

Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP)

International Confederation



1. THE LOGO

The logo appears at the top of this page. It represents the relationship of friendship and fraternal love which unites all the members under the merciful gaze of God.

2. THE MOTTO

The motto, which is part of the logo, is, as we can see, “*Serviens in spe*”: to serve in hope.

3. SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY

The history of the Society is really quite simple. It is about the dream of a group of laypeople who were friends, quite young in fact, who in the chaotic Paris of 1833 sought to consecrate themselves to the poorest. To this end they established a Christian community that helped and participated in the pain of those who suffer.

Six young men, of whom the eldest was just 24 years old and the youngest 19, met together to offer help, consolation, and Christian love to the most vulnerable persons, committing themselves, moreover, to do this personally.

To complete the group, the maturity of these young men inspired them to place themselves under the guidance of a person older than they, who then was around 40 years old and who offered them life experience, contacts, and the capacity for relating that they needed.

The origins of the foundation have been discussed at great length, both within and outside of the Institution. The Conferences have experienced a great expansion over the years (140 countries and more than 720,000 members in October of 2003), and many have tried to discover to which of the first seven members this merit belongs.

With regard to the foundation, we can only say, with total assurance, that which the seven founders themselves expressed then: Only God, who smiled on the friendship that existed among them all, provided the group the grace necessary to dream that particular dream, and the strength to make it become reality. And so, it is our good God who must be considered to be the author and the true founder of the Society.

4. THE HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH SURROUNDED THE FOUNDATION IN FRANCE IN THE 19th CENTURY. SOME CLARIFICATIONS

The history of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP) is tied closely to the social and political history of France and Europe of the 1800s.

In 1840 Frederic Ozanam, one of the seven founders of the SSVP wrote *"We are entering a period in which no one can foresee the ups and downs, but of which it is impossible to be mistaken about the advent."* At the dawn of the 19th century all of the thinkers, learned persons and philosophers, regardless of their political ideas or intellectual traditions, shared the conviction, more or less explicit, that the old world had come to an end. It was not the French Revolution of 1789 that marked the key moment of the historical shift, but rather the Industrial Revolution, whose effects were certainly noticed by 1810: the mechanization of industry, the proliferation of steam-driven machinery, the development and concentration of factories, the displacement of the populace, and the exploitation of the working class by inhumane rhythms of labor and with no thought given to the unification of this new economic world. The consequences of this situation were immediately felt: a steep drop in wages caused by competition among workers seeking jobs and thus an excessive increase in unemployment, synonymous with hunger. Faced with this situation, some of the intellectuals began to react in the first years of the Restoration. Yet they were isolated in a society which still functioned according to old patterns and which was unaware of what was about to occur. Along with Lammenais, Charles De Coux and Fr. Gerbet must also be mentioned: in 1830 they were among the first of the wave of Catholics who would be concerned for the fate of the working class. In *L'Avenir*, the daily newspaper of Lacordaire and Montalembert, they published various

articles that caught the attention of several young Catholics who would later found the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul. *L'Avenir* was suspended in November of 1831, and so De Coux and Gerbet continued their efforts through a series of conferences. Frederic Ozanam, along with some of the other founders of the Conferences, had become part of the group of Catholic students of the Sorbonne that had promoted this initiative, about which they were quite enthusiastic. The great principle that oriented this search and these reflections was the conviction that the economy should become social.

