



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

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Happy Travelers

Our Vincentian formation, [we are taught](#), is a lifelong process of becoming. Like all of God's people, our lives are not simply a series of events, but a journey – a spiritual journey towards perfection in union with our Creator. For us, this journey follows the Vincentian pathway, our special way of living our faith, which we call Vincentian Spirituality. If we seek to imitate the lives of our saints and founders, then, it is helpful to study their lives as examples of spiritual journeys that found their destination in holiness. When we do this, we will see that for Vincent, Louise, Frédéric, and Rosalie alike, several things distinguish their journeys, their spirituality, in ways that we can imitate, perhaps most especially two things that link their actions to their spiritual growth.

First, for each of them, the practice, the actual, physical work of charity, was foremost a spiritual exercise. As Saint Vincent once explained, "*loving those who are poor is to love Him in that way; serving poor persons well is to serve Him well*". [[CCD XIIIb:434](#)] "Seeing the face of Christ" is not a mere slogan for Vincentians, it is our calling by Jesus, [who promised us we would find Him in the poor](#), and our spirituality, inherited from Saint Vincent de Paul. On our shared and individual journey then, we must, as Frédéric declared in founding the Society, "*go to the poor*." [[Baubard, 65](#)]

Second, each of these role models of Vincentian holiness took the time to reflect on their encounters with the neighbor and to share with their communities the insights they'd gained. As Blessed Frédéric reminds us, "*the blessing of the poor is the blessing of God*." [[Baubard, 96](#)] What a shame it would be if we were to spend so much time in the presence of Jesus Christ and not take the time to pray, to meditate, and to share with each other how He spoke to us, what He said, and how He transformed us! As Saint Louise put it, we should "*reflect that Our Lord wills that, after we have worked for our neighbor, we must turn our attention to preparing ourselves for heaven which is our blessed home*." [[SWLM, L.346](#)]

Blessed Rosalie believed that reflection needn't be done only after the work, but that "*you can make it right here, without leaving your work. Reflect that your souls should be as white as these soapsuds and as light so that they can mount toward God*". [[Sullivan, 116](#)] It was Rosalie who taught this practice of Vincentian spirituality to the first members of the Society, gathering them together in her parlor after each visit to reflect on it together in the hope of better discerning their growth, and God's will.

Our Conferences, our communities of faith, are at the center of our spiritual journeys. They are communities of "*faith and love, prayer and action*." [[Rule, Part III, St. 5](#)] They are communities in which we do the work of charity, grow in faith together, and share with each other our own spiritual journeys through spiritual reflections in which "*members are always invited to comment as a means of sharing their faith*". [[Rule, Part III, St. 7](#)] May we continue to share, and by sharing, be "*happy travelers at the end of our journey*". [[13, to Materne, 1830](#)]

Contemplate

Do I truly open my heart in sharing my spiritual journey and theirs with my fellow Vincentians?

Recommended Reading

[Walking the Vincentian Pathway](#)

To You Alone

To offer the benefit of the doubt is to assume the best of somebody even when you are uncertain of the truth. Is this not what we are called to do in our encounters with the neighbor?

Thomas, [we are told in John's gospel](#), would not believe Christ had risen until he had first seen the wounds for himself. To be clear, it wasn't Christ's word he was doubting. Quite the contrary, he was insisting that he only would trust Christ, and not his friends, who had already testified to the resurrection. Their words were not good enough for Thomas without tangible proof to back them up. If St. Thomas the Apostle struggled to trust in the word of the other ten closest followers of Jesus, how can we hope to trust in the word of a neighbor whom we have only just met?

Perhaps, like Thomas, we can find ourselves assured not by Christ's words, but by His wounds. "*In the poor,*" our Rule reminds us, "*[we] see the suffering Christ.*" [\[Rule Part I, 1.8\]](#) Not the risen Christ in all His heavenly glory; not Christ the evangelizer and servant; not Christ the performer of miracles. No, we are called to see the suffering Christ, the broken Christ, the Christ [who felt abandoned](#), alone on the cross.

