



## **A Priest's Perspective: What Vincentians Need to Know Before Meeting with Clergy**

Fr. Bud Pelletier has been a priest of the Diocese of Phoenix for over 20 years and served in a variety of parishes and diocesan offices. Since 2010 he has served as the spiritual advisor to the SVdP Diocesan Council in Phoenix. In 2014 he was appointed by Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted to work full-time with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul-Phoenix as mission advancement officer.

Before I answer specifically any questions, I would like to say that the goal and purpose of the answers, and hopefully all our efforts on behalf of the Society is not to beat some priest/pastor/bishop into submission to our will. We do think the Society is a great help to the parish, diocese, and larger world, but everything, even when dealing with negativity, must be done in a calm, rational, prayerful way. When people, priests and bishops see us dealing with problems in the same way we want to serve others, in the Love of Christ, which will do more for our cause than all the long-winded answers I might offer. In the secular world they say "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." The goal is to propose the Love of Christ, through the Society.

Also, please don't take my answers as some kind of divine solution from on high. You might try a suggestion and it doesn't work. I'm not omniscient, as people (mostly from my own family) will gladly line up to tell you. I am sometimes just plain wrong.

### **1. Often, too often, when a pastor says "no" to a Conference, he says it's because the parish can't create the revenue stream for SVdP. What is the best response to that?**

Pastors have a lot of responsibilities, not the least of which is simply paying the bills. In our diocese it is not unusual for a pastor to come into a parish and suddenly face the fact that besides the operations of the parish, there is a debt for building or other projects that may run into many millions of dollars, and that means monthly mortgage payments in the tens of thousands of dollars. It also might be just as true in some areas that simply paying the bills is an effort. I can tell you from personal experience that it is sometimes impossible to sleep at night knowing that in one week you have the school payroll of tens of thousands of dollars, the parish & school operations bills of electricity, water, etc., for more tens of thousands of dollars, and a projected income for the next week of only a few thousand dollars. So when a group appears and lovingly and humbly asks to start a new Conference, and oh, by the way, we'll need to raise money from within the parish, it seems to be an impossible request. The priest is thinking that there is just no money to be had; there is no magic money tree at the rectory! Why are these people asking for something that is not possible?

Of course there is a spiritual response from the Church's teaching on Stewardship – that if we are doing the work God wants done, the resources will follow. But that isn't very satisfying when the parish might have received cutoff notices from the utilities because of the unpaid bills. As a wise

monsignor once told me, “God’s Church runs on Grace, but she needs a little CASH too!” (If you say it with an Irish brogue, like he did, it actually sounds charming.)

First, do you have an actual plan and budget for the proposed Conference? Many times people come to ask the pastor for something with no real plan and somehow it is just supposed to happen, or they want the pastor to solve the problems for them. Remember, the Society is an organization of the laity, not run by the clergy. So have a real, sensible, written out plan. When he can see real numbers, he can start putting things in place in his head. It also shows that you have a level of fiscal responsibility and won’t be wasting the resources you gather.

Second, start small. You don’t need to plan a \$25 million operation from the first day. Yes, we will always be overwhelmed with requests for help. It feels awful to have to turn people down who come to us for aid, but we need to be prudent and realistic. Also look at the wonderful in-kind gifts (material donations) that are possible along with the cash donations. Talk directly with the manager of your local grocery store(s) to see what the store might be able to make possible. Many of our Conferences in Phoenix do this, and developing and treasuring that relationship has been important for the Conference. Neighbors like to help neighbors rather than nameless, faceless entities that only show up a few times a year asking for a handout. Remember, PEOPLE are the gift, not just their assets. Those personal relationships mean a lot.

In many instances, when we do an in-kind donation campaign or drive, people also donate money. Stapling a cash donation envelope to the grocery bag we want them to fill is always important. They might not have that can of green beans, but they might give \$5 or \$10.

Next, make your own plans for raising resources that don’t involve the parish. Rely on the genius of the laity to look at fundraising potential, and don’t just look at the Catholics in the parish as the only source of resources. We can reach out to the larger community and invite them to contribute (and therefore become involved) in our mission. (Have you seen any of those extreme couponing shows? They are impressive!) The pastor will be impressed that you aren’t going to be demanding that he somehow supply all your needs. Like I said, he’s worried about keeping the parish doors open and the lights on. Asking him to take on an additional worry might be too much for him to handle. You might even propose a joint fundraising venture where you will split the proceeds with the parish.

Lastly, in our diocese we have a very active ‘twinning’ program, meaning that Conferences help and assist each other.

## **2. My pastor says “no” to any SVdP and any community group. Any suggestions for how to deal with that?**

My first question back to him would be a very respectful and humble, “Why not?” Not to put him on the defensive, but ask for understanding. “Father, you said you’re not interested in the Society operating a Conference in the parish. I hear you, and I would like to understand you better if you could tell me a little more about your thinking on the topic?” Or some such wording that is respectful and curious. Then LISTEN CAREFULLY. Don’t be forming responses to his words; take them all in to remember them. When he’s finished, THANK HIM for helping you to understand, and let him know you’re going to go and think and pray about what he has told you. Don’t try to respond to him in that first meeting – unless you’re a trained politician who can think fast on your feet, it probably wouldn’t go well.

