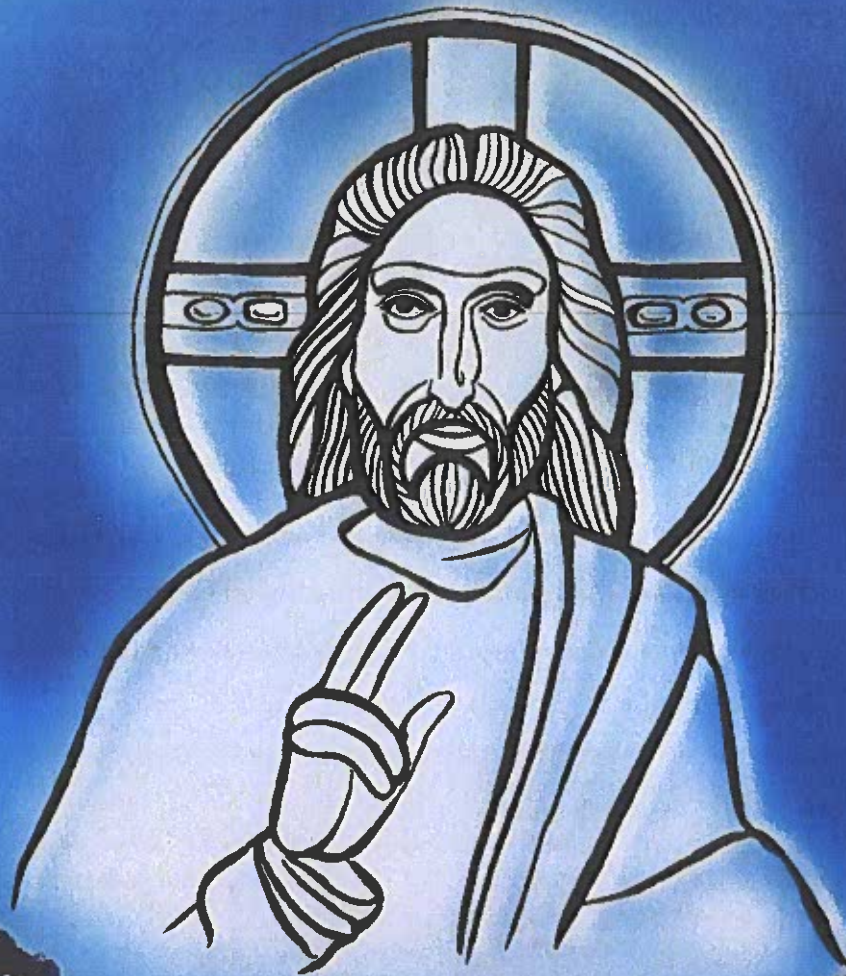


Serving in Hope

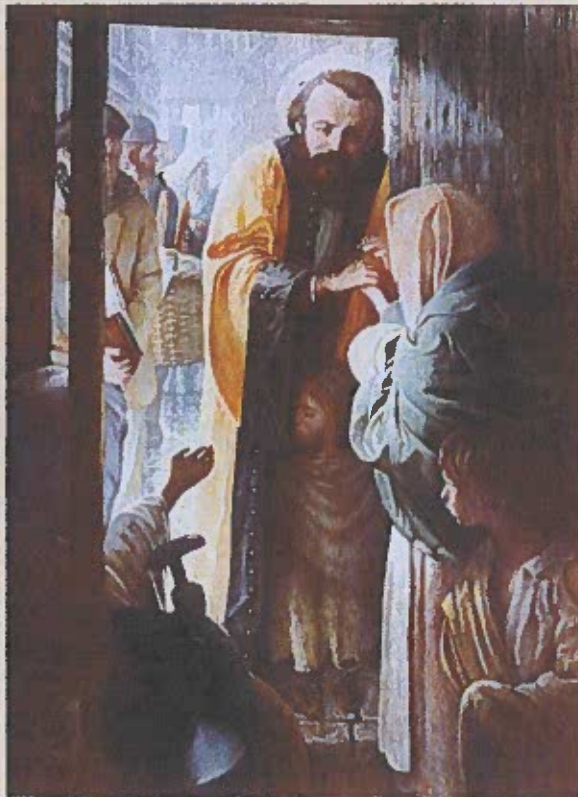
MODULE VII



Our Vincentian Home Visit

Video/Formation Guide

Society of St. Vincent de Paul Council of the United States



Icon: Frederic Ozanam Making a Home Visit

LOVING...

LISTENING...

ADVOCATING...

DISCERNING...

PRAYING...

WITH A...

Vincentian Heart

“The knowledge of social well-being and reform is to be learned not from books nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him.” (Frederic Ozanam)

Loving with a Vincentian Heart

The first step in the Vincentian journey is developing loving relationships with those we serve. We make Christ’s healing presence felt, through our presence to those who are suffering. Indeed, our attitude and behavior promote trust and openness. In the icon we see the **Loving Vincentian Heart of Frederic** making a home visit in the Mouffetard district on a cold and damp winter day. He gently holds the hand of the mother, holding a baby, and looks directly into her eyes in compassion.

Listening with a Vincentian Heart

As Vincentians engage in learning about poverty they grow in understanding and compassion for the conditions the neighbor must endure. Sometimes we must suspend our judgments long enough to really hear their story. We must listen, empathize and be fully present. In the icon we see the **Listening Vincentian Heart of Frederic** as he listens to the mother and looks inside the dark, dirt floor hovel he sees the grandmother, holding her cane in one hand, reaching out in gratitude. He notices that the small wood stove has an unlit candle sitting on it, indicating that there is no fire in the stove. Shivering from the cold, the mother and grandmother are clothed in blankets and shawls, touching the heart of Frederic.

(Continued on the inside back cover)

Serving in Hope

MODULE VII

*Our Vincentian Home Visit
Video/Formation Guide*



*Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Council of the United States*

**IN SPECIAL GRATITUDE TO
James Davis
for his Vincentian Heart and his dedication in creating Module VII**

INTRODUCTION

MODULE VII: OUR VINCENTIAN HOME VISIT



A NEW DIMENSION AND DIRECTION TO THE SERVING IN HOPE SERIES

- Module VII: Our Vincentian Home Visit introduces the opportunity for frequent stops to: **“Pause to Reflect and Share,”** providing the important time for moments of silent personal reflection, to sharing in small groups as well as discussion together in the Conference. This allows for a focus on dialogue and reflection and so **each Conference will likely move at a different pace as each Session will take many meetings to complete.**
- The facilitator is challenged to “hold the space” as the members of the Conference become more and more comfortable with these various forms of reflection and sharing. **Periods of silence** are actually expected. There will also likely be times of **spirited dialogue** as we embrace the diversity of relationships with the neighbor that challenge our status quo approaches.
- The facilitator for the meeting will be focused on creating an environment for learning and sharing among Conference members as a priority, **taking as many meetings as necessary to proceed through the sessions.** This variation is encouraged and based on the inclusion of a broad range of home visit strategies emerging in our focus on systemic change, and our need to have sufficient time for sharing and reflection. This Module can be used during Conference meetings or for a Retreat Day.
- As the session titles reflect, this Module is about the cultivation of a **Vincentian Heart** in the context of our encounter with the neighbor, each other, and the communities we serve.