As Blessed Frédéric put it, when we look at the poor, we can, like Thomas, "*put finger and hand in their wounds and the scars of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads; and ... we should fall at their feet and say with the Apostle, 'Tu est Dominus et Deus meus.' You are our masters, and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise shall we not love Him in your persons?*" [\[137, to Janmot, 1836\]](#)

The poor will rarely share with us their "whole story", at least not before we have formed "*relationships based on trust and friendship.*" [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) Instead, they offer us their needs, much like Christ suffering on the cross, who Saint Louise points out "*does not address His Father. He does not ask for something to drink. He simply cries out, 'I thirst.'*" [\[SWLM, A.21\]](#)

We can never really know the neighbor's "whole story", so at some point, we have to extend the benefit of the doubt; at some point we have to offer the same trust that we ask for in return. We are called to judge the need, not to determine what [kind of person](#) we are serving. We are called to serve [for love alone](#). And that love, as St. Vincent teaches, means that "*We do not believe a man because he is very learned but because we consider him good and love him.*" [\[CCD I:276\]](#)

For Thomas, all doubt was removed at the sight of Christ's wounds. If our love leads us to see Christ's wounds in the suffering poor, we will be better able to respond as St. Louise calls us to do: "*Listen to Him, O my soul, as if He were speaking to you alone, 'I thirst for your faithful love.'*" [\[SWLM, A.21\]](#)

Contemplate

Are there times I let my doubts overcome my mercy and compassion?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

Chosen from All Eternity

Virtue, our catechism teaches, is a "*habitual and firm disposition to do good.*" [\[CCC: 1833\]](#) The good deeds themselves are not the virtue; they are, or should be, the fruits of our virtue. From our virtue of charity comes our practice of generosity; from our virtue of gentleness comes our practice of kindness and patience, and so on. Attaining virtue, though, can come from performing the acts – we become by doing. As Aristotle put it, if you want to become a builder, you build. By extension, if you want to attain virtue, you behave virtuously. Perhaps that's just a fancy way of saying "fake it until you make it."

Is it necessary, though, to practice and attain every virtue? Is that even possible? St. Francis de Sales, a friend and mentor of St. Vincent de Paul, argued in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* that "*Every calling stands in special need of some special virtue... and although all should possess every virtue, yet all are not called upon to exercise them equally, but each should cultivate chiefly those which are important to the manner of life to which he is called*", and that from among the other virtues, we should "*choose the most excellent, not the most showy*". For example, he explained, most people will choose material almsgiving rather than spiritual, or choose fasting rather than gentleness or cheerfulness, even though in both cases, the latter choice is the better one. [\[IDL, 126-127\]](#)

St. Vincent reinforced this point in a conference for the Daughters, asking, "*Do you think, Sisters, that God expects you simply to bring His poor persons a piece of bread, a little meat, some soup, and some medicine?*" Certainly, the bringing of food is virtuous, but is that our primary calling? Is that enough? "*Oh no,*" Vincent answers, "*that wasn't His plan in choosing you from all eternity to render Him the services you do for Him in the person of the poor. He expects you to provide for their spiritual needs as well as for those of the body.*" [\[CCD IX:189\]](#) We are chosen, we are called, into this Vincentian vocation to attain not only virtue, but holiness. As our patron Saint teaches, we do this by dedicating ourselves to the interior virtues, the higher virtues.

St. Vincent gave to us our five [Vincentian Virtues](#), the ones that St. Francis would tell us are important to the manner of life to which we are called. We seek first to practice [simplicity](#), [humility](#), [gentleness](#), [selflessness](#), and [zeal](#) in all of our works in the hopes of becoming truly simple, humble, gentle, selfless, and zealous in our passion for the full flourishing of every person. This is our calling, our vocation. Our home visits, as Frédéric often explained "*should be the means and not the end of our association.*" [\[182, to Lallier, 1838\]](#)

Holiness is a lofty goal, and if it feels overwhelming, we will do well to "*reflect on the grandeur of God's plan for you: that He wants you ... with little ability or education, to cooperate with Him in communicating His Spirit!*" [\[CCD IX:189\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I sometimes focus more on my external acts than on my inner formation in virtue?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

A Culture of Welcome

Many of our Conferences struggle with finding – and keeping – new members. Often, when this happens, we begin to tell ourselves that perhaps we are asking too much of potential members; scaring them off with the notion of weekly or twice-monthly meetings and home visits. We look for ways to make the Society seem like something it is not so that we can ease people into it. In the end, this approach will not only fail to attract members, but it will diminish the Society itself.

