



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

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## True Presence

Vincentians are doers, we are people of action. We love God, as St. Vincent said, “*with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.*” [\[CCD XI:32\]](#) We believe, as Frédéric did, that “*religion serves best not to think, but to act.*” As central as our prayer life is, our Conferences are “*communities of...prayer and action.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3\]](#) And yet, as we often emphasize in our home visit training, ours is not a ministry of constant motion or problem-solving, but is instead, in its heart, a ministry of *presence*.

In our person-to-person service to those in need, we seek to “*establish relationships based on trust and friendship.*” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) We seek to be like the friends we call in our own times of distress, who come to us not to find us new jobs, or heal our sick family members, or bring the dead back to life, but to sit with us, to feel the sadness that we feel, and by sharing it, to lighten our burdens.

We are called to see the face of Christ in those we serve, but also to share Christ’s face, His love, and His presence. Just as He told us [the poor would always be with us](#), so also He assured us that He would be with us Himself, [until the end of the age](#), and He connected these two truths by reminding us that how we treat the poor [would be judged as if done to Himself](#).

Our ideal is to serve the neighbor [for love alone](#); not the love of romance, but the love of God, the love that is called charity, the love that Vincent said is “*inventive to infinity.*” [\[CCD XI:131\]](#) It was in Christ’s inventiveness, Vincent said, that He found a way, after his earthly life had ended, not to remain a carpenter, but to remain truly *present* to all who believe, and to all who seek Him, in the Eucharist.

The primary purpose of the Society is our own growth in holiness, and while our person-to-person service is our primary means towards this growth, our spiritual practices, like Vincent and Frédéric before us, include “*devotion to the Eucharist*” [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) And how could it be otherwise? In the poor, as in the Eucharist, we see Christ’s true presence, and our service itself becomes sacramental.

We are called not only to stand with the poor, but on our home visits, to sit with them; to be present with them. It is through our presence, not simply our actions, that our home visits, like [Eucharistic Adoration](#), become acts of love and devotion to God’s beloved Son.

Jesus, Son of Man, was sent by the Father to share our humanity fully, to be present with us, among us, and finally, through bread and wine, in us. To share Christ’s love as Vincentians, then, is to be truly present, going to the neighbor as Christ came to us, bringing within us Christ’s true presence through the Eucharist we have received. Ours is a ministry not only of presence, but of true presence, for on the home visit, as in the Eucharist, He will, [as He promised](#), be truly present, too.

### Contemplate

How can I be more present to the neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to Be Simple](#)

## The Way to Peace

Our little human minds and hearts can sometimes become so bound up in worry and anxiety that we find it difficult to act; difficult even to know what actions to take. We pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then wonder, with even more anxiety, when our prayers will be answered. This is no less true for us than it is for the neighbor, whose troubles often greatly exceed our own.

Jesus understood this tendency of ours; He understood us, telling us to “[let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day](#)”, not to be anxious about material needs, but instead to concern ourselves first with God’s kingdom. But what about the neighbor, whose troubles are many times beyond our ability to alleviate, at least in any permanent way. We’re called to share their suffering, which naturally leads us to share in their anxieties. Over time this can weigh on us, making our hearts heavy, filling us with discouragement. How can we let their troubles also be enough for our day?

In sharing the face of Christ, we are called also to share the great hope that Christ offers. How can we offer this hope to the neighbor when we allow ourselves to lose hope? St. Louise de Marillac offered this advice to the Daughters of Charity, who also suffered what now call “compassion fatigue” telling them “*you will see a great amount of misery that you cannot relieve. God sees it as well ...do all you can to provide them with a little assistance and remain at peace.*” [[SWLM, I.353](#)]

So, we seek a way to the peace that will soothe our anxieties, but there is no way to peace. Peace is the way. God’s peace is already in our hearts, for peace is the God who made us in His image. Letting go of our anxieties and fears, abandoning ourselves to God’s will rather than our own, trusting fully in His providence; in these ways we let go of all the noise and clutter of worldly cares that disturb His peace within us. In turn, we share this peace with the neighbor through our virtue of [gentleness](#); “*our friendly assurance and invincible goodwill, which mean kindness, sweetness and patience in our relationship with others.*” [[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1](#)]

When one person is angry, it can lead others to anger. Laughter, too, is contagious. We are created to live in community, and it is only natural for us to [rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep](#). At the same time, as our hearts connect with the neighbor, we cannot help but share God’s peace when we allow it into our own hearts.

