



Vincentian Life: Member



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INTRODUCTION

As a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP), you are part of a large international family dedicated to the spiritual growth of all its members and to the needs of God's poor. We believe that by doing this work we grow closer to God and we are sure that you will find your membership a source of satisfaction and many blessings.

We hope this handbook gives you a sense of belonging to the greater "Vincentian family." May God bless you in your commitment to grow in holiness, fellowship and service through your work in the St. Vincent de Paul Conference.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Please go to www.svdpusa.org – click on SVDP Members along the top of the home page, this will take you to the membership section of the National Council website. Here you will find an enormous amount of information that will help you to grow in your membership as well as help you to better understand the many, varied aspects of the Society. Take time to peruse these documents.

These documents were produced by:
National Council of the United States
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
58 Progress Parkway
Maryland Heights, MO 63043
314-576-3993
www.svdpusa.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This member handbook is a result of the efforts of many Vincentians. This document is based on an original Member Handbook that was acquired from our fellow Vincentians in England. It was then revised by the Central Council of the

Diocese of St. Petersburg, FL. With their consent, we have created this additional revision to reflect the varied characteristics of Vincentians throughout the United States. Besides those Vincentians who authored the original and revised document, I would like to thank the following Vincentians for their efforts in the final compilation of this document: Louise Coniglio, Stacy Ehrlich, Irene Frechette, Althea Graham, Bill Henckler, Pam Hudson, Frank Kiolbassa, John Miscik, Marvin Ropert, and Susana Santana. Their edits, insights and comments were invaluable in completing this document.

Michael S. Syslo
Editor

WHAT IS SVdP?

VISION

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is an extraordinary organization that addresses the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. The Society enables us, with all our weakness and strengths, to grow and become enriched spiritually, by serving those in need.

In this ever-changing world, with poverty increasing in a multitude of different guises, the demands and opportunities for service are many and varied. The work that Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his young friends undertook was radical. They cared for the poor and the suffering and that is the challenge that we also face today.

Membership is a “vocation,” a calling to serve God in His poor. It is an opportunity to put faith into action in a practical way, and in a spiritual context. Unlike some social service agencies, the Society is not simply a material service provider. We should cherish our “spirituality” and do all we can through prayer, reading Scripture, Masses, and retreats to nurture it. Vincentians epitomize the New Evangelization by example of what they do, thereby bringing and inviting everyone to enjoy the Good News. People notice what we say and do, and how we do it. They see how we treat one another for good or ill. The spirit of fraternity among Vincentians should glow like a lamp in the dark for others to see how genuinely we love one another.

OUR PURPOSE

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States is part of an international, “lay Catholic organization” actively working in 150 countries for the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized. Inspired by our Principle founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, we strive to bring the love and peace of Christ to those we serve in the spirit of the Gospel message: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat...” (Matthew 25)

No work of charity is foreign to the Society. We are involved in a diverse range of activities, for example:

Support and Friendship

Through “person-to-person” contact, we are committed to respecting the dignity of those we assist and to fostering their self-respect. In providing material assistance and other support, we assume “confidentiality” at all times, and endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship.

Promoting Self-Sufficiency

We believe it is not enough to provide short-term support. Those we serve must also be helped to achieve “self-sufficiency” wherever possible, and the sense of worth this can provide. When the problems we encounter are beyond our competence, we build bridges of support with others more specialized than we are.

Working for Social Justice

We are committed to identifying the root cause of poverty, to promote “social justice” and in “solidarity” with the poor and disadvantaged, we advocate and work for the changes needed to create a more just and caring society.

Knowing No Boundaries

The Society respects the religious liberty and value of all God’s people and will help anyone without discrimination of any kind. We are totally committed to relieving poverty and distress of our brothers and sisters overseas, by sharing with them what we have in abundance.

Our Objectives

1. The growth in holiness of each member (and to aid those we serve to grow in their faith)
2. A spirit of fellowship and friendship among members (as well as with those we serve)
3. Serving those in need

HISTORY

Founding of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

A young student, Frederic Ozanam, and a group of five other students founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris in 1833, with their mentor, Joseph Emmanuel Bailly. They set up the first local group, which we call a “Conference” to show that their faith inspired them to love and care for others; and to learn about, deepen and be strengthened in their faith, so as to grow closer to God.

International Beginnings

After its humble beginnings in Paris, the Society grew to over 2,500 Conferences around the world during the lifetime of Frederic Ozanam. Since then, the Society has expanded dramatically. Today there are more than 47,000 Conferences with more the 770,000 members working in 150 countries throughout the world. The Patron of the Society is St. Vincent de Paul who was chosen as Patron because of:

1. the initiative he showed in seeking and finding the spiritually and materially poor;
2. the way he organized others to help him work; and
3. the deep spiritual vision which enabled him to see Christ in the poor and to love them so profoundly that they could sense God’s love for them in the encouraging words and practical help given to them.

Vincent de Paul was all set for a comfortable life as a chaplain to the aristocracy when he realized that God wanted him to work with the poor that he saw all around him. He had energy and was full of ideas for involving others in his work. The Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity were but two of the responses to needs which Vincent had a burning desire to alleviate. It is not surprising, therefore, that our Society took St. Vincent as its Patron.

Frederic Ozanam, who was beatified on August 22, 1997 by St. (Pope) John Paul II, was a remarkable man. As a student in Paris in the 1830’s, he was a committed Christian and Catholic voice. He enjoyed debate and argument and was challenged to prove the worth of his faith with the words, “Show us your works!” He organized his friends to assist the poor in Paris. This was the period of the revolution graphically described by Victor Hugo in “Les Miserables.”

The work grew, as did the numbers of young people wishing to help. One of the Society's prayers states "that we should never claim that our works spring from ourselves alone." St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederic Ozanam each worked with other people and never sought glory for themselves. They were ever at the "service" of God's poor. This is the high ideal of the Society of which you are a member. High office means nothing. The National President is a Conference member like anyone else and makes visits as directed by the President of his/her own local Conference.

