.

Vincent's zeal drew him to offer the priests of the Mission to the church's service not only in France, but in far flung lands where Christ's word was yet unknown. The Vincentians not only ministered to the slaves of the Barbary pirates in North Africa but ransomed the freedom of twelve hundred of them, all the while showing the church's beauty through their humble prayers and actions.

Vincent's special zeal for these foreign lands was partly driven by his fear that *"that God might gradually do away with {the church} ... because of our depraved morals, those new opinions' which are spreading more and more, and the general state of affairs... in another hundred years we may lose the Church entirely in Europe."* [\[CCD III:40-41\]](#)

Two hundred years later, young Frédéric Ozanam and his friends faced a world which, in his words, had *"grown cold"*, and it called *"us Catholics to revive the vital beat to restore it, it is for us to begin over again the great work of regeneration..."* [\[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

This is the "good of the Church" that the founders were challenged to show, and their answer was not a debating response, not merely words, but actions, not merely actions but a way of living; of living their faith in every part of their lives, bearing witness to Christ's love in their actions, and *"by showing the vitality of their faith, affirm its truth."* [\[Baunard, 65\]](#)

This work was, and is, at the heart of the "new evangelization" Pope Saint John Paul II describes in [Redemptoris Missio](#), reviving, as in Frédéric's time, "a living sense of the faith." Like the communities Vincent visited 400 hundred years ago, it is we who are first evangelized when we encounter Christ's suffering in the neighbor. May they in turn see His love not in the bread we offer, but in its bringing; not in our works, but in our love; not in our presence alone, but in the presence of Him who is among us on each home visit, [as He promised](#), when we gather in His name.

### Contemplate

Will they know we are Christians by our love?

### Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

## For Our Mutual Friend

When the founders of this country publicly stated their intent to separate themselves from the British Empire, they closed with the stirring pledge of “*our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.*” No one reading that [declaration](#) doubted for a moment the seriousness of their commitment. When members join the Society, they similarly promise to “*share their time, their possessions, their talents and themselves*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) If we are living this promise, the neighbor should never doubt the seriousness of our commitment.

In their revolutionary pledge, the founders promised this total commitment to each other; it was truly a pledge of friendship, an unbreakable and sacrificial bond for the sake of the liberty they sought together. Ours also is a pledge of friendship, between not only the members themselves, but with God and the neighbor. It is “*a three-fold relationship with God, the poor, and one another – mutual support and friendship.*” [\[Rule, Part III, St. 5\]](#)

Christ, who told us that there is no greater act of love towards one’s friends than to give one’s life for them did exactly that for us, and so, St. Vincent asks, “*Can we have a better friend than God?*” When our friends – our best friends – ask us to join them at a movie, a show, in a hobby or pastime that we otherwise might not choose, we do it not for love of that hobby, but for love of our friend. Similarly, then, St. Vincent continues, “*Must we not love all that [God] loves and, for love of Him, consider our neighbor as our friend!*” [\[CCD XI:39\]](#)

The neighbor is truly loved by God; it is the neighbor for whom He died no less than He died for us. When we pledge to share our time, our possessions, our talents, and ourselves, we make this pledge in true friendship, knowing that there is no act of friendship greater than self-sacrifice, and always mindful that one of the friends in this “three-fold relationship” has not only already made, but kept this pledge.

So, when the neighbor calls us, we never respond by seeking a way to limit our help or to serve our own convenience first. Instead, like we would for any true friend, we drop everything in order to “*serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#)

Charity, the love of God, is [to do for others](#) what we would reasonably want them to do for us; it “*causes us to do for our neighbor the good that a person has the right to expect from a faithful friend.*” [\[CCD XII, 216\]](#) The American founders “mutually pledge[d] to each other”, to their friends, a very great commitment. May we mutually pledge to our friends – to each other, to God, and to the neighbor – in our words and in our actions, a true declaration of charity.

### Contemplate

Do I ever allow myself to give less than I would expect to receive from a friend?

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## The Greatest Need

The [parable of the good Samaritan](#) is a Vincentian favorite, and a powerful allegory for our own home visit, reminding us that Christ calls us very directly to serve the neighbor. Perhaps this beloved parable can also shed some light on what our Rule calls “*adaptation to a changing world*”. [[Rule, Part I, 1.6](#)]

The Samaritan cleaned and bandaged wounds, transported the robber’s victim on his own mule, and found shelter for him. Today, other than perhaps performing basic first aid, we would leave all the rest of that work to the paramedics. It isn’t that we’re lazy. Quite the contrary. In our time, it would be irresponsible for us not to call 911 immediately. To find help is also to help.

It would be rare, in our day and age, to find a bloodied robbery victim lying in the street as people look the other way as they pass, and equally rare that the victim’s only possibility for help would be from a stranger passing by. Yet there remain in our modern world many who are overlooked, ignored, or found too burdensome to assist, even if they are not always lying in our path. The Samaritan stopped to help. Vincentians must first “*seek out and find those in need and the forgotten*”. [[Rule, Part I, 1.5](#)]

In many cases, the emergency aid we offer by paying bills, or providing food and clothing are just as urgent as the bandages the Samaritan provided, but as we build relationships with the neighbor, we also identify and help prioritize other needs, not all of which can be referred to other organizations.

In this age of the internet, social media, phones in our pockets that can connect us with thousands of people, and with all the knowledge of history and science literally at our fingertips – with a thousand Facebook friends, people are lonelier and more isolated than ever.

Just as the robber’s victim lay bleeding on the side of a dusty road until one person cared enough to stop, so too do so many of our neighbors lie in desperate need of a connection that they perhaps can’t fully articulate themselves, but it is written on their hearts. It is written also on our hearts, because we are made by God to live in community – in communion – with one another. Each of us draws the others closer to God through our love. When we go to the neighbor it is our presence that matters most.

And when you think about that challenge given to Frédéric and his friend so many years ago, it was not a challenge to see how many bundles of firewood could be delivered; it was a challenge to show the good of the church in the modern world. The answer to the challenge was to go to the poor just as Christ came to us.

Anybody can give money. You can even do it online. Like the Samaritan, our founders chose to give of their time, their possessions, and themselves. Let us, as Jesus commanded, [go and do likewise](#).

### Contemplate

When I offer assistance, do I truly stop on my path to give my love, talents, and time?

### Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#)



## Only to Be Shared

In a house in Reuilly, a district in the southeast of Paris, the Duchess of Bourbon had founded a hospice that served as a home for elderly and sick former servants of the royal family in their final years. It was here, in 1831, that a young Daughter of Charity was assigned. Sister Catherine, known to her family as Zoe, was 24 years old when she arrived. Born to a farming family, she was one of 17 children, ten of whom lived past infancy. Her mother had died when she was nine. By the time she was twelve, she had become the woman of the house, cooking, cleaning, and caring for her family. She never learned to read or write growing up, beginning her schooling when she was 18, mainly so that she could be admitted to the Daughters of Charity, which she was, in 1830.

Assigned to the Enghien Hospice as a novice, she was sent first to the kitchen, where she helped prepare meals for the elderly residents. Soon, she would be moved outside to care for the cows, pigs, and chickens, and later, to do the laundry. The work was tiring, but not too much for a young woman. Rising each day at 4:00, she was always diligent in her mending, washing, and folding.

After taking her vows, she remained at the hospice, continuing in her labors for 45 years, never complaining and seemingly never tiring of it. For a time, she had carried out the superior's duties, but declined the title. She gladly relinquished these duties to a much younger superior. When others urged her to complain, she led them instead to follow her in humble obedience.