“*The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit,*” St. Vincent taught. “*He will reign in you if your heart is at peace.*” [[CCD I:111](#)]

### Contemplate

Do I allow “the day’s own troubles”, mine or the neighbor’s, to crowd out God’s peace?

### Recommended Reading

[500 Little Prayers for Vincentians](#)

## The Bashful Poor

Effective Conferences, our manual explains, are “reachable.” [\[Manual, 26\]](#) While most Conferences make every effort to ensure that their phone number, along with perhaps a web site and email address, are well-publicized and shared with other community organizations for referrals, our Rule calls us to do more than that. It calls us “*to seek out the poor*”. [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#)

On its face, this might seem unnecessary. After all, if the neighbor has fallen behind on rent, is facing a utility cutoff, or has hungry children to feed, why would they not actively seek out our help? Yet so many wait until the very last moment to call; they exhaust all possible alternatives to avoid calling us; they apologize for having called and are concerned that assisting them might deprive somebody “who really needs help.”

For each person we meet who tells us this, how many more are there who never call, fearful that they would be taking from somebody “who really needs help”? It isn’t that they are in denial about their immediate needs. They simply do not see themselves as “the poor” because their needs are only temporary. When there is a little more month than money, they often choose to just “tough it out.”

In an 1848 letter to his brother Alphonse, a priest, Bl. Frédéric explained that the church must concern itself “*not merely with the poverty-stricken, but with the working classes who do not need alms.*” [\[Baunard, 261\]](#) To “not need alms”, of course, is not the same thing as needing no assistance at all. In Frédéric’s time and ours, there are many people who work very hard to support themselves and their families, but simply come up a little short from time to time. For that proud working person, their first instinct simply is not to call a church for a “handout.”

These are the same people that St. Vincent de Paul called “the bashful poor” - people who were temporarily impoverished by war or natural disasters, who were ashamed or embarrassed to ask for assistance. [\[CCD XIIIb:2\]](#) How do we find the “bashful poor”? And what do we offer them?

Frédéric believed that they would best be reached by “*special sermons, by charitable associations, and by sympathy, which will touch them more than is generally believed.*” [\[Baunard, 261\]](#) In other words, it is our friendship, understanding, and advocacy that will make clear to all that we are here for all of our neighbors. Unlike an agency, we don’t ask the neighbor to “qualify” or to prove they are poor enough to be deserving of help. No work of charity is foreign to the Society, sometimes that is a handout, sometimes it is a hand up, sometimes it is a helping hand, but always it must be a handshake of respect, of understanding, and of welcome.

### Contemplate

Am I so content with waiting for the desperate poor to call that I don’t reach out to the working poor?

### Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#)

## Providing What is Needed

One of the central tenets of Vincentian spirituality is trust in Divine Providence. We are called to trust that God will provide what is needed for things to work out for the best. In theory, this sounds quite simple, because we know that God is good and that He loves us. In practice, though, we slowly come to realize that our trust is needed not because of what we know, but because of what we do not know.

Every Conference probably has some miraculous story about a time when, just as they had offered their last dollar in assistance, an entirely unexpected donation arrived. It happens often enough that we can hardly call it “unexpected” anymore. These stories offer comforting reassurance for our trust in Providence. God, after all, has so often provided “what is needed” to our treasuries that we, along with Bl. Frédéric, can happily conclude that *“to do works of charity, it is never necessary to worry about financial resources, they always come.”* [[121. To his mother, 1836](#)]

It’s easy to trust when we receive what we think is needed. We are called to trust not only that God will provide what is needed, but that He knows what is needed even when it makes no sense to us; that He alone knows the best way for things to work out.