American Beginning

The first St. Vincent de Paul meeting in the United States took place in St. Louis, Missouri in 1845, just 12 years after the beginning in France. As the Catholic population expanded, it rapidly became a powerful force in the nation. The Society was at the forefront of the development of the Catholic Church's social justice message. The Society was also instrumental in the founding of Catholic Charities. By 1905, there were 200 Conferences and 3,000 brothers. By 1925, membership had risen to 6,500. At the time of the celebration of *150 years of caring* in 1995, there were 4,400 Conferences with 60,000 members in almost every state in the Union. From being an exclusively male Society until 1968, 45% of members today are female. The scope of the work of the Society here, as elsewhere, has expanded tremendously since its founding.

Today

You are part of the family which, in the United States alone, reaches out each week of the year to about 230,000 people in need. We do this by visiting them in their homes, hospitals and care centers, or by providing accommodations for them. The Society also runs thrift stores, dining rooms, food pantries, homeless shelters, transitional housing for the elderly and disabled and many other projects.

Some Conferences specialize in visiting hospitals while others visit the incarcerated or their families. There are youth Conferences in schools and parishes, as well as young adult Conferences in universities. Many Conferences *twin* with other Conferences in Mexico, Central America and other parts of the world, providing money for them, exchanging letters and praying for one another. The Society operates a number of vacation initiatives, including summer camps for inner city youth.

Social Justice

Nowadays, the Society in the United States sees its role increasing in working to remove the causes of injustice, as well as dealing with its effects. The Society responds to government plans, pointing out the effects that proposed legislation might have on the poorer members of society. We do this in close consultation with other Catholic and Christian groups. While avoiding partisan politics, we speak on behalf of the poor, who themselves often have no voices.

To enable us to do this, it is very important that we record efficiently and effectively the works we perform at all levels, so that government and other authorities can see that we know what we are talking about from experience. We also encourage communities to improve their quality of life. So you have joined an organization that has broadened considerably the scope of its activities over more than 170 years in the United States, while still retaining its fundamental links with its beginning and its original aims.

Systemic Change

A relatively recent change has occurred in the emphasis of the works performed by members of the Society in the U.S. Much of our work has been focused on providing direct assistance to those in need. The recent change is related to what is called systemic change. We not only provide for direct assistance but we work toward helping those we serve make their way out of poverty toward a state of self-sufficiency.

A specific methodology has been developed which helps our members better understand what affects the thinking of those living in poverty. The better we understand the people who come to us for help (without stereotyping), the better we can serve them. We have also developed programs that help those living in poverty to gradually work their way up.

VINCENTIAN VOCATION

PURPOSE OF THE SOCIETY

The purpose/intentions (essential objectives) of the first members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul were:

1. (Holiness) To bear witness to Christ and His Church by showing that the faith of Christians inspires them to work for the good of humanity.
2. (Fellowship) To bring together people of goodwill and to assist them by mutual example and true friendship in drawing nearer to Christ. This fulfills his essential precept, namely, the love of God in the person of their fellow men and women.
3. (Service) To establish a personal contact between its members and those who suffer, visiting them in their homes and bringing them the most efficacious and brotherly aid possible.

The goals of the Society are just as valid today. The Vincentian vocation leads to action: the Society is not just a caring group with spiritual trimmings.

The primary object of the Society continues to be the spiritual development of its members. This again is eminently practical. As we know, the more people strive to develop their spiritual side, to deepen their faith, the more true to Christ will their witness be. The question is not whether the Society exists for the spiritual development of its members or for the active service of the poor. It is for both, because it is precisely in and through their compassion and care for those who are suffering that members grow and develop as Christian men and women.

The more Christ-like our service is, the more acceptable it will be to those in need. If we are Christ-like in our service, it will be effective and will meet people's real needs.

VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

The key aspects of St. Vincent de Paul's spirituality were:

1. Love for the Father;
2. Sharing Christ's compassionate and effective love for the poor; and
3. Openness to the Holy Spirit.

VINCENTIAN VIRTUES

The five Vincentian virtues are:

1. **Simplicity:** Frankness, integrity, and genuineness.
2. **Humility:** Accepting the truth about our frailties, gifts and strengths; acknowledging that the latter are given to us by God for others, and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.
3. **Selflessness:** Giving up something good in favor of something better - dying to our ego.
4. **Meekness:** Discipleship with a gentle strength.
5. **Zeal:** Energy and enthusiasm; a true concern for the soul, for the full human and spiritual flourishing of people, and for their eternal happiness.

A WAY OF LIFE

The Vincentian vocation is a way of life. It is not something to put on like a coat when visiting a family or attending a Conference meeting. Members must try to be Vincentian all the time – at home, at work, and at leisure. New members may worry that they now have to be better than other people. Not so. We all have our faults and failings. Vincentians do not have any false sense of spirituality. Vincentians aspire to the spirit of the Samaritan who could not pass by on the other side of the road when someone is in need.

WHAT WE DO

As well as fostering the spiritual development of its more than 100,000 members, the Society works in parishes all over the United States to help those in need. At first glance, it may seem that *meeting needs* is the business of government since we have a system of care for those in trouble, with cash and other benefits, and with social workers and other professionals. There may be less absolute poverty than there was in years gone by, but government can only deal with minimum standards, and there are still some people with needs which government cannot meet. The Society works to fill in the financial gaps on a short-term basis whenever it can.

At the heart of our work are the person-to-person contacts and the Christian love for our neighbors – whoever they may be. It is also our intent to bring the hope and encouragement. The Society aims to be abreast of new needs, and has been in the forefront of many initiatives; for example, helping unemployed and underemployed through day resource centers, assistance in preparing resumes, assistance in preparing for interviews, and many other ways.

What is poverty? Social scientists and government offer various ways to measure poverty, all based on financial resources. The Society takes a broader view. People are poor when, through lack of resources, they are excluded from the ordinary living patterns, customs and activities of their community, and face a constant struggle to live with “dignity.” We exclude no form of poverty from our concern:

- Loneliness
- Inability to organize a home
- Being an orphan
- Having no aim in life
- Being depressed or mentally ill
- Having severe learning difficulties
- Being a care giver

- Homelessness
- Unemployment
- Alcoholism
- Drug addiction
- Bereavement
- Inability to cope with a problem
- Being head or member of a single-parent family

The above is not an all-inclusive list. As Vincentians, we seek to aid Christ in whatever form or guise He comes to us.