How To Lead The

"SERVING IN HOPE" –MODULE VII: OUR VINCENTIAN HOME VISIT VIDEO/ FORMATION GUIDE SERIES

In A Conference

INTRODUCTION:

The facilitator describes to the group the process which is going to take place:

- Provide a copy of the Formation Guide to each member of your Conference for their personal reflection and notes.
- Stress that sharing is not compulsory but encouraged, and mention the need for confidentiality.
- Ask, or assign, different members to read the different sections.
- **For Module 7 share that the society is evolving and adopting systemic change strategies that require learning and change. Discussion among the members and sharing of perspectives is really important for each conference community to discern how they choose to respond.**

OPENING PRAYER/QUIETING DOWN PERIOD

Facilitator invites group to:

- Become relaxed and aware of God's presence with us.
- Review the Learning Objectives for the session.
- **View the video.**

INTRODUCTION

- Read the Opening Prayer together.
- Each section is read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, by the different members.
- Hearing different voices will allow different emphasis on words/phrases.

PERIODS FOR " PAUSE TO REFLECT AND SHARE"

- **Module 7 is intended to include the practice of silent reflection and sharing throughout. Please follow the simple instructions carefully to ensure this session provides the contemplative and relational experience that helps us deepen our journey together to holiness.**
- **Periods of silence are expected and while sometimes uncomfortable, they are an important part of the practice.**
- **Facilitator and participants will be reading the specific instructions for the blend of individual quiet reflection and sharing in small groups and in the conference as part of the session.**
- **The facilitator will be responsible for encouraging the discipline of reflection and sharing that is central to the formation and learning offered.**
- **The facilitator introduces the suggested Discussion Question(s).**

SHARING

The facilitator invites members who wish to share on the Discussion Question, or on how one of the readings struck them, or on what the material inspires around ongoing change in the Vincentian vocation and ministry. Possibly not everyone will share, but time should be allowed for each person who wishes to share his/her thoughts.

To encourage sharing, the facilitator can conduct group sharing sessions where a person shares or verbally “passes” to the next person. Another strategy is use of a “talking piece” that is passed from member to member during specific group sharing sessions. Another suggestion would be to have the group in a circle facing a center. This strategy can encourage a sharing directed to the center of the group and helps folks not feel on the spot and freer to share.

CLOSING PRAYER

At the end of the session the Leader closes with the Closing Prayer.

In Thanksgiving to the Home Visit Task Force:

**Jack Murphy
Connie Casey O'Donnell
Tom Pelger
Roger Playwin
Tom Wagner
Ray Sickinger
Sr. Kieran Kneaves, DC**

Preface

Serving in Hope is a video-assisted resource for the spiritual formation of the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The goal of the series is to root all members of the Society in the spirituality and heritage of its founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and patron, St. Vincent de Paul.

Serving in Hope combines videos with formation guides. The Formation Guides, given to each member, provide materials to enrich your understanding, invites you to discuss insights and to record your responses.

Serving in Hope offers a 5 minute Video Introduction for each of the five Sessions in the Module.

Serving in Hope is an on-going formation program for all members of the Society. It is also a program that can be used to mentor future new members into the spirituality and heritage of the Society.

Serving in Hope

VIDEO/FORMATION GUIDE SERIES

MODULE I: OUR VINCENTIAN VOCATION

- Session 1: What is a Vocation?
- Session 2: Vocation of the Laity
- Session 3: The Vocation of Vincent and Frederic
- Session 4: Essential Elements of the Society
- Session 5: Core Values
- Session 6: Mission

MODULE II: OUR VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

- Session 1: Vincentian Charism
- Session 2: Jesus, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor
- Session 3: Contemplatives in Action
- Session 4: Journey together to Holiness
- Session 5: Sacraments and Vincentian Feasts
- Session 6: Mary in Vincentian Spirituality

MODULE III: OUR VINCENTIAN HERITAGE

- Session 1: Blessed Frederic Ozanam
- Session 2: Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Session 3: The Rule
- Session 4: Blessed Rosalie Rendu, DC
- Session 5: The Vincentian Family
- Session 6: Vision of Charity

MODULE IV: OUR VINCENTIAN MISSION

- Session 1: Justice and Charity
- Session 2: Catholic Social Teaching
- Session 3: Life and Dignity
- Session 4: Family, Community and Rights
- Session 5: The Poor and Work
- Session 6: Solidarity and Creation

MODULE V: OUR VINCENTIAN RULE

- Session 1: Defines our Vocation
- Session 2: Captures our Spirituality
- Session 3: Encourages our Community of Faith
- Session 4: Creates our Relationships
- Session 5: Demands our Work for Justice
- Session 6: Guides through our Statues

MODULE VI: OUR VINCENTIAN CONFERENCE

- Session 1: Our Spirituality
- Session 2: Our Friendship
- Session 3: Our Service
- Session 4: Our Home Visits
- Session 5: Our Parish
- Session 6: Our Church

MODULE VII: OUR VINCENTIAN HOME VISIT

- Session 1: Loving with a Vincentian Heart
- Session 2: Listening with a Vincentian Heart
- Session 3: Advocating with a Vincentian Heart
- Session 4: Discerning with a Vincentian Heart
- Session 5: Praying with a Vincentian Heart

MODULE VII

Our Vincentian Home Visit

Session 7.1 LOVING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART. p.8

- Establishing loving relationships
- Adopting attitudes and behaviors that promote trust
- Deepen understanding of our home visits
- Appreciate the importance of systemic change
- Discuss home visits components, conditions, guidelines and principles

Session 7.2 LISTENING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART. p.20

- Deepen the art of observing and listening
- Establishing Vincentian relationships through encounters
- Recognize personal bias, prejudices and judgements
- Incorporate systemic change into the home visit
- Appreciate and allow the Vincentian Virtues to inspire our actions and attitudes

Session 7.3 ADVOCATING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART. p.34

- Appreciate the call of Pope Francis and our Rule to become Advocates
- Deepen our understanding of the theories and strategies to move people out of poverty
- Understand the importance of systemic and immediate needs
- Comprehend the need to change attitudes
- Identify approaches that contribute to freedom and independence

Session 7.4 DISCERNING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART. p.50

- Understand the tension between Charity and Stewardship
- Recognize the conditions of poverty and create creative solutions
- Appreciate the importance and grace of Vincentian Discernment
- Deepen the knowledge of the Discernment process
- Comprehend the deeper meaning of our Rule and Manual

Session 7.5 PRAYING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART. p.62

- Appreciate the Vincentian Ministry of presence
- Understand the need to pray before, during and after the visit
- Comprehend the importance of personal communication and dialog
- Recognize the ability to create prayers from the heart
- Deepen the understanding of the deeper needs and spiritual well-being of our neighbor

MODULE VII

Our Vincentian Home Visit

SESSION 7.1

Loving With A Vincentian Heart

Learning Objectives

After completing this Session
you will have greater insight to:

- ① Establish loving relationships as the basis for service to the neighbor
- ② Adopt attitudes and behaviors that promote trust and openness in our relationships
- ③ Deepen understanding of home visit strategies that honor dignity and support communication and creativity
- ④ Appreciate the concept of Systemic Change and begin an awareness of the need to help bring the neighbor out of poverty
- ⑤ Discuss the Components, Conditions, Guidelines and Principles of the home visit



SESSION 7.1: LOVING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART

Notes

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it is written: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord." (Luke 4:17-19)

INTRODUCTION

It all began with a Home Visit

Our Vincentian charism began when Vincent de Paul made a home visit in Chatillon in 1617. One Sunday morning Vincent, in his homily, simply told the story of a destitute poor family in his parish. Later on in the afternoon as he went to visit them he found that many women in the parish had already brought food and aid to the family. Knowing that he had not told them what to do, Vincent realized that it was God who had touched their hearts. He also understood that charity needed organization so he established the Confraternities of Charity, which became the first branch of the Vincentian Family. It was here in Chatillon, that Vincent's heart was also touched and he surrendered the rest of his life to serve the poor.