Reflecting years later on the founding of the first Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes, which marked the beginning of the Vincentian Family, St. Vincent saw something other than his own achievement in response to a sick family in his parish. Instead, he insisted that it was entirely God’s idea, for it was not Vincent who had made that family sick.

Sometimes we can only see in hindsight the good that comes from events in our lives. It would have been very easy for Vincent to simply lament the family’s troubles or decide it would be too hard to help. It would also have been very easy for him to congratulate himself for having taken action. But Vincent understood that we are all called to help, and in that instance, God’s call came in the form of a family in need. God provided not funding but suffering which in turn led to a great flowering of charity among His servants who trusted in Him and sought to do His will.

Providence is not merely a generous donor, nor is it the cavalry arriving in the nick of time. To trust in Providence means abandoning ourselves to God’s will, trusting fully that if we act in accordance with His will, then the outcome, however it may appear to us, also will be His will. As St. Vincent reminds us, *“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](#)]

### Contemplate

Do I allow myself to become frustrated when things don’t work out as I’d planned?

### Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

## One Who Lives Differently

*Serviens in spe*, reads the Society's motto, Serving in Hope. Hope can be a powerful feeling, a state of mind that keeps us going through great difficulties. It is a light at the end of the tunnel, the silver lining behind the cloud, and the gain we seek to receive from the pain of our efforts. But the hope in which Vincentians serve is much more than a feeling or a motivation, it is a [virtue](#) and a grace to be shared.

There is no doubt that the material support we offer to the neighbor is important. Sitting in darkness and heat with the electricity cut off in the middle of summer can lead to hopelessness, hunger and thirst can lead to despair, and as Bl. Frédéric cautioned, we must "*beware of despair most of all, for this is the death of the soul.*" [42, to Falconnet, 1831] The money, the food, the furniture and clothing – all the things we can provide to offer some small relief for the neighbor's suffering is vital. As St. James reminds us, if all we do is wish the poor well, but "[do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.](#)"

Yet, as important as these works are, they are not enough by themselves; works without faith are no less empty than faith without works, and "*Vincentians visit not merely to drop off groceries or pay a bill, but to form relationships based on trust and friendship.*" [Manual, 20] Our visiting, our encouragement, and our prayers serve most importantly to bring true hope.

We work tirelessly not only to help the poor, but to help them move out of poverty. At the same time, we recognize that the hope in which we serve must not be so limited that it is restricted to a hope that the lights will be turned back on, or the rent will be paid, but is instead "*the great hope that cannot be destroyed.*" [Spe Salvi, 35] It is the hope that is the light of the world, the hope that fills our hearts, the hope that transcends all worldly cares; it is a hope that grows from the love of a God who holds each of us precious in His sight, and does not abandon us in our despair.

It is important to eat, but it leaves you hungry again later. It is important to pay the rent, but the bill comes due again next month. God's love is eternal, and our first responsibility in serving the poor is to do so for love alone, in the hope that through our caring "*the poor may catch a glimpse of God's great love for them.*" [Rule, Part I, 2.1]

[Life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.](#) Those things are consumed in an instant and then we need them again, which sometimes leads us to worry too much, or to store up more than we need, but "*the one who has hope lives differently.*" [Spe Salvi, 2]

### Contemplate

In relieving the neighbor's suffering, do I also offer hope?

### Recommended Reading

[Spe Salvi](#)

## Joy in Gratitude

In the times that our work seems difficult, and the problems of the neighbor or of our Conferences seem overwhelming, there is one thing that should fill our hearts and minds, bringing us to a state of peace and good cheer in serving: gratitude.

