



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
NSW  
*good works*



# **SPIRITUAL ADVISER HANDBOOK**

JUNE 2019

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## Part 1 | The Spiritual Adviser in the Society

### “I’ve been appointed as the Conference Spiritual Adviser ...NOW WHAT?”

The Spiritual Adviser within the St Vincent de Paul Society holds a key role in helping Vincentians to achieve their primary purpose within the Society of growth in holiness. From the beginning, when Emmanuel Bailly arranged for the first members of the “Conference of Charity” to go to Sr Rosalie Rendu, the Spiritual Adviser has assumed responsibility for the spiritual growth and development of each member as well as the group as a whole.



Emmanuel Bailly, who was the first Conference President, is also considered to have been the first Spiritual Adviser. Knowing the depth of Sr Rosalie’s devotion to the poor, he guided the young Vincentians towards her example and mentorship. She formed them in the spirit of St Vincent, teaching them how to serve with respect and compassion, seeing in each person the face of Christ.

By entrusting to Sr Rosalie the spiritual formation (through service) of the original members, Bailly shows us that the Spiritual Adviser serves best as a *facilitator*, not an *instructor*.

The Spiritual Adviser is an animator, acting as a guide along the Vincentian pathway, encouraging members towards an ever-deepening relationship with our Lord, promoting the mission of the Society and growth in the Vincentian charism. The Spiritual Adviser helps Vincentians strive to see the face of Jesus in those whom they serve.

Through their own example, they help members come to understand the role of spirituality in Vincentian life, and how to form themselves in that same fashion. The Spiritual Adviser considers the spiritual needs of each member, as well as the group as a whole.

The primary qualification is a dedication to the Vincentian charism, with a commitment to encourage others to grow in their Vincentian spirituality.

Finally, the Spiritual Adviser is an inspirational force within the group, participating in discussions, as well as in person to person service to those in need. Leading by example, they help to create and foster an environment of prayer, understanding, respectful listening and discernment. When appropriate, they might challenge members and the group to new works and approaches, embracing those opportunities God places before us to grow in holiness through trust and charity in new and courageous ways.

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*The Spiritual Adviser helps Vincentians strive to see the face of Jesus in the poor and needy whom they serve. This is the essence of Vincentian spirituality.*

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## Position description for Spiritual Adviser

**Position Title:** Conference Spiritual Adviser

**Appointment:** The Spiritual Adviser is appointed by the Conference President in consultation with the Conference members. The Spiritual Adviser's term ceases with the election of a new President.

### The spirit of poverty and encouragement

Members of the Society are united in the same spirit of poverty and of sharing. They encourage one another to live a profound spiritual life and to share in the spirit of prayer. For this purpose, the role of the Spiritual Adviser is very important.

*The Rule, 2012 Edition, Part 1, 3.13.*

### Meetings of the Vincentian Members

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.

*The Rule, 2012 Edition, Part 1: 3.3.*

## Primary Objectives

The Spiritual Adviser holds a key role in helping Vincentians to achieve their primary purpose within the Society: growth in holiness, supporting them in their ongoing formation in the Christian Gospel, service to the poor, advocacy for those who are disadvantaged, and Vincentian spirituality. Their role is to facilitate the Conference or Council to be (as stated in The Rule above) 'genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action' and 'meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them.'

## Key qualities and skills of a Spiritual Adviser

A Spiritual Adviser:

- Is an active Catholic and a person of prayer who is grounded in Gospel values and knowledge of or prepared to develop a good understanding of Vincentian Spirituality.
- Has a genuine desire to continually deepen their own spiritual and faith life and encourage others to do so.
- Is willing to grow in what it means '*to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love.*' (The Rule, Part 1, 1.2).
- Is able to share good counsel.
- Has experience in building and nurturing relationships.
- Is able to listen with sensitivity and openness to others.
- Is willing to grow in their capacity to lead prayer and facilitate sharing.
- Is committed to nurture the Conference to be '*a community of faith and love*' as stated in the Rule excerpt above.
- Values the spiritual, formative and life experiences of all those in the Society and encourages the gifts and talents of all members.

## Spiritual Adviser Handbook: June 2019

- Is committed to and familiar with the Rule, mission and ministry of the Society.
- Is prepared to work with the Conference President to nurture the three essential elements of Conference life: Spirituality, Service and Community within their Conference (The Rule, page 58).
- Is able to deal with tension and ambiguity.
- Is aware of their personal strengths and limitations of their role.

The Role includes:

1. Attending meetings and encouraging regular attendance of all members.
2. Using the Society's and other resources to provide scriptural and other spiritual readings for the Conference meetings or facilitate others to share this responsibility.
3. Creating opportunities for individual and group reflection and prayer.
4. Encouraging members to participate in reflection days and retreats and Regional, Central Council and state-wide gatherings for members' spiritual enrichment (e.g. festival events).
5. Liaising with the Conference President to offer Eucharistic and other liturgical celebrations.
6. Confidentially offering support and advice to the President as they seek to develop the Conference in Vincentian service and being a community of faith and action engaged in spiritual growth.
7. Animating and advising, providing inspiration, challenge, advice and support to the Conference or individual members of the Society in their ministry.
8. Promoting a sense of unity and belonging among Confreres in the Vincentian family.
9. Collaborating with other Spiritual Advisers to grow in understanding of their role and new ways to support Vincentian formation.
10. Taking appropriate action based on their own personal limitations and strengths of their role as Spiritual Adviser.

### Training

The Spiritual Adviser will have completed *Society Orientation* or *Welcome Friend* (or its equivalent). It is highly recommended that they will also have completed a training program on providing assistance such as *Vincentian Visitation Guidelines* or *Communication Skills With The People We Assist*.

The Spiritual Adviser is encouraged to read and refer to the Spiritual Adviser Handbook and related resources and programs.

 [See Workbook Reflection 1](#)

## Part 2 | Foundation for Spiritual Advisers

### The Beginnings of the of St Vincent de Paul Society

Frédéric Ozanam left his home in Lyon, France, in the autumn of 1831, for Paris. He registered in the School of Law at the Sorbonne.

Frédéric collaborated with Emmanuel Bailly, editor of the *Tribune Catholique*, in reviving a student organisation which had been suspended during the revolutionary activity of July 1830. They called their new association "The Conference of History." The group met on Saturdays to discuss various topics, primarily philosophy and history.

In the course of these meetings, Frédéric and his friends often found themselves in debate with another group of students. At one of their meetings, a member of this group challenged Frédéric and the practising Catholics. He admitted that the Catholic Church had done much good work in the past, but "what do you do now?"

Frédéric called for a meeting of five of his friends; they agreed to meet at Bailly's office.

The date was April 23, 1833, Frédéric's twentieth birthday. Frédéric had taken the challenge very seriously, and admitting to himself that it was valid, declared that "we will go to the poor."

The group agreed to found a "Conference of Charity." Emmanuel Bailly, a married layman, was chosen by the six students as their first President. In a short time, they changed their name to The Society of St Vincent de Paul in honor of their patron, the 17<sup>th</sup> century "Apostle of the Poor."

From the beginning, spirituality was central to the Vincentian vocation. It is manifested through the service to the poor and vulnerable - and, through them, to God. As Vincentians, this service to God is described as a journey toward holiness.



#### The Journey Together Towards Holiness

Vincentians are called to journey together towards holiness, because true holiness is perfect union with Christ and the perfection of love which is central to their vocation and the source of its fruitfulness. They aspire to burn with the love of God as revealed by Christ and to deepen their own faith and fidelity.

Vincentians are aware of their own brokenness and need for God's grace. They seek His glory, not their own. Their ideal is to help relieve suffering for love alone, without thinking of any reward or advantage for themselves.

They draw nearer to Christ, serving Him in the poor and one another. They grow more perfect in love by expressing compassionate and tender love to the poor and to one another...Their journey towards holiness will be all the more fruitful if the members' personal lives are characterized by prayer, meditation on the Holy Scriptures and other inspirational texts, devotion to the Eucharist and to the Virgin Mary... and to the teachings of the Church.

*The Rule, Part 1, Section 2.2.*

## The Rule of the Society

The Rule of the Society grounds us in the spirituality of our vocation. The Rule embodies the charism of St Vincent as its guide in charity. Monsieur Bailly, who co-wrote the first Rule in 1835, emphasized the source of our Rule in a letter to the whole Society in 1842:

*"They are not the word of man, or at least they are the word of a man who was made a Saint, a man whose sayings and whole life God has crowned with heavenly glory. You are aware, of course, that those thoughts are taken from the most intimate writings of St Vincent de Paul, from the Rules which he drew up after many years' experience for the holy societies of which he was the father."*

Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ.