Now, actually go and think and pray about what he said. If it helps, write down what you remember. Work with a group or other local Conference to address some of the issues. In his explanation, he might just tell you exactly what you need to work on or address. Then wait a few months, and ask for another chance to talk with him. When you meet with him, tell him that you took his words to heart, and you would like to discuss the issue a little more. Remember, Blessed Frederic started his work which led to the Society based on some respectful comments from an atheist. Respectful dialogue is a hallmark of the Church, as Pope Francis reminds us always. It also might help for you to prepare a written response for the pastor, not to read to him, but to leave with him to consider. Make sure you sprinkle it with comments from the SVdP national and international websites, and also from Pope Francis. The goal is never to berate or belittle the pastor, but touch the spiritual nature that led him to the priesthood.

His “no” might mean that he really doesn’t see the need or desire for a Conference in the parish. If you are coming in from the outside, remember you get to leave, and then he must remain and deal with the issues of the Conference. He may have had some very bad experiences with Conferences in the past (certainly not from anyone WE know). I can tell you that some of our Diocesan Council members belong to a parish that will not let a Conference in. They love the parish and the pastor, but they participate in the closest Conference available, which is in another parish. Conferences are always looking for new, enthusiastic members, and the solution just might be to go find another Conference to join.

**3. How do you get a parish/priest to have a SVdP Conference in their parish when they already have a food pantry, outreach ministry, etc. in place already? Yes, one can try to use the reasoning of SVdP as a spiritual organization, but that does not always work. Any suggestions?**

This is much harder to approach. In our world, in companies, committees, parishes, etc., there is a strong “Not Invented Here” bias. This means that unless it is the personal idea of the person or group, it is not considered. Sometimes a pastor or parish wants to do things in a certain way. Before completely dismissing it as inferior to the Society, take a look at how it all works. Ask for a tour or explanation from someone (preferably the priest/pastor) and during the tour be as attentive as possible. Ask many questions that show your appreciation of the efforts. Don’t be constantly comparing it to the work of the Society, which will put everyone on the defensive. Actually, really learn about the ministry.

Then, maybe begin to help or volunteer in that ministry. Let them see how the Society grows in the love of God, through you. Let them see an active, happy, Vincentian. Many times early missionaries would enter a community and just start doing good things. Later the people would ask them why they did such nice things, and that provided the base from which they could then speak about Christ. If all we say in the Rule about the growth and development of Vincentians is true, then let that light shine everywhere possible; don’t retain it just for officially approved Society meetings and events.

**4. How do you get a pastor who already has a social ministry in his parish to agree to host a SVdP Conference? How many parishes which have a Conference also have some sort of social ministry?**

Many parishes have lots of different types of outreach ministries. While it would be nice to have the local Conference to be all things to all people, we know that is just not possible. At some of the parishes where I've worked, the SVdP Conference just did emergency food boxes, and that was all. Other groups had already established themselves doing things the Conference would normally do. You can partner with them! It is always good to keep a friendly connection between ministry groups and lend a hand when necessary. As I've seen, sometimes groups merge when they can both benefit.

**5. How would I respond if the pastor says he doesn't want to introduce this to the parish – he wants that to be brought to him by his parish?**

Thank him! Thank him for the invitation to begin speaking to others in the parish about a Conference. That might not be what he is thinking, but that is what he has just said. He wants parishioners to bring this to him, so go to the parishioners. You probably know one or two (I would hope), and start speaking with them. No, you don't need the pulpit at the end of Mass to do this. Many Catholics just tune out the announcements anyway. The earliest days of the Church were based on one person talking with one other person. It took a few millennia, but we are now over one billion members. Start small. Look for and pray about the resources which the Holy Spirit has placed there for you. If there are prayer groups in the parish, see about speaking to them through the person in charge of the group. If there is a youth group, speak to the person in charge of it. You get the idea. Maybe you have to start smaller than a fully functioning Conference with meetings and officers. When I invite someone into the Society, I never start with meetings and bylaws (unless they want that). I start with a volunteer experience, and let it grow from there.

When you have parishioners excited and serving, then they will take the idea to the pastor (with all the love which the Rule offers).

I've used this very same line before, when someone from outside the parish comes and tells me that the parish needs to start some new group or ministry. What goes unsaid is that YOU, FATHER, have to start, staff, and run this new ministry and browbeat your parishioners into making it happen. I had plenty enough to do on my own, thank you, and when I said I needed parishioners to start it up, I meant that it really had to be run by parishioners without my intervention. In reality, once I said this, the outsider went away, and no one ever wanted to start up that group – which means it never really would have worked in the parish.

**Links to Fr. Bud's Videos:**

Fr. Bud's presentation at St. Vincent de Paul Meeting (44 minutes)  
<https://vimeo.com/125686767>

Fr. Bud on how the Society helps Priests and Parishes (9 minutes)  
<https://vimeo.com/127292911>