Most current members will tell you that they first joined the Society seeking “*to live their faith, loving and committing themselves to their neighbor in need.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.1\]](#) Most of us wished, as our Patron Saint so memorably put it, to “*love God...with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.*” [\[CCD XI:32\]](#) Ours is a vocation, a calling, and whether it was in response to a pulpit talk, or a simple tug within our hearts, we all answered a call to serve.

It was only over time that we began to feel God’s presence growing in our hearts through serving His poor. We stay because we have felt and received God’s transformational grace. And if we are truly transformed, why would we keep this to ourselves? Don’t we want this for all of our friends?

This, after all, is the primary purpose of the Society! Our home visits, the heart of our vocation, have always been considered the means, not the end of our association. On the home visit, we see the face of Christ – we come to know Him. This is the universal vocation of all God’s people: to seek union with our Creator. [\[CCC: 1877\]](#) St. Vincent teaches us where to find Him – right over there, with His hands outstretched. He is the hungry one. He is the thirsty one. He is the stranger, the prisoner, the sick.

President-General Jules Gossin observed in 1851 that when “newcomers sit down unnoticed...without any words of welcome and encouragement...[they] are discouraged, become timid, stand apart, and if they do not leave the conference...they have less taste for it...” [\[Gossin, Circular letter, 1851\]](#) It remains true that when prospective members attend a meeting, we should never just let them sit there and observe. We should welcome them as the friends their presence has already proven them to be, and as quickly as possible accompany them, on a home visit, to see the Lord who called them there!

Just as we evangelize through our loving actions on every home visit, so we evangelize among ourselves and all prospective members by the example of “*our fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.4\]](#) If our hearts are filled with Christ from our vocation, it is only so that we may better share Him. It is not our persuasive marketing pitch, but our joy in serving Christ that will call new members to this vocation, and it is our full friendship and welcome that will keep them in our conferences.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes keep God’s transformational grace to myself?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#)

Under the Cross

Amélie Ozanam, Blessed Frédéric's widow, had a brief invocation, or perhaps a motto, that she often added to notes and letters that she wrote. It was "*et sub cruce, Hozanna!*", meaning "and under the cross, Hozanna!" in Latin. This was a play on her maiden name, Soulacroix, which is French for "under the cross", along with her married name, Ozanam, which is from the Hebrew, *hoshi'a na*, or hosanna. We sing praise under the cross!

For Vincentians, the idea of a life "under the cross" is central to understanding our vocation. Saint Vincent often reminded his followers of the importance of bearing their crosses, just as [Christ had asked](#) of all who wished to follow Him. For Vincent, our suffering, our challenges, our crosses, should be borne with happiness, because "*He sanctifies souls by crosses, just as He has redeemed them by His own Cross.*" [\[CCD IV:180\]](#)

As Vincent understood, we all have different crosses; some as simple as temptations or bad habits, some as serious as illness, addictions, or poverty. Whatever they may be, our crosses are not meant to defeat us. To give in to temptations, for example, is to attach ourselves to the worldly; to resist them, to bear the cross, is to remember the greater joy that awaits us in the next life. We should take comfort, then, in our crosses, and bear them willingly, even cheerfully. As St. Louise said, "*your sufferings will be changed into consolation because of the crosses you are privileged to bear.*" [\[SWLM, L.393\]](#)

Our crosses, in this sense, are an extension of Christ's own cross, a share in His suffering, an invitation "*to cooperate in all the great works,*" Frédéric explained, "*which can be done without us!*" After all, he went on, Christ could have summoned "*twelve legions of angels*" when He was condemned, but instead "*willed that Simon of Cyrene, an obscure man, carry His cross and so contribute to the great marvel of universal redemption.*" [\[173, To Lallier, 1838\]](#) The crucifix, a sign of great suffering and pain, is for us instead a sign of great comfort. We see beauty in that image of pain because we see it with "hope-tainted eyes", knowing that Christ's story does not end there.