*The Rule, Part 1, 1.8.*

## Our Vincentian Founders



### St Vincent de Paul

He was known as the "Apostle of Charity" and "Father of the Poor." He is the patron saint of charitable institutions and founder the Congregation of the Mission, Confraternities of Charity, and Daughters of Charity with Louise de Marillac.

St Vincent is our inspiration and model. His Rule and spiritual charism with a preference for the poor and vulnerable, in the model of Jesus Christ, is the foundation of who and what we are as Vincentians. He inspired a young man 200 years later - Frédéric Ozanam.

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*"After the love of God, your principal concern must be to serve the poor with great gentleness and cordiality, sympathizing with them in their ailments and listening to their little complaints... for they look on you as people sent by God to help them. You are therefore intended to represent the goodness of God in the eyes of the poor."*

*St Vincent de Paul, 1657*

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### St Louise de Marillac

St Louise de Marillac is the patroness of Christian social workers. She was a contemporary of St Vincent and was inspired by Vincent's spiritual leadership. She was Vincent's collaborator in founding the Daughters of Charity, after organising hospitals, schools, orphanages, and homes for the elderly.

Her attitude toward the sick and poor remains the model for all members of the Vincentian Family today. It is from her spiritual lineage that 200 years later Sr Rosalie Rendu would guide young college students in Paris in their efforts to serve the poor.

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*“As for your conduct toward the poor, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart, inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately; procuring necessary help for them without being too bothersome or too eager.”*

St Louise de Marillac, 1647

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### Blessed Frédéric Ozanam

Frédéric was the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. He was a writer and social justice thinker as well as a devout Catholic. When challenged about his beliefs and how well they were lived out, he joined with other college students to create the Society as a response to the needs of the poor and

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*“Knowledge of the poor and needy is not gained by poring over books or in discussions with politicians, but by visiting the slums where they live, sitting by the bedside of the dying, feeling the cold they feel and learning from their lips the causes of their woes.”*

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, 1845

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vulnerable, and so that Catholics could grow in spirit as visible symbols of the Church.

A college professor, historian, and lawyer, he continued to dedicate himself to personally serving the poor throughout his life, and his vision of a “worldwide network of charity” inspired the formation of many new Conferences. He spoke often and widely on the Society.



### Blessed Rosalie Rendu

Rosalie Rendu was a Daughter of Charity and is considered a mentor of Frédéric and his companions. She taught the first members the art of helping the poor and the sick and has been an example of loving and prayerful service for Vincentians through the centuries.



She served the poor of Paris for 54 years and was known throughout the city for her work. In all kinds of weather, Sr Rosalie walked the streets of the Mouffetard, her rosary in her hand and heavy basket of bread on her arm, visiting the homes of those in need.

Sr Rosalie’s example reminds us of the importance of the home visit as the means towards spiritual growth.

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*“Because you see Christ in his poor, I know you will approach each one you visit with humility as His servant. Always remember, that if we had been through the hardships they have had to meet—if our childhood had been one of constant want—perhaps, we too, would have given away to envy and hatred, as I must admit have many of the poor in this quarter. But be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor. They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you bring them.”*

Blessed Rosalie Rendu, 1833

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## Our Vincentian Organisation

### The First Conference

The Conference of History was a weekly gathering of college students originally organised by Emmanuel Bailly to discuss social issues of the time. The date was April 23, 1833, Frédéric's twentieth birthday, and that was the beginning of the first "Conference of Charity". A short time later, they changed their name to The Society of St Vincent de Paul in honor of their patron.

Emmanuel Bailly was chosen as the first President and he also served as a guide and mentor. He enlisted Blessed Rosalie Rendu to provide training and spiritual guidance. This gathering set the foundation for an entire organisation of charity and spiritual growth.

### Origins

The Holy Spirit was undoubtedly present in all of them at the founding of the Society fostering the charism of each one. Among them, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam was a radiant source of inspiration.

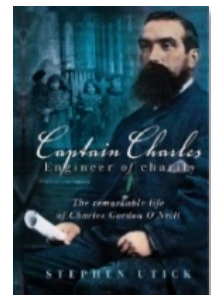
*The Rule, Part I, Section 1.1.*

### Growth of the Society

St Vincent de Paul's organisational influence can be clearly seen within the Society as it developed. By 1835, at least 200 Vincentians were serving the poor. How could they stay one Society, and keep the spirit that they all loved going? They decided to capture the organisation, structure, and most especially charism and principles in a Rule. The Rule of the St Vincent de Paul Society captures the Vincentian way, which Sr. Rosalie taught the young students, and the passion which the students had for their mission as a group of laymen. It also expresses the practical nuts and bolts for keeping the original spirit alive across a large group.

As we've seen, St Vincent de Paul was a great organiser, and believed a reasonable level of organisation was critical to helping the poor. St Vincent (SV XIII, p423)

From its beginning in 1833, the Society quickly grew, expanding throughout Europe from Paris to Italy, England, Belgium, Scotland and Ireland all within twelve years. In 1854 the Society was established in Melbourne by Father Gerald Ward and in New South Wales by Charles Gordon O'Neill 1881. (See more detail on Ward and O'Neill at <https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/About/History/>). Today the Society is a worldwide organisation with over 850,000 members in more than 150 countries.



We grow in holiness by serving Christ in the poor. In the Conference we grow in friendship, service and spirituality, activating our faith in person to person service. All the Councils of the Society exist to support the Conference, and in turn, to serve those we assist.

 [See Workbook Reflection 2](#)

## Vincentian Spirituality

The Letter from Pope John Paul II on February 14, 2001 to Mr Jose Ramon Diaz-Torremocha, then President General of the St Vincent de Paul Society states:

“The St Vincent de Paul Society represents an outstanding form of Charity that is carried out on all the continents; the service of the poor which, as St Vincent loved to recall is a way of serving Christ. Through its daily commitment, the Society of St Vincent de Paul is a constant reminder to the Church of its vocation to show Christ’s preferential love for its poor. This vocation fills the Church’s life, prayer and action, inviting her to make her own the tender, compassionate look of Christ, who reminds every person of the value of their dignity and their unique place in God’s heart.

The spiritual life and the apostolic works, the charism of Frederic Ozanam, (your precursor and example, whom I had the joy to beatify in Paris in 1997) were deeply marked by this contemplation of Christ’s face in the poor. Such a spiritual attitude is essential for your apostolic works and for the enthusiasm of your Conferences. I therefore encourage you in your personal contact with the poor always to be witnesses to charity as well as justice, contributing to the individual’s overall development, after the example of your founder, Blessed Frederic.”

### The Vincentian Charism

The word “charism” is used to describe a particular spiritual orientation, and any special characteristics of its mission or values. The Vincentian charism refers to the teachings of St Vincent de Paul. The Vincentian way of spirituality is a certain way of being. As Vincentians we are called to:

- **Study**, understand and follow the example of the lives of our founders and patrons
- **Show the love of God** in action
- Through **Person to Person** service to the poor, to see the presence of God in each person and their challenges
- **Be attentive to the inspiration of the Spirit**; trusting that God will provide the means for what is asked of us
- **Live by the fundamental principles** of Vincentian Spirituality, growing in holiness through the five Vincentian Virtues.

In *The Way of St Vincent de Paul* (p13), Fr Robert Maloney describes a spirituality as: ‘A spirituality is an energizing vision, a driving force. It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God. It is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a person to transcend himself or herself. For the



Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual's energies in the service of the kingdom.'

Vincentian spirituality is a way of relating to God and to the world that is modelled on the vision of St Vincent and has been adapted by many who have come after him including Blessed Frederic and his companions. St Vincent had a particular vision of Jesus Christ as evangelizer of the poor, which can be summed up in the lines from Luke's gospel:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'  
(Lk 4:18-19)



This vision of Jesus is one who announces good news to all but particularly to people who are poor, lowly or outcast.

Faith is the foundation of Vincentian spirituality. Charity (a translation of the Greek word *agapē*, also meaning "love") is the motivation which leads us to others. Hope allows us to face up to suffering – both our own and that of others, but recognising that suffering is temporary and not the final word.

### The Vincentian Virtues

Vincentians seek to emulate St Vincent in the five virtues essential for promoting love and respect for the poor:

- Simplicity** being authentic and honest.
- Humility** being realistic about ourselves and others.
- Gentleness** being approachable.
- Selflessness** being self-disciplined in order to put the needs of others before our own.
- Zeal** involves working hard for those in need and having passion for our Vincentian vocation.