It is easy to be grateful for good fortune, however fleeting: the raise at work, the second helping of pie, the cure for an illness, or a narrowly avoided accident while driving. “God was with me!” we think. We say a prayer of thanks and, smiling, go on with our lives.

But God is also with the ones who were not healed, the ones who remained hungry, the ones who crashed their cars. Not only is He with them, both [the Father](#) and [the Son](#) have told us that they will always be with us, and further remind us that in serving them, [we truly serve Him](#). How can we not be grateful for this opportunity to serve, however difficult it may seem at times? This is our vocation, after all, our calling – it was not [we who chose Him, but He who chose us](#), who called us, who sends us to offer His comfort to the afflicted.

*“Humble yourselves for this grace,”* St. Vincent teaches, *“and be grateful for it. Humble yourselves at the sight of this astonishing action of God for what would you be...had He not chosen to call you from your poor and lowly state to serve Him?”* [\[SWLM, 792\]](#)

It is part of our trust in Divine Providence that should lead us to gratitude. If God has called us, we trust, even in difficult times, that this is for the best, in accordance with His will. In turn, St. Louise taught, it is our gratitude that will give us *“the disposition necessary to receive the graces you need to serve your sick poor in a spirit of gentleness and great compassion, in imitation of Our Lord who acted this way with the most unfortunate.”* [\[SWLM, 434\]](#)

It is in our virtue of gentleness, born of gratitude, that we express *“kindness, sweetness and patience in our relationship with others.”* [\[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1\]](#) This is true not only when things go well, or when we think we have a solution to the neighbor’s material needs, but also – and especially – when things seem most bleak. In our gratitude for being called into His presence in our vocation, as St. Louise asks, *“Why are our souls not in a continuous state of joy and happiness?”* [\[SWLM, 774\]](#)

The smiles we offer are not ours alone to give but are a great gift of joy from God, a sign of His eternal love. When we remain grateful, we cannot help but share this joy with the neighbor, and *“reflect on the eternal joy that you will have in heaven if, on earth, you love God and your neighbor as He has commanded you.”* [\[SWLM, 804\]](#)

### Contemplate

How many times have I thanked God for my difficulties, along with my joys?

### Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)

## A Cycle of Love

We serve, our Rule reminds us, [for love alone](#). [Rule, Part I, 2.2] This does not mean we do it in exchange for love, but rather that our works are motivated by love, and freely given as acts of love. Our own hearts, aflame with the love of God, cannot help but share this gift, to put the needs of another before our own. And although we do not seek it, it is the nature of the Divine love to always remain a gift, and one that will return to us only when we freely give it away.

This is why Bl. Rosalie Rendu taught her Daughters always to receive love with gratitude, even as we continue to give. “*Love the fact that the poor love you,*” she said. “*If you have nothing to give, give yourself.*” [Sullivan, 322] After all, if we seek God and serve God in the poor, then the love we receive from them is the love of God. As Bl. Frédéric Ozanam explained “*in exchange for our love they will give us their prayers, and the blessing of the poor is a blessing from God.*” [1457, Annual Report, 1834]

God’s love is given to us gratuitously; it is a gift, a grace which we can neither earn nor repay. Indeed, the words gratitude, gratuitous, and grace all stem from the Latin *grātia*, which refers to a favor or kindness – a gift. Like all things we receive from God – our talents, our comforts, our food and drink, our successes, our health, our very lives – God’s love is always offered back to Him, because it always remains of Him and in Him. He calls upon us to share His love with each other and with the neighbor, in whom we will find Him. He is not hidden from us. Rather, St. Vincent de Paul taught, “*Wherever we go, we always find God. If He’s the one you seek, you’ll find Him everywhere.*” [CCD X:416]

In so many areas of society, economics, and life, we observe cycles. Cycles of poverty, cycles of despair, cycles of violence – many of them vicious cycles, which end as they begin, ever renewing the despair or poverty with which they began. Like the ouroboros devouring its own tail, each is seemingly contained entirely within itself, perpetuating itself in its hopelessness.