The spirituality of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul also begins and lives in the home visit. In 1833, Frederic and his companions began to do home visits guided and mentored by Sr. Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity.

As we walk into the 5th Century of the Vincentian Charism, we realize that we hold a profound grace in our hands as we rediscover our Vincentian Home Visit. We are called to revive this fundamental grace of the Society by integrating the new insights of systemic change and the contemporary understanding of poverty.

Indeed, Vincent de Paul taught us that we would find Christ in the poor and that the poor would find Christ in us:

"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)

Our Vincentian Ministry is an enduring Catholic Christian Pathway that imitates the way Jesus Christ served the poor and marginalized as a sign of God's limitless Love. Our ministry and vocation are grounded in person-to-person relationships with those we serve and those with whom we serve.

Our attitude to those we serve is that of a friend, a brother or sister, a neighbor; always seeking to honor the dignity of each person, respecting them, and seeking to promote their well-being.

OUR MANUAL DEFINES CONFERENCE LIFE

The Conference is the basic unit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and this is where the strength of the Society lies. Conference members value the special "treasure," the "pearl of great price," that we have as Society members. (p.18)

The mission of the Conference is the mission of the Society: to join together in a bond of friendship, and to grow spiritually by offering person-to-person service to those who are needy and suffering, in the tradition of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, and patron, St. Vincent de Paul. (p.18)

The person-to-person work of most Vincentians is associated with a Conference operating within a Catholic parish, but the Society's Rule allows for great diversity in the formation of Conferences. (p.18)

In the Church today, many people recognize the call of the Gospel of Jesus and the need to serve others. The Society strives to be creative and discover opportunities for meaningful charitable work. It seeks to enlarge the scope of its concern by reaching the hidden and new poor, and to match the skills and interests of all its members with the needs of people. (p.18)

The Conference provides willing Christian helpers with opportunities to minister to those in need on a person-to-person basis through home visits. The Society's motto is "No work of charity is foreign to the Society". (p.18)

The Conference must create awareness for itself in the parish community, finding ways to keep parishioners informed about its charitable works and inviting them to become part of this special ministry. (p.18)

Unlike other organizations within and outside the Church, the Conference meets less to conduct business than to celebrate and deepen its unity for essentially spiritual reasons. Opening and Closing Prayers, together with the Vincentian spiritual reflections, heighten our awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence. (p. 21)

And so we find these words in the Rule:

Prayer in Union with Christ

In every Conference throughout the world and in their personal lives Vincentians raise their prayers to God, united with the prayers of Christ, on behalf of one another and their masters the poor, whose suffering they wish to share. (Rule 2.3)

Pause to Reflect and Share:
What relationships does your Conference cultivate to maximize the Vincentian Ministry?

OUR RULE FORMS OUR VINCENTIAN HEART

The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope. (Rule 1.2)

Prayer Before Personal Encounters or Visits

Vincentians pray that the Holy Spirit may guide them during their visits and make them channels for the peace and joy of Christ. (Rule 1.7)

To Anyone in Need

The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender, or political opinions. (Rule 1.4)

Promotion of Self-sufficiency

Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community. (Rule 1.10)

Concerns for Deeper Needs and Spirituality

Vincentians are sincerely concerned with the deeper needs and the spiritual well-being of those they help, always observing a

Notes

Session 7.1

profound respect for their conscience and the faith they believe in, listening and understanding with their hearts, beyond both words and appearances. (Rule 1.11)

Gratitude to Those We Visit

Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognize that the fruit of their labors springs, not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve. (Rule 1.12)

Pause to Reflect and Share:

For you, what are the most important aspects of the Vincentian Ministry as defined by the Rule and Manual?

THE HOME VISIT “...Then Go and Do the Same.”

The first step in the Vincentian journey is developing relationships with those we serve. The aim of our Vincentian ministry is the development of relationships between individuals and with God, through the person of Christ. The development of these relationships is the foundational and unique journey of the Vincentian ministry of love and healing. Members of the Society are deeply called to this journey through their role of service to the neighbors in need.

Vincentians make Christ’s healing presence felt, through their presence, by those who are needy or are suffering. By their work, Vincentians help to develop this relationship by transforming situations which make the lives of people less human—situations which prevent relationships from developing with one another and with God.

This work also transforms Vincentians and enhances their relationships with God and others. It puts them in closer touch with God’s healing presence as found in the world, first among each other, and then in each Vincentian’s contact with those who suffer. Our loving presence is the heart of our Vincentian ministry. While we may also assist with paying rent or utilities, or other support to help the neighbor move out of poverty, our love, our friendship, and our presence are the core gift.

Frederic Ozanam often prayed and reflected on the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan. (Lk 10:25-37) The question posed by Jesus captured his heart: “Which of these three, in your opinion, was **neighbor** to the man who fell in with the robbers?” The answer came, ‘The one who treated him with compassion.’ Jesus said to him, “**Then go and do the same.**” This is what drove Frederic and the founding members to go

out to those living in poverty to bring Christ's love and compassion to their neighbors. Today, we hold this grace in our hearts as we are called to serve our friends and neighbors, never thinking of them as or calling them clients.

COMPONENTS: CULTIVATING VINCENTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding the person and their background

Vincentians have a special sensitivity to the emotional needs of people: to be needed, to be independent, to feel loved and secure, to feel useful, and to receive recognition for past performances. For those neighbors living in generational poverty and those with life-long challenges, Vincentians begin by establishing a personal relationship. Find something you have in common with them. They will be able to relate and "hear" the Vincentian if the person served can say to themselves, "This person is not so different than me." And if the Vincentian can also say, "This person is not so different than me." Don't lead with data-gathering; lead with loving presence.

Know how hard it is to ask someone for help

Admitting you need help means a lot of different things to people in terms of failure. It is essential that we engage in a "strength-based" approach, identifying those skills and abilities that the neighbor possesses that will be important to help them.

We must examine both our way of being with the neighbor and the feelings we experience when visiting. Are you tolerant and accepting of ways and behavior that are different from yours?

Positive regard and genuineness

There has to be Christian sincerity and respect for dignity. Folks know intuitively when they experience it. Indeed, the words of the Rule penetrate the Vincentian heart:

Reverence for the poor

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." (Rule 1.8)

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Session 7.1

Understanding your own motivation and prejudices

You must know yourself and what conditions generate judgment on your part. We tend to like people who appreciate our help and thank us because this makes us feel good. We may like helping an elderly person because this reminds us of the concern we have for our own mother or father. Or we may like a person because her house is neat and clean, or because her children are respectful and quiet.

Conversely we tend to find it more difficult to serve the neighbors who are more difficult to please, who do not thank us, seem to expect help, and whose living conditions we find distasteful. This is the opportunity for our own transformation, to face our own brokenness, to serve humbly and gently without regard for recognition.

Ongoing development of the "Vincentian Relationship" is required

We constantly need to improve our ability to refer folks to other agencies, our competence to maintain confidentiality, and our aptitude to learn communication skills in order to serve our neighbor more effectively.

