



INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF
THE SOCIETY OF SAINT-VINCENT DE PAUL
GENERAL COUNCIL

THE «CONFERENCE»

"Conference" is the name historically given to the groups of the Society of Saint-Vincent de Paul. The **770.000 Society members** are divided into about **44.600 Conferences**, forming 148 branches on the five continents. These figures express the accomplishment of Frederic Ozanam's vow who, at the age of twenty, dreamt of "*embracing the whole world in a network of charity*".

HISTORY

The first Conference was founded on the **23rd April 1833**, in **Paris**, by Frédéric Ozanam and six of his companions.

When, 20 years later, he died, the Conferences had already spread in 17 countries of Europe, Africa, America and Asia.

MEMBERSHIP

The Conferences can include adults or young men and women, possibly both categories. "Mini-Conferences" made of 8 to 12 year-old children have been started in many countries in order to train them, since their early age, in the practice of charity.

The Conferences can be for men, for women or can be mixed. Some of them include couples for whom charity is part of their married vocation.

The Conferences number an average of 10 to 20 members, although there is no statutory figure. There should normally be at least three members.

Whatever their age, social condition, position, **all** members are equal and **coresponsible** for the running and activity of the Conference. "*The Society, in each of its Conferences .. makes no distinction regarding gender, wealth, occupation, social status or ethnic origin*" (Rule¹ 3.2)

¹ Rule of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Rome, October 2003

LOCATION

The geographical location of the Conferences is most varied. They exist in **urban** as well as **rural** environments. If the **parish** remains their natural or privileged location, they also spring up in new townships on the outskirts of developing cities, in schools, universities, firms, youth institutions, cultural clubs, recreation centers, scout groups and even, when authorized, in army land, sea and air units or in military medical schools.

COORDINATION

The Conferences are not isolated in the carrying out of their activities. *“The members meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action. Spiritual bonds and friendship between members are essential, as is the common mission to help the poor and marginalized. The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends” (Rule 3.3).*

When their number reaches a certain level, they are grouped together in local, diocesan and, ultimately, national Councils.

The 147 national branches (Superior, National Councils or assimilated) are coordinated in a cohesive ensemble by the **Council General of the International Confederation**, which is a sign of the **unity and diversity of the Society**.

FOUNDATION

The Conferences can spring up in different ways:

- On the initiative of a bishop, a priest, a member of a religious order, a nun. Certain orders, such as the Congregation of the Mission, the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity, the Society of Jesus, the Missionary Congregations (White Fathers, Holy Spirit Fathers, Foreign Mission Fathers of Paris) have much encouraged the promotion of the Conferences.

- On the initiative of a "Vincentian", member of the Society, concerned about the propagation of the dual message of Saint Vincent de Paul and of Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

- Through the spontaneous association of Christians brought closer together because of their spiritual affinities and their desire to share an ideal of love and service of the most destitute.

AGGREGATION

The adherence of the Conference to the great universal fraternity of the Society of Saint-Vincent de Paul at world level is expressed by the "aggregation" decided by the Permanent Section of the Council General in Paris, cradle, historical centre and international see of the Organization.

The aggregation can be granted to a Conference after one year's normal functioning. The request is forwarded on a form provided by the Council General. The questions to be answered are related to :

- faithfulness to the spirit of the Society,
- knowledge and observance of the Rule,
- frequency of meetings,
- nature of activities,
- spiritual life,
- relations with the clergy,
- links with the various echelons of the Society's structure,

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- the Conference name must be placed under the patronage of a Saint whom it chooses in accordance with its own criteria. The name can actually be the same as that of the parish, or any other one. It has been agreed to use names other than those of Vincent de Paul or Frédéric Ozanam which would be chosen too often.

The applications are forwarded to the Council General :

- directly when there is no structure at local, diocesan or national level,
- through such a structure when it exists.

When the aggregation has been decided, it is delivered in the form of a document called "Letter of Aggregation" (bearing the signatures of the International President General, of the Secretary General and of the National President) which is dispatched to the Conference.

FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

In order to ensure a sound spiritual formation of the members of the Conference, a deep and supportive friendship amongst them and an efficient service of the persons or families in need, it is important that the Conference meets regularly.