OTHER THINGS WE DO

Both nationally and locally, the Society has “Special Works.” These are initiatives, usually organized at the District Council or Diocesan Council level, some of which may be quite large in scale. They are often managed by committees composed largely of Vincentians and are firmly part of the Society. Listed below are some Conference activities and some of the more common Special Works.

FEEDING THE HUNGRY

Members are involved serving at free dining rooms, either at our own SVdP facilities or at community centers.

Many Councils and Conferences operate food distribution centers. They give out bags/boxes of food to those in need on a regular basis. Some Conferences have food pantries that they draw food from to deliver to families in need. Some Conferences work with community food distribution centers to provide food for those who come to them for help.

Many Conferences organize holiday food boxes for Thanksgiving, Christmas and/or Easter. Many Conferences also conduct food drives at various times of the year to ensure an adequate supply of food for those in need.

CLOTHING THE NAKED

Many Conferences have access to SVdP thrift stores, enabling them to provide good quality clothing and footwear to people in need through a voucher system.

VISITING HOSPITALS, SHUT-INS AND NURSING HOMES

Conference members, who wish to do so, can and often do visit persons in hospitals and nursing homes giving comfort and encouragement to lonely patients. Members also arrange visits to people who are not mobile - the elderly, ill or handicapped who cannot regularly leave their homes.

VISITING THE INCARCERATED

This is specialized work, and members living near a prison facility may want to become prison visitors. Most dioceses have special training programs related to this type of ministry. Many Conferences also visit and support the families of the incarcerated.

HELPING THE HOMELESS

Typically, Conferences spend a significant amount of money each year to keep individuals and families from becoming homeless by assisting with rents and utilities. They also work closely with shelters. Some Councils operate homeless service centers and Conference members can work in these facilities.

CHILDREN CAMPS

Some Diocesan Councils (like Baltimore, Detroit, and Los Angeles) run residential summer camps for young people. Conference members can volunteer to spend time supervising at such camps, along with non-Vincentians. Some Councils and Conferences have provided assistance so that children can attend Catholic summer camps.

SVdP THRIFT STORES

Thrift stores provide a useful point of contact with the public we serve. Some are located in areas of great need, others where a ready market for used goods exists. Stores give us a means to serve the poor, either by making gently used clothing and household items available at low cost, or free of cost through the Conference voucher system. Stores can also provide some employment and are a source of additional funds to the Society.

FURNITURE UNITS

Some Councils have furniture-processing centers, where new furniture is built or old units restored, or where mattresses are torn down and rebuilt. Once restored, furniture can be sold or given to those in need through a voucher system.

DISASTER AID

This program has given the Society the means to respond quickly to emergencies such as natural disasters, war and famine. The National Council has developed a

Disaster Services Division to aid Councils and Conferences throughout the country in assisting those suffering from local disasters.

SUPPORTING AN OVERSEAS CONFERENCE (TWINNING)

Just as we assist needy people at home, so we also provide help for neighbors abroad. The Society worldwide operates a “twinning” program, which links Councils and Conferences in more affluent countries with those in less-developed areas. Twinning is an expression of Charity within the Society. For example, some twinning with Mexico has enabled the construction of a medical facility.

Twinning demonstrates the bonds of friendship that unites Society members everywhere. Every Conference is encouraged to twin with a Third World Conference. Currently, the Conferences and Councils in the United States are encouraged to twin with SVdP in countries in Central and South America. Pope Paul IV wrote, *“All those who hear the cry of human suffering, all those who work to set the world aright, are true apostles. The daily bread they bring is a sign of more than human love. It is a sign of Providence. If development is now the name of peace, who can refuse such work?”*

In a very brief introduction such as this, it is impossible to cover every aspect of the Society’s work. Each Conference could be doing something unique to meet a particular need and that is how it should be.

HOME VISITS

The main activity of a Conference is to visit people at home, in the hospital or elsewhere. Here are a few useful tips about visiting.

MAKING A HOME VISIT

Visiting people in their homes is at the very center of the Society's work. Person-to-person contact is the main distinguishing feature of SVdP. But since Conference members usually are neither trained counselors nor social workers, they may find visits difficult, particularly if they are new to the Society and inexperienced in such activity. Normally, new members visit with more experienced people. If you have never done these things before, it can seem a daunting prospect. We offer some advice below based on the practical experience of existing members.

VISIT IN PAIRS

Visits should never be made alone. Vincentians always work in twos. New members will always make the first few visits with an experienced member before teaming up with a partner on a regular basis.

There are several reasons why it is unwise for visits to be made by only one person. Some visits can be difficult and two people can give each other support. It also helps to protect the members from any allegations that might be made against them. Remember, our Lord sent His disciples out in pairs. Visits should always be done in pairs, no exceptions. From time to time, Conference Presidents should review the visiting teams and change them, to spread expertise and to allow members to learn from each other.

PREPARE YOURSELF BEFORE YOU GO

Try to find as much as you can about the person or family, what their problems are, what they are interested in, what their background is. This will help you understand and serve them better. Some of this information may already be available in a case record if the person or family has been visited in the past by

fellow Vincentians. Older people we visit, in particular, may have led a fascinating life and, given an opportunity, will often give you an insight into their past. Many old people have few visitors and love to talk about their experiences. If you find the right topic and show genuine interest, you never need fear that the conversation will dry up. Understanding the background to a family or individual may also save you blundering into an embarrassing topic which is best left until trust has been established and the person confides in you.

Keep in mind that the person or family to be visited called for assistance because they are in crisis. Although we want to get to know them and build up a level of confidence and trust between us, their minds are focused very heavily on the need they have. You will address the need with due diligence while still getting to know them.

PRAY

Pray about your visit. Remember the Holy Spirit is always there at our side to be called upon. We are never alone when we visit.

CONTINUITY AND REGULARITY

It is important to establish trust and seeing the same faces at regular intervals is important, especially for people who have complex problems or who find it difficult to form relationships. If they are to share their worries and problems, they want to do it with people they have come to regard as friends. A constant stream of new faces will make this process difficult, if not impossible. Equally, if trust is to be established, a regular pattern of visits that can be relied on is vital.

On the other hand, there are some advantages to having a variety of members visit some people or families. Some Conferences organize their teams on a rotational basis – a team or teams to cover certain days of the week or one week each. The principle to follow, however, is to visit in the way that is most helpful to each person we visit, so every Conference should be flexible in its organizational arrangements.