Focused on developing these virtues – these habits or ways of life with a firm disposition to do good – Vincentians work as servants of God caring for the poor and those in need.

 [See Workbook Reflection 3](#)

### The Essential Elements

The Essential Elements of the Society: spirituality, community/friendship and service, were established by Emmanuel Bailly together with the founding members.



**Spirituality:** Vincentians are called to ‘journey together towards holiness’. This is nourished by prayer and reflection on Vincentian experiences. (The Rule p. 18)

**Community:** ‘Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, prayer and action... The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide community of Vincentian friends.’ (The Rule, 3.3)

**Service:** Reaching out with the hand of friendship to the vulnerable and those in need and working to address unjust structures.

### Vision of the Society

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering “a hand up” to people in need. We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.

### Mission Statement

A Mission Statement answers the who and what of an organisation. It states in precise and concise language the composition and chief purposes of a group. The Society’s mission statement is simple and clear:

*“The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.”*



### Our Aspiration

An Australia transformed by compassion and built on justice.

## Key Values of the Society

The Society adheres to a group of values which central to its creed and ministry.

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Commitment</b> | Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values.  |
| <b>Compassion</b> | Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement.                                    |
| <b>Respect</b>    | Service to all regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinions. |
| <b>Integrity</b>  | Promoting, maintaining and adhering to our mission, vision and values.                                 |
| <b>Empathy</b>    | Establishing relationships based on respect, trust, friendship and perception.                         |
| <b>Advocacy</b>   | Working to transform the causes of poverty and challenging the causes of human injustice               |
| <b>Courage</b>    | Encouraging spiritual growth, welcoming innovation and giving hope for the future.                     |

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*Allow yourself to be led by the Lord. He will direct all things through you.*

**St Vincent de Paul**

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## Vincentian Spirituality – On-Going Formation

Our vocation as Vincentians calls us to continue to grow in our understanding of our call. We are nourished by the sharing of our faith that occurs in our conferences, as we learn from each other. As we meet the people we serve and find Christ in our encounters we are also being continually formed in our faith and vocation.

On-going formation includes taking up opportunities to deepen our understanding of the Vincentian charism through such things as reflection days, talks and festival events. Further detail about Vincentian formation is in Part 4.

### Formation of members

It is essential that the Society continually promote the formation and training of its members and officers, in order to deepen their knowledge of the Society and their spirituality, improve the sensitivity, quality and efficiency of their service to the poor...

*The Rule, Part 1, 3.12.*

## References

[https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms\\_docs/186961\\_Frederic\\_Ozanam\\_A\\_Life\\_in\\_Outline.pdf](https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/186961_Frederic_Ozanam_A_Life_in_Outline.pdf)

<https://www.slideshare.net/mw28/frederic-ozanam-and-collaboration>

## Part 3 | Spiritual Adviser and Conference Life

### Overview

The Spiritual Adviser, working in concert with the leadership within the Conference enables the mission of St Vincent de Paul to be observable and vibrant in our meetings as described by the passage from the Rule below.

The Spiritual Adviser is called not to be a teacher, but a “spiritual animator”; to be dedicated to learning about Vincentian Spirituality; not to have all the answers, but to seek answers together with other members; not to form members, but to encourage each member to pursue personal formation on our shared Vincentian pathway. This is also consistent with the renewal of *the priesthood of all believers*, highlighted at the Second Vatican Council.

There is a common misconception that the Spiritual Reflection is intended to be “taught,” as a homily, or merely shared by reading aloud from a personal trove of Catholic or Vincentian literature. As a result, people may ask, “Am I qualified to be a Spiritual Adviser? Am I *holy* or *knowledgeable* enough?”

As noted in the Spiritual Adviser’s position description (page 4) ‘*Their role is to facilitate the Conference or Council to be (as stated in The Rule) ‘genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action’ and ‘meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them.*

All Vincentians are encouraged to remain open to the calling of being a Spiritual Adviser; to have a special dedication to your own personal Vincentian formation, and to share it with others in your Conference.

Spiritual advisers may also be recruited from your parish or community. There are many members of our churches, schools and Catholic agencies with background and training or interest in theology, ministry, pastoral care and spirituality who could happily respond to an invitation from Conference to join them as their Spiritual Adviser.

#### Meetings of the Vincentian Members

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 the marginalized. The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide Community of Vincentian friends.

*Rule, Part 1, 3.3.*

 **See Workbook Reflection 4**

## The Essential Elements of the Conference Meeting

The Spiritual Adviser helps foster and encourage the essential elements of spirituality, community/friendship, and service throughout each Conference meeting. One of the tensions Spiritual Advisers often report is the 'business' of the meetings seem to crowd out spirituality and reflecting on our service.

It is important not to be discouraged by this!

In fact, this "business focus" is a very natural and common tendency; one that was observed by Blessed Frédéric as

early as 1835, just two years after the first Conference was formed! In a letter to his friend Lèonce Curnier, Frédéric observed that: *"We fulfill our duties from habit; we carry out our good works by routine, but no more the enthusiasm, the ebullient proselytizing, the rays of charity which at the beginning came sometimes to illuminate and warm our souls. We are very numerous but we lose in intensity what we gain in expansion. There are ordinarily 50 to 60 of us at a meeting, but we do not know one another very well. The session is nearly always concerned with business; it seems long."*



Frédéric went on to propose reforms to keep the Society's focus on what was (and is) its primary purpose: the spiritual formation of our members. Indeed, the first Rule of the Society was published that year, clearly establishing the centrality of spiritual formation.



## Prayers at our Meeting

Many Conferences offer the Sign of the Cross only twice: at the beginning of the Opening Prayer and at the end of the Closing Prayer, demonstrating that the entire meeting is offered as a prayer. Take time periodically to remind members of this custom, especially new members, so that it does not simply become a rote exercise.

Several years ago, Sr Gwen Tamlyn, Spiritual Adviser to State Council, shared with the Spirituality committee:

*"Our meeting, the same as your Conference meetings, is a prayer from the beginning to the end. It should hold all the elements of prayer – worship, petition, devotion, confidence, listening and above all love. That is why we make the sign of the cross only at the beginning and the end. The whole meeting is our Vincentian prayer."*

Up until then I had segmented our Conference meetings to prayers, spiritual reflection, reporting on families visited and the allocation of visits, etc, finishing with prayer. Sr Gwen's words completely changed the way I then looked at our meetings.

**Margaret Smith**, Conference President, Springwood.

### From New Rule and Statutes

“Within the Rule there are five elements above all others on which we should focus: the need for prayer, both individual and collective; our personal commitment through action; the unity in which we must share as brothers and sisters; the universality of our commitment to serve the poor and marginalised; and our vocation as members of the Church community.”

*The Rule, p13.*

## The Spiritual Reflection

The Spiritual Reflection is perhaps the most important part of a Conference meeting. One of the roles of the Spiritual Adviser is to facilitate this in whatever way will promote the spiritual growth of the members and the Conference as a whole.

The Spiritual Adviser is nurturing the Conference as a community of faith, ‘growing together in holiness’ so enable this time to do that. Ask members for their thoughts, and do not be afraid of silence as they consider the questions you pose. God speaks to us in the silence.

### How long should the Spiritual Reflection last?

There is no time limit for the reflection. One reason for placing it at the beginning of our meetings is to enable members to focus and be in tune with why we are here. It is important to allow space and silence and not to cut off discussion prematurely. This may sometimes require some judgement: *Are people still reflecting in order to share their thoughts, or are they silent because we are “done?”*



## Preparation

Even after the most careful preparation, sometimes the reflection can be hard work. The following preliminary ideas and suggestions may help.

- Keep the reflection simple. Most of us are not theologians. It is enough to reflect with our fellow Vincentians on the ordinary experiences of the day – particularly our Vincentian encounters.
- Share the facilitation within the Conference. Every member is a potential facilitator. The Spiritual Adviser can encourage this in various ways.
- Most of the work will always be done by the Holy Spirit. The facilitator simply sows the seed. The longer-term effects will happen in their time.

A good thought to remember is that “I will do my best and leave the rest to God”. Be prepared to actually do this. You have no control over what is going on within each person and what they bring to meetings.



