

VINCENTIANS WORKING WITH THEIR PARISHES

A guide to maintaining positive relationships with pastors, parish councils,
and human concerns committees.



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VINCENTIANS WORKING WITH THEIR PARISHES

"We are Part of the Life of the Church"

SITUATION

- The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a voluntary association of lay persons, historically part of the Catholic Church. While independent of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, it is, at the same time, part of the life of the Church. The basic working unit of the Society, the conference, has always been closely identified with the parish community. Fulfilling those responsibilities requires goodwill, respect, and filial devotion by conference members and their leaders.
- As part of the Roman Catholic Church, the Society exists with the permission of the universal Church. It exists in a diocese because of the bishop. It operates in a parish because of the pastor and parish council.
- Each conference must work to become a recognized presence within its parish. Servant leadership is what we claim to provide, and we are judged by our actions, not by our lofty goals.
- A good working relationship with the pastor (or parish director), parish staff, and parish council is essential. It is our responsibility to make this work.
- The conference and its members must enter into the life of the Church fully, generously and enthusiastically! This implies active involvement in parish life beyond the works of the conference. We are not a 'stand alone' organization within our parish community.

OBJECTIVE

- **Attain the highest level of cooperation with and respect for the pastor, staff, and parish council.**

The relationship you have with your pastor is critical for the success of the conference and its mission. The pastor is not obligated to support the conference financially. You earn his support as you help him minister to the needs of those within his parish and as you lighten his load and enable him to spend more time being shepherd, priest, counselor and confessor.

Similarly, most parishes employ professional people who oversee various ministries in the parish. It is equally important to work cooperatively with them for the good of the parish. Although most are not ordained, they report to the pastor and have expertise in the areas for which they are hired. An active, positive working relationship is to be sought, one that is mutually beneficial. Such a relationship will utilize the strengths each party brings to the parish and to the community it serves.

Since the Vatican Council, lay people have been invited to share in the responsibility for overseeing all activities within the parish. Parish Councils have been mandated by our Archdiocese at every parish to make decisions about the direction of the parish, its physical

and spiritual needs, etc. Communication with Parish Councils is essential for a conference to thrive in today's Church.

STRATEGIES

- **Understand the pastor's role and responsibilities.**

The pastor is responsible for both the spiritual and material welfare of all the people living within his parish boundaries. This is an enormous responsibility, obviously beyond what he can do by himself. He is, therefore, dependent on a wide variety of people and organizations to fulfill this responsibility as best he can. These include other clergy assigned to his parish; parish employees; the parish council; and people serving in various unpaid ministries.

Almost all pastors make some provision to help the poor. This may take on varying forms - a "*Paz de Cristo*," "*Good Samaritan*," or "*Helping Hands*" ministry, or simply having the housekeeper make sandwiches in the rectory kitchen for those who appear at the door. Some pastors give cash to those needing shelter (often out of their own pockets), write parish checks to repair vehicles, and make calls to well-off parishioners asking them to help families they find in desperate straits.

- **Understand how we fit into the parish**

The SVDP conference is a voluntary apostolate organized by lay people who want to serve God by serving His poor. In many parishes, the Society can trace its birth from when a wise pastor called together a group of parishioners to start a conference. The Society today simply does not start a conference without the pastor's permission.

When a conference is created, it is essentially asking that it be given a portion of the responsibility for taking care of those who are in need locally. It offers the pastor its help, "Trust us, we will take care of the poor." Because we are a "proven commodity" within our Church, pastors usually are glad to accept our offer. Since, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has helped the most fragile and vulnerable in a quietly efficacious way.

It is an act of great faith when a pastor gives a part of his ecclesiastical responsibility to a group of lay people who have organized themselves and elected their own officers. The conference should feel complimented and work hard to retain their pastor's confidence.