During many turbulent and dangerous times, Catherine's calm reassured her sisters. When the Commune in 1870 arrested and killed clergy and religious, and threatened to burn down their house, Catherine somehow knew they would be safe. Indeed, throughout her life she shared small visions that later came to pass. She was so unassuming that people hardly noticed her prophecies until years later.

It was not until her final days that the great secret of Catherine's life would become known. In 1830, at the Motherhouse on rue du Bac, young Catherine had been visited by the Blessed Virgin. She had laid her head on Mary's lap and received instructions to have a medal struck. During Catherine's lifetime, millions of medals had spread throughout the world – Catherine herself often gave them out. Stories of miracles and of the apparition were well-known, but nobody knew the identity of the young Daughter of Charity who had been chosen by the Queen of Heaven.

When it was revealed that Catherine had been the one chosen by Mary, nobody who knew her was surprised. Of course, it was her; of course, it was the one who washed laundry for 45 years. Of course, it was the one who had arrived as an illiterate farm girl, the one who asked nothing for herself. This vision had been her greatest gift, and like all gifts from God, she knew it was given only to be shared.

### Contemplate

Do I make a habit of sharing generously the time, talents, and treasure I have received from God?

### Recommended Reading

[Sister Catherine LaBouré of the Miraculous Medal](#)

## Like Unto Him

When he was eighteen years old, Blessed Frédéric felt as if he was not committed enough to living his faith, that he too often failed in charity. His spiritual director at the time advised him that his many distractions and temptations would fade away when he was formed. “*When I am formed,*” Frédéric lamented. “*When will that day come?*” [[Letter 13, to Materne, 1830](#)]

For the young man, in a hurry to grow, this was an obvious question. When, exactly, can I check “formation” off my list? When will I be finished? When will I be what I am meant, and called, to be? These are questions every Vincentian, indeed every Catholic may ask.

Yet we know what we are called to be. Jesus said it quite clearly: we are called to “[be perfect, just as Your heavenly Father is perfect.](#)” Christ, of course, was only echoing the words of the Father, who said (more than once) that “[you shall be holy, because I am holy.](#)” Knowing that we are called to be like God, you would think we would be more patient with ourselves, more willing to “*abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be very careful not to run ahead of it.*” [[CCD II:499](#)]

The word “holy” stems from the same root as “healthy” and “whole”, meaning complete. Similarly, “perfect” also expresses completeness. As the Apostle explains, “[when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.](#)” When we are formed, we will be complete, fulfilling God’s plan and His will for us.

This is why, for Vincentians, our formation is not limited to training events, like the Ozanam Orientation, which serves the intellectual dimension of our formation. Instead, we feed our human formation by service to the poor, building habits of holiness by serving “[for love alone.](#)” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)] Our spiritual formation is fed by our reflections, prayer, and sharing our insights and growth with each other. For our ministerial formation, we try to live our vocation in “every moment of our lives.” [[Rule, Part I, 2.6](#)]

When will we be formed? When will we be perfect? The two questions have the same answer.

The same God who called us to this vocation walks with us on our pathway, guiding our steps if we let Him. To continue this walk is not to confess our inadequacy, but to express our gratitude for having been called. Along the way, we are regularly reassured by our “devotion to the [Eucharist](#)” [[Rule, Part I, 2.2](#)], in which “*God, seeing Himself in us, makes us, once again, like unto Him... thereby giving us the capacity to live in Him as He lives in us.*” [[SWLM, M.72](#)]

We will be fully formed, fulfilling God’s will for us, when we are perfect. We remain humble in our incompleteness and patient in our pursuit of holiness, reminding ourselves that “*Even the saints could be better since the Creator alone enjoys infinite perfection.*” [[Letter 515, To Amélie, 1843](#)]

### Contemplate

How have I become more holy this week?

### Recommended Reading

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

## This Sweet Business

“Let us go to the poor!” was the stirring declaration which founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Challenged to demonstrate the good of the church in their modern world, our young founders could find no better way than to imitate Christ, who descended from heaven to visit us in our poverty. [Baunard, 416]

As Christ Himself explained, He “[did not come to be served, but to serve](#)”, to give...to visit. The one that hosts is the one in the place of honor; the one that visits is the servant. Our Rule emphasizes this aspect of our vocation explaining that visits to those in need “*should be made in their environment*” (their homes). [[Rule, Part III, St. 8](#)] But where are they? Where is “*their environment*” except in their home?

Of course, we know that “home” may be usually, but is certainly not always, a house or apartment. Poor prisoners cry out from their prisons, the poor elderly from assisted living facilities, and the poor homeless from the streets. They cry out to us if we have ears to hear them.

Similarly, poverty takes many forms. “*Blessed are you who are poor*”, Christ tells in the [Gospel of Luke](#). “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*,” as [Matthew](#) recounts this teaching. Whatever the poverty in whatever the home, it is we who are the visitors, we who knock on the door, sit by the bedside, or go to the park bench. After all, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us “*one of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation*”, and that other kinds of poverty often are “*born from isolation ... by man's basic and tragic tendency to close in on himself*”. [[Caritas in Veritate, 53](#)] How better to alleviate material and spiritual poverty than to break the isolation which contributes to it?

“*Home visits*,” the Rule continues, “*are always made in pairs*.” [[Rule, Part III, St. 8](#)] By visiting in pairs we continue the tradition begun when [Christ sent forth His disciples in pairs](#). In this way, we begin to evangelize through our “wordless witness”, as two friends in Christ, sharing their time with a neighbor, showing them by our presence that they are not forgotten, letting them [know we are Christians by our love](#), gathering as two with the neighbor as a third, and Christ is in our midst.

Christ offered a gift on His visit: [His very life](#). Although the gifts we bring in the form of food, or money, are much more modest than that, those material gifts also are not really the point of the home visit. Though we may not give our lives as Christ did, Frédéric calls us to give them a little at a time, through every action we take, to “*smoke night and day like perfume on the altar*.” [[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1837](#)]

We are called invest much, to pour our hearts into each visit. And yet, as Frédéric tells us “*He who brings a loaf of bread to the home of a poor man often brings back a joyful and comforted heart. Thus, in this sweet business of charity, the expenses are low, but the returns are high*.” [Address in Lyon, 1837]

### Contemplate

What is my investment in charity, and what is my return?

### Recommended Reading

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

## The Measure of Success

In Blessed Frédéric's famous essay "[Help Which Honors](#)" he points out that when we focus on mere material assistance when there is no reciprocity, when we "*give the poor man nothing but bread, or clothes, or a bundle of straw — what, in fact, there is no likelihood of his ever giving [us] in return*" it can be humiliating. This is so not only because the neighbors cannot literally repay us for the assistance, but because without having earned it through their own work, they have lost some of their dignity.

Because we are accountable to civil authorities and to donors for the material resources that we give, we regularly (and rightly) report the totals. As a result, it can become easy to allow ourselves to begin measuring our works by people, dollars, loaves of bread, bills paid – the things that are easy to tally up. We can point to each of these things, patting ourselves on the back for all that we've done.

But nowhere in the Rule or the Gospels are we called to measure our success this way.

Instead, we are called to offer "*any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions.*" [[Rule, Part I, 1.3](#)] To alleviate is not to eliminate. Like [Veronica](#), we offer some relief, some temporary alleviation of suffering.

