

Provincial Treasurers

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Superior General
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Let me begin by thanking you for your services as Provincial Treasurers in the Congregation of the Mission. I am most grateful for your generosity in accepting and working hard at this office. The task of the Provincial Treasurer is difficult. I say that for three reasons especially:

1. Your job is many-faceted. At times you must be bookkeeper, accountant, administrator, counselor, investor, legal representative, lawyer, and insurance agent.
2. Many of you have very little formal preparation for these tasks, even though you often perform them remarkably well. Few of you took courses in accounting. Few of you have degrees in economics. Most of you have learned what it means to be Provincial Treasurer because you accepted the job out of obedience and worked hard to figure out what it entailed.
3. Being a Provincial Treasurer today is much more complex than in the past. The world has become computerized, so economic transactions take place rapidly, especially in the field of investments. Society has become more litigious, so there are endless laws and bureaucratic procedures that at times frustrate even the most large-hearted man.

So, I say to you with great sincerity: thank you for taking on this difficult office.

I St. Vincent and Administration

Let me say a few words to you today about St. Vincent and administration. You know most of what I will say already, but recollection and meditation on our roots help us live more vitally in the present and confront the future with greater responsibility. I offer you four fundamental convictions that guided St. Vincent's administration.

1. *He believed that, without a solid economic base, the Congregation cannot carry out its mission.*

St. Vincent was realistic, practical. He said that he never accepted the proposal of “persons who have only the desire and do not wish to meet the costs”!¹ If the missionaries were to perform their services *gratis*, then they had to count on a financial base in the form of some kind of a fund or a source of regular income.

Here is a list of his foundations (I speak here only of the Congregation of the Mission):

¹SV VII, 208.

1625	Collège des Bons Enfants à Paris	1635	Toul	1643	Marseille	1654	Turin
		1637	Aiguillon		Cahors		Agde
			La Rose		Sedan	(1671)	
		1638	Richelieu	1644	Saintes	1658	Meaux (to 1661)
1632	St. Lazare		Lucon		Montmirail	1659	Montpellier (to 1661)
			Troyes	1645	Le Mans		Narbonne
			Alet (to 1641)		Saint Charles (Paris)		
		1641	Annecy		Genoa		
		1642	Crécy		Tunis		
			Rome	1646	Algiers		
				1648	Madagascar		
					Tréguier		
					Agen		
				1650	Périgueux		
				1651	Poland		
				1652	Montauban (Notre Dame de Lorm)		

As you can see, he founded, on the average, about a house a year between 1635 and 1659. That was a remarkable pace for someone who by all accounts moved slowly and never “stepped on the heels of providence.”² But what is all the more remarkable is that he set up a foundation for the support of each of these houses. It is interesting to note that the geographical distribution of these foundations follows principally the locations of the pastoral and financial interests of St. Vincent’s most important contacts. He was a good beggar and a good negotiator.

2. *He was inventive in gathering funds, from a wide variety of sources, for the setting up of foundations.*

St. Vincent was remarkably creative in putting together foundations in order to support houses, missions, and other works.³ Funds for supporting our mission and our missionaries came from benefices, from the rights to claim taxes and duties, from wills, from properties, from donations, from coach-route businesses, and other sources.⁴ Among his most generous benefactors were King Louis XIII and his widow, as well as the Duchess d’Aiguillon. Strange as it may sound to us today, the main source of income for the missions in Algeria and Tunis was coach-route businesses in Chartres, Rouen, Orleans, Soissons, and Bordeaux.

This creative attitude of St. Vincent is quite relevant today as traditional sources of funding are drying up. As many treasurers have certainly experienced, Mass stipends are dwindling, funding agencies tell us that they have less money, private donors are suffering from the stock market turndown of the last several years, and in many provinces the income from confreres’ salaries is now considerably less than in the past. This lessening of traditional sources makes creativity all the more imperative.

3. *While he forcefully urged the members of the Company to live a simple lifestyle, at the same time he wanted administrators to be careful to supply the needs of the confreres.*

In a delightful letter, he tells Antoine Colée, Superior at Toul:

I have heard that your bread was not well made. Please have it

²SV I, 68.

³Román, José María, “The Foundations of Saint Vincent de Paul” in *Vincentian Heritage*, 9 (1988), 134-160.

⁴José María Román, *St. Vincent de Paul, A Biography*, translated by Sr. Joyce Howard, (London: Melisende, 1999), 293-295.

*done by a baker, if you can find one, for the most important thing is to have good bread. It would also be well to vary the food sometimes...to relieve the strain on poor nature which tires of seeing the same things all the time.*⁵

In 1649, after making some rather veiled threats to Mathurin Gentil, who was the treasurer of the seminary at Le Mans, he states:

*Make an effort to serve good bread and good meat and not to sell the better wine so as to serve what is inferior, nor to expose the community to complaints of miserly treatment.*⁶

4. *Of course, the context for all of this, in St. Vincent's mind, is that the goods of the Company are "are from the patrimony of Jesus Christ, from the sweat of the poor."*⁷

For that reason he states:

*We shall render a very exact account in this matter before God. Our goods belong to God and to the poor. We are only their stewards, not their owners.*⁸

What the Congregation possesses, it possesses only for this end: that we might live in the Company as servants of the poor and the clergy.