- **Be realistic about the level of understanding everyone has.**

In the Society, council leaders regularly have to contend with members who do not know the Society's mission, with conferences who fail to follow the Society's Rule, with clients who think we simply hand out government entitlements. This is because we have failed to communicate the *who, why, what, and how* of our ministry.

Why does it surprise us, then, when we find pastors who see us as through a glass darkly? And, upon finding them unacquainted, do we lead them to knowledge by our works, or do we try to educate with words? Frederic Ozanam himself found that action, not words, bring people to the truth.

We have an obligation to our pastors and their staffs to help them understand the Society and how it works in the parish environment to serve the parish and the poor, so that knowledge

replaces misunderstandings.

Pastors have a natural desire to know as much as they can about their parish, its people and organizations. You should have the same curiosity about parish goings-on. Relationships work both ways. Provide information in small amounts, slowly at first. Constantly show by doing, by following our mission, by living your faith in your parish community. A tour of one of the St. Vincent de Paul special works can be the final step in a low-key but planned effort to build a relationship between conference and pastor based on knowledge of each other.

- **Understand how our actions today can have long-term consequences.**

The pastor who trusts SVDP to serve the poor is then free to go on to another one of the many things he has to do. He will depend on the conference to do what it promised. Nothing is more destructive of the relationship between pastor and conference than the failure of a conference to do its job. This forces the pastor to reassume responsibility for the poor and to reestablish some parish system to do so. It increases his workload, his financial burden and his stress level. He loses confidence in more than the conference; he loses confidence in the Society.

A pastor who has been misled or left out of the loop will often be cynical about the Society and even unsupportive of the conference. He will carry this attitude with him as he is transferred to other parishes in the diocese. This will require us to work twice as hard to repair the damage his past experience(s) with the Society have left him. We must show ourselves both (a) capable at the moment, and (b) committed to being there over the long haul.

- **Understand the potential conflict inherent in our situation.**

The conference needs the parish for its meeting rooms, office and pantry space, as its primary source of new members and for much, if not all, of its income. It often provides the conference's spiritual advisor, and is the principal source of its sacramental spirituality and sense of faith community.

Yet the Society, as a Catholic association, is a lay movement, founded by lay people, led and managed by lay people. It is a small faith community, established by the Church, and officially recognized as an instrument of the lay apostolate, through the witness of charity.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the "*dynamic tension*" that flows from this duality. We have the formality of our independence from direct ecclesiastical jurisdiction coexisting with the reality of our near-total dependence on our pastor and parish community.

Some conferences may place too much emphasis on "independence," even flaunting its identity as an independent lay organization. They forget their role as part of the life of the Church, and that their members are all part of their parish community and must act as such.

The conference should work to become an intrinsic part of the parish community. In the best conferences, members also serve their parish in other ways, including being extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, lectors or greeters, members of parish councils and committees, religious education or being part of RCIA teams, etc.

- **Understand the role of the human concerns committee.**

The human concerns committee is one of four mandated committees of every parish council. *The Parish Committee Resource Book* of the Archdiocese lists its responsibilities as follows:

1. Discern the social needs in the parish area, especially the poor.
2. Develop responses to meet needs.
3. Involve others in actively helping people in need and to work for justice.
4. Support those in the parish who are already involved in service to the needy.
5. Develop a consciousness in the parish of social problems.
6. Work with other committees, parish staff, community groups, and neighboring parishes to address social problems.
7. Respond to needs through
 - (a) Direct Service
 - (b) Social Action
 - (c) Justice Education
 - (d) Empowerment
8. Determine budget priorities and makes recommendations to the parish council.

Human concerns committees are not responsible for do everything, but rather for involving others in actively accepting the responsibility of their Baptism. They coordinate the work of those dealing with service and justice in the parish, making certain that the various needs are addressed.

The conference, as well as many other parish ministries, are under the umbrella of human concerns. The human concerns committee is the channel of communication to the parish council. The Archdiocesan *Resource Book* suggests that all of the ministries under the human concerns umbrella be represented on the committee. Conferences should designate one of their members to serve on this committees to help create a unified effort within the parish and to avoid the duplication of effort.