Certainly, we are called to identify "*unjust structures*" and to work towards eliminating the root causes of poverty, but we must remember always that justice cannot replace charity. [[Rule, Part I, 7.1](#)] After all, the seeking after justice, while it is to the benefit of all society, is not going to put food on a particular hungry neighbor's table tonight. We are called, as Frédéric said, to "*make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot*". [[Letter 136, to Lallier, 1836](#)]

Because suffering "*can shake our faith and become a temptation against it*" [[CCC, 164](#)], our service to the neighbor must above all demonstrate the care of a loving God who does not abandon us in our suffering. Ours is an association not only of works, but of faith. We serve the neighbor in charity – the love of God – and walk with him in friendship.

We cannot always know – in fact, we may rarely know – whether we have drawn another towards God, and so we can't report that accomplishment. But the conversion of hearts is never really our accomplishment, it is God's. The more we focus on the material, the more we risk robbing the neighbor's dignity, rather than restoring it.

Instead, we are called to [selflessly](#) offer our time, our talents, our possessions, and ourselves; to [gently](#) offer our friendship and our prayers; to [humbly](#) demonstrate our faith through our works; and with [zeal](#) to "*do all the good we can, and trust to God for the rest.*" [[Baunard, 81](#)] Even if it doesn't seem measurable.

### Contemplate

How do I measure success?

### Recommended Reading

[A Heart on Fire](#)

## Faith, Hope, Love, and Trust

In this vocation, we are called to trust, especially in two important ways. First, we are called to trust in Divine Providence. [\[Manual, 63\]](#) Second, we are called “*to establish relationships based on trust and friendship*” with the neighbor. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) It seems important, then, to examine exactly what it is to trust; what is the meaning of the word?

Our trust in providence is certainly an act of faith. We believe that God will provide. More importantly, we place this trust in Him fully understanding that what he provides may not be at all what we thought we needed; our trust is that He knows better than we do. As St. Vincent puts it, we “*Trust fearlessly in Him who has called you, and you will see that all will go well.*” [\[CCD III:136\]](#) Trust, then, overcoming fear, is also an act of hope.

God understands our weaknesses, but trusts us, also, and blesses us when we seek to do His will. In this way, we strengthen our relationship with God, and our trust becomes also an act of love. And so, in faith, hope, and love of God, we seek to serve the neighbor because [we know this is God's will.](#)

We seek the face of Christ in the neighbor, we see His suffering in theirs, and, just as with our trust in providence, we seek to establish a relationship based on trust and friendship. This means not only trust in the neighbor; it means earning the neighbor’s trust. Relationships must be mutual. Offering our trust begins with an act of faith - extending the benefit of the doubt. Because we can never know any neighbor’s “whole story”, we always must decide not whether, but at what point, we will extend that benefit of the doubt.

It is helpful to remember St. Vincent’s reminder that “*We do not believe a man because he is very learned but because we consider him good and love him.*” He goes on to explain the mutuality of this trust, saying that “*Do what we will, people will never believe in us if we do not show love and compassion to those whom we wish to believe in us.*” [\[CCD I:276-277\]](#) The poor are accustomed to skepticism. By showing instead our faith in them, we earn their trust in us.

We know that there are often times we simply cannot provide the material assistance the neighbor seeks, but by earning their trust, by bearing witness to God’s love through our own, we offer something greater than bread alone: hope. The dictionary even suggests that a synonym for trust is hope, and for Vincentians especially, that makes perfect sense.

If we seek to serve in hope, we must serve also in trust.

### Contemplate

How can I better trust, and earn the trust, of the neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

## The Chosen

[“It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you,”](#) Jesus explained to the twelve at the Last Supper. This small and most loyal group of His followers, who had left behind home and family, dropped their fishing nets to walk with Him, were not there because they had figured something out about Him – they were there because He had called them.

In His call, they were invited not only to follow, but to be taught, nourished, led to become like Him, and [to bear fruit that would remain](#). This is the calling of all Christians, indeed, of all people. It is our vocation.

It is no coincidence that our specific Vincentian vocation follows Christ’s words almost exactly. Our vocation, as our Rule puts it, is “*to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.2\]](#) Like the Apostles, to “*seek to draw closer to Christ.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.1\]](#) Also like the Apostles, it is not we who chose Him, but He who chose us.

This Vincentian vocation is our particular and special way of living our faith, and it is all the more special when we realize that we were chosen and specially called to it by Christ. If we are tempted from time to time to instead credit ourselves too much, we receive regular calls from Him to remind us who is chosen, and who chooses. He may call us from a darkened apartment, with the electricity cut off. He may call us at our food pantries because He is hungry. He may call us from a park bench, seeking shelter from the cold.

Time and time again, we do not choose Him, He chooses us, and when He does, we hear again His words that [“as I have done for You, You should also do.”](#)

And what is it He has done for us? What is it He calls us to do in turn for others? What is it He seeks when He calls the Conference helpline? Yes, we surely are called to bring whatever relief we can for the material needs presented to us, but we also must “*never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.14\]](#)

The poor cry out, and often their cries are unheard, or ignored. What a great gift it is when they cry out to us, when they call us, when they give us the opportunity to answer and to serve. This is what Blessed Frédéric called “*the sublime vocation God has given us. Would that we were a little bit worthy of it and bent easily to its burden.*” [\[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#)

And why shouldn’t we bend easily to it? The poor do much more than just call us. They choose us.

### Contemplate

Am I joyful to answer each time He chooses me?

### Recommended Reading

[The Rule, Part I](#) and the Gospel of John, Chapters [14-15](#)

## Gifted

As members of the Vincentian family, we share in the great charism of our patron, St. Vincent de Paul. A charism, our church teaches, “*whether extraordinary or simple and humble [is a grace] of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefits the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world.*” [CCC, 799] Indeed, the very word charism derives from the Greek *cháris*, meaning favor, or gift. This same word from the Greek is at the ultimate root of eucharist, meaning thankfulness.

Similarly, both *grace* and *gratitude* comes from the Latin *grātia*, which means a favor or gift. It should not be surprising that gifts are so closely tied to gratitude. After all, saying thank you is a basic social obligation when we receive gifts. Gifts are not payment of debt; they don’t come with stings attached. They are gratuitous (another word from *grātia*).

We express our gratitude for Christ’s greatest gift, His sacrifice on the cross, in our celebration of the eucharist. Like all gifts, His sacrifice is not something we earned, but was instead freely given. In the same way, our Vincentian charism, and our individual charisms, are gifts from the Holy Spirit, unmerited and freely given. More importantly, they are given in order that we might share them.

This understanding of our own gifts, “*that all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace*”, is at the heart of our virtue of humility. [Rule, Part I, 2.5.1] This beautiful Vincentian charism, this gift of the Spirit, shared across four centuries by generations of priests, brothers, sisters, and lay people, is given to us to share.

We do this by offering our presence and material support purely as gifts to our neighbors in need, “*never adopt[ing] the attitude that the money is [ours], or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it.*” [Manual, 23] And because the gifts we share – our time, our talents, our possessions, and ourselves – are ultimately not our gifts, but God’s, all thanks for them goes only to Him; all glory for our works goes only to Him.

So let us share freely of our gifts, recalling always the words of St. Louise de Marillac: “I praise God with all my heart for the blessings His goodness bestows upon your holy works. I beg you to be most thankful to Him for them because you must not believe that these graces are merited.” [SWLM, L.368]

## Contemplate

Do I seek always to give thanks for my gifts, by giving gratuitously and freely, in imitation of Christ?