The Society is making our "Systemic Change" goal the pathway to understanding more and more about how to effectively serve the neighbor. Participation in the Ozanam Orientation: Understanding Poverty section, as well as Bridges Out of Poverty or See Poverty...Be the Difference workshops are essential to advancing our loving presence during the home visit. Insights from these resources are integrated throughout this Module.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

Which of these COMPONENTS is most challenging to you and why?

Where am I on my Vincentian journey and what spiritual and intellectual resources will be helpful?

CONDITIONS: NURTURING VINCENTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Good communication includes a lot of listening

Sometimes until a person can put into words and verbalize problems by explaining them to someone else, they have not thought the situation out clearly enough to arrive at a solution. When we assume the stance as a friend, those we serve can begin to allow us to act as their "Thought Partners." Listening is often the greatest gift we can give to another.

Empathy is important.

Empathy means "I know that it must hurt" or "I know it is difficult." It is not pity but an act of compassionate understanding. Empathy says: "I can understand how you feel and feel it with you in a limited way, even though I may not feel that way myself." Empathy feels with a person. This is an essential element of loving presence during the home visit, as our Rule states:

Empathy

Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister. (Rule 1.9)

You must allow the neighbor to express negative feelings

Allow the person to discuss feelings without fear of being condemned, embarrassed or ashamed. Take nothing personally; sometimes what is needed is a listening ear. This ministry of listening can open up opportunities for creativity in solution finding as often the answer is inside the person just waiting for someone to help them "talk it out."

You must do what you say you will do

If for some reason it becomes impossible for you to accomplish what you promised, always explain why you are not able to do it.

Notes

Session 7.1

Service includes emotional and moral support

Emotional and moral support says: "I am here to journey with you, and I will be present to you and will listen to your story, and will help you think through options and assist when possible."

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important aspect of building a trusting relationship. The Vincentian commitment to confidentiality is one of the first promises that Vincentians make to the neighbors they serve.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

Which of these **CONDITIONS** is most challenging to you and why?

GUIDELINES:

BUILDING VINCENTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Start with the person and the immediate need

Establish some kind of personal connection. Listen carefully, asking open-ended questions about their needs. As you perceive and observe other needs bring them in carefully, honoring the neighbor's prioritization before suggesting something different.

In integrity and by genuinely asking questions we live our Vincentian Virtue of **Simplicity**.

Center our attention on the unfolding of the story

There may be unpleasant things we have to hear and respond to. In serving the neighbor, we must face reality: real sorrow, real hate, real sin and real despair. By dying to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice and sharing ourselves in a spirit of generosity we live our Vincentian Virtue of **Selflessness**.

The way we give is more important than what we give

The primary currency of the home visit is loving presence. Material support is important and helps in the present, but relationships forged with love and presence honor the dignity of the neighbor and create mutuality.

Humility is needed

Our Vincentian Virtue of **Humility** calls us to empty ourselves of our selfishness and allows the Lord to do what he wants in us. When empty of self, we are in a position to enter into friendship which is found through the mutual sharing of wounds, not by concealing them or pretending they don't exist. In humility we can be honest with ourselves and admit we do not know what is exactly right for another person most of the time. The freely chosen emptying of ourselves unites us with others in their enforced emptiness.

Goodness and Kindness

Vincentians are called to emulate Vincent de Paul who always had a smile of simple goodness and transparent kindness. He prayed for the grace of being cordial, pleasant, kind, present and accessible to all. Vincent begged God to imprint on his heart pure and tender love, and in this gift he offered his heart to others and humbly asked for theirs. Indeed our Vincentian Virtue of **Gentleness** calls us to kindness, sweetness and patience in our relationships with others.

Self-help requires self-involving behavior from the person being helped

This is the aim of Vincentian ministry—helping neighbors help themselves. The Vincentian should not do everything for the person or family if they can do some of the things themselves.

This avoids having people become dependent on Vincentians. At the same time, our Manual instructs us: "Erring on the side of compassion is always advisable." (Manual p. 27) Indeed, our Vincentian Virtue of **Zeal** calls us to have a passion for the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

What do these GUIDELINES call forth in you?

PRINCIPLES:

PROMOTING VINCENTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

- **We Are Compassionate & Non Judgmental**
- **We Understand Before Being Understood**
- **We Serve Creatively**
- **We are Stewards of our Resources, Sustaining our Ministry**
- **We Strive to Help our Neighbor to Come out of Poverty**

Our Rule defines the guiding Principles of our Vincentian Vocation and Ministry:

The Journey Together Towards Holiness:

Vincetians 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.

Vincetians 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 one another.

Therefore, their journey together towards holiness is primarily made through:

- Visiting and dedicating themselves to the poor, whose faith and courage often teach Vincetians how to live. Vincetians assume the needs of the poor as their own.

- Attending the meeting of the Conference or Council, where shared fraternal spirituality is a source of inspiration.
- Promoting a life of prayer and reflection, both at the individual and community level, sharing with their fellow members. Meditating on their Vincentian experiences offers them internal spiritual knowledge of themselves, others and the goodness of God
- Transforming their concern into action and their compassion into practical and effective love

Their journey together towards holiness will be all the more fruitful if the members' personal lives are characterised by prayer, meditation on the Holy Scriptures and other inspirational texts and devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary, whose protection we have always sought, and to the teachings of the Church. (Rule 2.2)

Indeed, our Vincentian relationships are rooted in our Essential Elements of **Spirituality, Friendship and Service.**

Pause to Reflect and Share:

**How does Conference life set the stage for your Vincentian friendship with each other and with those you serve?
How do these relationships strengthen you on your Vincentian journey?**

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord,

The poor and neglected are often without hope,
-may we bring your peace to those we meet in our Home Visits.
Teach us to do what is right in simplicity and humility,
-and to speak with courage and compassion.
Teach us to go to our home visits filled with selflessness and zeal,
-filled with the grace of a listening heart.
Teach us how to embrace our neighbors in gentleness,
-recognizing the face of Christ in them. Amen

MODULE VII

Our Vincentian Home Visit

SESSION 7.2

Listening With A Vincentian Heart

Learning Objectives

After completing this Session
you will have greater insight to:

- ① Deepen the understanding of our Vincentian heart
- ② Establish Vincentian relationships through the encounter
- ③ Recognize personal bias, prejudices and judgments
- ④ Incorporate systemic change learnings into the home visit
- ⑤ Appreciate and allow the Vincentian Virtues to inspire our actions and attitudes



SESSION 7.2 LISTENING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART

Notes

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

“For I rescued the poor who cried out for help, the orphans, and the unassisted... the heart of the widow I made joyful. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame; I was a father to the needy; the rights of the stranger I studied.” (Job 29:12-16)

INTRODUCTION:

The Vincentian Ministry is grounded in a dynamic giving and receiving of the Love of Jesus Christ. It is a ministry of the heart. Our Rule tell us:

The Journey together towards holiness

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 one another. (Rule 2.2)

Pope Francis in his Exhortation *Sapientia Cordis*: “Wisdom of the Heart” well describes the spirituality of the Vincentian approach to our brothers and sisters in need:

On this World Day of the Sick, begun by Saint John Paul II, I turn to all of you who are burdened by illness and are united in various ways to the flesh of the suffering Christ. This year’s theme invites us to reflect on a phrase from the Book of Job: **“I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame”** and I would like to consider this phrase from the perspective of *Sapientia Cordis*: **“Wisdom of the Heart.”**

This “wisdom” is no theoretical, abstract knowledge, the product of reasoning. Rather, it is, as Saint James describes it in his Letter, “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity” (James 3:17).