STEPS TO TAKE

- **Communication is essential.**

The relationship between the conference and the pastor requires continuing communication between the two.

- The pastor needs to know what conference activities are being planned and what is being accomplished within his parish. Conversely, the conference needs to know what the parish is planning to do that might impact its ability to serve those in need.
- The best way to nourish a healthy relationship is to have the pastor, his appointed staff member, or human concerns delegate attend the conference meetings. If this is not possible, the president should meet regularly with the pastor at least quarterly, to keep him updated as to conference activities. It is best to have a regular set date so that the communication will be ongoing.
- The conference should seriously consider having a representative on the human concerns committee. This insures that duplication with the Society's ministry is avoided, and can keep both the committee and the parish council aware of the Society and its particular projects.

- **Invite your pastor, parish council members, or human concerns committee member to come to visit the one of the Society's special works.**

While the essence of the Society is found in the work of the conference in its own parish neighborhoods, the special works of the Society help people realize the span of our work and the

resources we are able to bring to play by parish conferences working together. This also helps the pastor and parishioners understand that their parish conference is part of a larger "family" that is supportive on many levels.

- **Face up to problems.**

We sometimes hear stories of "problems with the pastor." When investigated, these are usually the result of simple personality conflicts and only rarely serious authority disagreements.

- Personality conflicts are common everywhere in our world today. Perhaps the pastor has difficulty communicating with the conference President or seems to rub members the wrong way. Try having the conference secretary be the contact with the pastor, or minimize the number of Vincentians who try to meet with him.

On the other hand, *perhaps you are the problem*. Are you aggressive when you deal with your pastor, rather than supportive? Do you hate change, and are you critical of his new ideas or ignore his recommendations? Are you inflexible in your plans, wanting others to change their plans for your convenience?

The issues surrounding personality conflicts can be many and difficult to overcome. They require a concerted effort by all the individuals involved in order to work out a solution.

You are responsible for working out a personality conflict with your pastor, not vice versa. Remember that the Society exists and operates in the parish only with the permission of the pastor. Keep in mind that it is not the pastor or the SVDP conference that will be impacted by a failed relationship. **It is those in need who will suffer. It is the parish community that will fail in its witness to see Christ in the poor.**

- *Authority Disagreements.* Since we use church facilities and regularly collect money during church functions, SVDP can easily be perceived as not only part of the parish church, but under the immediate control of the church's pastor. However, the Society is governed by its own rules of operation. These have proven themselves over the years and must be followed. The conference makes the decisions it feels are best to assist people in need. Although empowered to make its own decisions, members also need to listen to the pastor and parish staff when they offer advice on the conference's helping activities.

- *Rivalry.* Conflicts sometimes happen between conferences and human concerns committees. Sometimes these are based upon the committee duplicating SVDP efforts, taking over work that the conference thought was its ministry. Without regular and structured communications with the committee, conferences can often easily be ignored. Some human concerns committees may have worked under the assumption that they are the successor to the Society, with the conference simply being a remnant of a pre-Vatican II era.

On the other hand, some conferences have resented sharing their ministry with others. Longing for "the old days" when the conference was quite unique in the parish and had the pastor's ear, some have become even less visible and relevant within the parish. Open and honest communications with the human concerns committee will make most "rivalries" disappear.