II Some Principles in Our Constitutions and Statutes Concerning Administration

There are many articles in our Constitutions that deal directly with the administration of temporal goods. They provide a series of principles that are very helpful for all of us to meditate on.

1. *The principle of the apostolic purpose of ownership (148 §1).*

The goods which the Company owns are the patrimony of the poor; their

⁵SV I, 387.

⁶SV III, 505.

⁷SV XI, 201.

⁸SV XI, 30; cf. also SV X 305, 309, 316-17; cf. C 148 §1.

purpose is to support our “giving ourselves to God in the service of the poor.”⁹ Our goods serve our missionary goals, as St. Vincent often notes.¹⁰ All members should live in close solidarity with the poor.

2. *The principle of the communitarian form of evangelical poverty (148 §2).*

Like the community of the Acts of the Apostles,¹¹ we hold all the goods of the Company in common. There are no private owners of the community’s goods. St. Vincent puts it very clearly in the Common Rules: “Members of the Congregation, individually and collectively, should understand that, following the example of the first Christians, all our belongings are common property.”¹²

3. *The principle of co-responsibility (149).*

Since our goods are held in common, all share in responsibility, in varying degrees, for their acquisition, administration, and use. This co-responsibility requires good communication in regard to the administration of goods. All have a right to be informed about the administration of the goods of the Congregation, and have a corresponding obligation to be transparent in accounting for their use of those goods. All have a right to receive adequate formation and health care at the various stages of their lives, and have a corresponding obligation to use well the goods provided by the Congregation.

4. *The principle of subsidiarity (150 §1).*

The acquisition and administration of temporal goods takes place on various levels through various juridical persons (houses, provinces, the General Curia), whose mutual responsibilities are described in the Constitutions, Statutes, and Provincial Norms. Each level has its autonomy within the framework of the norms of the Congregation.

5. *The principle of solidarity (151 and 152).*

But even though there are distinct juridical entities within the Congregation (houses, provinces, the General Curia), provinces which have more should help those that are less fortunate. Houses within a province should help

⁹Cf. SV I, 185; II, 64; III, 149; IV, 15, 67, 117, 126, 138, 156, 233, 280, 361, 577, 596; V 83, 107, 233, 326, 425, 584, 634; VII 13, 38, 369; IX 13, 26, 29, 221; *Entretiens* (1960) 37, 471, 550, 562, 569, 571, 583, 586, 742, 743, 775, 776, 811, 825, 831, 835, 888, 916, 944.

¹⁰Cf. CR III, 2.

¹¹Acts 2:44; 4:32.

¹²CR III, 3.

one another. In a worldwide community like ours, this principle is becoming more and more important. In fact, I am very grateful to the many provinces which have so generously helped other provinces.

6. *The principle of entrustment (153).*

Though all are co-responsible, nonetheless, the Congregation entrusts the administration of its temporal goods in a special way to treasurers, under the direction and oversight of superiors and their councils. This principle places a very special responsibility in your own hands, as well as in the hands of the local treasurers. Others should help you bear this responsibility, as I will mention later, and the Provincial and his council should provide direction and oversight. Still, the administering of the goods of the Province is, primarily, your responsibility.

7. *The principle of stewardship (154).*

Administrators are not the owners of the goods of the Congregation. They are stewards; on the deepest level, our goods are the patrimony of the poor. Under the direction of superiors, treasurers should willingly, and with good grace, distribute the goods of the Congregation for the legitimate uses of the confreres and for the apostolic goals of the Company. They should be careful that there is equity in the distribution of the goods to the confreres.

8. *The principle of required permission (155).*

For the alienation of the goods of the Company and other transactions that affect our patrimony adversely, the written permission of the competent superior, with the consent of his council, is required. Many of the problems that reach the Superior General would be avoided if this principle were carefully observed.

9. *The principle of accountability.*

Our Constitutions and Statutes require that all treasurers render an account of their stewardship. The Provincial Treasurer, for example, must, twice a year, give to the provincial and his council an account of the receipts and expenditures of the province as well as a report on the status of the patrimony of the province (S 103 § 2). Provincial Treasurers should also give to the members of their province a general report of their administration of the patrimony of their province, according to the Provincial Norms (S 103 § 7).

Treasurers should strive always to be completely transparent in their relationships with superiors, helping them to understand even complicated matters so that they might make good decisions about the use of the Company's goods. A treasurer should never be an obstacle in the decision-making process of

the provincial and his council.

