

# The Saint Vincent de Paul Society in the Vincentian Family

Michael Thio

*International President*

The Vincentian Family is preparing to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of its charism which, throughout the years, has allowed the members of the various branches to serve the poor in every part of the world. Therefore, we want to express our gratitude to the editors of *Vincentiana* for offering us the opportunity to speak about our ministry within the overall context of the Vincentian Family. We know that *Vincentiana* is a well-known publication especially because of its reflections on Vincentian spirituality. At the same time we know that other persons, not related to the Vincentian Family, often use this publication during their research. For this reason I begin by explaining the concept of the Vincentian Family and then, I explain the manner in which the members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society belong to that Family and finally, I present our objectives and some of the highlights of our ministry during recent years.

In the article, *The Vincentian Family: An Overall View*, written by José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, C.M., it is stated that an institution is in some way a member of the Vincentian Family if it has one or more of the characteristics listed below:

- directly founded by St. Vincent de Paul;
- wholly adopted or in some way adapted the *Common Rules* of St. Vincent;
- honor St. Vincent as their patron or primary source of inspiration; assume particular aspects of the Vincentian charism;
- profess the same spirit as the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity;
- participate at their very core in the vocation of St. Vincent de Paul, which consists in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor;
- assume as their own the spirit of simplicity, humility, and charity;
- are affiliated with the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Father then states *that in a family of this nature two complimentary [sic] factors are united... on the one hand, a common origin and a common ministry and, on the other hand, a plurality of persons and institutions.*

We must be mindful of the fact that at the present time the ministry of the Vincentian Family is not limited to one country or, for that matter, to one continent. The Family is ministering in almost every part of the world. There is also no doubt that the Vincentian Family has been affected by the globalization syndrome (affected in the fullest sense of that reality).

The members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society are proud to state that they are members of the Vincentian Family and have accepted the responsibility that results from such membership which began at the time when one of our primary founders, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853), dreamed of *establishing a worldwide network of charity*.

### **The objectives of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society**

From the time of its establishment in 1833, the Society has placed itself under the patronage of Saint Vincent de Paul. The members of the Society continue to live and to pass on to others the Vincentian spirit. The vocation of the members is rooted in two primary principles: continual prayer (deepening of one's faith) and an encounter with Christ through an encounter with those men and women who are poor. These principles impel the members to serve the less fortunate members of society and to do so with great respect, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation.

Historically, the focus of the ministry of the Society is home visitation: at the time of its foundation, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam (the primary co-founder) and his companions reached out to the poor by visiting them in their homes throughout the city of Paris. Today, the members of the Society reach out to those persons who are in need wherever they might be found: in their own homes, on the streets of our cities, in shelters for the homeless, in hospitals, in prisons.

The ministry of the Society is always focused on the practice of charity. The members minister in the areas where they live and respond to local needs. The manner in which such charity is practiced is quite varied and can involve the members in health care, farming, education, housing, professional development, providing assistance to the elderly, the disabled, the lonely, and those excluded from participation in society in any way. As a result of donations, we are also able to provide assistance in times of emergency. In other words, we are able to help the victims of natural disasters. At the same time, we are also able to engage in projects that advance the financial development of people.

### **What is a conference?**

A "conference" of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society is the basic unit of the Society. A conference is constituted by a group of about 10-15 members. The individual conferences function in an autonomous

manner but are coordinated by a council (local, regional, national) that is proper to the structure of each country. The members meet regularly (once or twice a month) in order to pray together, to plan and discuss their ministry on behalf of those persons who are poor. Usually each conference has a relationship with a Catholic parish.

There are about 51,000 conferences throughout the world and more than 780,000 members in 150 countries where the Society is present.

### **Structure of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society**

The International General Council is the highest administrative body of the Society on an international level. From the time of its establishment (1833), the headquarters of this Council has been located in Paris, France; its leaders are volunteers who are supported by a team of employees.

The General Council binds together the individual member countries of the International Confederation of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. The mission of the Council is to support the ministry of the Conferences throughout the world. It fosters the exchange of news and the formation of leaders and provides the various conferences with tools that enable them to establish and strengthen their bonds of solidarity. Furthermore, it promotes the sharing of resources between members residing in rich and poor countries. The General Council also organizes international gatherings that bring together the member countries. The Council also takes responsibility for planning those international gatherings.

As the highest administrative body of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, the General Council is responsible for gathering together, analyzing, and compiling the information that is received from each country or zone. This task enables the Council to publish reports that enable the members to understand the manner in which the ministry of the Society has evolved. Those reports also allow the Society to plan its worldwide strategy.