AT THE VISIT

ESTABLISH A PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE

Remember you are privileged to have the opportunity to visit. On the one hand, you are visiting as a member of a two person team; bring your smile, your sense

of humor, and your ability to listen. When you meet people for the first time, tell them who you are, give your first name ONLY, and shake hands. Mother Teresa reminds us, “Your smile is the sunshine of God’s love.”

But it is important to remember also that you are visiting as members of your Conference. It will be a comfort to them to know you are able to call upon other skills in the Conference and with total confidentiality assured. If it is a first visit, tell them what you hope to achieve by the visit that may only be to get to know one another – and listen to the worries they have. Explain how your parish Conference may be able to help. Remember, the first visit is very important, setting the tone for a future relationship built on friendship.

GETTING THE FACTS

An important part of the visit is what you learn about family circumstances and problems. Listen and take only those notes that are absolutely necessary, such as details of income or contact names and numbers. Any other notes should be jotted down immediately after your visit - visiting and listening is more important than the paperwork. If you don’t understand the family circumstances, you may not be of much help. In early visits, the full facts may not emerge. It may well take time for an honest exchange to occur.

Be careful not to judge their lifestyle. It is important to understand that people living in poverty and/or in crisis may not have the same value system that you have. Be open to what they have to say and listen carefully.

It could be necessary to ask questions which people find uncomfortable, such as details of income and family expenses. Explain that this is needed in order to build up as complete a picture as possible. You should confirm that the information is confidential and the Society tries to ensure that its funds are used in the best possible way, depending on the needs people have. Because the Society’s funds are from the public, we must account for every expenditure.

OBTAINING THE BENEFITS TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED

When you are aware of the situation people are in, you can often help by telling them of their rights and informing them of entitlements or assistance programs they may not know about. It is good practice to have a member of the

Conference who will keep up-to-date with main public assistance benefit levels and with changes. Other options to confirm entitlements are:

- Suggest that the person should visit the local community assistance agency or office, where someone will advise and help to fill in the various forms if necessary. The home visit team may offer to go with them if no one else can and they ask for help. Remember: if you transport them, Vincentians go in pairs.
- Suggest they call other organizations, churches and hot lines for help (if appropriate). Each Conference should maintain a resource list for its members to carry so that they can provide this extremely valuable information to those in need.
- Suggest that the Information and Referral Hotline (211 in many communities) may have even more information than what you carry.

In extreme circumstances, if someone is unable to visit the local office and no friend can help with completing the forms, a letter or telephone call to the local community assistance office may secure a home visit. Remember: you cannot obtain information from the community assistance office without the written permission of the people you are trying to help.

FINANCIAL HELP

Even if people are now receiving the benefits to which they are entitled, they may still need help. But if you give financial assistance, they may have to declare it and risk losing an equivalent amount of benefits. For a one time problem, it is usually easier to provide financial assistance to avoid creating an extra burden on the person or family we are trying to help, but consider giving goods or food rather than money. Help with clothing or furniture may be possible. Never give anything, or discuss finances, in front of neighbors, other visitors or children; ask if you can talk in private or go back at another time.

If there are large debts, it is unlikely that the Conference will be able to pay these off. While some funding may be available from the District Council or Diocesan Council, large amounts are usually beyond our reach. To avoid someone from being taken to court, suggest contacting a debt counselor at one of the several low cost or free nonprofit debt counseling agencies. Recommend classes in budgeting, looking at the various bills to see how much should be put aside each

week. If there is a local credit union, encouraging them to join is an excellent way to help them.

CULTIVATING A CORRECT ATTITUDE

All dealings must be founded on respect for the family. It is tempting to tell people how to run their lives, but this is not the role of a friend. Respect for the dignity and judgment of those being helped must be part of the relationship.

The people you visit have minds of their own. They know where the shoe pinches most painfully, so they should be helped in the way that they will find most useful. Never tell people what to do. Discuss the options and let them decide. Never take action on someone's behalf without their full knowledge and consent.

A visitor should be aware of the danger of falling into the trap of playing God to families and leading them to believe that he or she will solve all their problems. The aim should be to give as much as we can in terms of material aid, services and time; but we must always be conscious of the danger of creating unhealthy dependence. A good visitor will always encourage self-help, independence and personal decision-making, so as to lessen passivity and indecisiveness.

Visitors must be careful not to judge families, even in their hearts. We will never know all the circumstances of someone's past life, which may have scarred them or left them unable to cope. People fall into all kinds of difficulties for many reasons, and some not of their own making. Many families depend on government assistance, through no fault of their own and some elderly people are poor because of inadequate occupational safety rights or inadequate employment benefits. The only criterion for our help is "need;" the cause of it does not matter.

COPING WITH UNEXPECTED PROBLEMS

Sometimes visitors may suspect a serious problem, such as violence, cruelty, child neglect or abuse. The correct response to such suspicions is to report back to the Conference immediately for advice. The Conference may decide to contact a specialized organization and enlist their help. (The principle of confidentiality, which underlies all Society work, permits such consultation without mentioning any names.) But again, beware that you do not start any action that could get out

of hand. The general principle is that any action should be taken with the full knowledge and consent of the person you are endeavoring to help.

Over the last several years, a lot of concern has been raised (rightly so) and legislation has been put in place related to abuse of children and vulnerable adults. It is important for all Vincentians to understand what is required of them by law within their state as well as the rules established by the Bishop of the Diocese in which they live. These rules and regulations may include mandated reporting to authorities of suspected abuse as well as special training and background checks for Vincentians. The Society has made a formal commitment to follow all of the procedural rules of the various dioceses related to what is typically referred to as "Safe Environment."

OFFERING CHRISTIAN LOVE

A visit will be fruitful if members have something of their own Christian love to impart to those they help. This does not mean, as one member puts it, "pushing rosaries at them." It is not necessarily done by anything said, but rather by what you are, the way you behave, the values and attitudes that come through in your conversation, your handshake and your smile.

You may not always be able to give money. You can always offer a listening ear, a little time and a compassionate heart.

Vincentians are encouraged to pray with those they serve at the end of the visit. While spontaneous prayer is better from one point of view, they may prefer prayers they know, so that they are able to join in. Ask if you can pray on their behalf. The Lord's Prayer is known by most Christians. However, never impose prayer on those you visit.