Before presenting a reflection, the facilitator should develop some understanding of the nature as well as the needs of the members, such as their background, interests, families and be sensitive at all times to these. Based on your sense of where members are, select an appropriate form of reflection for your Conference. Ensure there are a couple of questions which will encourage responses from members. Good questions are usually short, open-ended, and invite people into their own experience. For example:

- How has this story touched your life?
- What nourishes your faith?
- Tell a story of a 'gesture of love' that you gave or received recently.

Also be aware of and honest about, your own limitations and be ready to share these with the Conference if necessary.

In time a sense of trust needs to develop within the Conference and the Spiritual Adviser will nurture this through modelling appropriate attitudes, manner of speaking and his or her way of being with each member. Gentleness, affirmation and a sense of the Conference being a safe place will in time create a good basis for mutual spiritual growth.

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*Periods of silence are expected and while sometimes uncomfortable, they are an important part of the practice. God speaks to us in the silence.*

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## Resources

There is no single, prescribed format for the reflection. Spiritual reflections can take a variety of forms – scripture passages, quotations from our founders or other spiritual writers, YouTube clips, music, meditations, stories and other resources.

A key aspect for reflection is that members are invited to participate, whether they do so silently or in conversation.

There are several resources to assist you such as the NSW *Spiritual Reflection Guides*, prepared by Leo Tucker which follow the lectionary readings of the Church and are posted to each Conference three times per year. There is a new one for each week of the year and they are also available online. The link follows this section.

United States National Council also creates Reflection Guides and the link follows this section.



## See Workbook Reflection 5

## References:

NSW Spiritual Reflection Guides

[https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/NSW/Spiritual\\_Reflection\\_Guides/](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/NSW/Spiritual_Reflection_Guides/)

USA Spiritual Reflections for 2019, reformatted in Australia by Victorian State Council

[https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms\\_docs/301241\\_2019\\_Vincentian\\_Reflections.pdf](https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/301241_2019_Vincentian_Reflections.pdf)

## Leading the Spiritual Reflection

- Present the reflection with perhaps an introductory question or thought to keep in mind. Read the question(s).
- Restate if necessary and then allow some time for personal response.
- Invite members to share responses. If the group is fairly reserved this could be done as a one-to-one conversation with the person next to them.

Encourage sharing by emphasising confidentiality, respecting each member's response and stressing the great gift we are giving to one another through sharing. Do not be too concerned if responses take their own direction. Be slow to impose your own ideas but do so if necessary in an unresponsive situation.

Be an active listener – make eye contact (most important), positive body language – nods and always affirm. There are rarely 'rights or wrongs'.



Always be a role model in what you say and how you are. Above all allow yourself to be vulnerable. This can have an empowering effect on others and can build up a stronger sense of group engagement.

## Exploring Scripture Passages

There are some ways to elicit responses for Scripture passages, such as:

- Invite members to notice a word or a phrase that stands out for them during the reading. Share with the group.
- Suggest placing oneself in the parable/story somewhere – even as Jesus. How would you be feeling?
- Have some relevant questions – What is the message? Who would you be like? How would you react? What happens next? What is this telling us about Jesus?

## Leading the Vincentian Reflection

### Opening Prayer/Quieting Period

Leader invites group to:

- Become relaxed and aware of God's presence with us.
- "Let Go" of distractions and quietly pray to the Holy Spirit.

### Reading

Each section is read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, by different members. Hearing different voices will allow different emphasis on words/phrases.

### Quiet Period

Leader invites everyone:

- To quietly reflect on the reading and notice if anything strikes them
- Consider the reflection or discussion question/s and then allow 2-3 minutes of quiet. **Don't be afraid of the silence.**

### Discussion and sharing

## Apostolic Reflection: God is here

One of the most powerful forms of Spiritual Reflection you may wish to follow in your Conference meetings is Apostolic Reflection. For a more in-depth perspective, see **Apostolic Reflection** by Hugh O'Donnell, CM in Appendix B.

The tradition of Apostolic Reflection dates back (not coincidentally) to the Apostles, whom Christ sent forth in pairs. Upon their return, He would ask them what they had seen, what they had learned. St Vincent also followed this model with his missionaries. This was also the process that was taught to Frederic and companions by Sr Rosalie and which enabled them to be aware of the presence of God in their encounters with poor persons and to learn from this.

Vincent had a conviction that God is present in our world, in the midst of the events of life and especially in the people that we encounter. As Vincentians we particularly find the presence of God in the people that we serve, our encounters with them give us a particularly special vision of the face of God.

As with all reflections, do not be afraid of silence! If members are reflecting on what they have heard, and contemplating the meaning to themselves, just relax and wait.



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*The heart and soul of apostolic reflection, then, is to be found in the radical conviction that God is here. When you come together in apostolic reflection, then, what is the ground for your coming together? God is here in me, in my Sister, in each other and in the community. God is here in our coming together.*  
From **Apostolic Reflection** by Rev Hugh O'Donnell, CM.

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## Apostolic Reflection

The simplest form of apostolic reflection is for two members to simply share their experience of a visit or encounter with a person they assisted. Then to reflect on these questions:

- What were my reactions and feelings during the visit?
- How did the person receive me?
- What thoughts and feelings stay with me after the visit?
- Then the Conference reflects together on the story shared. This is not a time for evaluation of what happened but listening to and reflecting on the experience.
- What have we heard?
- Does a scriptural image or passage come to mind for anyone?
- Does a quote or image from Frédéric or Vincent come to mind?
- What insights come to us from this reflection?
- Is there any action we are inclined to take?

## References

Step by step process of Apostolic Reflection: <https://famvin.org/en/2018/03/11/simple-guide-apostolic-reflection/>

## Holiness in Daily life

In early 2017 Pope Francis sent an Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the call to holiness in today's world. In this the Pope speaks of the "Saints Next Door", "the holiness in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those who work hard to support their families, in the sick, holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence." (See references below).

He goes on to express that holiness is not just for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend time in constant prayer, "we are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves".

A model of Daily Reflection based on the Jesuit Daily Examen is outlined in the picture with these four steps:

- **Presence:** Become still and aware of where you are right now.
- **Gratitude:** What am I thankful for this day?
- **Review:** I observe my feelings, moods and urgings in response to my feelings. How did I act?
- **Response:** What was life giving? How might I continue to live that way? How do I desire to live my life differently?

There are numerous resources available online on the Examen including guided meditations, (see reference below).

Other simple techniques for reflecting on an encounter or a visit are simply to ask:

- Where did you find God's presence?
- What's the voice of God in this experience?

## References:

Summary of the Exhortation on Holiness:

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/04/09/pope-francis-new-exhortation-jesus-wants-us-be-saints>

James Martin, SJ You tube clip: Five takeaways on this Apostolic Exhortation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRweQno8PJA>

On the Daily Examen: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>



## Meditation on an Encounter with Someone in Need

Find fifteen minutes in your day and a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Allow your mind to wander through some of the visits you have made or an encounter with a person in need.

Choose one person/family you are especially thankful to have been able to meet or who you were particularly challenged by. Prayerfully reflecting on your visits, or encounters with those in need and sharing your insights at Conference meetings will lead each Vincentian to spiritual growth.

What is it about them or their story that made you thankful for the encounter?

- Who was in their household?
- What did the home look like on the outside? On the inside?
- What was your reaction to their physical circumstances?
- What emotions/feelings did you feel as you made the visit?
- What touched your heart?
- What specific help did the person need? Why?
- What positive characteristics did you see in the client?
- How might you have behaved differently?
- Can you name where you found God's presence in the visit?

**Our Mission, Our Story, Our Reflection Guide,**  
by the St Vincent de Paul Society, Victoria, p32.

[https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/VICTORIA/Spiritual\\_Reflections/](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/VICTORIA/Spiritual_Reflections/)

## Facilitating faith in action in challenging circumstances

The Spiritual Adviser may be the one to help the Conference members when a discussion or situation is causing tension or confusion.

The first action of the Spiritual Adviser is to invite everyone to consider the following:

- "Let's stop and be still. What can we do? What are the facts?"
- "Let's ask God to help us to know if we should continue the conversation? What is God asking of us right now?"

You may need to help members to 'put your own oxygen mask on before helping another.' There may be concerns about boundaries with those we are assisting or other matters regarding our response to the situation. Is it time to pause, to be honest?

- Have compassion in your confusion or unsureness. We can't do everything for this person or family.
- What would Jesus/ Frédéric /Vincent/Rosalie say here? How do they inform our discussion?
- What does the hand of friendship look like in this situation?