- **Maintain rules for independence**

There are serious conflicts which could arise over the issue of authority and, if not resolved, destroy the conference or be a major violation of the Rule of the Society. The conference leader is expected to give ground when trying to resolve a personality conflict with the pastor, parish council, or human concerns committee members, to honor as best s/he can respect the parish's wishes regarding helping individuals and families, *but is expected to hold her/his ground on serious matters involving these issues:*

1. SVDP funds should not be co-mingled with parish funds.
2. The conference must have its own bank account, separate from the parish's account(s).
3. Members of the ordained clergy (priests or deacons) cannot be officers of a conference, although they can be members and serve as spiritual advisor. Members of the clergy cannot be authorized signers on the SVDP checking account.
4. The conference does not need the approval of the pastor or of any other parish authority to assist people in need, That decision is made by the conference itself, usually after advisement by one of its home visit teams.
5. Parish staff should not verbally or otherwise commit the conference to assist certain people. The decision to help or not help is made solely by the conference itself or by one of its teams after a home visit. The conference, however, will likely give special attention to the recommendations of staff since it recognizes we are all common servants of the poor in the parish.

Finally, some conferences provide parish office staff with food bags, bus tickets, gasoline vouchers and referral forms for the homeless and desperate who walk in off the street when SVDP teams are not available. We work together to serve God's poor.

- **Use understanding, cooperation and prayer to solve all conflicts.**

Issues of conflict should be approached in a humble, prayerful manner. If a resolution cannot be reached between the parish and the conference, there may be a need to raise the issue to a higher level. Contact your district council president to begin the process of involving others to mediate the disagreement.

Resolution of any conflict lies in the truth, and the truth will prevail. Hopefully, the ongoing conflict will not cause irreparable damage to the relationship between the parish and the conference. Once the authority issue has been satisfactorily defined for both parties, it is assumed that the conference will continue its efforts to serve the poor and will be able to work cooperatively with the pastor.

- **Become part of the parish community.**

1. *Help the parish.* Do more than help the parish take care of the poor. Be there promptly when a meeting is called, or send another conference representative. Be reliable when you are asked to do something. Agree to speak to the RCIA, new parishioners, etc. when you receive a request.

2. *Get permission.* Ask before you pass out anything in or around the church. Present your

material at least two weeks or more so it can be reviewed.

3. *Don't make more work for the pastor or parish staff.* Remember, the pastor may give permission, but you do the work. Don't ask him to write letters or articles - you write them and submit them to him for approval. If the conference wants to do something, get the pastor's permission, but then the conference should do the work. Don't dump it on parish staff. This includes everything from stuffing fliers into the church bulletin to setting up tables for a food or clothing drive, from cleaning up after conference meetings and activities to being good stewards of parish facilities and utilities.

4. *Whenever possible, tie conference activities to the natural rhythms of parish liturgical life. Our SVDP ministry is an extension of Eucharist.* Be in contact with your liturgical associate to find out what is coming up and how the conference might be a part. Have your display table outside the church the week when the Gospel is about the widow's mite. Ask to be a part of the parish festival with a booth raising funds for whatever the festival's purpose is.

The purpose of each of these points is to encourage Vincentians not to work in isolation, but to be a part of your parish. ***Be visible!***

- **Actively seek out the pastor's suggestions and listen to his ideas.**

A good pastor is often also a good manager, a wise fund-raiser, a shrewd judge of people, and the most knowledgeable person about what is going on in the parish and neighborhood. Tap into that knowledge! People are supportive of things they helped create; get the pastor on board early, and he'll be an enthusiastic supporter of your activities! A good relationship with your pastor can bring untold benefits to the SVDP conference, including his permission:

- for several second collections a year (from the typical "fifth" Sunday to the very generous monthly);
- to distribute brochures and pamphlets which bring in new members and contributors;
- to permit Vincentians to address all the weekend Masses during the *"Invitation To Serve"* membership campaign;
- to place SVDP envelopes in the pews or at the back of the church (or in the parish's regular envelope package);
- to stage events and activities involving parish facilities;
- to give SVDP the donations from the poor boxes (or to let SVDP install poor boxes in the church);
- to provide space for a generous pantry, perhaps an office and phone; and even printing access.

SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE CONFERENCE

From earliest times, the Society has had the practice of seeking spiritual advice and direction from pastors as part of the spiritual life of its conferences. The inclusion of pastors was not considered an honorary assignment, but a concrete guide in the formation of attitudes which are compatible with the Gospels and the examples of Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam.

Over the years, due to the decline in the number of clergy and the increase in their duties, only a small percentage of conferences have the regular involvement of their pastors at the meetings. Recognizing this problem, the National Society began encouraging conferences to identify alternate spiritual advisors from the parish or from their own membership. Training programs and multiple sources of Vincentian spiritual reflection resources have been developed and are available in our area.

- It is important that the conference consult the pastor before selecting anyone to serve as spiritual advisor of the conference.
- Some pastors may wish to reserve the title of spiritual advisor to themselves, even if they cannot attend the conference meetings. In these cases, the conference should discuss with the pastor the addition of an assistant spiritual advisor to represent him and carry out some of his responsibilities as spiritual advisor.
- The role of a lay spiritual advisor includes leading prayer, selecting appropriate reflection material, facilitating the discussion of such material, and being the liaison to the pastor in spiritual matters.



ADDENDUM

The Lay Character of the Society

by Amin A. de Tarrazi, former President-General of the International Council of the Society

The Council General is often questioned about the lay character of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a matter which had been debated in their own time by Frederic Ozanam & his companions. Considering this aspect constituted one of the original fundamental features of their newly created institution, our pioneers stood firmly for the recognition of this particular status within the Church. This reflection may help to better understand the genuine significance of our organization. Living testimony of the Church's charity, it is in the Church's very heart that the Society draws its inspiration, its justification, and its aim.

Founded in Paris, in 1833, the St. Vincent de Paul Society is not a clerical organization subject to any religious hierarchy. Instead, it is an ecclesial spiritual fraternity, encouraged by the Church and officially recognized as a lay apostolate, through the witness of charity.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, as a Catholic association, is a lay movement, founded by lay people, led and managed by lay people. Since its origin, it has been recognized as such by papal authority. Successive popes have issued briefs confirming these original and specific characteristics.

*During a general audience held in the Vatican on Feb. 7, 1968, Paul VI made such a declaration, which was significant in the particular character which it attributed to the Society. He placed it somewhere between individual apostolate and organized apostolate: **apostolate through friendship**. (See below, Osservatore Romano, February 16, 1968.)*

Vatican II resolutely laid claim to this approach about the laity, clearly expressed through various Council and post-Council texts. At the international level, through the intermediary of its Council General, the Vincent de Paul Society has continually maintained close, faithful, confident, respectful, and regular relations with the Vatican: Secretariat of State, Pontifical Councils (notably with Cor Unum, Justicia et Pax, Pro Laicis, and various other dicasteries in Rome).

The same applies, in various countries, at national and diocesan levels. Reciprocal ties of friendship and esteem unite our leaders with Bishops' conferences, of which their pastoral recommendations receive our full support.

In the Code of Canon Law, there is no arrangement relative to the "Private Associations of the Faithful" (Book H Section V Chapters 1-4), for their leaders to be appointed by Bishops' conferences. In Council texts concerning the laity, it is the spirit, rather than the letter, which recognizes lay responsibilities & initiatives in a truly "adult" Church.

But, over and above compulsory arrangements of a legal nature, the essential factors remain the kinds of motivation which inspire us. Indeed, after more than 160 years of existence, our Society is most intimately attached to the Church, not so much by conventions, protocols, or regulations, as by love, fidelity, and affection.

We live, thanks be to God, in a Church which has been renewed, rejuvenated, and freed from conventionalism, and which is open to dialogue. At the heart of the Church, the hierarchy,

inspired by the Council, wishes to promote a laity full of life, active and dynamic, with a sense of responsibility and fully aware of its ecclesial mission.

The strongest bond uniting the clergy and lay people, within the fraternal ecclesial community is far more charity and mutual confidence than law and legal arrangements.



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