Always remember that it is NOT our purpose to convert people, or actively seek to promote our faith. Many of those we visit may be of other faiths or no faith at all and we must always respect that. It is enough that they can recognize in us God's love for them. If it brings them nearer to God, that is a wonderful outcome but one that is the result of grace, not of our efforts. Be prepared to share your faith if the matter arises. Otherwise, leave everything safely in God's hands.

AND FINALLY

Be patient. Do not give the impression that you are in a hurry to go somewhere else. Looking at your watch or giving the appearance of wanting to leave will put off the person you come to see. Take Our Lord's example. He always made time for those who wanted to talk to Him or seek His help. Make the person you visit feel that their needs are the most important thing for you at that moment. Enjoy your visiting. It is often said and it is so true, you will get as much out of a visit as the person you go to see. Not every visit will run smoothly and some will be difficult or even painful but, with God's help, your effort will bear fruit.

HOSPITAL AND REST HOME VISITS

This is a very worthwhile work. Those who have no close relatives or can only be visited occasionally may feel left out at visiting times when it seems that everyone else has someone who cares about them.

Many of the points made about home visits apply in hospital and rest home visits. Visitors should establish a pleasant atmosphere, treat the patients they meet with respect and sensitivity and approach their task in a spirit of “Christian love.”

It is important to remember that the rule about Vincentians doing things in pairs applies to all activities – not just home visits.

Visiting people in a hospital or in a care center, however, calls for extra skills and a need to follow procedures:

IDENTIFY YOURSELF

Remember to make yourself known to the hospital reception and ward staff, so that they know who you are and why you are there. More importantly, you must be sure that you have their permission to be there. Once they know you, staff will often ask you to visit a patient who has few visitors or arrange for Communion to be brought to a Catholic.

LISTEN

Hospital visitors must be very good listeners, able to let the patient do the talking if he or she wishes and to respond by encouraging them and reacting appropriately. Many people in the hospital are vulnerable, lonely, frightened or in pain and it can help to talk to someone who has time for them.

GIVE TIME BUT KNOW WHEN TO LEAVE

Hospital visits should not be hurried. The visitors should give the impression that there is all the time in the world, so that the patient can relax and enjoy the visit. Quite often, however, a short 10-minute visit is all that is required. It may be worth checking with the nurses to determine how long they feel you should stay. You want to avoid over-tiring the patient, but stay longer if the patient wishes.

Sometimes a patient won't want to talk. He or she may feel tired, ill or depressed. Under these circumstances, a visitor should respect the patient's wishes and leave pleasantly, with a promise to call again.

MIRROR THEIR MOODS BUT BE CHEERFUL

If a patient is in a serious mood, a light frivolous approach will not help. It is safer to mirror the patient's mood initially but then to move to being cheerful and helpful, leaving them feeling better than when you arrived. Make sure the conversation is not somber for too long. Exchanging lists of people you knew who had the same illness is not going to cheer them up.

BE USEFUL

Visitors can sometimes act as useful channels to patients – by contacting the medical professionals when the patient feels unable to do this but wants more information, by contacting families, lawyers or others on the patient's behalf. This is done only at the patient's request and through the hospital authorities or social workers. As with home visits, never take action without the patient's full knowledge and consent or, if he or she has a family, discuss the matter with them and encourage them to do whatever is required. The Conferences make use of a release of information waiver that is signed by the person we are serving in order to discuss their situation with others.

BE SENSITIVE

If a patient already has visitors when you arrive, do not crowd the bed or make friends and relatives wait but offer to come back at a time when no one else will be there.

BE CAUTIOUS

Be careful not to get drawn into medical diagnosis or prognosis. This is particularly important when visiting patients who are seriously or terminally ill.

To the question, “Am I going to die?” try turning the question into an opportunity for the patient to voice the doubts and fears they may have about the future and comfort them.

BE FAITHFUL

Continuity of visits is very important particularly for long term patients who like to build up a relationship with their own visitor and depend on him or her coming regularly. In some cases, the hospital visitor may be the only person that the patient sees during the week, so the visit can be really important and worthwhile for them.

OFFERING CHRISTIAN LOVE

If the patient is a Christian and would like to see their Priest, Minister or Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist, arrange this with their agreement.

Tell them you will pray for them and so will the Conference. It may give them comfort if they say quietly, there and then, a prayer or blessing for healing and peace of heart.

Ask their prayers for yourself also, for other members of the Conference and for all those the Conference visits. This will help them feel part of the Vincentian family.

HOW OUR WORK IS FUNDED

We have mentioned home visits and some other works which members perform; but, to carry out much of the work, the Conference and all other parts of the Society need money. Unlike the other local parish groups, a SVdP Conference is part of a network of support for both expertise and financial help.

The Society is almost entirely dependent on public support to carry out its work. When you take all of the work being done in the parish areas and combine that with all of the special works being provided in the Councils, the needs satisfied by the Society are enormous. In 2014, the Society provided more than \$985 million worth of goods and services in the United States, assisting more than 11,000,000 people.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY COME FROM?

The money comes from fund-raising, fifth Sunday collections, SVdP envelopes included with parish envelopes, poor boxes, and many other arrangements agreed upon with your Pastor. There are special bequests, legacies, donations from individuals and companies, and donations from the general public in support of programs such as food drives, clothing drives, holiday adopt-a-family and food baskets.

The members themselves are another important source of funds to the Society. At each of our local Conference meetings, a Secret Collection is taken up and members contribute to it. The amount of the member's contribution is left to each individual according to their means, always remembering our call "to be generous with our time, our possessions and ourselves..."

The public's generosity creates internal challenges. People give money to the Society in the expectation that we will spend it wisely and where it is needed most. As trustees of charitable funds, we have both a legal duty and an obligation under good stewardship to spend them on appropriate Society works, honoring

any wishes the benefactor may have expressed about particular works or to use in specific areas. If the conference cannot use the funds as the donor requested, the decision to use the funds in another way or withdraw the donation is the donor's.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY GO?

It is a tradition of the Society that we do not hoard money. Without being in any way irresponsible, a spirit of generosity is encouraged.

DIRECT AID

Most of the money a Conference receives goes for direct aid – that is, to help people within the parish boundaries who have immediate needs of one sort or another, including rent, utilities, food, furniture, clothing, transportation, medical care, etc.