The Rule beautifully describes a way of living and serving within the Vincentian framework by responding to the Gospel message of Christ. A further resource is the **Vincentian Visitation Guidelines** which explore the qualities of a Vincentian visit and much more. Conferences are encouraged to review and reflect upon the Guidelines frequently and ensure all members have a copy. Appendix F has a few excerpts from the Guidelines.

*See more on this topic in Parts 4 and 5.*

## Connecting our Service with the Gospel

Charity is love, and love is an act of will: to put the needs of another before our own. As Vincentians, we are called to do this because we truly see, and serve, Christ Himself in the person of the poor. And as both St Vincent and Blessed Frédéric taught, our service and our friendship must be mutual. It must be, as Frédéric put it, “help which honors.”

Because Vincentians are “doers,” called, as St Vincent put it, to serve God “with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows,” it is possible we might sometimes focus only on our activity in our meetings. Spiritual Advisers can assist the Conference to connect our service or experiences of visitation with our spirituality.

As discussed previously, using a visit as the basis for the Spiritual Reflection is a very centering exercise for Vincentians. However, our reflections need not be restricted to the formal one at the beginning of the meeting. Indeed, as we remind ourselves by offering the Sign of the Cross only to open and close the meeting, our entire meeting is a prayer – and a reflection.

There are countless examples of our Vincentian work which can be compared with Gospel stories. Visiting the lonely, feeding the hungry or being with those on the fringes are but a few.



The lives of Jesus and Mary are sufficient in themselves to provide us with enough to model our lives on. However, far more important than our action is our presence and manner and motivation for doing what we do. We can be like a Pharisee – confident in our own specialness and maybe presuming to be a little better than others or like the Publican – aware of our own fragility and limitations and conscious of our dependence on God in everything.

If our work is to be truly effective, it must flow from our own developing relationship with God, from our prayer life, and from our constant reflection on all we do.

If, by our presence, we may be able to help people see other options or feel more confident as well as assist with electricity then we are heading in a good direction – in the company of Christ and the person we are assisting. The three of us are in it together!

### **The Gospel of Matthew Doesn't Need Our Footnotes**

St Vincent de Paul often referred to the Gospel of Matthew, reminding us that Christ “went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as done for or against himself.”

It is important for us to remember the words of that Gospel, without adding footnotes:

#### **Matthew 25:35-40**

1. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink ... *Only if my hunger and thirst did not result from my own bad decisions;*
2. a stranger and you welcomed me ... *Only if you hadn't welcomed me too many times already;*
3. naked and you clothed me ... *Only if I promised to go to a budget class first;*
4. ill and you cared for me ... *Only if I demonstrated I “deserved” assistance;*
5. in prison and you visited me ... *Only if my life was an example of pure Christian morality.*

Then the righteous will answer him and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?”

And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

 See Workbook Reflection 6

## Part 4 | Collaboration and Community Building

### Vincentian Celebrations

In addition to our regular Conference meetings, there are many opportunities to grow together as a community of faith, and to mark the milestones of our Vincentian vocation. Spiritual Advisers, working closely with the Conference President, are encouraged to promote these practices.

### Vincentian Feast Days

Attending Mass together as a Conference is an important sharing of our faith and there are a number of Vincentian Feast Days that may provide a context for such celebrations:

- Feast day of St Vincent de Paul, 27 September.
- Feast day of Louise de Marillac, 9 May.
- Feast day of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, 9 September.
- Feast day of Rosalie Rendu, 7 February.
- Frederic's birthday/Founding of the Society, 23 April.
- Charles O'Neill was born on 23 March and died on 8 November.
- Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi, 4 October.
- Feast day of Mary McKillop, 8 August.

### A Feast Day of Local Custom

A "feast day of local custom" might be the feast of your Parish's patron, particularly if that patron is a Vincentian Saint, such as St Catherine Labouré or St Elizabeth Ann Seton. It is certainly not necessary, though, to choose only a Vincentian saint!

Recalling that Frédéric, a devout and studious Catholic, drew inspiration from many Saints outside the Vincentian family, it is far more important to choose a feast day that your Conference agrees upon that particularly inspires them, your parish, or your local community.

### Annual Conference Mass

A Conference Mass celebrated at least once a year for all members, including spouses and families is encouraged. During this Mass, it is most appropriate to commission new members into the Conference, pray for those we have visited, pray for our benefactors, pray for the poor, pray for the deceased members, and for continued good work. Working with your Parish Priest and choosing a date all members agree to, it can also be a time for commissioning or recommitment of members and officers.

The Appendix has some commissioning services and other celebrations for Conferences or Councils. While this is not strictly the responsibility of the Spiritual Adviser, it is a good practice for you to work with the Conference President and local priest to plan these celebrations.



If Mass is not possible or a priest is not available, these services may be led by the Conference or Council Spiritual Adviser, Conference or Council President or other appropriate leader.

### **Festival Meetings**

Regional Councils should conduct at least one Festival Mass and Meeting each year, which should include a Commissioning Ceremony for new Conference members, as a means of deepening the spiritual dimension of being a Vincentian.

A meeting of members is an occasion for their spiritual growth, mutual sharing of the Society and a study of its works and future plans.

All members in the region are encouraged to attend the Festival Mass and Meetings and meet together in a social gathering.

Central and State or Territory Councils may organise Festival Masses and Meetings to supplement those organised by Regional Councils.

New Council members may be commissioned at the Festival Mass.

At a Festival Mass and Meeting members renew their commitment to the work of the Society. This renewal is to take place annually.

*The Rule, Article 23, p66.*

### **Social Gatherings**

Many Conferences make a point of having a meal or a coffee on a regular basis as a means of deepening relationships while enjoying a relaxed and informal time together.

### **New Members**

Those who wish to become Vincentians are not simply considering a Parish Ministry, or activity; they are discerning their call to the Vincentian vocation. Because our primary purpose is spiritual growth, the Spiritual Adviser has a key role to play in this process.

The Spiritual Adviser can assist in helping a prospective member discern if this vocation is for them as well and to encourage them in their growth in Vincentian service and spirituality.

They might engage in a conversation with the potential recruit about the spiritual foundation of the Society and how we nurture that through the way we perform our service, are inspired by The Rule, reflect on our service, have spiritual reflections at our meetings and encourage members to participate in communal gatherings.

 **See Workbook Reflection 7**

## Who Are Welcome?

### Conference Members and Volunteers, a Spiritual Perspective

An opportunity may arise for the Spiritual Adviser to assist the Conference to support members and potential members who come from different faith backgrounds, or who may feel uncomfortable with the 'Catholic' or explicitly Christian nature of our spirituality.

Deacon Vince Ryan shares a story and some of his thoughts about this experience:

"I recently had a conversation with a volunteer working in one of our Vinnies Centres and who was keen to join our Conference. After attending her first Conference meeting she spoke to me privately to share that she is a Catholic, but she struggled with the prayers and spiritual aspect of our meeting. I didn't enquire about what her issues were as I didn't think that would have been appropriate. I asked her some questions:

- 1) Do you hold to the ethos of the Vincentian Spirituality as based firmly on the Gospels and respect it, understanding that this is what drives our own goodness?
- 2) Can you accept the people you encounter without judging them, and accept them as loved and loving in the eyes of our God?
- 3) Do you agree not to discredit the faith that underlies our work?

She answered 'yes' to all. She had a real joy about wanting to support those in need. I was happy to accept her as a member of the Conference.

There are several realities that inform that decision:

Goodness comes from God. Our generosity is God's Spirit at work and is initiated from God - not from us, but through us. Goodness is a gift, and whilst this woman may have differing beliefs, God is actually at work through her. I clearly see God's gift in her and hopefully, she may come to realise that.

2) I refer to St Paul's expressing that we bring many gifts to our ministry but it is the one Spirit at work in us. We have to honour that reality. As a Society we also are sowers of the seed of faith - that is our gift to others whether they be volunteers, members, staff or the very people we serve.

3) St Mary of the Cross MacKillop started to educate children from poor families as a means to evangelise, as well as to teach them important skills. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to work in such a way as to change the hearts of people. We facilitate those opportunities in every aspect of the Society. Frederic Ozanam stated we are here to 'save souls'.

4) I am uncomfortable with deciding if a Conference member is faith filled enough to become the ideal Conference member. This is fraught with problems as it has the potential to become a 'power' issue. We are servants of the poor as St Vincent de Paul expressed this critical aspect of Jesus' message. We bring love, an openness to listen, and hope to those we sit with.