## Recommended Reading

[Spirituality of the Home Visit](#) – use this journal to reflect on this aspect of your home visits

## A Communion of Friendship

We are called as individuals to the virtue of charity, expressed as complete love of God for His own sake, and love of the neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. [\[CCC, 1822\]](#) Charity is not only the greatest of the theological virtues, [\[1 Cor 13:13\]](#) but also the greatest commandment of Jesus Christ. [\[Mark 12:30-31\]](#) Our expression of this love requires us to share our personal graces, our individual charisms, in the service of one another, [\[1 Pet 4:10\]](#) united in this same love. Therefore, this virtue of charity, the central calling of our faith, is best expressed in communion – indeed, it is only expressed in communion – and communion is the heart of our Conferences, and our essential element friendship.

God's people – each of us and all of us – also are called to share in the “threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King” [\[CF, 14\]](#). Since “God is love” [\[1 John 4:8\]](#), this necessarily means that our exercise of mission must be an embodiment of love, of charity, of *agape*. In Conferences, our works of charity are always works of the Conference, not of individual members. Even our home visits are always conducted in pairs, not alone.

It was Christ's mission to enter into this world, where He “fully reveal[ed] man to himself”, [\[RH, 8\]](#) not only by taking on human nature along with His own divine nature, but by living in perfect communion with His creatures, especially His disciples. He expressed the call both to communion and to mission most clearly at the Last Supper, asking God the Father that the disciples might “be one” with one another, and be united in perfect union with God the Father. Just as importantly, He prayed the Disciples might lead others to be joined in this union. [\[John 17:18-23\]](#) This prayer calls us all to the mission of evangelization in communion with each other, with Him, and with all His creatures.

We all are parts of one body, as the apostle teaches, each with his own role, each with his own graces; part of not just a body, but of *Christ's* body [\[1 Cor 12\]](#) which is His church. [\[Eph 1:22-23\]](#) Consequently, mission can only be fully realized in communion as one body, as one church, in the fullness of charity.

In His own mission, Christ was not alone. Who saw Him saw the Father, with whom He is fully united. Our model of communion, then, begins with the unity of the Father and Son, sealed by the Holy Spirit, whom He sends to strengthen and unite us. [\[John 14:16-17\]](#) The example of the Holy Trinity shows us that the Divine life is a shared life. United in perfect Communion with one another, the three persons of God also call us to communion. Our pathway, then, to the divine life, and our mission to call others to it, must also be shared. In this way, “The specific ministry of the Conference belongs not only to the Society, but to all Christian people.” [\[Manual, 16\]](#)

Our social nature, Christian charity, and individual gifts all are meant to be placed in the service of mission, in communion with our Conferences, and through the church which Christ founded.

### Contemplate

Do I live my vocation in a community of friendship with both fellow Vincentians and the neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)



## Will and Grace

The word vocation, as we know, is from the Latin *vocāre*, meaning “to call. A vocation, then, such as our Vincentian vocation, is a calling, specifically a call from God. If you have heard the call, it is for you. What matters most to our own salvation, then, is not the call, but our answer to it.

God’s call can come to us in many forms – a nagging feeling that we cannot shake, a pang in our conscience, an event in our lives that seems to hold deeper meaning, or a person who raises new ideas. It is in times of reflection and prayer that we may feel most attuned to God’s voice, but His call is not bound by our attention to it. If you hear His call, it is for you.

Nevertheless, even having heard the call, we often question our fitness to answer it. “Am I holy enough?” we wonder, when asked to consider serving as a spiritual advisor. “Am I really a leader?” we wonder when the nominating committee asks to consider us as a future president. “Do I have the compassion, or the knowledge, to be a home visitor?” we wonder, especially as new members.

If you hear His call, it is for you, and if He has called you, He will give you the graces you will need to fulfill His will. With our friends, we can offer all the well-considered reasons why we cannot do things; we can list out our other obligations, our shortcomings, or our self-doubts. All these things may be reasonable and true, and they may be quite convincing to our friends, but God already knew all of those things before calling.

Yet He called, and we heard Him.

When Gabriel appeared before a young girl in Nazareth to tell her she would bear a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was asking her to do some very difficult things. She might believe she was carrying the Son of God, but who in her community would see it that way? What would her betrothed think? Was she capable of raising a child in those circumstances? How could she even be sure she could provide food and shelter for the two of them?

But the angel in his greeting, “[Hail, full of grace](#)”, made clear that God had already given her all the gifts, all the graces, all the ability to fulfill His will, and so, in her humble obedience, she answered “yes” to His call. We, like Mary, are called only to those things that God wills for us. He knows what we can do, even if we don’t, and we can take the same reassurance as the angel offered to her, to not be afraid, for the Lord is with us. He has given us sufficient grace. And God’s will does not remove His grace.

### Contemplate

Am I sometimes hesitant to answer God’s call because I doubt my own gifts?

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## Abundance

“Why on earth would they do that?” we sometimes ask ourselves after a home visit in which the neighbors explain a decision they’ve made which makes no sense to us. Perhaps they’ve used their last dollars to pay a past-due cable bill, and the rent is due next week. They’ve quit a job in anger, despite having nothing to fall back on. Or they’ve used their tax refund on recreation when their electricity is already cut off.

In their book [Scarcity](#), authors Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir examine how human decision-making and cognitive abilities are affected when resources become scarce. Whether it is money, food, or even time that is insufficient, or barely sufficient for our needs, we don’t tend to make rational decisions. It’s not a matter of wealth or education. Very busy people, for example, for whom time is scarce, often mismanage the time that they have.

For the poor, of course, scarcity is a constant in their lives. We should hardly be surprised that some of their decisions make no sense to those of us who have in abundance what the poor lack. Scarcity is not affecting our thinking. At the same time, while we set aside our judgment, as we are called to do, and set about trying to provide for whatever scarcity the neighbor faces, we may ourselves lose sight of the most important scarcity we can address: love.

“*Man cannot live without love.*” Pope St. John Paul II reminds us. “*He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him...*” [\[RH, 10\]](#) That is why our Rule explains that “*Vincentians should never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.14\]](#) Of all the resources we may have at our disposal, love is the only one that is never scarce.

[All the things of this world, after all, will pass](#); both scarcity and abundance of material things is an illusion. It is much easier to remember that [life is more than food, and the body more than clothing](#) when we want for nothing; it is more difficult when we are hungry and poor. The material assistance we offer is meant not to create false abundance, but to demonstrate God’s love; to be God’s instrument in providing what is needed, just as [He promised it would be provided](#); and so, “*by showing the vitality of [our] faith, affirm its truth.*” [\[Baunard, 65\]](#)

It is the who poor evangelize us by sharing Christ’s suffering with us. In turn, we evangelize first by fulfilling Christ’s promise to provide for their needs, and through our works, offering the only true abundance, an abundance that sweeps away all scarcity: the abundance of God’s love, and His hope.

### Contemplate

Do I let my love grow scarce enough to affect my thinking during encounters with the neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

## The Wages of Love

Unlike that of humans, God's judgment, we are taught, is equal to His mercy. This is one reason that we refrain from judging the neighbors we serve; our judgments, sometimes harsh, can cloud our vision, and limit our charity. Mercy, on the other hand, is indispensable to charity.