When the Revolution of 1830 exploded, one of the founders of the Conferences, who would later be given the title of Blessed, Frederic Ozanam, was only 17 years old. He had a burning faith and at the same time was open to the new ideas. Avoid class struggles, yes, absolutely. But because of his love and his faith, he would not admit using political means. In 1831, outraged by the *Journal de débats* for having called "*the working class barbarians and enemies,*" Ozanam denounced "*the contempt for human dignity, the exploitation, the comparison of the worker to a machine, the slavery, the waste in the face of human misery, the usury, the brutality of the economists and the industrialists.*" A small group of Catholic students, companions of his from the Sorbonne, had gathered around him, among them Jules Devaux, François Lallier, Auguste Le Taillandier and Paul Lamache, all future members of the first Conference along with Ozanam. With the idea of entering more incisively into the controversy with the students who were atheists, Lamache, Ozanam and Lallier decided to prepare their presentations as a group and so together they put the finishing touches on their arguments. Frederic Ozanam rose to the occasion in the controversy. Nevertheless, after presenting his principles and convictions, all sides maintained their own points of view. Le Taillandier was the first of the future founders to be on the right track as he tried to inspire his friends with these words: "*A meeting of charity where a group of Catholics gather together would have the double merit of preserving in them the spirit of faith and making their companions who are indifferent see the persistent and beneficial vitality of Christianity.*" The conclusion of all was clear "*Let us not speak so much about charity, above all else, let us put it in practice and help the poor*" added Ozanam.

Lamache, Ozanam, Devaux, Le Taillandier and Felix Clavé would be the founding nucleus of the SSVP. "*We have been brought together by a movement of Christian pity, and no one in particular can call himself the originator of the Society. When we have said that about the origins of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we have said everything*" expressed Lallier in 1856. Emmanuel Bailly, who presided over the literary conference in the *Place de l'Estrappe*, was the first person to whom the small group was drawn. He was a man of experience who

by then was over 40 years old and who had been concerned about the Catholic students for the past 15 years. One spring evening in 1833, the young men went to his home and Frederic Ozanam presented their project to him. After listening intently to him, Bailly expressed keen interest in the project and joined up with them as one more member among the rest. They went to see the pastor of the parish in the neighborhood, Fr. Olivier, who only invited them to direct the catechesis of the young children who were needy. This suggestion was not quite that for which they were looking. They were gifted with a greater generosity and a deep commitment. The oldest of the group, Bailly, had the great idea of sending them to visit a woman religious who would profoundly influence the whole group, and without whom the SSVF would not have been the same: Sr. Rosalie Rendu. In 1815, despite her young age, she was chosen to lead the community of the Daughters of Charity, and from then on, all the lower classes of Faubourg Saint Marceau, Saint Médard and Montparnasse would have to deal with her. She welcomed them with great warmth and instantly understood what they were seeking. She got to work immediately and gave them tickets for free bread which she distributed to help the poor. She showed them how to use the tickets and how to alleviate misery in the most concrete ways. These young men, along with Sr. Rosalie, began to act. Their work consisted in going personally to visit the poor in their own homes and distributing aid to them. After this meeting with Sr. Rosalie, all of the first members formed the small Conference of Saint Vincent, whose project was placed under the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul, whom Sr. Rosalie had presented as a model of boundless humility, charity and simplicity. On 23 April 1833, the first seven members met in the offices of the *Tribune Catholique*, Bailly's newspaper: thus was founded the first Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul. In August of the same year, Léon le Prévost, a learned man who was around 30 years of age, and who joined the Conference, wrote: "*In this moment there is a great movement of charity and of faith, but all this in a sphere veiled in humility*" [...] "*from these new catacombs shall come forth a light for the world.*" Le Prévost would shortly leave the Conferences in order to found the Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul. By the end of 1834, the number of brothers was around a hundred and some thought of a possible division. One of the founders, who with his reasoning strongly influenced the others, was Blessed Frederic Ozanam. As testimony that the decision was correct and was in accord with the designs of God for the humble Society that was coming to life, in 1850, only a quarter of a century after its foundation, the number of Conferences in France had grown to 285. There were 37 in the Netherlands, 28 in Belgium, 24 in Ireland, 24 also in Prussia, 22 in Canada, 17 in England, eight in Mexico, five in the United States, six in Italy (actually Italy did not

yet exist as such, neither as a state, nor from a political perspective, four Conferences were founded in the Kingdom of Savoy and Sardinia, more precisely in Genoa, Nice, Ovada and Chambéry, there were two others in the Papal State in Rome), two in Scotland, two in Turkey, one in Switzerland, one in Greece, one in Spain, one in Bavaria and one in Algeria.