5) There are deep spiritual ramifications that are present when we pray together, and when we sit with those we serve. 'When two or three are gathered in my name then I am with you.' (Matt 18:20). All that we offer - a listening ear, love, hope, goodness and much more, we only do it on behalf of Jesus. The emptier we are the more Jesus gives us. That is true power-less-ness.

I feel that if we are open to the Spirit at work in us, and there is evidenced goodness in those who wish to join our Conferences, then their beliefs are not the determining factor. If they affirm the three questions above, then let's make them welcome!

## Retreats and Reflection Days

While spiritual reflections are a focal point of every regular Conference meeting, there is also great value in dedicated time set aside to pause and reflect. Many Regional and Central Councils offer regular reflection days, mornings, afternoons or evenings.

Alerting members to retreats, talks, workshops and other opportunities offered by the parish or diocese or other groups in your area is a great way to encourage people's spiritual growth.

## Members Stories

### Christine O'Mahony

*Former Regional Council President from the Bathurst Central Council*

Christine recommends Spiritual Reflection Days because:

- They bring members from all six Conferences together in a different environment that is relaxed and peaceful and focused on them personally and not meeting agendas.
- They allow members to grow their relationship with one another.
- For some, it is a growing point for how important and vitally enriching our own spirituality is. And that we don't take enough time to do this in our busy lives.
- For some it was challenging to be asked to try and look at some things in a different way from their traditional thinking.
- Some said this is important and we need to have the opportunity each year.
- They enjoyed having experienced interesting facilitators and a different one each time.
- By sharing the organising of times, dates and venues, people appreciated ownership of the planning process and therefore wanted to support the day.
- The Day allowed the opportunity for sharing and refreshing their Vincentian Vision and Mission.
- Personally, Spiritual Reflection Days allow me the opportunity to get to know people better. They inspire and encourage me to do the best job I could in my leadership role to reflect the Spirituality of our mission to serve others.

Christine's planning tips include:

- Give the members a couple of days to choose from. Go with the majority it will never suit everyone.
- Be aware some members have long distances to travel, so don't start too early or finish too late.
- Make sure your flyer or information is colourful, cheerful and clearly states time, dates etc. Get it out to Conferences and Centres in plenty of time.
- The Central Council office will likely assist with this.
- Be in touch with Conference Presidents to remind them to encourage members to attend.
- Keep the group size manageable. Better to have 2 group sessions and keep it personal.
- The Regional Council Leadership Team shared the planning and organising. It does take time, but it is worth it and one of the most important things they do.

**Margaret Loker**

*Spiritual Adviser for Lismore Central Council*

Margaret's ideas include:

- I encourage members to attend events such as "Breakfast with Bishop Greg" in Ballina.
- Look out for other guest speakers hosted by other faith-based groups such as Baptist Care.
- We also take it in turns to host "World Day of Prayer" each year, followed by morning tea and fellowship.

**Margaret Atchison**

Margaret shares about a recent Reflection Morning in Armidale:

The 30 participants were seated in a large circle with a central prayer focus based on the chosen Gospel parable and we had two main sessions. Each session consisted of personal reflection with a couple of questions, followed by small group sharing then coming back to the larger group for further sharing. Some tips I would share from my experience are:

- Personal invitations work better than general advertising.
- Participants must be made to feel very welcome.
- The program should be clear from the start and must be very well prepared.
- Time limits should be adhered to throughout especially starting and finishing times.
- Feedback should be invited at end of session and if necessary, contact details taken for future events.
- Generally, all effort should be made to make a spiritual reflection event successful but really this needs to be handed over to God. From my experience, positive things can happen and in ways not anticipated – and maybe not immediately either.

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*"There are two reasons why we join together  
... Number one is, that by drawing closer to  
the poor, we draw closer to God.  
...My second reason is, that our membership in  
such a union will bear silent and humble  
witness to the faith that is in us..."*

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Frédéric Ozanam



## Discernment and Prayer

Prayer is continual and on-going communication with God. It is at the very centre of both the process of Discernment, and the spirituality and lifestyle of a Vincentian. Vincentians seek through prayer, meditation on the scriptures, the teaching of the Church, through their daily lives and in their relationship with those in need, to bear witness to the love of Christ.

Discernment and prayer are key in preserving the dignity of the human person. Growth of spirituality runs parallel with the growth of the human conscience. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality; their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods will always lead to good judgement in serving the poor. (CCC 1780)



In all of His life Jesus presents himself as our model. He taught us how to pray and taught us to love one another as he has loved us. Prayer to Jesus is imitating that love, including loving one another.

In *Vincentian Discernment* by Fr. Hugh O'Donnell, CM says this, "Discernment, then, what is it? Two key components are (1) to be led by the Spirit (2) in freedom. Our freedom is engaged in discernment. It is the Spirit who addresses our

freedom. The Spirit calls us, invites us in our freedom to go in a certain direction, to act in a certain way, to be in a certain way. It is the dynamic: the action of the Spirit touching the freedom of the children of God.

It is a choice, not between good and evil, but between two or more goods. In a course on discernment at Saint Thomas Seminary, students were asked, "What have you learned so far?" One student said that in learning that discernment is not a choice between good and evil but a choice among goods, he found himself far more challenged than when he was choosing between good and evil. It is true. It is a greater challenge for us to acknowledge that discernment is the choice among several goods."

### Discernment in Action

"I have always appreciated and valued the thoughts of others when decisions - e.g. continuing to visit or assist with rent -are being made. In my experience, good decisions are made after wide consultation amongst members with various views being expressed and listened to. Prayerful consideration by the group is essential before the decision is made. Good leadership is important so that all stakeholders feel they have at least been listened to."

**Margaret Atchinson**

The Rule calls us to journey towards Holiness (2.2). It also gives ways of achieving this. Henri Nouwen (1932 - 1996), a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian, explains this journey in terms of discernment and prayer.

“Discernment is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God’s desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.

Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God. We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives loses its power over us. Our desire to be successful, well liked and influential becomes increasingly less important as we move closer to God’s heart. To our surprise, we even may experience a strange inner freedom to follow a new call or direction as previous concerns move into the background of our consciousness. We begin to see the beauty of the small and hidden life that Jesus lived in Nazareth. Most rewarding of all is the discovery that as we pray more each day, God’s will—that is, God’s concrete ways of loving us and our world—gradually is made known to us.”

**Henri Nouwen**

Excerpt from this article by Richard Rohr:

<https://cac.org/discernment-versus-decision-making-2018-05-31/>

 See Workbook Reflection 8



## Conference decisions and discussions

It is often the case that the demands for members these days are higher and the situations of the people we assist are more complex. Members might look for a prescription or template for how to respond. Sometimes we can’t do anything to solve their dilemma, but we can always provide friendship and support and perhaps a referral or open the door to other resources.

At the Conference meeting, the Spiritual Adviser may be the one to invite members to allow space in the decision making for discernment. Frédéric described the Conference as the ‘training ground of charity’ and so in our learning and doing, we may need to stop struggling to find the solution and just listen. Here’s a story from a Conference President that demonstrates this.

Paul reported on a visit to a man who had recently lost his job and needed help to pay his electricity account, which seemed excessively high. "We allocated \$250 of EAPA vouchers towards his account but he seemed to expect more, which I didn't think we should give. He also had a large Telstra bill and asked if we could pay the lot, we filled out four Telstra vouchers for him but he didn't seem very grateful. He is a single dad and has two teenage children living with him. I didn't enjoy that visit at all".

When asked what was there about the visit that upset Paul his response was, "He was ungrateful and I thought greedy, wanting more than we had given him." After acknowledging Paul's feelings, Members were encouraged to talk about how the unemployed dad might feel having lost his job with the care of two teenagers on his own and being unable to pay the bills and supply food for his family. We noted the uncertainty of whether he would get another job and the loss of dignity having to ask for help. The conversation revealed the lack of considering the dad's perspective and that being in a position of power may lead us to be judgemental.

Our Spiritual Adviser suggested that we try to put ourselves in the shoes of the person we are assisting, or imagine if that person was a son or daughter of ours would our response be different. Some members remembered past instances when they had not acted in a truly Vincentian way towards those coming for assistance. Not everyone is capable of living up to Louise's call to 'love the poor' but by acknowledging our frailties we can grow in that love and our Vincentian values and do better next time.

"I have found that better questions produce better discussions. The discussion about how we assist cannot be theoretical or other worldly. Vincentians are masters of the practical: They need to consider, what does Sunday's Gospel mean in terms of Mr. Lee? What does the woman at the well have to do with Ms. O'Brien? Who has not had trouble seeing the face of Jesus in the Smiths? What is there in us which may be an obstacle to our loving service to Mrs. Mendez?