Each of the neighbors we serve bears a cross, and we are called to see in them the suffering Christ. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#) Like the crucified Christ, they suffer, they thirst, and they [cry out in abandonment](#). Bearing our own crosses cheerfully helps us better to walk with them, like Simon of Cyrene, easing their burden, but more importantly, offering them the hope that sees past suffering.

It is our presence that shows them God's love, our comfort that reassures them they are not forgotten, and our actions that say, along with Saint Vincent, "*I shall share in your consolation, as I intend to share in your cross...*" [\[CCD III:234\]](#)

Contemplate

Do I gladly bear my own cross along with the neighbor's?

Recommended Reading

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

Invitation to Grow

Why did you join the Society of St. Vincent de Paul? And why do you stay? These are two very important questions for every Vincentian to meditate upon from time to time. Membership is a vocation, a calling. Each of heard a call, but it spoke to each of us differently, based on our own backgrounds, our own motives, our own unique and unrepeatable persons.

Were you drawn by the invitation of a friend, motivated, as we often are, to love what our friends love? We sit through concerts or ball games only because our friend is a fan, and sometimes we also become fans over time. St. Vincent once pointed out an even deeper friendship flows from this tendency, asking, “*Can we have a better friend than God? Must we not love all that He loves and, for love of Him, consider our neighbor as our friend!*” [CCD XI:39] If you joined because of friendship, is that still the reason that you stay? If you were drawn by something else, have you grown in friendship that keeps you in the Society?

Others, of course, perhaps most of us, heard a call to live our faith in acts of service; we weren’t drawn as strongly to prayer groups or “conference table ministries”. Instead, we wanted, as St. Vincent so famously put it, to “*love God...with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows*” [CCD XI:32], serving Jesus [exactly as he asked us to!](#) After all, aren’t works of charity what the Society is best known for? Yet over time, the work can sometimes be wearying, the calls can be [interruptions](#), the stress we share with our neighbors in need can begin to wear on us. The service may be the reason you joined, but is it the reason you stay? Is it the work itself, or is it something deeper that flows from the work?

Some of us were called by the inspirational example of our patron Saint’s holiness, and truly sought first to deepen our own faith and spirituality by following his example, even as he imitated the example of Christ, and if we sought prayer and meditation, we certainly have found it in our Conferences. We are people of prayer. But as you’ve prayed and reflected with fellow Vincentians, have you discovered new levels of friendship? Has your prayer led you to action? Why do you stay?

It is difficult to separate these motives because they all work so closely together. Our friendship informs our service and becomes part of what we offer to the neighbor. Our encounters with the neighbor, in whom we see Christ, strengthen our faith and spirituality. Our faith grows stronger as it is shared with each other in prayer, reflection, friendship, and service. One of the best ways to continue in this growth is to take the time to reflect on it, and to share our own growth with our fellow Vincentians.

You might say this is essential.

Contemplate

Take some quiet time this week and ponder these questions: why did I join, and why do I stay?

Recommended Writing

Write down your thoughts, then share them your fellow Vincentians. Grow together.

A Model to Follow

When we hear the word “leader” we naturally think of a great general, a head of state, one of those celebrity CEOs, or even a star athlete leading a team to victory. The great leader is an American archetype: charismatic, confident, inspiring; a leader, in short, is “large and in charge”.

For most of us, this is an image that would be difficult to live up to, so when the Council or Conference announces an upcoming election for a new president, we remain quiet, and even if invited directly to serve, we demur. “Large and in charge,” we think, “That just isn’t me.”

Perhaps instead we should first consider that it is not merely our fellow Vincentians suggesting that we consider serving as leaders. After all, we are taught to discern God’s will for us in the people and events in our lives. What people or events led us to join the Society in the first place? Surely, we didn’t come up with that idea on our own. Indeed, St. Vincent de Paul was quite clear that not a single one of his works was ultimately his own idea, all of it came from God. It was God who called us here, and God who calls us now. If He asks us, through others, to consider leading the Conference, we ought to take the time to seriously discern that call.