It is a *way of seeing things infused by the Holy Spirit* in the minds and the hearts of those who are sensitive to the sufferings of their brothers and sisters and who can see in them the image of God. So let us take up the prayer of the Psalmist: “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a *heart of wisdom*” (Ps 90:12).

Wisdom of the heart means serving our brothers and sisters. Job’s words: **“I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame,”** point

to the service which this just man, who enjoyed a certain authority and a position of importance amongst the elders of his city, offered to those in need. His moral grandeur found expression in the help he gave to the poor who sought his help and in his care for orphans and widows (*Job 29:12-13*).

Today too, how many Christians show, not by their words but by lives rooted in a genuine faith, that they are **“eyes to the blind” and “feet to the lame”!** This service, especially when it is protracted, can become tiring and burdensome. And yet, what a great path of sanctification this is! In those difficult moments we can rely in a special way on the closeness of the Lord, and we become a special means of support for the Church’s mission.” (Message of Pope Francis: World Day of the Sick, 2015)

Pause to Reflect and Share:

When have you been “eyes to the blind and feet to the lame... even when service becomes “tiring and burdensome”?

OUR RULE IGNITES OUR VINCENTIAN HEART

The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society’s members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope. (Rule 1.2)

Any Form of Personal Help...

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. (Rule 1.3)

...to Anyone in Need

The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender, or political opinions. (Rule 1.4)

To Seek Out the Poor

Vincentians strive to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten, the victims of exclusion or adversity. (Rule 1.5)

In the spirit of our Rule, we go to the homes of those in need when it would be easier for them to come to our office. The home visit is

often our first person-to-person opportunity to establish a Vincentian relationship with the neighbor.

It is very important that we attend to our own self-awareness so that we establish a loving presence right from the beginning. Our conversation is the opportunity to learn from the neighbor through their story to find out certain basic information as well as better understand their needs and circumstances. We also want people to be relaxed and honest; their own home is the best environment for that to happen. The Vincentian ministry is grounded in our loving presence with the neighbor and the spirituality of our calling is rooted in the home visit.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

Definition:

The first encounter is a guided conversation between people where the Vincentian initiates the dialog during the visit and takes responsibility for creating an environment for the neighbor to share their story.

While home visit discussions can be quite simple and straightforward, they can also be complicated and demanding. Vincentians commit to ongoing learning about the complexities of different types of poverty and the specific strategies that best support trust and relationship. A home visit is more than just a friendly conversation although it certainly should be carried out in a friendly way; most importantly it is the opportunity to establish a Vincentian Relationship.

Purpose:

- To establish a trusting relationship with the family or individual so that Vincentians can find ways to mentor and support
- To provide information which will help
- To offer service and problem solving help
- To give Vincentian loving presence to persons in crisis

Personal Preparation:

It is important that we understand our own prejudices. In the Ozanam Orientation and Systemic Training Offerings, we learn from poverty experts about different types of poverty with very different populations, backgrounds, and histories of need. For example, in Donna Beegle's

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book, *See Poverty...Be the Difference*, we discover that often persons in generational poverty are formed in Oral Culture environments while most middle class persons are formed in Print Culture environments. These cultures communicate, learn, and problem solve very differently.

At times you may be frustrated with the person whom you are visiting. While you're trying to help they don't seem to cooperate; they don't seem to want the help you think they need. This can drive judgments and attitudes.

Phil Devol in his book, *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, describes the impact of the "tyranny of the moment" on those in poverty. The multiple simultaneous stressors that impact persons in poverty effect both short and long term capacities to learn and plan. We attribute motives to someone else's behavior without discovering the "why" behind their actions. This tendency is one of our biggest challenges!

There are many references in the Rule and in the Vincentian tradition advising us to join our brothers and sisters **where they are**, no judgments, only love and support and encouragement around the next decision that could improve circumstances for them and their family.

We remember Blessed Rosalie Rendu's words:

"Always remember, that if we had been through the hardships the poor have had to meet, if our childhood had been one of constant want, perhaps, we too, would have given away to envy and hatred. But be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor."

Pause to Reflect and Share:

What biases and prejudices do you carry in your heart?

Understanding your own feelings about the neighbor:

Ask yourself if you think the neighbor that you are trying to assist is standing in the way of your helping? Perhaps your own feelings, frustrations, and judgements are coming across and, as a result, they are resisting help from you. Sometimes the only thing a vulnerable person can control is resistance.

Sometimes establishing the relationship with a person in situational poverty who "is more like you" is easier, and you are able to provide

that assistance that gets them back on their feet and in a sustainable position. While at other times, working with folks in generational poverty or those with life-long challenges is more complex and demanding.

We learn through our participation in poverty education offerings that we must expand our role to include mentorship and longer term relationships with neighbors that have more complex and life-long needs. We come to understand that sometimes their reaction to you is not always based on you as a person but on what you represent. You may be blamed because the many welfare programs have not cured all their problems.

On the other hand you may be seen as the person that can fix problems that are clearly long term and which will require the neighbor to make significant progress in self-help and care. Vincentians continue to advance their understanding and strategies because our ministry calls us to all manifestations of poverty!

Understanding the Behavior of the Person:

As Vincentians engage in learning about poverty they grow in understanding and compassion for the conditions the neighbor must endure. Some behavior can be taken at face value. For example, if a neighbor acts angry because she had to wait in a welfare line for five hours it is understandable. We must listen to the story fully, empathizing and being fully present.

Sometimes we must suspend our judgments long enough to really hear the story. An example of this is the person who lies to a landlord at the point of renting an apartment. She tells the landlord she is not on welfare when she really is. From this you might decide that this woman is a liar and does not have a good character. However, if we take the time to understand why she lied, we learn it is because she knew that she would not get the apartment if the landlord knew she was on welfare. She is desperate to find a place for her children so she lied to get a roof over their heads.

It is important to strive to come to the frame of reference of the person, by listening to the story as it wanders, suspending our desire to get the answers to specific questions that we need for our records, until the person feels heard. Trust must be established so the neighbor will be able to open up and receive our love and assistance.

Pause to Reflect and share:

When have you been able to shift from judgment to compassion? Why/how?

OUR MANUAL CAPTURES THE GRACE OF HOME VISITS

From the Society's beginning, the central and most basic activity of Conferences has been the visitation of the needy in their homes. This is the clearest symbol of our Vincentian charism, which dictates the highest respect for the dignity of the poor. It symbolizes our Vincentian commitment to reach out to the needy, rather than require them to report to an outside service site. In the home, needy persons feel most free to confide their stories of struggle. In that family setting, Vincentians are asked to listen, offer humble advice, and render assistance. (p.23)

Visit in Pairs:

Vincentians always visit in pairs. This practice emphasizes the Conference's status as a community, not a collection of individuals who "do their own thing." The visiting team is ideally composed of Vincentians of genders, various age groups, and different life experiences, so that a better perspective of the needy person's situation can be gained, and various courses of action explored.

Vincentian visitation to the needy is always done in pairs for the protection both of the needy person and the members. The precedent was set by Christ Himself, when He sent out the Apostles two by two (MK 6:7). The Society wisely continues this tradition in the interest of safety, liability, and propriety.

Showing Up:

It is worth noting that the most important, and easiest, thing you do in a home visit is simply show up. The fact that Vincentians take time out of their lives to visit a neighbor in need has a significant impact on the neighbor's spirit and willingness to forge ahead despite life's difficulties. As Blessed Rosalie Rendu stated, "God has already touched your heart or you would not be giving up your precious free day to serve the poor."