My Conference has been quite open to such reflections, and the challenges of the Gospel have begun to take root in our approach to the people who ask us for help. During the last three meetings, our reflections have led to a discussion of the people we helped since the last meeting, or a discussion of the importance of becoming a better vehicle of service for our parishioners. The spiritual reflection portion of our meeting never ended: it just flowed into our 'business.'

I think that's how things should be."

From: **Vincentian Spirituality ... It really works!**  
By Gerry Felsecker, Council of Milwaukee, USA

 See Workbook Reflection 9

## Part 5 | Prophetic Role

### What is the role of the Prophet?

The qualities of a prophetic leader are described in the writings of scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann and capsulated here:

- The task of prophetic ministry is to **nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception**, which is alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.
- A prophet's job is to point out the areas where a community is acting in opposition to God's principles, and energise, to **encourage the community to return to God's love**.
- It is the task of the prophet to bring to **expression the new realities** against the more visible ones of the old way of perceiving. Energising is closely linked to hope. We are energised not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.
- Challenging the dominant culture, prophets poke into places "out of bounds" and pry into our unconsciousness to become a **true, holy irritant**.
- To be a **life-giving disruptive force**. To *criticise* and to *inspire hope*.

In this Brueggemann stated: *"The authority of Jesus, his power to transform strangely, was found precisely in his own poverty, hunger, and grieving over the death of his people. In his poverty he had the power to make many rich. In his hunger he had the capacity to fill others. In his capacity to grieve he had the power to bring joy and wholeness to others. In his person, which was non-person in the eyes of the pseudo kings, he had the authority to give futures to his constituency."*

From *The Prophetic Imagination*, by Walter Brueggemann.

There is much to be found in these words and reflection for each of us in our ministry to the people on the margins and to our confreres.

 [See Workbook Reflection 10](#)

### Pope Francis on charity

'Are we ashamed to touch the flesh of our wounded or suffering brothers and sisters?' This was one of the key questions posed by Pope Francis during his homily at the morning Mass on Friday at the Santa Marta residence (March 2014). The Pope stressed that our life of faith is closely linked to a life of charity and Christians who do not practice the latter are hypocrites.

Pope Francis used his homily to reflect on the essential role of charity in the life of every Christian. He said Christianity is not a repository of formal observances for people who put on a hypocritical good appearance to conceal their hearts

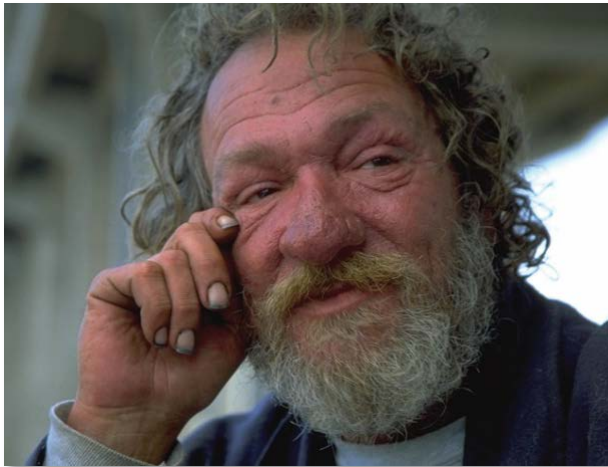




empty of any charity. Christianity is showing the flesh of Jesus who bends down without shame in front of whoever is suffering. This contrasts with the Pharisees who criticised Jesus and the disciples for not practicing the commandment to fast and who as Doctors of the Law transformed the observance of these commandments into a formality and transformed religious life into an ethic.

He said the most difficult charity (or fasting) is the charity of goodness such as that practiced by the Good Samaritan who bent over the wounded man unlike the priest who hurried past, maybe out of fear of becoming infected. And this is the question posed by the Church today: "Am I ashamed of the flesh of my brother and sister"

*"When I give alms, do I drop the coin without touching the hand (of the poor person, beggar)? And if by chance I do touch it, do I immediately withdraw it? When I give alms, do I look into the eyes of my brother, my sister? When I know a person is ill, do I go and visit that person? Do I greet him or her with affection? There's a sign that possibly may help us, it's a question: Am I capable of giving a caress or a hug to the sick, the elderly, the children, or have I lost sight of the meaning of a caress? These hypocrites were unable to give a caress. They had forgotten how to do it ... Don't be ashamed of the flesh of our brother, it's our flesh! We will be judged by the way we behave towards this brother, this sister."*



In the Spiritual Adviser role both an understanding of a prophetic stance and the stance of charity are needed to guide and ask courageous questions. We can only share this gift through nurturing relationships and building trust through profound and deep listening.

## Courageous Listening

Spiritual Advisers can model courageous listening in the Conference meeting. If conversations about those we assist seem to be veering off towards cynicism or a judgemental approach, the Spiritual Adviser has the opportunity to remind their fellow Vincentians that they are discussing a friend, a neighbor, and Christ Himself.

Some simple ways to do this might be to ask:

- "Did this visit remind you of any of Christ's encounters with those in need?"
- "How do we think Blessed Frédéric might have advised us here?"
- "What face of Christ did you see on your visit?" (You might even offer examples: Jesus weeping in the Garden at Gethsemane, carrying His cross, defying Satan's temptations...)

Let's imagine a situation where members are discussing a person the Conference is assisting. The Spiritual Adviser notices that it is becoming judgemental and divisive. A prophetic action might for the Spiritual Adviser to say something like this:

*"I wonder if we could pause for a moment and notice what is happening. I am hearing people use terms like hopeless, repeat offender, lost cause, as we speak*

*about Jason today. Are others also hearing that language? I would like to invite us to consider if we are demonstrating a Vincentian heart in this conversation? How does it feel for you to speak like this? What if we shifted our awareness and asked, 'How is Jason revealing the face of Christ to us today?'*

### See Workbook Reflection 11

See Part 3 on Facilitating Faith in Action and Part 4 on Discernment for further discussion of what may be seen as the prophetic role of the spiritual adviser.

Jesus, like the prophets, knew that listening was demanding, quoting Isaiah he reflects; "that they have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and understand with their hearts".

## Listening to the Other Person

Listening is much more than just hearing their words. Real listening to another person isn't passive, but an active – and quite tiring! – process which demands a high level of focus.

### When we really listen to someone else:

- We affirm their dignity and personhood through giving them our time and attention;
- We respect their individuality through being non-judgemental;
- We value their stories through keeping confidentiality;
- We stimulate their thinking through letting them talk;
- We empower their decision-making through reflection /encouragement/ clarification;
- We show that they are loved and cared for through our empathetic approach;
- We listen to the whole person - mind, body and spirit;
- Listening skills can be learned and practised. Some people are naturally good listeners, and others need to develop the techniques. Everyone can improve the quality of their listening by practising attentive or active listening.

From resources and short courses from The Diocese of Lichfield

<http://www.lichfield.anglican.org>

From An Introductory Course for Parish Visitors;

[https://cofelichfield.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2016/08/Introductory\\_Course\\_for\\_Parish\\_Visitors\\_new\\_1.pdf](https://cofelichfield.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2016/08/Introductory_Course_for_Parish_Visitors_new_1.pdf)

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*"We go to a listener for assistance, in order to help us recognise that we have our own answer waiting to come to light in our consciousness, thereby releasing energy for ongoing growth."*

From 40 Stories to Stir the Soul, by Sr Joan Chittister

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## Affirmation as a Spiritual Practice

The prophetic voice may be the one that avoids judgementalism and criticism by focusing on what is going well, what is good. This may be seen in itself as a spiritual practice as Phil Porter writes, “We have been taught to be modest and humble, to deflect praise, and to avoid claiming credit — “tooting our own horn.” But what does this do to our sense of self? What does it do to our self-confidence, to be encouraged, to accept blame, but discouraged from asking for or receiving affirmation, reassurance, or praise?”

Affirmation is a practice, a spiritual discipline. It is simple to do but may be unfamiliar. If we are primarily used to criticising or being criticised, it may seem like a daunting pattern to reverse. But by taking the simple steps of finding ways to affirm ourselves, and others, it will become easier to both do and “have.”

Begin by noticing those around you. What do you like about someone else—who they are or what they do? Be more aware of that and enjoy it. “Have” the grace of that appreciation in your own body. If it is possible, tell the person as well. You will both benefit. Practice focusing on the positive aspects of the information that surrounds you. What do you see, hear, taste, touch, smell, sense, remember, or imagine that increases your sense of enjoyment or well-being?” (from **Having it All**, the full article is in the Appendix.)