And in discerning, we consider also the nature of Vincentian leadership – servant leadership. Our model is not the commander, the ruler, or the boss. Our model is the master and teacher who nevertheless [knelt down and washed the feet of His disciples](#). “*I have given you,*” He said, “*A model to follow.*” Our model of a leader, then, is not the greatest, but the least; not the master but the servant. In short, a Vincentian servant leader is not “large and in charge”, but *small, and for all*.

But you say that you simply haven’t the knowledge or the gifts to lead? “*Don’t think,*” St. Vincent de Paul once explained, “*that responsible positions are always given to the most capable or virtuous.*” [[CCD IX: 526](#)] Servant leadership is part of our calling, part of our vocation, and it is precisely the humility that makes us reluctant to take on a leadership role that makes us better suited to do so. Trust in providence, in this case, means trusting that “*when God calls us to it ... either He sees in us the proper dispositions or has determined to give them to us.*” [[CCD XI:128](#)]

Our Cultural Beliefs remind us that “*as Vincentians we are committed to ... develop ourselves and others to become Servant Leaders.*” [[Rule, Part III, St. 2](#)] When we were called to this vocation we were already called to servant leadership, and we can all have confidence, when it is our turn to serve, that “*God gives sufficient graces to those He calls to it.*” [[CCD IX:526](#)]

Contemplate

Have I truly listened to and answered God’s call to lead?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

With All Our Strength

As Vincentians, we understand this to be a calling, a vocation. Each of us is called to serve God as a member of the Society, seeing Christ in the neighbor, and growing in holiness through our service. While the meetings and the works of the Society demand much from us, our Rule tells us that our vocation asks much more than that; that it is a “vocation for every moment of our lives”. [\[Rule, Part I, 2.6\]](#)

How could it be otherwise? Our Vincentian vocation is simply our specific way of living the universal vocation of all Christians, to seek holiness, to “[be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.](#)” This is not a call to be perfect only at Sunday Mass, or Monday Conference meetings, or on home visits. It is a call to be reborn, to be transformed, to be like Christ, fully united with God in eternal life.

So how do we seek holiness in “every moment”? How do we live our vocation, for example, at work? In *Christifidelis Laici*, Pope Saint John Paul II explained that “In discovering and living their proper vocation and mission, the lay faithful must be formed according to the *union* which exists from their being *members of the Church and citizens of human society.*” [\[CF, 59\]](#) In other words, we seek to be in the world, but not of it, [as Jesus prayed.](#)

We need look no farther than Blessed Frédéric to find a model to follow. For Frédéric there was no demarcation between Sunday and the rest of the week, no boundary between his prayer and his action, no separation between the secular and the spiritual life. In his teaching, he saw it as his duty to serve the university, but always to serve God in doing so. “I belong both to the church and the university,” he explained, “*I believe that I have partly succeeded when, in a public lecture to an audience of every belief and party, I profess Christian teaching with simplicity.*” [\[475, To M Soulacroix, 1843\]](#)

While he “*proudly professed our faith and refuted contrary systems, striving to fulfill our vocation as professors in a Christian manner and to serve God in serving wholesome teaching*”, he also believed it important “*that our lectures not be looked upon by our colleagues as provocations demanding a reply and that, if some are strangers to the faith, they not be made its enemies.*” [\[516, to Foisset, 1843\]](#)

He prayed before every lecture for the Holy Spirit to guide him, and his dedication to his students was total. Hearing of criticism for missing too many classes during his illness, he was unoffended. Instead, he literally arose from his deathbed, and walking into the classroom with assistance, began his lecture saying “*Gentlemen, our age is charged with selfishness, and professors are stated to be affected with the general complaint. Yet, it is here that we wear out our health, and use up our strength. I do not complain, our life is yours; we owe it to you to the last breath, and you shall have it. As for me, if I die, it will be in your service.*” [\[Baunard, 358-359\]](#) He loved his students as he loved God, with all his strength. It was his last lecture, and perhaps his finest.

Contemplate

Do I seek to serve God in all that I do?