Communication Techniques and Tips:

It is usually best to begin your encounter in a very straight-forward

manner. Explain that you are a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul from the local parish, and that you are interested in talking about the concerns and needs that prompted the neighbor to call us. It is helpful for the neighbor to know that in calling and inviting us to the home, they are helping us along our spiritual journey because we are called to support our neighbor in need with love and assistance in imitation of Jesus Christ. Share a little of your journey of giving and receiving grace through our relationship with them. Sometimes it is useful to tell the story of the Society in a way that helps reassure the person about our trying to be nonjudgmental, our solidarity with the neighbor and our commitment to complete confidentiality.

Establish relationship and trust first:

Before rushing in to offer solutions, you must understand the problems by listening to them with your Vincentian heart. What seems to be causing the problem? Get a good understanding of the neighbor and the situation. Find out more about the person. Encourage conversation about the person's history and "what is important to him/her." Share something of yourself, especially in relationship to their story, so that a sense of friendship can develop.

Be A Good Observer:

Vincentians visit in pairs, and this is very helpful from the perspective of observation. The person engaging the neighbor in conversation must stay fully present. The partner can take time to notice the condition of the neighbor's home, the living spaces, others living in the house, the children. While the emergent issue might be avoiding eviction or utilities being turned off, the family might be in need of furnishings, clothes and food.

Be A Good Listener and Be Aware of the power of body language:

Show that you understand what the person is saying:

- Maintain eye contact and nod your head
- Repeat back what the person is saying
- Ask questions
- Allow the conversation to wander with the neighbor's story
- Avoid refocusing the conversation to get your forms completed

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- Reassure the neighbor that you empathize and know this is difficult to share
- Avoid sending out signals of impatience and the desire to leave an uncomfortable situation/environment: checking your watch, looking around the room, hurrying through the conversation, leading with the clip board, etc.
- Continually refocus on the problem.

Pause to Reflect and share:

What deeper understanding of behaviors have you learned in your home visits?

THE JOURNEY OUT OF POVERTY

Look for Strengths:

Donna Beegle, in her teaching aide, "**Breaking the Iron Cage: Helping People in Poverty Move Forward,**" identifies approaches to understanding how best to support and promote the neighbor's journey out of poverty. "Every individual has strengths. You can empower people by focusing on what is good about them, what they do know and what skills they have now." Vincentians begin each relationship with love and support in mind. Starting out with a focus on what IS working helps to honor the dignity of persons.

Reverence for the Poor

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. (Rule 1.8).

Our greatest gift is our friendship and love, offered "in a truly brotherly or sisterly and selfless spirit." Indeed we can admire those we serve when we allow their circumstances to remind us of our own brokenness, our own difficulties and to remind us that as Frederic Ozanam told us that the poor person... "is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and our charity, and to save us by our works."

Promotion of Self-sufficiency

Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community. (Rule 1.10)

Only commit to what you can complete:

Remember the person is in a vulnerable position. One promise you can make to a neighbor is that you will try to do everything you can to help. Reassuring a person that “everything will be all right” may be well-intentioned but misleading. All you can really promise is that you will do everything you can, knowing that you must follow your Conference guidelines and boundaries. However, loving presence is the central gift of the Vincentian vocation and ministry as St. Louise taught:

“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)

Continue to learn what resources are available in the community:

Vincentians stay aware of what they can and cannot do. Knowing the social service agencies can be of immense help to neighbors. Learn how to make referrals to these agencies. Know what you and your Conference can do and when you must go to another agency for help. Collaboration is a goal and keeps the neighbor in the center.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

During your Home Visits what have you learned? And what is your plan for continuing education around poverty?

ESSENTIAL VIRTUES

In *The Spirituality of the Home Visit Journal*, available through the National Office, the focus is on how we live out our vocation through the home visit, and specifically how the virtues inspire our home visit practice. Our Rule tells us that: “Vincentians seek to emulate St. Vincent in the five virtues essential for promoting love and respect for the poor.” (Rule 2.5.1):

SIMPLICITY:

frankness, integrity, genuineness.

The grace of home visits leads us to a deeper awareness of how to live our virtue of simplicity. The virtue of simplicity: openness, honesty, authenticity, uprightness, living a simple life style. In a profound way, the home visit gives us an awareness of our own brokenness, and it is then that we find that slowly our Vincentian heart is filled with compassionate and tender love. Face to face, in the home visit Vincentians learn reverence for the poor. Indeed, the poor of God have a mysterious effect upon us. By their presence, they call us to take Christ's attitude toward them, and we find dispositions growing in ourselves which lead us to a love that is open to the faces of poverty and humility. In this way the life of Jesus begins to take hold in our hearts.

During the Home Visit:

- I know that whatever a neighbor tells me is to be kept in confidence. The exception to this is when I discuss the situation with the Conference members or if I have permission to talk about the problem with another agency or with his/her utility company, landlord, etc...
- I honor my sacred relationship with the neighbor by communicating respect for the dignity of each person during the home visit.

HUMILITY:

accepting the truth about our frailties, gifts, talents and charism, yet knowing that all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.

The grace of home visits leads us to a deeper awareness of how to live our virtue of humility by listening, being sympathetic, patient and compassionate.

Since dealing with the poor is an opportunity for us to empty ourselves of selfishness, we are then ready to allow the Lord to do what he wants in us. When empty of self, we are in a position to enter into friendship which is found through the mutual sharing of wounds, not by concealing them or pretending they don't exist. St. Vincent de Paul also came to know that humility was rooted in self-emptying because, as he taught it is only then that we can be filled with the Spirit of Jesus.

During the Home Visit:

- I realize that I am a servant of God and of the poor which shows through my attitude of equanimity with the poor. Accepting my own brokenness and dependence on God, I am humble in my approach to the neighbor.
- I am sensitive to the reverence necessary to convey respect and gratitude to the neighbour.

GENTLENESS:

friendly assurance and invincible goodwill, which mean kindness, sweetness and patience in our relationship with others.

The grace of home visits leads us to a deeper awareness of how to live our virtue of gentleness. Vincent encountered Jesus Christ most powerfully among sick, abandoned, and hungry people – the outcast of society. From his experience, he reflected and wrote: “I should not judge poor peasants, men or women, by their exterior not by their apparent mental capacities... But turn the medal, and you will see in the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these people.”

During the Home Visit:

- I ask open and honest questions in a friendly non-judgmental way to minimize the neighbors' fears and suspicions. I think about the words I use, and more importantly the way I say them.
- I remember tone and the general manner I communicate more than words by imagining the different ways that: “Are you looking for work” can be received depending on tone and manner.

SELFLESSNESS:

dying to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice; members share their time, their possessions, their talents and themselves in a spirit of generosity.

The grace of home visits leads us to a deeper awareness of how to live our virtue of selflessness. We must put aside our own prejudices, comfortable circumstances and favourite ideas in order to do the will of God. This sort of discipline calls Christians to die to themselves in order to follow Christ. Vincent called this discipline mortification,

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our Rule calls it selflessness. Mortification, or dying to self, was not theoretical to Vincent.

During the Home Visit:

- I try to stay focused on the neighbor's story, listening carefully with my Vincentian heart. I bring in my own story only when it serves to establish "oneness" and trust with the neighbor.
- I remind the neighbor that we come as friends to offer support and help, we are not professional social workers or government agents, but people just like them, who might one day stand in need of the same help.

ZEAL:

a passion for the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.