St. Thomas Aquinas went so far as to say that the "*sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy*" in our actions. It is an outward expression of our internal love of God. In other words, mercy unites us externally with the neighbor just as charity unites us internally with God. [\[Summa, II:II:30:4\]](#)

What, then, is mercy? The Latin word for mercy, *miseriordia*, literally means a miserable heart, which captures the emotional and passionate nature of mercy. When we see the suffering of another and we are moved to sadness ourselves – we can't help it. We are all connected. Vincent went so far as to say that "*to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him [is] to be lacking in charity; it's being a caricature of a Christian; it's inhuman...*" [\[CCD XII:222\]](#) Mercy, again, is indispensable to charity.

Recall, also, that Jesus calls us to mercy, not to judgment. To those who criticized Him for associating with tax collectors and sinners, he replied "[I desire mercy, not sacrifice](#)". He warned us that we would be [judged in the same manner](#) by which we judge others.

The English word mercy has its root in the Latin *mercēs*, meaning wages, which perhaps suggests new way to understand mercy – and a new way to practice it. Wages, after all, are what is owed to another, and to give to another what he is owed is an act not of charity but of justice.

This is exactly what Vincent taught, praying that God would "*[soften] our hearts toward the wretched creatures*" so that we might realize "*that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy.*" [\[CCD VII:115\]](#)

[The wages of sin is death](#), but because God's judgment is equal to His mercy, [the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord](#). He grants us the grace of His unlimited mercy, like all His gifts, only so that we might share it. If this is so, then it is through sharing God's mercy that we also share His justice.

The wages of sin, in other words, may be death, but the wages of love is mercy.

### Contemplate

Do I sometimes let my human judgment cloud the grace of God's mercy?

### Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope Module IV](#)

## What Good Have I Done?

In the course of the works of a busy Conference, we often become overwhelmed. The needs are many, and often are greater than our resources enable us to alleviate. We no sooner complete one home visit than the phone rings again. It can be exhausting, and even discouraging, if we measure our works the way they are measured by social service agencies or philanthropic societies. We may begin to question whether we are really helping the neighbor at all.

This feeling can lead us to a crossroads where we must choose: do we seek “efficiency” by trying to divvy up the resources as widely as possible, substituting phone calls for home visits, or asking the neighbor to come to us instead of we to them? Do we stop meeting, because our “business” can be conducted by phone or email? Or do we pause to reflect that these are the same questions that led to the Society’s founding and defined its purpose; the perpetual questions raised in the minds of members for nearly 200 years? Do we choose to recommit ourselves to the true good that we are called to do?

The introduction to the first edition of the Rule, written in 1835, assures us that “*we must never be ashamed on the smallness of our alms.*” Indeed, shortage of funds for “*considerable works of charity*” is, it said “*one of the conditions of our existence.*” [[Rule, 1835](#)] Our works and the good that we do have never been measured by the amount of money we can offer, or by the number of problems that we “fix”.

In founding the Society, Frédéric and his friends were challenged to show the good of the church in the modern world. Their challengers were quite convinced that they had better answers to poverty and the social question. What they could not see, but Frédéric could, was that the true good of the church, the message of Christ’s incarnation, is not that we are promised material abundance, but that we are promised eternal life by a God who loves us so much, He sent us His only Son. Bringing ourselves closer to eternal life and His love to the poor, is the good that God calls us to do.

Our Conference meetings are not business meetings. They are opportunities to share in prayer and reflection the ways in which we have grown closer to God, and the ways in which we have encountered Christ in our works. To the critics of his own time who accused the Society of not doing enough, Frédéric replied that they were only repeating the challenge the Saint Simonians had posed fifteen years earlier. [[Baunard, 279-280](#)] But the measurement of achievement only in material terms will always lead to disappointment. The poor, we are taught, will always be with us – not as burden, but as a challenge, a measure not of our alms, but of our love.

The good that we do is not in our works, but in our [charity](#) – our love of God and neighbor.

### Contemplate

How often do I pause to reflect on the presence of Christ in my Vincentian encounters?

### Recommended Reading

[What Good Have I Done](#) – a poem that asks and answers the question

## To Become Better

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the largest lay Catholic organization in the world, with about a million members and volunteers in 155 countries around the world. As the primary founder, and inspirational leader of the earliest Conferences, we can very fairly say that Blessed Frédéric Ozanam left a very large legacy – he literally changed the world. Yet we know him to have been a very humble and modest man. Although there is no record of him saying this actual phrase that is often attributed to him, it is very fair to say that he truly sought in his life “*to become better, and to do a little good.*”

How could such a modest goal become such a great, apostolic legacy? Perhaps it would be better to ask how it could *not*. After all, the very Kingdom of Heaven, Christ taught, [grown from the smallest of seeds](#). Frédéric accomplished great things not by setting out to accomplish great things, but by setting out to make himself better by growing closer to Christ, and to share the good news with others. This was his vision for the Society, too, as a “*a community of faith and works erasing little by little the old divisions*” made up of members resolved “*to become better themselves in order to make others happier.*” [[Letter 290, to Amélie, 1841](#)]

Frédéric believed that the church offered the solution to “the social question” precisely because it was not of this world; because through the saving word of Jesus Christ we will be able to place all questions in their proper place, and be united by love, not divided by material concerns. At the same time, he recognized the great challenge of this, and asked the very same kinds of questions we often ask ourselves: Am I holy enough? Who am I to try to teach others the path to holiness?

As Frédéric once put it, “*how does one make saints without being a saint oneself? How do we preach resignation and courage to the unfortunate when we feel devoid of it ourselves? How do we reproach them for things we too are guilty of?*” We’re challenged, he said, when we see “*we are equals in infirmity and in virtue often inferior to those we are visiting.*” [1372. Report to Gen’l Assly, 1838]

In his deep and lifelong [kerygmatic](#) commitment, Frédéric recognized that it is we who are first evangelized when we see that it is Christ we serve, that love of neighbor can never be separated from love of God, and that our own growth in holiness makes each of us not a mighty tree, but something much greater – a tiny mustard seed.

To seek personal holiness might seem, Frédéric conceded, a “*motive of personal interest, this egoism which is at the bottom of our work.*” [[Letter 82, to Curnier, 1834](#)] But we only become better by becoming smaller, greater by becoming more modest, and we change the world by first changing ourselves.

### Contemplate

Am I holy enough?

### Recommended Reading

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

## To Know Fully

In his 1978 book, [God and the Astronomers](#), astrophysicist Robert Jastrow concludes that the astronomers, following science alone to scale the mountain of ignorance, would, when reaching the truth at its peak, be “greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.” This metaphor captures a truth at the heart of our vocation, since the founders were challenged by those who scoffed at the church’s role in the “modern world.” Then, as now, the truth we serve is much deeper and more permanent than the temporary circumstances of the times in which we live.

In Frédéric’s time, many philanthropic associations formed whose goal was to get material resources out to as many people as possible, using every modern efficiency of the day. As Frédéric observed, after “*only a year in existence ... they already have large volumes of resumés.*” [[Letter 90, to Curnier, 1835](#)] He went on to contrast those works what he’d been challenged to show: the true good of the church.