It is important to note that the activity of the first members was not limited only to assistance: in December 1833 the administrators of the neighborhood of "*La Bienfaisance*" asked the members of the Conferences to accept the role of "Commissioners of Charity." This was the beginning of collaborative activity between the Society and the Public Administration that continues with great success in our own days. The following year the young Vincentian students met with young workers with the idea of helping them with their studies. A short time later, the Court entrusted them with the mission of reaching out to young people in trouble. In 1836 the Court asked the Vincentians to help prisoners who had been released from confinement. In the same year the Society began its assistance to the military. In order to defend the most vulnerable members of society against the rising prices, the Conferences created food pantries and began to administer some dining rooms. The first home built for a poor family was in 1842 in Lille. The institution of the "*Avocat de pauvres*," began in 1844. In 1850 in the factory of Baudin, in Jura the first conference for businesses was founded. Around 1850 banks for unemployment and credit were founded, as were recreational clubs for workers.

The development of the SSVP from its foundation to our times has necessitated the transformation of its juridical structure to that of an International Confederation. This transformation was approved by the International General Assembly that met in Rome in October 2003. On this occasion, a new Rule was presented which contains the International Statutes of the Society.

5. SPIRIT, CHARACTERISTICS AND OBJECTIVES

What can be better than availing ourselves of the words of one of the founders, perhaps the best known for his intellectual and public work, to summarize the four objectives of the SSVP? In the report presented to the Leadership Council dated 4 December 1836, Frederic Ozanam recalled the two objectives of the Society: "*The welfare of the members and the welfare of the poor [...]*." On 11 August 1838 Ozanam wrote to Lallier: "*The presidents of the Conferences are invited to remind frequently the assemblies, which they preside, that the objective of the Society is, above all, to inflame and to spread the spirit of Catholicism among the youth; and that, to this end, regular*

attendance at meetings, the union of intentions and of prayer, along with the visits to the poor are indispensable.”

The Rule of the Confederation confirmed this spirit, affirming in chapter 1.2 on **the Vincentian vocation**: “The vocation of the Society’s members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope.” It is important to cite the following paragraph, also from the Rule, 1.3 about **any form of personal help** that formulates the possible activities: “No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions.”

6. THE APOSTOLIC MANDATE TODAY

The spirit of the founders’ faith (who were in the vanguard for their time, ecclesiastically speaking) remains alive today among the Vincentians. The relationship to the Catholic Church is confirmed in chapter 5 of the Rule, corresponding to **the relations with the hierarchy of the Church**: “*Faithful to the clear intentions of Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions, the Society has a close relationship with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Respect of the members for the hierarchy provides the foundation for harmonious reciprocal cooperation.*” Recently this relationship has been strengthened and been given official character with the naming of one of the members from the General Council of the Society as person in charge of the relationship with the Holy See. The Society is equally committed to ecumenical cooperation and cooperation among different religions, following the Magisterium of the Catholic Church as foreseen in chapter 6.2 of the Rule.

The Rule also expresses the relationship of the SSVP with the Vincentian Family in chapter 4.3: “*Members throughout the world, together with other communities inspired by the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul and with those whom they help, form a single family.*”

7. MEMBERS AND COUNTRIES IN WHICH THE CONFEDERATION IS PRESENT

The present situation, as indicated in the first several paragraphs, is one of great expansion. We are present on all continents:

- Africa 40 countries: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo,

Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

- America 33 countries: Antigua, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, United States, Uruguay, Venezuela.
- Asia 27 countries: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China (Hong Kong), India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Syria, Thailand, Timor, Vietnam.
- Europe 30 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, England and Wales, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine.
- Oceania 10 countries: Australia, Caroline Islands, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu.

8. USEFUL ADDRESSES, CONTACT NUMBERS AND WEBPAGES

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The General President of the Confederation is, at present, José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha of Spain.

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