Recommended Reading

[Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam](#)

A Culture of Encounter

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the [home visit](#) both were formed when Frédéric Ozanam declared in 1833 that “*we must do what Our Lord Jesus Christ did*” and “*go to the poor.*”[\[Bauard, 65\]](#) The very first Rule in 1835 enshrined “*the object of this Conference*” as first, to grow in faith and spirit, and second, “*to visit the poor at their dwellings*”.[\[Rule, Intro, 1835\]](#) One hundred and ninety-one years later, the home visit remains the core, the very heart and soul, of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

At first, home visits were not merely the central work, but the only work of the Society, whose young members, guided by Bl. Rosalie and the Daughters of Charity, “adopted” poor families, visiting them regularly to bring food, firewood, clothing and other assistance, but more importantly, forming true relationships, “*relationships based on trust and friendship*” as today’s Rule says.[\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#)

It was personal relationships formed on home visits that led the first members towards what we now call systemic change. They didn’t start from an abstract vision of what society ought to be, but from a practical understanding of the real lives of their friends and neighbors, from “*climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret, sitting by his bed side, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind.*”[\[Bauard, 279\]](#) That’s why, in its first year, the first Conference created an apprenticeship program for young men. It’s why, three years later, the new Conference in Lyon began a library and school for soldiers. It is also why, as Frédéric said, “*home visits to the poor have still remained our principal work.*”[\[1369, Rpt. to Gen. Assembly, 1837\]](#) The home visit inspires us to other works, and so the same Rule which declared home visits the “object” of the Conference, also insisted that “*no work of charity should be regarded as foreign to the Society.*”[\[1835 Rule, Art. 2\]](#)

Yet, even more important than this practical benefit of home visits is that they are our primary path to our growth in holiness. That is why our Rule still considers “home visitation reports” an essential part of the Conference Meeting.[\[Rule, Part III, St. 7\]](#) Sharing and meditating on our work leads us to “*internal spiritual knowledge of [ourselves], others, and the goodness of God.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#)

We are called to see the face of Christ in the poor. When Christ calls us, we don’t ask Him to come to us, take a number, and fill out a form. We go to Him, we seek to encounter Him, wherever He lives – in a house, on the street, in prison, in assisted living, or in a hospital. The home visit is not our central work only for practical and historical reasons, but because it is an encounter that changes us.

Each visit is a holy encounter, and we make it with the deep understanding that “[one does not live by bread alone](#)”, that our assistance is only temporary, but that the love of God which sends us is eternal.

Contemplate

When was my last home visit?

Recommended Reading

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

Another Advocate

In 1833, President (and Spiritual Advisor) Emmanuel Bailly opened the first meeting of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul praying “*Veni, Sancte Spiritus...*” We continue this special devotion to the Holy Spirit today, beginning our [Opening Prayers](#) at Conference Meetings with the very same invocation, but now in our own language: “Come Holy Spirit, live within our lives, and strengthen us by Your love.”

The Holy Spirit, Jesus told His disciples, would be sent to them after His ascension to heaven as “[another Advocate](#)” - in other words, to represent the continued presence of Christ, the first Advocate, on earth. In this way, He introduces us to the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. The word used in the Greek is *paraclete*, which carries the same meaning as the Latin *advocatus*, a term that that referred to legal counsel, but in our use refers to one who provides counsel, comfort, protection, and much more.

The Paraclete, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, then, is our protector, our comforter, and our mediator with God the Father. As Vincentians, we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our discernment, the fire of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in all of our works.

Interestingly, many Conferences and Councils refer to members of home visit teams as “advocates.” Whether or not your Conference uses this term, it is a helpful way to understand our role in serving the neighbor. We are called not only to “*see the suffering Christ*” in the poor, [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#) but to hope that it is Christ who loves through us, so that “*the poor may catch a glimpse of God's great love for them.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.1\]](#) In other words, we seek to be “another advocate”, sharing and showing the face and the love of Christ, offering not only material assistance, but prayer, comfort, and counsel. We are called to share the face of Christ, and to be a channel of the Holy Spirit.