As good stewards of funds donated to the conference, the conference should not give cash to those being served. After verifying the bill is valid, a check made payable to the business or utility should be written.

TWINNING

As explained earlier, many Conferences “twin” with poorer Conferences in other parishes. For a regular monthly “twinning,” Conferences are able to share some of their comparative wealth with their brother and sister Vincentians in poorer parishes. They too face significant requests for assistance but lack the resources to meet those needs. Our financial help is vital to their task and this is living proof of a Conference's acknowledgement of its role in our *family*.

Many Conferences go even further by twinning with a Conference in a third world country. They share some of their comparative wealth with those who struggle to serve those in need in poorer countries. In many of these countries, the Society is growing in membership, is youthful and does an enormous amount of work. Our financial help may seem small to us (typically \$100 per month) but it goes a long way. The amount of the twinning donation should be determined in light of the general economy of the country to which it is sent and the ability of the receiving Conference to use the funds.

SPECIAL WORKS

Many Conferences, District Councils and Diocesan Councils have “Special Works” which have been set up to meet a particular need which require financial support on a regular basis. Examples of this are dining rooms, medical/dental clinics, and summer camps, etc. Some also operate thrift stores, which are works that actually bring money into the Society to help pay for our good works.

CONFERENCE OPERATING EXPENSES

Typically these include envelopes, postage, pantry electric bills, office telephone bills, communication supplies, training materials, etc. These should be a very minor part of most Conference expenditures but may include expenses incurred in traveling to essential meetings for training and education. Members incurring such expenses should submit a claim for them. If a member does not wish to be reimbursed, he/she should make a claim and donate the money in the secret collection. If no claim is made, it may deter people from joining us if they feel they will have to pay for their own expenses.

SOLIDARITY CONTRIBUTIONS

Many organizations ask their members to pay annual dues in order to help cover the costs of the organization. Officially, there are no dues within the Society. However, the Society asks for solidarity contributions to help defer the costs of operating upper Councils – District, Diocesan, National and International Councils.

The National Council has established a formula in which the Conferences, District Councils, and Diocesan Councils contribute to cover the expenses of the National Council. The National Council in turn makes a contribution to the Council General International (CGI) for its support.

Some District or Diocesan Councils make the solidarity contribution on behalf of their Conferences, if they are financially able to do so, and do not require reimbursement. Some District or Diocesan Councils make the solidarity contribution on behalf of their Conferences and ask their Conferences to reimburse them for the contribution.

Some Councils request a solidarity contribution from their Conferences to support the work that the Council does. This is not always the case but it is common.

MORE THOUGHTS ON FUND-RAISING

As mentioned earlier, work with your Pastor to arrange for some type of church collection. The Society is acting for the parish in its works and is representing the parishioners, so the primary burden of financial support rests on the parish. But we cannot demand that support. Most Pastors are kind and generous. Others may feel you are competing with them for donations and expect you to find your own source of funds. Some Conferences simply stand while holding a basket for SVdP outside the doors of the church at the end of the Masses once a month. Also, it is important to understand that what happens with one Pastor may not be the same with a new Pastor.

Conferences may wish to raise money in other ways too. Generally speaking, people will pay to go out to be entertained or spend money on a simple meal or tea and coffee, plus a raffle, if it is for a good cause. But it is important to plan wisely to avoid fund-raising ideas where income is unlikely to make the effort worthwhile. Inappropriate fund-raising events include lavish receptions, showy entertainment and expensive meals. These are not in keeping with the five Vincentian virtues – simplicity, humility, meekness, selflessness and zeal – and are inappropriate to the needs of the people we serve.

Conferences are encouraged to organize at least one fund-raising event each year. These events are often enjoyable and help bind together the Conference members. If more events are planned, members should ensure that the extra work does not in any way interfere with the person-to-person visiting that is at the heart of our work and our vocation.

Most importantly, always thank those who contribute. Individual donations direct to Conferences should always be acknowledged with thanks and in writing. Contributions through church collections should be acknowledged by way of a church notice, or a “Thank You” note.

PARISH BULLETIN

Make full use of the parish bulletin: enlist the help of parishioners, ask for help, thank people for their generosity, seek new members, request furniture or other household items and announce meetings. A short account of how parish donations enabled the Conference to meet a specific need gives parishioners a

sense of personal connection with those being served. At least once each year, give a report to the parish on what has been done (it is generally better to avoid mentioning the names of Vincentians, except perhaps that of the President).

Be especially careful with the word “poor” in describing what your Conference does. It is better to use a phrase such as “the elderly and those in need.” Many of the elderly remember a time when SVdP was thought to help only the financially poor. In seeing the statement “we visit the poor,” they could be upset if they are actually well off although lonely and shut-in and felt they were being labeled as destitute.

HOW SVdP IS ORGANIZED

The Society in the United States has a simple and effective structure that exists to support the work at all levels. The basic element is the local group which we refer to as a Conference. Conferences are supported through a structure of geographically-based District and Diocesan Councils whose roles are to guide, coordinate and support the local Conferences. Councils also provide opportunities for communication and sharing expertise. The Council structure ensures that Conferences are not isolated from the main body and a source of referral and advice in issues requiring a broader perspective and of financial support beyond the local means.

The United States National Council draws all the organizational strands together. Apart from its leadership role, it translates the views and actions of the members into Society policy and develops national programs. The National Council is also the Society's voice to the outside world.

Geographically, the United States covers a wide area that includes all 50 States. In order to cover this vast area efficiently, the country has been divided into eight (8) regions, each led by a Regional Vice President.

A number of committees report to the National Council. These committees study issues, provide advice and suggest programs on a wide range of subjects.

The structure of the Society in the U.S.:

- Conferences (about 4,600)
- District Councils (about 350)
- Diocesan Councils (54)
- Regions (8)
- National Council, its Board of Directors and committees
- Council General International (CGI)

THE CONFERENCE

THE BASICS

We have inherited the terms “Conference” and “Council General” from our French origins. The first groups in Paris were called Conferences (derived from the French word “confrère” which means “colleague”) and the name has persisted throughout the years and all over the world. The local Conference is the basic and most important unit of the Society. Conferences vary in size from less than ten (10) members to more than sixty (60). Conference work also varies greatly from area to area. The primary work of Conferences is visiting families and individuals in need, including elderly, sick or home bound people who may be very lonely. Some Conferences concentrate on visiting people in hospitals and prisons (and their families). There are Conferences of youth and young adults, both in schools and in parishes.