The grace of home visits leads us to a deeper awareness of how to live our virtue of zeal. Frederic Ozanam, rooted in the grace of home visits, wrote:

"Help is humiliating when it appeals to men from below, taking heed of their material wants only, paying no attention but to those of the flesh, to the cry of hunger and cold, to what excites pity, to what one succors even in the beasts. It humiliates when there is no reciprocity. But it honors when it appeals to him from above, when it occupies itself with his soul, his religious, moral, and political education, with all that emancipates him from his passions and from a portion of his wants, with those things that make him free and may make him great."

During the Home Visit:

- I let my enthusiasm about the strengths and abilities of the neighbor that I assess show, establish a sense of mutuality in any plan we develop collaboratively. I will be careful about going too far in opening up discussions that I will not be able to fully handle.
- I will approach my neighbor holistically, by asking about their lives, their faith, their hopes and dreams. I must be careful to be sure that any plan is "their" plan.
- Honoring their dignity I must not to do for them what they are fully able to do for themselves.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

During your Home Visits how have you learned to live the virtues especially by supporting your neighbor to achieve their dreams?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord,

Open our ears to the cries of the hungry,
-especially those who are starving for respect and dignity.

Open our hands to all those in need,
-especially those who lack the resources to maintain their lives.

Open our lips to proclaim your steadfast love,
-especially to those who seek a better quality of life.

Open our hearts as we go on our home visits,
-especially fill us with the grace of a listening heart.

Amen

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Our Vincentian Home Visit

SESSION 7.3

*Advocating With A
Vincentian Heart*

Learning Objectives

After completing this Session
you will have greater insight to:

- ① Appreciate the call of Pope Francis and our Rule to become advocates with a Vincentian heart.
- ② Deepen our understanding of the theories and strategies to help move people out of poverty.
- ③ Understand that our Vincentian charism embraces systemic and immediate needs.
- ④ Comprehend the demand of the Rule for us “to change our attitudes.”
- ⑤ Identify approaches that contribute to people’s ultimate freedom and independence.



SESSION 7.3 ADVOCATING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART

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OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

“The love of Christ urges us who have reached the conviction that since one died for all, all died. He died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised up...In all we do we strive to present ourselves as ministers of God, acting with patient endurance amid trials, difficulties, distress...Conducting ourselves with innocence, knowledge and patience, in the Holy Spirit, in sincere love.” (2 Cor. 5:14-15; 6:4-6)

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis often echoes the call of our Vincentian Vocation. In his book *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis inspires us to bring **loving attentiveness** to our relationships with the neighbor in need. Pope Francis touches our Vincentian heart and calls us to become advocates for people living in poverty. In many ways, he describes the Vincentian charism and reflects the Vincentian commitment to approaching poverty systemically, and so let us ponder and pray with some of his words:

“Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other ‘in a certain sense as one with ourselves.’ This **loving attentiveness** is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith.” (#199)

“It is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned and many others.” (#210)

“...If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good. In this regard, one saying of Saint Paul will not surprise us: ‘The love of Christ urges us on.’ (2 Cor 5:14)...” (#9)

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“...For here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means.” (#10)

“Though it is true that mission demands great generosity on our part, it would be wrong to see it as a heroic individual undertaking, for it is first and foremost the Lord’s work, surpassing anything which we can see and understand...” (#12)

“The Church, guided by the Gospel of mercy and by love for mankind, hears the cry for justice and intends to respond to it with all her might. In this context, we can understand Jesus’ command to his disciples: ‘You yourselves give them something to eat!’ (Mk. 6:37). It means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter.” (#188)

“Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.” (#207)

Pause to Reflect and Share:

How do you find the Vincentian Vocation and Ministry reflected in Pope Francis words?

OUR RULE FORMS OUR VINCENTIAN HEART

The Vincentian charism and “stance” towards those we serve is best described by the foundational principles found in our Rule:

The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society’s members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope. (Rule 1.2)

As Vincentians, we are called to serve our neighbors in need, approaching them with loving presence and friendship. The complex conditions of the different circumstances of poverty challenge us to discern how best to support our neighbor.

We are called to discern how to best connect with our neighbor to assure that the partnership and help we offer is targeted to position them to actively participate in their own plan, by recognizing their gifts and talents.

Vincentians are aware that sometimes we risk enabling behaviors that keep a person and their family in poverty. Our focus is on empowering our neighbors to move out of poverty. One way of explaining empowerment is with the old saying: "give a person a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a person how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Empowerment is helping a family or an individual become economically stable. For the Vincentian, this requires ongoing education and formation around poverty's circumstances and obstacles and the strategies that best enable the journey to a sustainable life.

While our Rule calls us to promote "self-sufficiency", we must recognize that none of us truly lives a sustainable life by ourselves and our own effort. Our faith calls us to be a community of believers. The path to sustainability is not one carved out solely by an individual. Everyone needs social capital: others who care about them and connect them to others.

Vincentians are called to **advocate** with a Vincentian heart. The charism of Vincentian spirituality speaks to both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the focus is on changing legal, cultural, environmental and social conditions that impact and marginalize persons and populations. It can mean advocacy to change systems that affect the lives of the poor like availability of healthcare or insurance; a compassionate welfare system that encourages work, not dependency; job training; access to affordable, decent housing; access to quality education for children and adults; a plan that mitigates the loss of public benefits as income grows to not discourage taking a higher wage job; and the conversion of predatory loans to traditional low interest loans.

Vincentian macro level advocacy appreciates the complex intersections between public policy, economics and culture. Our advocacy goal is to effect systems that promote economic stability of those we serve.

The macro level of advocacy reflects the Society's commitment to

Systemic Change. We are called to stay attuned to the presence of poverty in our communities as our Rule states:

Adaptation to a Changing World

Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society. (Rule 1.6)

The micro level focuses on changing individual lives. This can be very personal and means one person individually touching another person's life, as Jesus did, through one-on-one relationships: "person-to-person" friendship, advice and counsel, thought partnership, support and encouragement. It can be a referral to a program or course that might help them, such as life skills, parenting, etc ... or direct coaching on creating a resume, job interviewing, budgeting as well as help through times of financial stress related to rent, utility bills and food ... whatever helps them realize their dreams. There is always a call to meet immediate needs that we must respond to out of love for the person. However, we must also be careful that we do not drift into simply enabling the current life in poverty by simply becoming "rescuers."

Engaging the neighbor in their home, bringing the loving presence and friendship flowing from the compassionate love of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Vincentian ministry. It is the relationship of the friend, journeying with individuals and families in a kind of solidarity that truly recognizes and respects the dignity of each person and the gifts that flow from that dignity. Our Rule in a profound way calls us to:

Reverence for the Poor

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. Members observe the utmost confidentiality in the provision of material and any other type of support. (Rule 1.8)

We help persons by sharing our time and listening presence. While we must prioritize, we should take care not to jump to quickly to a

plan WE think will work. Sometimes, **real** help takes **real** time. What we know about the impacts of poverty on a person's decision-making capacity helps us to have compassion when folks have disorganized approaches to problems.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

How have you become an advocate with a Vincentian heart both in macro and micro levels?

TYRANNY OF THE MOMENT

Phil DeVol, in his book *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*, describes how the "Tyranny of the Moment" impacts persons living in poverty. Because their lives are dominated by an exhausting pattern of day-to-day problems there is no time or energy for learning new skills or the development of longer term planning habits. It is true that the most important support we can give is listening and sharing as a neighbor and friend.