We're further called to be a “*voice for the voiceless*”, sharing “*the perspective of those we visit who suffer*” in order to address issues of justice in our wider community. [\[Rule, Part I, 7.4-7.5\]](#) This is a role the Society has played quite prominently throughout our history, beginning with Bl. Frédéric himself. In 1898, for example, Edmond Butler, who later served as National Council president, served on New York's Committee on Dependent Children where he advocated the natural rights of parents, informed by the understanding gained through the relationships the Society had built with the poor.

Today, our advocacy continues not only through formal programs, such as [Voice for the Poor](#), but also, and more importantly, in every conversation we have with friends and neighbors, giving voice to the struggles of the poor, and seeking solutions in collaboration with others in our communities.

Give me the gentleness to offer comfort, the hope to offer prayer, and the zeal to be a voice for the poor. All this and more is what we mean we pray, “*Come Holy Spirit, live within our lives.*”

Contemplate

How often do I pray specifically for the Holy Spirit's guidance and inspiration?

Recommended Reading

[Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam](#) – especially Chapter 6

To Discern, Not to Decide

In the Society of St Vincent de Paul, “*all decisions are made by consensus after the necessary prayer, reflection and consultation.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.10\]](#) In other words, we don’t simply vote the minority “off the island”, but instead ensure that every voice is heard as we seek to arrive at a solution that everyone can support. The process of prayer, reflection, and consultation that we follow to arrive at consensus is discernment.

Discernment, in turn, is not simply a decision-making process, in which we tally up the pluses and minuses, or offer arguments for our positions. It is instead a search for truth, and that truth, for us, is always the will of God. To truly discern, then requires that each of us let go of our attachment to our own ideas, keeping our minds and hearts open not only to the ideas of others, but to the idea that our purpose is not to choose from among competing alternatives, but to find the one truth that is God’s will.

Our first Rule explained the importance of self-denial in this process, saying that “*The man who is in love with his own ideas, will disdain the opinion of others... We should, therefore, willingly acquiesce in the judgment of others, and should not feel annoyed if our own propositions be not accepted by them. Our mutual good will should proceed from the heart and should be without bounds.*” [\[Rule, Intro, 1835\]](#)

These words echo St. Vincent de Paul, who said that we should “*deny ourselves totally for love of God, to bring our judgment into harmony with that of our neighbor... and conforming to God’s judgment of things!*” [\[CCD XII:175\]](#) For Saint Vincent de Paul, the will of God was always the center of holiness, and always the guiding light for his works and his plans.

Discernment is not a contest to determine whose will is strongest, but instead is always a seeking of God’s will to guide us, whether discerning our individual pathway, discerning the best way to help a neighbor, or discerning a plan for new special works. If we truly believe that God called us to this Vincentian vocation, we must also believe that the God who called us here is here; that he is within and among us; that each of us individually and all of us as a group were called here by God; and that it is His voice and His will we are called to continue to serve. He makes His will known to us through Holy Scripture, through the Rule and traditions of the Society, and through the people and events in our lives. To deny ourselves in this process doesn’t mean refusing to say what we think. It means offering our reasons, but not our judgment. It means having the humility to recognize that we do not know all the answers, and being willing to accept God’s will as it is revealed to us, even – and especially – when it contradicts our own preconceived notions.

In other words, if we truly wish to hear His voice, we must first lower our own.

Contemplate

Am I sometimes too attached to my own opinions at Conference meetings?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module VII](#) – especially 7.4 “Discerning With a Vincentian Heart”

The Challenge of Modern Times

Blessed Frédéric and his friends founded the Society in 1833 in answer to a challenge posed to them by another group of students in a discussion group called the Conference of History. The other students, adherents to San Simonianism, a form of utopian socialism, believed the church's day had come and gone, and that poverty and other social problems could be best addressed with modern, scientific methods. Yet their challenge to Frédéric was not a challenge to show how much bread or firewood could be distributed, or how many poor families could be assisted. Their challenge was simpler, but more difficult. "Show us," they demanded, "the good of the church in the modern world."