Membership is open to men and women, young and old, of other Christian denominations and faiths, if they share the spirit of the Society and sincerely accept its principles, as explained in The Rule. By working closely together in works of charity, we hope to reduce prejudice and foster understanding between races and cultures. But the Society is Catholic in origin, character and tradition and The Rule relating to the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and Spiritual Advisor ensures that its Catholic ethos is fully preserved.

There are commissioning ceremonies for new members, for existing members (to be renewed annually) and for Presidents.

CONFERENCE MEETING – FREQUENCY

All Conferences, however, have one thing in common. Members are always available to help people in need and they meet as a group, ideally every week;

however, at least twice-monthly meetings are required. One of the reasons the Society has thrived as an international body is that it was founded on the basis of a weekly meeting of its members. This regular coming together is one of the Society's greatest strengths and is a major reason for its unbroken existence since 1833.

WHAT HAPPENS AT A MEETING?

This is the primary gathering of Vincentians where all three of the essential objectives of the Society come into play: spiritual growth, friendship (community), and service. It is at the meeting that members discuss, organize and develop their work, and share their talents and resources in the service of those in need. The meeting is important also in giving people the opportunity to work together, rather than in isolation and to develop their spiritual lives. Normally each Conference has a regular day of the week and time of day or evening for its meeting. This is arranged to suit the members, bearing in mind the availability of the Spiritual Advisor. Meetings generally last an hour. The President, elected for a three-year term, facilitates the meeting. Decisions are made by all of the Conference members, hopefully by consensus.

OPENING PRAYER

Meetings start with prayer to remind members that the Society is a spiritual organization, not merely a humanitarian one. It was Frederic Ozanam's vision that Vincentians would find, in their meetings, not only opportunity to serve those in need, but also personal spiritual development. From the beginning, it was recognized that nothing of value could be achieved unless it was founded on love and nourished by prayer. Society meetings have always begun and ended with prayer and praying remains an essential part of each meeting.

Over 300 years ago, St. Vincent de Paul told his followers that they must be servants of the poor. Prayer reminds Conference members that it is Christ they are serving in those they help. Prayers give us practical help by providing the proper Christ-centered vision of people in need, so that our attitudes will be like His – caring, helpful and non-judgmental. Finally, it is the quality, not the quantity, of prayer that is important. A short time at the beginning and end of each meeting where people raise their minds and hearts to God is sufficient.

SPIRITUAL READING AND DISCUSSION

After leading the opening prayer, the Spiritual Advisor leads the Conference members in an appropriate spiritual reading. In the Spiritual Advisor's absence, another member or the President should lead the reading. Members are invited to comment, saying what the reading meant to them. This short reading and discussion is another traditional feature of the meetings (at all levels of the Society). The National Council provides readings based on the liturgical year and meditations as relevant spiritual materials for use at meetings. Spiritual Advisors are encouraged to select materials that they feel are relevant to Conference membership and the struggles those they serve are facing.

MINUTES

The minutes, which are prepared and presented by the Secretary, give a brief account of the business of the previous meeting and raise matters that need continuing and further attention. Approval of the minutes is essential and a record of that approval is then entered into the minutes of the current meeting.

TREASURER'S REPORT

The financial section of the meeting includes discussion of the current state of Conference finances, a report on money spent, donations received and any proposed expenditure in the future. At each meeting, a secret collection is taken and members make a personal sacrificial contribution. The amount is not designated and nobody can see what is given by a single individual. The total amount becomes part of the Conference's financial review. When the Society was started, the secret collection was the only source of funds.

DISCUSSION OF SERVICE

Oral reports on visits to families, hospital visits or other work done by members since the last meeting include the nature of any problems and, of course, any good news. Such reports should be brief and to the point. If a family is experiencing financial difficulties, details of the current situation are given. If action has to be taken, the facts should be outlined, discussed and a decision

reached before moving on to the next report. The President allocates visits to be made unless some other system to do so is already in place (i.e. teams covering specific days of the week). The meeting minutes reflect decisions while maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of those we serve.

CLOSING PRAYERS

These can be as brief as the opening prayers. One of them, which thanks God “for the many blessings we receive from those whom we visit,” is a positive acknowledgement of the great value to our members of their work with those in need. Members are encouraged to add or substitute spontaneous prayers for the needs of their families or friends or for current world needs.

RENEWAL

At least once each year, Conferences should take time to reflect on and review their activities. Change is not recommended or required unless the Conference as a whole believes it is appropriate.

COUNCILS

THE BASICS

District, Diocesan, National and International Councils are the recognized channels of action and communication in the Society, linking Conferences locally and internationally. They provide Presidents with support and an opportunity to share their knowledge, problems and ideas. At the same time, they help each other by cooperating in joint projects for the benefit of those they serve. Decisions are usually made by consensus but can be made by vote. Because the Society is democratic, the view of each elected President, who represents the Vincentian community, is crucial.

You will also find a designation of Archdiocesan Council. The Archdiocesan Council exists only in those dioceses which the Catholic Church has designated as archdioceses (such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Santa Fe and a number of others). The Archdiocesan Council for all purposes of the Society is identical to the Diocesan Council.

DISTRICT AND DIOCESAN COUNCILS

The main purpose of a Council is to SERVE and HELP Vincentians by supporting the Conferences. The District Council consists of the Presidents of the Conferences within its territory. The Diocesan Council consists of the Presidents of the District Councils within its diocese. Each Council may have a Board of Directors but not all Councils do. Each Council provides leadership for its constituent Conferences and District Councils.

DISTRICT COUNCIL FUNCTIONS

The District Council is both supportive and developmental. Each Council:

- Helps to start new Conferences;

- Helps to build up small and weak Conferences;
- Promotes Vincentian spirituality and encourages attendance at retreats;
- Provides advice to Conferences on difficult cases;
- Makes financial grants to Conferences and to Special Works, sponsors Special Works (thrift stores, dining rooms, food distribution centers, etc.);
- Encourages members to attend formation/training programs;
- Arranges other meetings for members, families and friends, as appropriate;
- Encourages twinning;
- Coordinates with social service and public assistance agencies; and
- Provides a two-way channel of communication between Conferences and the next upper Council.