Finally, the General Council is the guarantor of the International Rule that governs the Society and is responsible for the integration of the new Conferences, which are established every year in different parts of the world.

Since 2010 I have served as President of the International General Council of the Society and the Council has focused on ten strategic objectives:

**GOAL 01:** Enhance the spiritual formation and development of members. This is fundamental to our Vincentian vocation and mission.

**GOAL 02:** Leadership and members' formation, training, and development to provide for quality and enlightened leaders and members.

**GOAL 03:** Continue to enhance the internationalization of the Society as a global Catholic charity. Extend the Society to new countries, expand the scope and quality of the Society's services to the poor and needy. Work together to foster systemic change.

**GOAL 04:** To develop effective communication and to promote better understanding and knowledge of the Society's ministry and activities (internally and externally).

**GOAL 05:** To better focus on youth and young adults' active involvement and to provide them with every opportunity for participation in the growth, leadership, and well-being of the Society.

**GOAL 06:** To be involved in greater collaboration with other branches of the Vincentian Family in mutually beneficial projects and programs for the poor and needy.

**GOAL 07:** In the spirit of the Church's ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and activities, we will collaborate with other Catholic and Christian organizations in the works of charity and justice.

**GOAL 08:** Maintain close and strong relationships with the hierarchy, thus giving witness to the reality that we are all part of the one mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

**GOAL 09:** Evolve a strategic plan to respond to and address worldwide calamities (providing emergency relief assistance, accompanying people in the recovery phase, and in the reconstruction phase of peoples' lives).

**GOAL 10:** Governance within the CGI (internally and externally) and interaction with National Councils.

### **Strategic Plan and recent activities**

The goals that were just cited are accomplished through a strategic plan that places responsibility on different individuals. This plan also has controls and is continually evaluated.

Each year, in accord with our strategic plan, we submit a report of our activities. Here I would like to highlight just a few of those activities that the Society engaged in during the past year.

### **International Commission for Assistance and Development**

This Commission (composed of members from the General Council) contributes to the international relief and reconstruction efforts in time of emergency (some natural disaster). In addition this Commission is also involved in the following efforts: micro-finance projects, educational projects, providing housing for the homeless and refugees.

## **Emergency Relief Efforts**

The Society has provided assistance to more than 22 countries during times of earthquakes, flooding, typhoons, hurricanes, war, civil and political unrest, epidemics, and famine. More specifically, we provided assistance during flooding in Brazil, Burundi, Bolivia, Croatia, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands; during times of war in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and the Central African Republic; during times of earthquakes and typhoons in Chile, Nicaragua, and the Philippines; during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone; providing assistance to refugees in Uganda and Lebanon. The Society has assured the availability of drinking water, food, clothing, blankets, medical supplies, provisional shelters (tents), heating and cooking units, kitchen supplies, furniture for homes.

## **Reconstruction Projects**

These efforts have involved repair and construction of houses in the Philippines, Zimbabwe, and Burundi. Other projects have included educational and counseling services that have enabled people to become active participants in the life of their community.

## **Development Projects**

It is most important to promote systemic change wherever possible, because in doing so we enable the less fortunate members of society to become self-sufficient and, therefore, independent. These projects are intended to enhance the dignity of the human person and to allow families to live together with dignity and meaning.

Our projects have included the following:

- education, food programs, collaboration programs, micro-financing programs (Haiti);
- agricultural development (Peru);
- education and professional formation (Guinea-Bissau);
- scholarships (Turkey and Botswana);
- agricultural programs (Mozambique).

## **United Nations - Economic and Social Council**

The Society is an accredited NGO at the United Nations with a presence in New York and Geneva. UNESCO is headquartered in Paris. Our representatives participate in meetings and work in close collaboration with the other UN representatives of the Vincentian Family. The Society wants to strengthen its presence in order to further develop

its role at the UN. Our representatives have participated in various meetings in New York and Geneva, as well as in Paris during meetings of UNESCO.

### **Conclusion**

Faithful to its calling and living the gospel of faith, hope, and charity, the Vincentian Family continues the service of Christ as its members serve those persons who are poor and in need. By becoming involved in the cause of those who are poor we promote Christian action and virtue. We also give witness to Christ.

As Christians and Vincentians we ought to preserve and develop our spirituality in order to maintain our relationship with Christ. By living a good Christian life we call people to conversion and draw them closer to God, while giving witness to Christ's love and goodness.

We give thanks to God for the 400 years during which people have given witness to our charism and we give thanks to God because we know that this charism has inspired, enlightened, and blessed the Vincentian Family as its members minister for the greater glory of God.

*May God be gracious to us and bless us;  
may God's face shine upon us.*

Psalm 67:2

Translated: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.