Yet each of these is only one small part of a much greater and more powerful cycle of God’s creation, of life itself. Christ taught us not to despair over the troubles of the day, over the food we eat, or the clothes we wear. He taught us the power of God’s love through His own supreme sacrifice of love on the Cross, given with no thought towards repayment – as if there were any way for us to repay Him. He asks us, instead of repaying Him, to partake of Him, to receive His love and to share it with each other.

In the Eucharist, He remains truly present, continuing to give Himself, just as Bl. Rosalie calls on us to do. With each work of charity, of love, we both begin and perpetuate a great cycle of love, one that replaces poverty with gladness, and despair with hope. We do not give in order to receive, yet when we love, we are loved in return by God, through each other and the poor, and we are renewed.

### Contemplate

While gratuitously sharing God’s love, do I remain always open to receiving it again?

### Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

## Who Do They Say That We Are?

“Who do the people say that I am?” [Christ asked of his disciple](#), before asking, “And who do you say that I am?” He was not surprised to receive two different answers, despite the fact that He never wavered in telling all people exactly who He was and why He was here. “I am,” He told all who would listen, “[the true vine...the light of the world...the resurrection and the life...the good shepherd...the bread of life...the gate for the sheep...the way and the truth and the life...and whoever has seen me has seen the Father.](#)”

Who do the people say that we are, we Vincentians? Do they say we are service providers? Social workers? Or do they say we are the ones who returned their calls, the ones who came and listened, the ones who cared when it seemed nobody else did? Like Christ, we most likely would hear different answers from different people, but that should never be because we are inconsistent in who we say that we are, in our words and in our actions, for how else can they know who we are?

It has been said that a rule, such as our Rule, if it is followed faithfully, could easily be recreated just by observing how the members live. Would an outside observer say of us, they “*seek to relieve suffering for love alone, without thinking of any reward or advantage for themselves*”? [\[Rule, Part I, 2.2\]](#) They “*do not judge those they serve*”? [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) They “*serve the poor cheerfully*”? [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#) They are “*a community of faith and love, prayer and action*”? [\[Rule, Part III, St. 5\]](#) They are “*an international Catholic voluntary organisation of lay people, men and women*”? [\[Rule, Part I, 1.1\]](#)

We are who we say we are, in our words and in our actions. We do not serve the poor because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic; because we are followers of Christ who assured us that we would find Him in the hungry, in the thirsty, in the stranger, the prisoner, the naked, the poor, and all those who mourn. Our actions must never contradict our words, and our words must not contradict our actions. This is not because it is important for us to be recognized or praised for the work we do, but because it is important for the one who sends us to be known, so that others may find Him, too.

As St. Vincent taught, admonishing one of his superiors for his efforts to enhance the Congregation’s reputation, “*Let us entrust our reputation to Him... to do with it as He sees fit. To Him alone glory is due; let us never do anything that does not give glory to Him and, to that end, let us trample underfoot human respect and self-interest.*” [\[CCD IV:480\]](#)

Like Christ Himself, we cannot control who the people say that we are, we can only control who we say that we are, and in the end, all that will matter is who God says that we are.

### Contemplate

Who do I say that I am, in my words and in my actions?

### Recommended Reading

#### [The Rule](#)

## From Darkness Into Light

It is from St. John of the Cross that we get the phrase “[dark night of the soul](#)”, which we use to describe a crisis of faith in which we are plagued by doubts about God, our souls, and our church. It is through such dark nights that our saints and blessed were led to holiness, and to the light that they shared.