III Some Delicate Practical Guidelines

Every phase of the life of the Province passes through the treasurer's office: from initial formation to the care of the aging, from clothing the confreres to building a church, from paying insurance for the living to processing wills for the dead. The scope of your work is very broad. Let me suggest a few practical guidelines that, experience teaches, are very important:

1. *While it is imperative to depend on others for advice and help, you yourself must accept a primary responsibility in the administration of the goods of the Congregation.*

There are two parts to this guideline. In the first part, I recommend that you get abundant advice. In a world which becomes increasingly complicated in terms of laws and financial structures, no one person can understand and administer everything. It is unreasonable to expect that. As the General Ordinance of July 1, 2001,¹³ states, each province should have a financial committee to help you with input. The second part of the guideline, however, says that you must not place responsibility for administering the goods of the Congregation in the hands of someone else, not even a financially experienced confrere, nor a trusted lay friend, nor a professional investor. All these may help you, but you yourself are responsible for the administration of the Company's goods. Some of the worst financial problems that we have had in the Congregation have occurred when treasurers abdicated their own responsibility so that it fell into the eager grasp of others.

2. *While you must be "professional" in the carrying out of your administrative responsibilities, you must also always remain fully a priest or brother in the Congregation.*

There are two parts to this guideline too. The first part says that you must become as competent as possible in your office as treasurer. This is surely not easy, since many of you have had little professional training. Actually, I admire how much so many of you have learned and the competency with which you carry out the duties of your office. I also encourage you to continue to seek ongoing formation for your ministry as treasurers. Taking some accounting or finance courses, learning different computer programs that would be useful in the treasurer's office, or participating in associations with other religious treasurers could be very helpful ways to strengthen your "professionalism" and your service. The second part of the guideline, however, says that you must, even in

¹³ In *Vincentiana* 45 (2001) 447-448.

your professionalism, remain a priest or brother of the Mission. Make time, to the extent possible, for other forms of ministry — preaching and the sacraments; make time for prayer; make time for continuing your own theological and spiritual formation. Remain simple in your lifestyle, even if you administer large sums of money. Be gentle and warm with confreres and others whom you serve, even though at times you might have much larger concerns on your mind than the small matters that they bring to you.

3. *While it is important for you to protect and increase the resources of the province, you must not allow that to be an end in itself.*

This guideline also has two parts. The first part says that the resources of the province are the foundation for our works in the service of the poor. We must protect them, and even increase them, since the demands on our resources will undoubtedly be greater in the future than they are in the present. The second part of the guideline, however, says that the growth of our resources must never become an end in itself. In other words, we must be willing to spend, and even substantially, when the needs of the poor or the confreres demand it. Our goods are ultimately in the service of the poor, the Community, and the wider Church.

4. *While you must provide clear, abundant information to those who have ultimate responsibility for decision-making (provincials and their councils, the Superior General and his council), you must also be quite circumspect with those who have no right to know about the business of the Congregation.*

This guideline also has two parts. The first part says that simplicity is the rule of the Congregation, especially in our dealings with superiors. The treasurer must be clear in the information that he provides and in the advice that he offers. He must recognize that he himself is not the final decision-maker in many important economic questions. He must therefore provide the information necessary, and clear advice, to those who have the final responsibility in decision-making. The second part of this guideline says that the treasurer must be very discreet. Lots of people will be curious about the assets of the Congregation. He should provide only what information is necessary in a given context.

5. *While you are not ex-officio a member of the provincial council, you have a right to be heard on all matters that have significant economic implications.*

This guideline also has two parts. The first part says that the treasurer is not automatically a member of the council (though he may be by some other title: election, the choice of the provincial, the provincial norms). There may be many occasions, therefore, when the provincial does not consult you about important

matters (for example, some personnel matters). On the other hand, the visitor and his council surely have an obligation in prudence to consult you on all matters that have significant financial implications, even though they themselves bear the final decision-making responsibility in these matters. The problem, of course, is that sometimes a council may not recognize the financial implications of a decision, even if the financial component may not be the primary factor in the decision. The key here is good mutual communication.

My brothers, I want to encourage you. To you, as good stewards, is entrusted the patrimony of the Congregation. This patrimony is the fruit of the work of those who have labored before us, but it is also the seed for the future. This patrimony nourishes our formation programs and provides care for our sick and elderly. It supports our mission as well as our missionaries. In this room are gathered those confreres, you, who in some way influence all the material goods of the Community.

And so I offer you this encouragement and challenge:

- Your ministry is important, do it well for the sake of the Gospel.
- Your experience is important, share it with each other openly and humbly.
- You yourselves are important. Continue to grow in faith in the gospel and in enthusiasm for the mission of the Community.

Let me conclude with a prayer from St. Vincent:

O my God, we give ourselves entirely to you. Give us the grace to live and die in a perfect observance of true poverty. I ask this of you for all here present. We give ourselves to you, my God, in order to honor and serve for our whole life, our lords the poor, and we ask this grace of you by your holy love.¹⁴

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¹⁴SV IX, 26.