 See Workbook Reflection 12



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*“There are some kinds of pain that cannot be taken away— loss, hurt, rejection, disability. But those who enter into the pain of another know what it is to talk about the love of God who does not change the circumstances that form us but walks through them with us every step of the way.”*

From *The Creativity of Listening*, by Bill Kirkpatrick

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## Listening and Dialogue

### Effective questions

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Open ended                     | Tell me about...<br>What do you think/ feel...                                  |
| Invitational                   | It would be great to hear about...<br>Would you consider                        |
| Specific                       | How often...<br>What does it look like when...                                  |
| Evocative                      | What might this mean?<br>Let's consider the possibility of...                   |
| Positively or neutrally biased | What might you learn from this?<br>Tell me what you are thinking/ feeling.      |
| Able to challenge assessments  | What evidence do you have that...<br>How could that be interpreted differently? |

### The Gift and Power of Deep Listening

The following excerpt from *The Gift and Power of Deep Listening* by Alan Seale offers a model of 'dialogue'. *The full article is in the appendix.*

"Dialogue is much more about listening than about speaking – listening beneath the words and the gestures to find the source of those words and inviting the source itself to speak more clearly and directly. Perhaps that source is a deep feeling or truth; perhaps it is a greater wisdom that is showing itself in that moment for the first time. We become a voice for that which wants to be expressed.

Several guidelines can help you learn how to use dialogue most effectively and develop your ability to listen deeply. First, "deep listening" goes beyond the conventional practice of "active listening." In "deep listening," the role of the listener is simply to be open, clear, and receptive, holding a space for the speaker to access his or her own well of deep awareness and wisdom.



The listener sits quietly and comfortably with the speaker and offers no verbal or physical responses, gestures, or acknowledgment. This is not a passive response. Holding the space in this way actually invites a much deeper level of engagement from the listener than if he was making sure that the speaker knows he is listening! In fact, when the listener remains quiet and

consciously holds the space for the speaker with no outward response, the speaker usually senses the listener's presence and support in a much more profound way.

Through this practice, the listener becomes aware of her habits around listening and reacting, many of which often keep her listening more on the surface. The speaker may also become aware of how he looks for validation or approval from the listener. Though this approach may feel uncomfortable for both speaker and listener at first, by surrendering to the process and trusting that a meaningful experience can unfold, new doors of awareness, discovery, and expression usually



open. Every time we do this process in a workshop or training, participants find it one of the most powerful parts of our work together.

When using this practice in daily life and work, begin by setting up these simple guidelines.

When you recognise it would be helpful to shift from conversation into dialogue, pause and invite the person or persons you are with into

the dialogue approach. Simply make an agreement with all participants that, while listening, each person will be fully present with the speaker yet refrain from outward response. Not responding allows the speaker to express herself and be the voice for what wants to be said with no worry about reactions, judgement, agreement or disagreement, or interruption. In one-to-one dialogue, the listener waits until the speaker is finished speaking before responding. In a group setting, a talking stick or similar structure can be used to make it clear who is in the role of speaker while everyone else remains in the listener role.

As the listener, your role is to take in what the speaker is saying on as many levels as you are able. Listen for the essence behind the words so that you will be able to respond directly to the essence rather than just responding to the words or your interpretation of what was said."

**PEANUTS CLASSICS** By Charles M. Schulz



## Praying with those we assist/serve

Joy Bowen, Pastoral Care Manager at the Matthew Talbot Hostel in Sydney, shares a story of praying with a person she was visiting.

“After some weeks of building a trusting relationship and understanding the spirituality of the gent, when he came to share his story of struggle, as he had done regularly, I asked, very gently, how he would feel about me saying a prayer for him.... He expressed that yes, he would like this. Using his story as a guide to his needs and using the words that he used I prayed out loud for him, asking that God give him the strength to be, fully, the person he was called to be. His emotional response at the end was... ‘That has done it, Joy, that has done it. Thank you’”

Kerry, from Kyogle in northern NSW shares this story.

“This happened to me at the Aged Care Ward when I was taking Holy Communion to the Catholics. I came upon a man (Bill) whom I knew. Bill is not a Catholic nor is he a church goer. I spoke to Bill, who had suffered a stroke and was hard to understand but we tried to have a conversation. Bill started to cry, I asked if I could get him something, he shook his head, so I asked if he would like to say the Lord’s Prayer. Fred nodded his head and away we went, even the non-Catholic ending. When we finished, he had a lovely smile and squeezed my hand.”



### Support for Members and Volunteers

Any member experiencing distress or concern about an incident or relationships related to their work in the Society are encouraged to utilise the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAP offers a free and confidential counselling service for all Society personnel, including members and volunteers. Your enquiry is confidential and the nature of your concern is kept between yourself and the counsellor. The number to ring is **1800 818 728**.

## For further exploration

There are many Vincentian resources available and some are highlighted here. The resources on the following pages are listed below by category. However, this is not an exclusive segregation. For example, you may well find some retreat resource that could be well adapted to a meeting setting, or some take-home resource that could be read at Conference meetings.

### Spiritual Reflections

<http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Tools/Spirituality-Formation/Vincentian-Reflections>

### Video Clips

**Vincent's Values: A Spiritual Perspective.** Interprets the five values of Vincent to be honest, be approachable, be realistic, be self-disciplined, and be hard working:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nfp5d\\_MPMKM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nfp5d_MPMKM)

**St Vincent de Paul, A Person of the 17th Century, a Person for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
Six minute clip on St Vincent de Paul:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRwez\\_neJT4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRwez_neJT4)

### Books

Introduction and Table of Contents for **Antoine Frederic Ozanam** by Raymond Sickinger:

<https://www.amazon.com.au/Antoine-Fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric-Ozanam-Raymond-Sickinger-ebook/dp/B01MDUG9P1>

The national USA SVdP materials catalog can be viewed at:

<http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Shop/SVdP-Catalog>

### Spiritual Adviser Resources

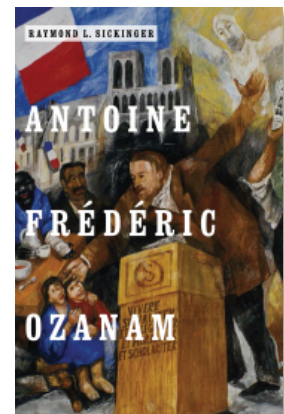
These are items to aid us personally in the fulfillment of your role as Spiritual Adviser.

#### Available for download:

- <http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Vincentian-Formation>
- [Vincentian Formation](#)
- [Guidelines for Formation](#)
- [Walking the Vincentian Pathway, Conference Record](#)

#### Available for purchase:

- Online Store: <https://www.svdpusa.org/materials/> or Catalogue (Information above)
- [Vincentian Celebrations](#), (Book with or without CD)
- [Walking the Vincentian Pathway, A Personal Guide](#)



## Conference/Council Meeting Spirituality Resources

### Available for download:

Various resources on the International website:

<https://vincentians.ssvpglobal.org/formations/>

### Spiritual Reading:

International Vincentian Reflections <https://vincentians.ssvpglobal.org/lectures-et-reflexions/lectures-hebdomadaires/>

Various resources on USA website: <http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Tools/Spirituality-Formation/Vincentian-Prayers>

- Commitment & Commissioning Ceremonies
- Icon of the Beggar
- Meeting Opening & Closing Prayers
- Prayers for Leadership Gatherings, [www.svdpusa.org/A1-Leadership](http://www.svdpusa.org/A1-Leadership)

### Available for download:

- Spirituality of the Home Visit Journal, W & PP, <http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Vincentian-Formation>, \$2

## Renewal/Retreat Resources

These are items to assist in planning and presenting retreat or renewal sessions.

### Available for download:

- [Turn Everything To Love \(Notes\)](http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Vincentian-Formation), <http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Vincentian-Formation>
- 2016 National Assembly Retreat, EA Bishop John Quinn, <https://vimeo.com/184015693>
- 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism, Tom McKenna CM, <https://vimeo.com/213902116>
- Vincentian Retreat Prayers, <http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Vincentian-Formation>

## Resources for Individual Formation

These are items for individual member formation and study.

### Available for download:

- <http://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Tools/Pathway-Toolbox/F-Spiritual-Advisors>
- [The Many Faces of Vincentians](#), Mike Syslo
- [Active Contemplative](#), Mike Syslo
- [Deeply Rooted](#), Mike Syslo