The Rule strongly recommends a weekly meeting but, in view of the complexities of modern life and multiplicity of family, professional or civic duties of the group's members it is accepted that fortnightly meetings (twice a month) are sufficient in some instances.

The day, hour, location and frequency of the meetings are the Conference's responsibility in agreement with the Spiritual Adviser.

FUNCTIONING

Spiritual formation, deep friendship and unity, continued service of the needy are all essential.

To bear fruit meetings of the Conference must be lively, full of ardour, of joy and friendship. They must, according to the example set by Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, try to strike a harmonious balance between **prayer** and **action**: spiritual development, social reflection and active commitment.

Members of the team closely consult with their Spiritual Adviser to ensure a spiritual development founded on the **Eucharist**, a thorough study of the **Holy Scriptures** and of the **teachings of the Church** (particularly the Conciliar texts, the great Encyclicals or the Pontifical Exhortations), a deep understanding of the spirituality of **Saint Vincent de Paul** and of **Blessed Frédéric Ozanam**, which is summarised in the Rule (2.4, 2.5, 2.5.1).

Closely united in the bonds of **friendship**, members of the Conference will have at heart to share this wealth with those who are so much deprived of it. They will be wholly present to their sorrows, their hardships and sufferings as well as to their joys, aspirations and hopes.

If a satisfactory functioning of the Conference is, basically, dependant on the spirit of its participants, it is also determined by the quality of its administrative organisation. Far from being self-centred it intends to be an instrument of assistance to the most destitute.

The structure of the **Board** is meant to serve this purpose by dividing responsibilities:

- The **President** holds global responsibility for the life and activities of the Conference in which he assumes the motivation and the harmony (see the Rule, 3.10, 3.11) .
- The **Vice-President** assists the President in the fulfilment of his task and replaces him should he be prevented from carrying out his duties.
- The **Secretary** writes the meeting reports, prepares the administrative documents and keeps the archives necessary to the continuity and efficiency of the work.
- The **Treasurer**, accountant for the funds of the Conference, is in charge of the proper holding of its financial statements and of the rigorous management of the funds collected for the prior benefit of the poor.

Within this board, the **Spiritual Adviser** is invited to contribute his spiritual and human gifts in order to help the Conference remain faithful to an **authentic Charity**, the ultimate goal of the Vincentian vocation.

The Spiritual Adviser is often the parish priest or a member of the parish clergy, sometimes a priest belonging to a religious order. Should there be no priest available, spiritual guidance can be provided by a deacon, a nun or a competent member of the Conference who has received the appropriate training.

ACTIVITIES

The Rule says, *“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.”* (art. 1.3)

The main criteria is that activities must be related to the local needs perceived by the members and priorities set in the context of **parish, diocesan and national pastoral initiatives** inspired by the **hierarchy** and the **clergy**.

Actually, the activities cover spiritual matters, children, elderly persons, the sick, the physically or mentally handicapped persons, prisoners, school and professional training, rural promotion, community development (see Rule 7.9), assistance to victims of natural disasters and wars, in fact solidarity in every sector of life and society.

THE SPIRIT

Spirit is the very substance of it all: the foundation, development, perennial character, moral radiance and the proper deeds of the Conference are determined by its spirit : the primacy of **prayer**, understanding and feeling of the **Vincentian vocation**, a sense of **sharing**, an attitude of self-denial, the person-to-person **service** of the poor, the **respect for human dignity, availability, loyalty, humility**.

The Rule should be prayerfully reflected on by every member, as it beautifully expresses the spirit of the Society.

Following the example of Saint Vincent de Paul, the will to do **"ever more"**.

Following the example of Blessed Frederic Ozanam, to resolutely turn our eyes and brace ourselves toward the future, because: ***"Charity must never look behind but always ahead as the number of its past blessings can only be small and that of the present and future miseries it will be called upon to alleviate, innumerable"***.

The "*Populorum progressio*", "*Sollicitudo rei socialis*" and "Centesimus Annus" Encyclicals as well as the "*Christifideles laici*" Exhortation shed their light on the present reflection of the Conferences, in the aftermath of the **Vatican II Council**.