The Society’s purpose is not service delivery, but charity - love. Our success is not measured by the quantity of dollars or food we may distribute, but by the quality of the relationships we form. In the recent pandemic, we were forced to make do with alternate forms of contact, rather than home visits. While being grateful for the ability to continue to serve, [we quickly saw they were only "half a loaf."](#)

In 1834, Blessed Frédéric explained that “*at-home assistance is one of the best rendered charities and one that produces the best results*”, especially, he continued, “*in these times when help is generally dispensed with such culpable indifference*”. [Doc. 1457, report on works, 1834] As Pope Francis explains, we set aside our own wishes and desires in serving the vulnerable. “*Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, ‘suffers’ that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people.*” [[Fratelli Tutti, 115](#)]

It’s a well-known axiom that most human communications are non-verbal. We pick up cues such as social context and body language from other people even when we are not aware of them consciously. There really is no substitute. The Apostle Paul even explains arriving at holiness and understanding by contrasting an image in a mirror with seeing face to face, when he will “[know fully, as I am fully known.](#)”

Recent psychological research has compared the effects of remote and face-to-face communication. Their conclusion has been that relationships and communication are not only better formed face to face (“fully known” you might say), but that [face-to-face meeting is even associated with better mental health](#). If only today’s researchers had consulted Frédéric Ozanam first. Not to worry – when they reach the mountaintop, he will be waiting for them there...in person.

## Contemplate

Do I truly stop to see and to know the neighbor in front of me?

## Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#), especially “*Home Visits in the Vincentian Tradition*”

## Answering God's Call

Central to the spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul is the importance of fulfilling God's will. Even more than that, he teaches, we must unite our will with His. In order to fulfill God's will, to make it our own, we must first discern His will, we must hear His calling for our lives.

From the Latin *vocare*, "to call", we have our English word "vocation". God's calling, then, is our vocation. The Catechism teaches us that all people "*are called to the same end: God himself.*" [\[CCC, 1878\]](#) Each of us also has personal vocations specific to our particular gifts and talents. [\[CL, 49\]](#) Whether it is the vocation to marriage, to the ordained priesthood, or to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, our personal calling is meant to help us answer the universal vocation to holiness. But to answer God's call, we must hear it.

In founding the Society, Blessed Frédéric clearly heard God's call, sharing with his friends that "*we must do as Our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the Gospel. Let us go to the poor.*" [\[Baunard, 65\]](#) In this, he anticipated Pope Saint John Paul II's teaching that all the lay faithful are called to share in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. [\[CL, 14\]](#)

When we gather together, especially when meeting fellow Vincentians for the first time, we often exchange stories of how we came to join the Society. Those stories usually begin with "I wanted..." or "I thought..." Somehow, many of us managed to answer before truly understanding God had called us.

God speaks to us through the events and people we encounter in our lives, and while we do not always hear His call at the moment it happens, we can always "re-read" our lives, just as we can re-read books in order to find things that we either missed, or were not prepared to comprehend the first time. We do this individually, and we do this together through spiritual reflections, especially apostolic reflection. God speaks to us in His own time. His call awaits our readiness to hear it and to answer.

Alongside the importance of doing God's will is St. Vincent's understanding that in the poor we serve the person of Jesus Christ. The neighbor is God to us, and if we see His face in them, we also hear His voice. This is our vocation, this is our calling, and if we are blessed today to hear His voice on our Conference helpline, [let us harden not our hearts](#).

### Contemplate

How often do I pause to discern God's will for me and God's call to me?

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## A Perpetual Expression

One of our essential elements is spirituality, but what is spirituality? How do we express it? How do we live it? What is its goal? Given that the spiritual growth of members also is the primary purpose of the Society, we probably ought to have some idea how to answer these questions.

To begin with the end in mind, the purpose, the ultimate goal of our spirituality, is as Jesus told us: to [“be perfect, just as Your heavenly Father is perfect.”](#) This is the universal calling of all God’s people. He calls us to Himself. He sent us His Son to share in our humanity so that we might share in His divinity. Jesus, the Son of Man, is our role model for perfection. He is the union of the human and the divine, not half of each, but fully both. In a similar way, we are created not as bodies with spirits, nor spirits with bodies. We are unitary, body and spirit together. [\[GS, 14\]](#) It is the spiritual dimension of our nature that sets us apart from His other creatures, and that enables us to glimpse the transcendent.

Yet, while each of us is made in God’s image, at the same time each of us is “unique and unrepeatable”. [\[CSDC, 131\]](#) As a consequence, each person’s spirituality, each person’s pathway of spiritual growth, also is unique. Just as we are given different gifts, so we are called to use them in different ways in order to fulfill God’s will for each of us - and for all of us. We are all [parts of one body](#), sharing God’s gifts with one another.

Spirituality cannot limit itself to a simple set of practices. As important as it is to attend Mass, pray the rosary, and study Holy Scripture, true spirituality calls us to much more. Spirituality is our entire manner of living our faith; *“not a part of life, but the whole of life,”* as Pope Saint John Paul II reminds us. [\[Ecclesia in America, 29\]](#)

As Vincentians, we walk together along a very special pathway towards holiness, towards the perfection to which Christ calls us. We live our faith in imitation of Christ, and also in imitation of our patron, Saint Vincent de Paul, who, Frédéric teaches, *“is a model one must strive to imitate, as he himself imitated the model of Jesus Christ. He is a life to be carried on, a heart in which one's own heart is enkindled, an intelligence from which light should be sought; he is a model on earth and a protector in heaven.”* [\[175, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

We devote ourselves, in our little Society, to the spiritual practices modeled for us by Saint Vincent and all the saints and blessed of the Vincentian Family, who found holiness by seeing and serving Christ in the poor, by loving God with the strength of their arms, and by trusting fully in Divine Providence in their lives. And if these are our beliefs, as Christians, as Catholics, and as Vincentians, *“let us,”* as Frédéric said, *“take them seriously, that our lives may be their perpetual expression.”* [53, to Falconnet, 1832]

### Contemplate

How can I better live my beliefs at work, at home, with neighbors, friends...everywhere?

### Recommended Reading

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



## Fulfilling His Promise

A young Vincentian, complaining about Conference meetings, noted that the members seemed discouraged, that they were just doing good works “by habit”, and that the meeting “*is nearly always concerned with business, it seems long.*” It’s no wonder members with this experience question the Rule’s requirement that we meet twice a month. [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3.1\]](#) Who would want to be subjected to that twice a month? Yet the International Council General’s commentary makes clear that twice a month is only a minimum – Conferences are expected to meet every week “*to talk about all the issues - concerning the poor, and concerning God.*”[\[“Rule and Commentary”\]](#)

It would seem they are talking about two very different sorts of meetings. Indeed, that young Vincentian didn’t seem to be attending Conference meetings whose purpose, as the Manual tells us, is “*less to conduct business than to celebrate and deepen its unity for essentially spiritual reasons.*” [\[Manual, 18\]](#) And it seems unlikely that he was complaining about the meetings the Rule describes as being “*held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.4\]](#)

It’s easy to fall into habits formed in business, or other organizations, in which meetings become a place, as the old joke goes, “where minutes are kept, and hours are wasted.” Conference meetings in the Society are meant to be a sacred place where members pray, reflect on their service and their faith, and grow in friendship and holiness together, not in isolation. We are not a service delivery organization, and we never have been. We serve [for love alone](#). Our primary purpose is our growth in holiness, and as Frédéric explained, “*fidelity to meetings, and union of intention and prayer are indispensable to this end.*” [\[182, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

When our meetings become too business-focused, it shouldn’t be a cause for discouragement, but a cause to rededicate our meetings to prayer and friendship. After all, that young, complaining Vincentian was Frédéric Ozanam, and he was writing about the very first Conference less than two years after it was formed. [\[90, to Curnier, 1835\]](#) Shortly after that letter, the first Rule was written – the Rule that reminds us still that “*members meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3\]](#)

The spiritual reflection is not merely a checkbox on the agenda. It is the main reason we meet, and the time we devote to it should reflect that. When we spend our time together in this way, we will find, as Frédéric soon did, that “*by seeing each other more often, we love one another all the more; seeing even more of us gathered together in the name of Him who promised to be among those who gather in his name, one feels all the more keenly that his promise is fulfilled.*” [\[1372, to the General Assembly, 1838\]](#)

### Contemplate

Do I invite Christ to my Conference meetings, reflecting with my friends on our service in His name?

### Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#) – especially “Conference Meetings” p. 18-19

## Payment for Tears of Joy

“Help ...becomes honorable,” Bl. Frédéric taught, “when it may become mutual.” [\[O'Meara, 177\]](#) It is this teaching that inspires our Rule's call for Vincentians to “form relationships based on trust and friendship” with the neighbor. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) Because after all, what is friendship if it is not mutual?

Asking for help can be humiliating. In some places, beggars on the street prostrate themselves, hiding their faces as if ashamed, literally with hats in hand to ask for pocket change from passersby. In the impersonal offices of many agencies, people in need often interact primarily with impersonal clipboards and application forms - forms that can be more complicated than a loan application. And unlike a loan, the assistance they receive for food, medicine, housing, and other needs is not something they will ever be expected to pay back. Yet, it is natural to feel an obligation to repay gifts, and when we can't, to feel emptied in spirit while being replenished materially.

In Frédéric's time, there were even critics who believed that charitable works wrongly obligated the poor. To them, Frédéric replied that you could only believe assistance imposes a one-way obligation if *“you have never experienced the obligation it confers on him who gives.”* Those who visit the poor, he explained, *“know that in accepting bread from their hand, as he takes the light from God, the poor man honors them; they know that the theatre and every other place of amusement can be paid for, but that nothing in this world can pay for two tears of joy in the eyes of a poor mother, nor the grasp of an honest man's hand when one has enabled him to wait till he gets work.”* [\[O'Meara, 177-178\]](#)

Not only is the obligation mutual, so are the gifts. This is natural among friends. That's the reason why, when we need help with something – especially something difficult, or that we'd rather not confide in a stranger – we ask a friend. A friend won't judge us for the mistake we made that led to our predicament. A friend won't abandon us. A friend won't embarrass us. A friend won't ask us to repay the favor.

In a way, asking for help is proof of friendship in itself. Asking somebody to be Best Man or Maid of Honor at a wedding is asking for a very great commitment of time, effort, and sometimes money, yet no friend considers this request an imposition. Rather, it is an honor, and a demonstration of trust.

In this sense, then, it is the neighbor who calls us for help who takes the first step in establishing this friendship. They trust us with their problems and their secrets. When we respond as friends, [for love alone](#), we earn their trust. When we offer not only material assistance, but our time and ourselves, we earn their friendship. In our mutual giving and receiving, in both seeing Christ and in imitating Him, perhaps both we and the neighbor may exclaim, [“Oh, what a friend we have in Jesus!”](#)

### Contemplate

Do I thank God in my prayers for the friends I have made on my home visits?

### Recommended Reading

[Apostle in a Top Hat](#)

## Not to Be Forgotten

There are thousands of agencies, organizations, and individuals who offer assistance to the poor. In our Conferences we often get to know them and refer neighbors to them when it seems they may be better able to provide for the needs we've encountered. We live in a very wealthy nation, filled with generous people. What is it then, that sets the Society apart? What do we bring to the neighbor?

In Frédéric's time, also, there were other organizations, many of them better funded than the fledgling Society. Yet, he observed, "*help is generally dispensed with such culpable indifference*". [1457, Report, 1834] Now, as in Frédéric's time, our primary purpose in visiting the neighbor is not merely to bring them material assistance. Anybody can do that, and if we measured success in bread alone, it could probably be delivered more efficiently by Amazon, but if we believe as we say, that the hungry one is Christ, surely we are called to do more than toss a loaf of bread on His porch.

In a beloved scene from the 1947 movie [Monsieur Vincent](#), the saint explains that "*Only because of your love, and your love only, will the poor forgive you for the bread you're giving them.*" More important than what we give is the manner in which we give it - not carefully measured out from our treasuries, but poured out from our hearts. For Frédéric, this devotion is what prevented Conferences from "*degenerating to welfare bureaus.*" [182, to Lallier, 1838] The assistance we offer is guided by "*the inspirations of the heart rather than the calculations of the mind.*" [82, to Curnier, 1834]

And after all, a loaf of bread or an electric bill are only temporary comforts, and bringing more of them doesn't really make them less so. As Frédéric observed, "*a donation of bread and money is very meager compared to the support our religion requires us to bring for the comfort of sick souls.*" [1457, Report, 1834] As our Rule still reminds us, "*Vincentians should never forget that giving love, talents, and time is more important than giving money.*" [Rule, Part I, 3.14]

We are called to serve in hope; not the hope of a paid bill, a full belly, or a word of practical advice. All those things, as important as they may be in the moment, will pass. We are called to bring with us what Pope Benedict XVI called the "*great hope that cannot be destroyed.*" [Spe Salvi, 35]

The poet Maya Angelou once said that "*people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*" So it is with the neighbors we serve. They will forget the groceries or the light bill; those things anybody can bring. But through our visit, they will feel no longer ashamed, no longer forgotten, no longer alone. They will feel loved – by us, and by the God who sent us.

### Contemplate

Do I, in my actions and my manner, always reassure the neighbor of God's love?

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## Guideposts on the Journey

To boast about our accomplishments in works of charity brings to mind a routine by the comedian Chris Rock, in which he jokes about people who brag when they do what they are supposed to do. (“I graduated high school!” “You’re *supposed* to graduate high school!”, etc.) We are Christians – we’re *supposed* to feed the hungry, comfort the sick, welcome the stranger; to seek and to serve Christ in the poor, [just as he said we should](#).

Humility should remind us that no matter how great the material result of our works may appear, it is not our accomplishment anyway, for “*all that God gives us is for others ... we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) St. Vincent de Paul, whose works we know truly changed the world, often explained that they were not his doing, but God’s. “*Worldly respect*”, Frédéric warned, is the “*greatest danger*” to the integrity of our work. [\[Baunard, 297\]](#)

We undertake these works for one primary purpose: in order to “*to journey together towards holiness*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) This journey doesn’t happen by itself; we must take each step intentionally. We must strive consciously to connect our works to our growth; to discern in the people and experiences of our Vincentian vocation the face of Christ, the voice of the Holy Spirit, and the will of God in our lives.

We do this first by reflecting silently and prayerfully after each home visit, perhaps writing down in [a journal](#) the feelings and thoughts it brought to our mind and to our heart. We also take time to “re-read” experiences long past; like coming to the end of a mystery novel, and surprised by the ending, turning back to an early chapter where we find that the clues were there all along, we just didn’t see them before. In a similar way, we now see past experiences with new eyes, transformed by more recent experiences. God remains present to us in our memories, still speaking the word He meant for us to hear; ready for us to hear it and to understand it whenever we are ready.

Growing *together* in holiness also necessitates that we share our experiences and our insights with each other. We are created as social beings, meant to live in community, and our Conferences are our communities of faith. This is why our Rule calls us to spiritual reflection at every Conference meeting, where “*members are always invited to comment as a means of sharing their faith*”. [\[Rule, Part III, St. 7\]](#) As the Catechism explains, it is “*through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation.*” [\[CCC, 1879\]](#)

Sharing our faith, our insights, and our growth makes yours a part of mine, and mine a part of yours. In this way, we are privileged to act as guideposts for each other on our shared journey towards holiness.