DISTRICT COUNCIL/CONFERENCE RELATIONS

The District Council has a particular relationship with the Conferences in its jurisdiction because of the common territory they share and the particular way in which the local environment affects the people they serve. Contact is maintained through the regular meeting of the Council as well as by correspondence, phone calls and visits to Conferences by the Council President or other Council members. The person-to-person contact that is the cornerstone of the Society's work with those in need is no less relevant for members in their relationship with each other. Visits by the District Council President to individual Conferences are essential to maintain the bonds of the Vincentian family and to demonstrate recognition and support for the work of the Conference. Ideally, every Conference should be visited at least once during the course of a year.

Inter-conference visits should be encouraged with a group of members from one Conference visiting a neighboring Conference.

DIOCESAN COUNCIL FUNCTIONS

The role of the Diocesan Council in relation to the District Councils is much the same as that of the District Council to the Conferences.

NATIONAL COUNCIL

The National Council of the United States consists of the elected Council Presidents representing each Catholic diocese in the country in which the Society has presence and the elected National President. This includes only those dioceses in which the Society has District or Diocesan Council. The President of the Diocesan Council is the National Council Member. In those dioceses where there is no Diocesan Council, the President of the oldest instituted District Council is the National Council Member.

Like the other Councils, it provides support for its members as well as being a forum in which the views of the membership can be translated into programs for action. The National Council has the responsibility for determining policies: such as strategic plans, disaster procedures, twinning regulations, advocacy limitations, etc. The National Council is also responsible for defining the Rule for the Society in the United States (see The Rule, Part III).

As a national body, it is the focus of the Society's communication with Church authorities, with Government, other national agencies and with the national news media. This fact and its own representative composition, equips it to provide well-informed leadership and support for the Society throughout the country and to provide an effective voice for the poor at a national level.

The National President is also in contact with the Society throughout the world, through both the Society's headquarters in Paris, France and directly with National Councils in many countries.

Various National Committees report to the National Council. These bodies provide advice to the National Council on various issues. The number of committees and their responsibilities change from time to time.

COUNCIL GENERAL INTERNATIONAL (CGI)

The Council General International (CGI) coordinates the activities of the Society throughout the world. It strengthens the links between all the National Councils of the Society. The President of each National Council is an ex-officio member of CGI. Major policy decisions affecting the worldwide Society are made during

International Plenary Meetings. The President General of CGI, together with the International Vice Presidents, makes a very important contribution through sharing his/her personal vision.

WIDER VINCENTIAN FAMILY

The Society is part of the Vincentian Family. Members include priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, affiliated members of the Sisters of Charity, Vincentian Volunteers, Association of the Miraculous Medal, and the members of the Society. There are more than 250 organizations throughout the world that follow the example and teachings of St. Vincent de Paul.

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

GENERAL MEETINGS

One of the ways in which members strive to deepen their Vincentian friendship is by holding General Meetings. When organized by the Council, these meetings bring together members from all Conferences to pray together, share problems and experiences and get to know each other socially.

Their purpose is to:

- Provide members with the opportunity to experience the breadth of the Vincentian Family;
- Encourage and renew the motivation of members in an atmosphere of festive joy;
- Share any special news from the Conferences and Councils;
- Communicate developments within the Society;
- Consult with members, providing an opportunity for an exchange of ideas;
- Provide knowledge and information (possibly through guest speakers) helpful to members in their work in their Conferences; and
- Take votes on matters requiring the approval of a majority of Vincentians.

Members should regard attendance at the General Meetings as an essential part of their Vincentian life.

FORMATION

The members of the Society are united in a spirit of goodwill, sincerity and commitment, qualities for which there are no substitutes. But certain other skills are necessary if the Society is to reach its full potential. Members should be

skilled in making contact with people in need, in establishing good relationships with them, in interviewing techniques and in knowing how to organize and to fund-raise, among others.

“Formation” is the process of developing the entire Vincentian – body and spirit. It has two aspects: growth in spirituality and training in service.

Formation and other education is arranged by the Society and many members have found this personal development helpful to their family and business life, as well as making them more effective members of the Society. Many members have learned to be more compassionate home visitors, to deal more effectively with the elderly, to respond more quickly to domestic violence, to know where to turn for vision or hearing problems, and many other subjects covered in workshops. The Ozanam Orientation is the primary training vehicle for Vincentians, and all new members are required to attend a session as soon as possible after joining the Society.

WHY TRAIN?

Is training important? Many feel that commitment and caring are the essential ingredients for being a Society member. This is true to the extent that good training is not a substitute for sincerity and hard work. At the same time, a willing heart can be channeled more effectively if topped by a good head that learned skills can be grafted on.

Serving our neighbor through the Holy Spirit and promoting the dignity and integrity of people are unlikely to be achieved by a second-rate or substandard service. Only the best is good enough, and the best will not be achieved merely by good intentions. If members do not know what we do, who we are, how we are expected to work, how can they serve in the Spirit of St. Vincent and Blessed Frederic? There is much more that can be done and members have an obligation to take all the necessary measures to prepare themselves adequately for effective Vincentian service.

OUR VALUES

As members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, it is important that we all subscribe to a set of values within which we work.

“As long as charity, humility and simplicity exist amongst you, one might say that the Society is still alive, but when these virtues are no longer seen, then one might say it is dead.” (St. Vincent de Paul)

WHAT WE DO FOR OTHERS

- Seek and find people in need, and
- Serve them, by
- Person-to-person contact, remembering to
- Respect the dignity and integrity of the individual,
- Be non-judgmental of those we serve,
- Be generous with our time, our possessions and ourselves, while on a wider front we
- Seek to promote social justice, and
- Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us in our work.

In all this, you are to be the hands and feet of Christ.

WHAT WE DO FOR OURSELVES

Love God by:

- Loving our neighbors as ourselves
- Supporting each other with friendship and encouragement
- Deepening and strengthening our own faith and promoting the spirituality of our brothers and sisters
- Being non-judgmental of our brothers and sisters
- Always acting in simplicity and humility and never claiming that our work springs from ourselves alone.

This is the Vincentian Vocation!

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