Bl. Frédéric, who lived only forty years, went through his period of doubt at a young age, about sixteen. Doubting his faith and his very existence, he struggled to harmonize faith and reason. With the gentle guidance of his teacher and guide, Abbé Noiro, he ultimately found peace when he begged God to shine the light of His truth. In exchange, he dedicated his life to defending and sharing that light, a commitment he would fulfill in both his words and his deeds – especially in serving the poor, shining God’s truth through his actions. [[Baunard, 10-11](#)]

St. Louise de Marillac, struggling through her son’s difficulties, financial strain, and her husband’s mortal illness, faced her own dark night. Blaming herself for all of her troubles, she questioned the church, the possibility of eternal life, and even considered abandoning her sick husband. Like Frédéric, she turned to prayer, begging for God’s comfort and reassurance on the Feast of Pentecost, 1623. [[SWLM, 1](#)] She received in return the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, showing her a pathway through the darkness. She called it her *lumière*, her light. She wrote it down and carried it with her for the rest of her life, sharing God’s light with others through her words and her example.

St. Vincent de Paul’s experience was different, in that asked for his dark night. While chaplain to Queen Marquerite, a famous doctor, also on the Queen’s court, was suffering crippling and even suicidal doubts. Despite Vincent’s counsel, they persisted. In his own prayers, Vincent asked God to transfer the man’s doubts to him. The doctor died in peace with the Lord, but for several years, Vincent lived through the torment of the doubts that he had taken upon himself. During this time, he could not even recite the Apostle’s Creed, so he sewed it inside his cassock, near his heart. Each time he wished to make an act of faith, he would touch his hand to his heart. He finally emerged from his dark night with a firm vow to dedicate himself to the imitation of Christ and service to the poor. [[Abelly, Bk III, 113-116](#)]

It is not the darkness of doubt that leads to holiness of life, but the light that emerges from it, a light that unites us with God. It is a light we are called to share, just as our saints and founders shared their light throughout their lives. As Vincent taught, “*Even if you never said a word, if you’re really united with God, you’ll touch hearts by your mere presence...*” [[CCD XII:15](#)] In the neighbor, we are called to see the suffering Christ, to share in his suffering, to walk with him in his darkness. We do this in imitation of Christ, sharing, through our presence and loving service, a [light that shines in the darkness](#).

### Contemplate

Does my loving service “shine a light” on my neighbor?

### Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

## Whose Coat Is It Anyway?

Catholic Social Doctrine teaches us the principle of the [universal destination of goods](#), under which we recognize that all things come from God, and are meant for all of His beloved. Nowhere should the demands of this principle be clearer than in our stewardship of the funds of the Conference.

As our Manual explains that “*Conference members should never adopt the attitude that the money is theirs, or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it.*” [[Manual, Ch. 2](#)] Our stewardship, properly understood, demands that we ensure every dollar goes to the poor, to whom it belongs because what belongs to the poor belongs to God. This understanding is the basis of our stewardship and accountability. Or, as St. Vincent put it, we “*are obliged to manage it well and to use it faithfully, because it belongs to our good God, in as much as it belongs to the poor.*” [[CCD X:245](#)]

This is why “*funds must be handled with the utmost care, prudence and generosity. Money must not be hoarded.*” [[Rule, Part I, 3.14](#)] If we hoard the funds given to us, we are withholding them from the God to whom they belong – not the God who may come calling tomorrow, but the God who is hungry or homeless today. When funds are plentiful because few neighbors are calling, that is the time to more actively “seek out and find those in need”. [[Rule, Part I, 1.5](#)]

After all, if you found a lost wallet, the first thing you’d do is try to find its owner – you wouldn’t just wait for the owner to find you. As Bl. Frédéric said in an 1848 article, “[To Good People](#)”, “*the time has come to take more care of these other poor who do not beg, who ordinarily live by their work, and to whom the right to work or the right to assistance will never be assured in such a way that they do not need help, advice and consolation. The time has come to go and seek out those who do not call you*”.