### Contemplate

Do I take the time to pray, reflect, and share the ways that I have grown spiritually through my service?

### Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#) – don’t just read it, use it!

## To Do a Little Good

In [Monsieur Vincent](#), the 1947 movie about our patron's life, he is asked near the end of his life if there is anything he wished he had done. His reply is simple: "More." This captures the indefatigable commitment to new and creative works that characterized his life, but perhaps does not fully capture his belief or his teaching.

In a 1657 report to the Ladies of Charity, Vincent took care, while praising their many good works, to caution them to "*moderate these practices; for, according to the proverb, 'Whoever embraces too much, loses his grip.' It has happened to other Companies ... that, because they took on things beyond their strength, they collapsed under the burden.*" [\[CCD XIIIb: 437\]](#) More is not always more virtuous, bigger is not always better. In his turn, Frédéric also expressed this idea often, especially in defense of the Society's works against those who criticized it as the "charity of a glass of water." In other words, the critics only measured success in worldly terms, by pounds of bread, or vast numbers of people reached. The Society, on the other hand, measures success by the tears we dry, the hands we hold, and the hearts we touch with the love of God. We imitate Christ in celebrating each home visit like the [shepherd who leaves his entire flock for the sake of a single lost sheep](#).

In a letter to his cousin Ernest Falconnet he elaborated on this idea, saying that "... *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, and then die in its delirium.*" [\[Baunard, 349\]](#)

If our reward for our works is in heaven, so is our motive for pursuing them in the first place. We are not called by ambition, but by God to this vocation. Ours "*is a work of God and not a human work. I have said this before; human persons would be unable to achieve it, so God Himself became involved in it. Every good action comes from God; He is the author of every holy work.*" [\[CCD XIIIb: 431\]](#)

So we are bound not always to do "more", but always to do His will, always to share His love, always to love Him in the neighbor. And when our work is done each week, we pray and reflect on it together, discerning together what God has told us through our Vincentian encounters, how we have grown closer to Him, and to hope, with Bl. Frédéric, "*that this Society of St. Vincent de Paul ... which has been allowed to do a little good, will continue to prosper under the divine benediction.*" [\[141, To Ballofet, 1837\]](#)

Certainly, some of our works are, or may become great, but every one of us can do a little good. Then again, when you think about it, since all good is from God, there really is no such thing as "a little good."

### Contemplate

Do I try to pause and focus on the "little good" first?

### Recommended Reading

[The Frédéric Ozanam Story](#)

## To Do a Little Good

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### Contemplate

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### Recommended Reading

[The Frédéric Ozanam Story](#)

## Old and Ever New

With the rapid growth of the Society within its first two years, there arose a debate as to whether the first Conference, now grown quite large, ought to split in two. “*Do you not think that our charitable society itself ought to make changes in order to survive,*” asked Blessed Frédéric, noting that the change was necessary not to become something different, but to maintain our special character as a small group of friends acting and praying together. [\[85, to Bailly, 1834\]](#) To continue, then, it could no longer be a single conference, but would instead become many conferences.

In our Conferences, Frédéric later observed, “*there is change as in all human things.*” When the loss of members causes “*some weakness ... the cleared ranks are soon filled with newcomers ... whose more ardent zeal, new ideas, and original insights prevent routine from setting in and the primitive fervor dying.*” [\[141, to Ballofet, 1837\]](#) This is why we continue to welcome “*all those who seek to live their faith loving and committing themselves to their neighbor in need.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.1\]](#)

Founded in a time and place where the Church was far weaker, and poverty far greater than today, the Society had as its primary purpose the renewal of the faith – first among the members, then the poor, and finally throughout society. Challenged to show the good of the church by those who believed that “modern” systems of philanthropy could do greater good by merely distributing bread, our founders recognized that there is no greater good than to do as our Savior did: to go to the poor, to encounter Jesus [where he told us He would be](#), and to share His hope and His love through our person to person service.

Throughout our 191 years, the Society has adapted to many changes in the world around us. We especially try always to recognize and understand new forms of poverty so that we can truly “*strive to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten, the victims of exclusion or adversity*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#) Time and again, we find that adaptations are necessary not to change who we are, but to preserve our essence; to renew, not to replace the vision of Blessed Frédéric and his six friends.

As Ozanam biographer Msgr. Louis Baunard explained, the Society “*is not old, if you mean by that term superannuated, withered; but it is old, meaning thereby experienced, powerful; old and ever new; as with all things immortal and divine. It is, I admit, not modern, in the sense that a thing is the fashion for a particular time, or in a particular country. But it is, and continues to be, young with eternal youth, with the youth of Charity that knows not decay.*” [\[Baunard, 416\]](#)

### Contemplate

Do I take the time to recommit myself to growing in holiness through service to Christ’s poor?

### Recommended Reading

[Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam](#)

## Seeking His Will Together

“Life,” the old saying goes, “is what happens to us while we are making other plans.” There is a deeper truth captured in this witticism, one that St. Vincent often repeated. It is not that we should make no plans and simply wait for things to happen, but rather, that we should take time not merely to examine what we have accomplished, but to examine what we can learn; in short, to discern God’s will from the people and events in our lives, especially in our Vincentian service.

It is often observed that we can learn more from failure than from success, or as Vincent put it, “*the Will of God cannot be made known to us more clearly in events than when they happen without our intervention or in a way other than we requested*”. [CCD V:459] When our plans and actions are made with our best effort to do God’s will as we understand it, the results of those plans and actions will either be in accordance with His will or can give us new insight into His will. Our failures also, then, remind us that any success we experience is not ours but God’s. We may “*have the joy of triumph*,” Bl. Frédéric explained, “*Providence will have the glory*.” [Baunard, 209] Indeed, this is the very definition of our virtue of humility! [Rule, Part I, 2.5.1]

Our true measure of success, then, can never be limited to achieving our own goals, because success belongs to God, who does not need us to write His resumé. Rather, we should first examine whether we [entrusted our works to the Lord](#), conformed to His will, glorified Him, and grew closer to Him. While our duty to accountability requires us to fully account for our actions, our funds, and other details of our work, the more important accounting, the core of our spiritual growth in this community of faith, comes through deep reflection upon our experiences, first in individually, and then with our Conferences.

Certainly, this practice of apostolic reflection should always follow our home visits, beginning with the discussion between the two visitors, continuing through prayer, and perhaps [journaling](#). We continue by sharing our reflection with other Conference members at our regular meetings. They, in turn, will have a glimpse of the God who was present in our neighbor, giving them new insights that they can reflect back to us. This won’t yield the definitive “answer” but will draw us closer to each other and to Christ.

In a similar way, it is important for us to reflect on all of our plans and all of their results – food pantries and other special works, systemic change initiatives, advocacy – not in order to tally success on our own terms, but to discern whether we are serving God first, and how we can do that better, always asking, “Where was God present? Did we see Christ’s face? What is He telling us now?” In this way, we all grow together in holiness by growing closer to Christ and to each other. This, not “business”, is the reason we have Conference meetings, and the reason we have them often. [Rule, Part I, 3.3.1]

### Contemplate

Do I take time to discern God’s will in both success and failure? Do I share this with my Conference?

### Recommended Reading

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