To show the good of the church remains our core mission, our evangelical mission, and the good of the church is the same as ever: to bring all people to eternal life in union with a loving God. And so Frédéric and his friends could see no better way to answer the challenge, no better way to demonstrate the good of the church than to "*do what Our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the Gospel. Let us go,*" Frédéric declared, "*to the poor.*" [\[Baunard, 65\]](#)

Since the beginning of time, God has loved us, awaited us, and answered our calls, but for one moment in human history, He put on the cloak of humanity and came to us. He visited us, walked among us, shared our pains and our burdens, and called us friend; He came [not to be served but to serve](#).

Our primary purpose is to grow in holiness. This is the good of the church. Our secondary purpose is to share Christ's love with the neighbor. This, too, is the good of the church. The good of the church was shown to us by our Heavenly father, [who so loved the world that He sent His only Son](#) to establish His church. And because "*love is inventive to infinity*" He further found a way to remain in our presence in the Eucharist. [\[CCD XI:129\]](#); to be present, to act [for love alone](#), as our Rule calls us to do. [\[Rule Part I, 2.2\]](#)

The good of the church is first to lead us to Christ. We do not summon Him to us. Rather, we seek Him [exactly where he tells us He will be found](#): in the hungry, in the thirsty, in the naked, the prisoner, the stranger, the poor. We seek out and find Him in the poor. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#)

By coming to us, in person, God established His church and all its goodness in the world. He went to the poor, He went to the hungry, He even went to the sinners, sinners that [many others of the day thought were undeserving](#). Vincentians seek both to encounter and to imitate Christ. We go to the poor, not because it is efficient, not because it is modern. It was neither of those things in 1833, nor even in 30 AD. We go to the poor to bring Christ's love, and to share the hope of the living Word.

This was and remains the good of the church, and the mission of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Contemplate

How can I better show the good of Christ's church in the modern world?

Recommended Reading

[500 Little Prayers for Vincentians](#)

To Wait for God's Own Time

The church calls the laity to “*fulfill their prophetic mission by evangelization*” which has “*peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world*”. [\[CCC, 905\]](#) Our Vincentian vocation, our special way of living our faith, also defines our special way of evangelizing.

And what is that way? It is plainly true that our visits to the neighbor, particularly the first visit, are not an appropriate time to evangelize by word. The neighbor is in a very vulnerable position, and while likely to listen very politely to what we say, they are equally likely to resent that we have made them feel, despite our best intentions, that coming to Mass may be the price of our assistance.

As the first Rule put it, “*All fervor is not holy or accepted of God. All times are not suitable for instilling new and Christian teaching into the heart. We must know how to wait for God's own time, and to be patient as He is.*” [\[1835 Rule, Intro\]](#) We evangelize first and foremost not by preaching, but by the witness of our actions; by our selfless works, performed for love alone.

Blessed Frédéric made this same point, explaining that while we hope to share the saving word of Christ with the poor, “*the poor are hungry, so we must first give them bread*”. [1457, Report, 1834] Saint Vincent similarly advised his missionaries (whose mission was to evangelize) 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.*” [\[CCD VIII:208\]](#)

Naturally, we do not hide who we are or why we are visiting, and one of the ways we bear witness to our faith is to pray to God for the neighbor. That is why it will often be the case that as we form relationships based on trust and friendship, it will be the neighbor that starts the conversation about our faith, precisely because our charity, our love, has stirred “*irresistible questions*” in their hearts. [\[EN, 21\]](#)

Though most of our visits begin and end with material assistance, we are never simply bearers of bread, because, as Frédéric reminds us, “*Charity does not consist so much in the distributing of bread as in the manner it is distributed.*” [1457, Report, 1834] We seek first to attain holiness, for without that how can we lead others to it? We pray that our kindness, friendship, and love will transform the hearts of the neighbors we serve, just as their suffering transforms ours.

In our annual reports, we record the assistance our Conferences provide. We hold in our hearts the memory of tears we have dried and hope we have shared. But we will never know many souls our works may have saved. That is up to God, not us, and “*We are not commissioned to perform the good which it is out of our power to effect.*” [\[1835 Rule, Intro\]](#)

Contemplate

Is my zeal for the salvation of souls tempered by my humility and faith that God is working through me?

Recommended Reading

This week, let's watch a video about [Our Vincentian Virtue of Zeal](#)