In a similar way, when we ask for donations, we never really ask for donations to the Society. We ask for money, for food, or for clothing for the poor. We ask not because of any special expertise, but simply because we know the poor in our neighborhoods; we know their needs. We only ask to collect up some “[second coats](#)” because we have an idea to whom they belong. As St. Basil the Great put it, “*The bread which you hold back belongs to the hungry; the coat, which you guard in your locked storage-chests, belongs to the naked; the footwear mouldering in your closet belongs to those without shoes.*” [[Homily on Gospel of Luke](#)]

We can no more leave Conference funds “mouldering in the bank” than we can leave our second coat “mouldering in storage”. Our time, our talents, our possessions, and ourselves all belong to God, and God is present to us in the poor.

### Contemplate

What is my second coat, and what am I saving it for?

### Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations II](#)

## One Society, One Rule

It is probably the case that while most members join the Society in response to a call from the Holy Spirit, they don't yet fully understand the Society as a vocation. And although we do not take solemn vows like members of the clergy or religious orders, each active and associate member "*accepts the Rule and Statutes of the Society*". [\[Rule, Part III, St. 3\]](#) It is this acceptance of the Rule which leads to our deeper understanding of our vocation, and which unites us as a true community of faith.

It was in this spirit that the Rule was first written: to lay out the principles and practices that had been discerned, so that they could continue, so that it could "*know what heaven required of it – that it should judge what it could do by what it had done*". [\[1835 Rule\]](#) Capturing our history, our traditions, and our spirituality, the Rule enables us each to gain this same understanding.

Originally written in 1835, two years after the founding of the first Conference of Charity, the Rule was expanded to include provisions for the still-evolving organization of local and national councils, as well as a council general, in 1839, 1850, and 1856. From then until 1967, this original Rule remained largely unchanged. Interpretation and understanding of the Rule was effected through Explanatory Notes, Commentaries, and Circular Letters over the years.

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Society undertook a seven-year project to revise the Rule, incorporating more modern language, and formally integrating some traditions that had developed over time, such as the inclusion of women as members. Adopted in 1975, this new version of the Rule was now divided into three parts: I. Basic Principles, II. Organizational Units, and III. The Council General. Each National Council was directed to develop its own regulations for implementing Part II, primarily through National Commentaries. Parts I and III, then, explained *who* we are, *what* we do, and *why* we do it, while Part II was concerned with *how*.

The only other major revision of the Rule occurred in 2003. It was with this version that the order of the three parts changed to their current form, with the National Council's regulations moving to Part III in order to properly reflect the Rule's order of precedence. Since our national regulations exist only to explain how we will implement the Rule, it cannot conflict with the first two parts. If it does, Part I always takes precedence, ensuring the worldwide unity of the Society.

In accepting the Rule, we are promising to read and understand it, to discuss it with one another, and to make our best efforts to live it, individually and together. After all, you cannot be a Vincentian without other Vincentians, and it is our Rule which unites us with "*a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends*". [\[Rule, Part I, 3.3\]](#)

### Contemplate

When was the last time I read the Rule alone, and with my Conference?

### Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#)

## A Spirit of Poverty

*“All those who have experience of public charity,”* wrote Bl. Frédéric in 1848, *“know that the poor are never better helped than by the poor.”* [[To Good People, L'ère Nouvelle, 1848](#)] Those who have suffered deprivation and indignities themselves will not only dig deeper to find food or money to help others, but will focus on the most urgent needs, and, most importantly, truly give of themselves. This is the *“spirit of poverty and encouragement”* that we are called to by our Rule. [[Rule, Part I, 3.13](#)]

In Frédéric's time, public assistance and philanthropic societies were growing. Many of them had large sums of money to spend, and after only a year had *“large volumes of resumés”* attesting to how much they had spent. [[90, to Curnier, 1835](#)] The Society, on the other hand, was never limited by money in its ability or desire to help. *“Go to the unhappy poor with your offering,”* Frédéric taught, *“no matter how small it may be. If we had but the widow's mite to offer, the poor will at least have had the consolation of having clasped the hand of a friend”*. [[Baubard, 274](#)]

Frédéric often used the image of the widow's mite, recalling Christ's teaching that the *“[poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.](#)”* In a similar way, our Rule calls Vincentians to a life of self-sacrifice, sharing our time, our possessions, our talents and ourselves. [[Rule, Part I, 2.5.1](#)]

We cannot solve all worldly problems, nor are we called to do so. We are called instead to seek and to share, through the witness of our love, the hope of the kingdom with all those who suffer. Like the poor of Frédéric's time, our help will be better when we share with the neighbor in the spirit of poverty. As St. Vincent said, *“the spirit of poverty is the spirit of God ...to have the same desires and affections of God, to adopt the sentiments of God.”* [[CCD XI:212](#)]

Seeking to be the face of Christ, we seek also to imitate Him in His poverty, this Son of God who humbled Himself to walk and to live among the poor, and who told us that [they are blessed](#). Of course, we ask for donations to support our works, just as the beggar on the street holds his hat in his hand towards passersby. At the same time, we trust in providence to ensure that whatever we have is enough. As Frédéric reminds us, the true spirit of poverty is not gratitude for what we have, but gratitude for what we can give.

*“Alas, my dear friend, misery surrounds us, and the heart aches since it cannot ease the burden! What is our little pittance cast into the great abyss of poverty? But are we not happy, nevertheless, to be able to offer this pittance? So many do not have the good fortune to give alms.”* [[124, to Falconnet, 1836](#)]

### Contemplate

Is there a time that I truly felt a spirit of poverty in this work?

### Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations II](#)

## Heroic Virtue

The word “courage” often brings to mind images such as a firefighter rushing into a burning house to save a child, or a soldier making his way under fire to help a downed comrade. Among our Vincentian saints and blessed, few examples are more vivid than that of Bl. Rosalie Rendu, who, during the revolution in 1848, climbed atop a barricade in the midst some of the fiercest fighting in the city, demanding that they cease fire. Just days prior to this, the Archbishop of Paris, attempting a similar act, had been shot dead. For Rosalie, both sides paused in their hostilities.

What is courage, exactly, and in what sense did our holiest Vincentians pray for God to grant it to them? Rosalie prayed to God *“to grant me the spirit of faith which will strengthen me in my weakness and give me the courage to make the sacrifices that He asks of me.”* [Sullivan, 104] The courage she sought was not to overcome trials or danger, but to overcome her own weakness; to overcome herself.

St. Louise was even more explicit in explaining this, saying *“We need great courage to overcome ourselves, although often the things we call trials are more imaginary than real.”* [SWLM, L.438] As she understood, it is not the difficulty of the trials that prevents us from acting, since many of them are not even real. Rather, it is our own fear, our own egos.

St. Vincent urged the missionaries to *“always be very courageous”* because otherwise *“that cursed spirit of laziness gives up at the smallest contradiction: there’s not the slightest discomfort it doesn’t avoid, no responsibility it doesn’t fear, no satisfaction it doesn’t seek; this self-love ruins everything.”* [CCD XI:216] We associate courage with heroism; Vincent associated courage with selflessness. This is not a contradiction, as Rosalie’s great heroism shows. Rather, selflessness is a prerequisite to heroism, and it is the selflessness that requires courage. We recognize this same thing in our military heroes, whose award citations often include some form of the phrase “with complete disregard for his own life and safety”.

Courage is of the heart, which is the Latin root of the word. As Frédéric once put it, *“I admire that courage which knows restraint in the face of a stricken family, and that praiseworthy smile which shines like a parting ray in the midst of the most somber thoughts. But I love not less those solitary tears shed in the silent room at the foot of the crucifix...whatever is strong is not what stands stiffly, but what straightens up after bending.”* [290, to Amélie, 1841]

The first step towards canonization in our church is the recognition of a life of “heroic virtue”, which doesn’t begin with courage under fire, but with courage to overcome ourselves.

### Contemplate

Do I pray for the courage to give more of myself?

### Recommended Reading

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