Mentoring a person or family over time requires education and instruction. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul provides training and recommends publications for ongoing Vincentian formation, and much of this formation comes from ongoing experience as each relationship has its own character.

Getting Ahead in a Just Getting By World, also by Phil DeVol, is one structured program (16-20 weeks of small group workshops) that empowers individuals to look at their lives now, their lives as they dream it could be, assess personal and community resources, develop motivation to change and a plan to achieve their dreams. Coupling this foundation with mentoring can start individuals on the journey to sustainability. Examples of systematic approaches to the mentoring role are available through the SVdP website under "Getting Ahead" or "Systemic Change."

The **Ozanam Orientation** presents an important session on "Understanding Poverty" as the Society realizes that this is essential to our Vincentian Vocation and the stewardship of our ministry. In this

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session, three patterns of Poverty in the United States are identified and discussed:

Situational Poverty: Poverty due to temporary circumstances

Life-long Challenges: Poverty due to long-term illness or disability

Generational Poverty: Poverty over two or more generations

There are other poverty patterns (immigrant, elderly, rural, working poor). Understanding the particular challenges of each pattern and especially the three categories help us to begin to understand and respect the importance of our education and formation around poverty so that we can deploy strategies that are most effective.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

How have you observed the “tyranny of the moment” in the lives of those you have visited?

STRATEGIES TO BREAK POVERTY BARRIERS

In her pamphlet *“Breaking the Iron Cage: Helping People in Poverty Move Forward,”* Donna Beegle has a section entitled “Strategies to Break Poverty Barriers.” In it she lists five theories of practice to help people move out of poverty, and along with the theories she suggests strategies we can use on home visits to assist those we serve:

1. STRENGTHS THEORY

“Every individual has strengths. You can empower people by focusing on what is good about them, what they do know and what skills they have now.” (Dr. Donna Beegle)

Vincentians begin each relationship with love and support in mind. Starting out with a focus on what IS working helps to honor the dignity of persons. Our Rule calls us to:

A vision of the civilization of love

Affirming the dignity of each human being as created in God’s image, and Jesus’ particular identification with those who are excluded by society, Vincentians envision a more just society in

which the rights, responsibilities and development of all people are promoted. (Rule 7.2)

Our greatest gift is our friendship and love, offered in a truly brotherly or sisterly and selfless spirit. Indeed, we can admire those we serve when we allow their circumstances to remind us of our own brokenness, our own difficulties and to remind us of the words of Bl. Frederic Ozanam, that the poor one: "is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and our charity, and to save us by our works."

Strategies:

- Stand in awe of those fighting poverty. Look for strengths and skills. Believe everyone has knowledge and talents.
- Tell people what you believe is good about them.
- Find ways for people to shine. Learn about their skills and ask them to contribute. Help them feel included and needed.
- Tell people you are happy to see them (even when they are late or have not met a deadline).
- Help them to feel wanted and valued.
- Practice showing empathy instead of sympathy (no one likes people to feel sorry for them).

2. RESILIENCY THEORY

"Resiliency is the ability to cope and continue functioning, despite experiencing stress and adversity. It is not a personal trait. Professionals can help people develop resiliency by focusing on what is good about the person." (Dr. Donna Beegle)

The Vincentian ministry is all about supporting resiliency in a person's life. We let our virtue of humility remind us of the nobility and dignity of each person we serve, and we accept our small role in encouraging our brothers and sisters on their journey, identifying the positive traits we authentically see and admire.

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One of the most important Vincentian traits is listening carefully to those we serve, picking up on the amazing ways they have adapted to difficult situations and lifting that up! Our Rule calls us to:

Promotion of Self-sufficiency

Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community. (Rule 1.10)

Strategies:

- Treat people special. Show them what is unique about them.
- Practice a “strengths-based approach” when communicating with people in poverty:
 - Stand in awe of those fighting poverty. Look for strengths and skills.
 - Tell people what you believe is good about them.
 - Find ways for people to shine. Learn about their skills and ask them to contribute. Help them feel included and needed.
 - Tell people you are happy to see them; help them feel wanted and valued.
 - Practice showing empathy instead of sympathy.

3. ASSET THEORY

“The more assets a person has, both internal (conflict resolution skills, sense of purpose, etc.) and external (housing, transportation, etc.) the more likely they will succeed. Learn what assets a person has and what services or opportunities are needed; connect them to those resources.” (Dr. Donna Beegle)

Caught in the confusion and chaos of poverty and in the negative messages that society and the media portray about the poor, persons we serve are often simply unable to appreciate the strengths and assets they already have, or the ability they have to access resources.

Only after a real and trusting relationship is established can we authentically identify assets and begin to support with education, advocacy, and navigating community resources that help individuals build skills. The strength of the relationship, based on friendship, allows the neighbor to open up and receive information.

Our Rule reinforces these relationships:

Empathy

Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or a sister. (Rule 1.9)

Strategies:

- Learn what assets a person has and what education or other resources are needed; connect them to those resources.
- Build partnerships in your community so you know where to find resources.
- Help people navigate the middle-class world. Coach them how to make phone calls; coach them how to fill out paperwork; explain complex information in simple terms.
- Teach people how to advocate for themselves. Tell them what questions to ask, explain how systems work, suggest programs or services you know will help them.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

What are the biases and judgments that get in the way of the full expression of your Vincentian heart?

4. SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

“No one does everything by themselves. Those who are successful have connections with others who support them in various ways. People in poverty need meaningful relationships with others who are educated and have resources to support them.” (Dr. Donna Beegle)

Donna Beegle says that only when we engage persons at a personal level, finding common ground with examples of our past struggles with similar problems and how we overcame them will they be able to trust and to be open up to our help. Then we can engage in activities based on Social Capital.

When a trusting relationship is established, then Vincentians can engage in mutuality that leverages ideas, education, and resources. As Blessed Frederic Ozanam says,

“Help becomes honorable, because it may become mutual, because every man who gives a kind word, a good advice, a consolation today, may tomorrow stand himself in need of a kind word, an advice, or a consolation; because the hand that you clasp clasps yours in return; because the indigent family whom you love loves you in return, and will have largely acquitted themselves toward you when the old man, the mother, the little children shall have prayed for you.”

(Frederic Ozanam, October 21, 1848).

Indeed, our Rule shapes our Vincentian heart by calling us to:

The practical Vincentian approach to social justice

The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice. (Rule 7.4)

Strategies:

- Introduce people to others who have benefited from education.
- Tell people about opportunities (programs, events, etc.) that you know will help put them in a place to build relationships with people who can help them.
- Make connections face-to-face instead of giving phone numbers or a “list” of people/agencies to call.

- Help people obtain all the tools, resources and knowledge they need to feel like they “belong” (clothes, materials, knowledge of etiquette, etc.).
- Give people address books and your contact information.

5. FAULTY ATTRIBUTION THEORY

“We attribute motives to someone else’s behavior without discovering the ‘why’ behind their actions.”

(Dr. Donna Beegle)

All Vincentians are working with a personal challenge around this tendency and it is one of our biggest challenges to cultivating a Vincentian heart! There are many references in the Rule and in the Vincentian tradition advising us to join our brothers and sisters where they are, no judgments, only loving, supporting and encouraging them in their next decision that could improve circumstances for them and their family.

Once again, we remember Blessed Rosalie Rendu’s words:

“Always remember, that if we had been through the hardships the poor have had to meet, if our childhood had been one of constant want, perhaps, we too, would have given away to envy and hatred. But be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor.” (Rosalie Rendu 1833)

Our Rule forms our Vincentian heart by encouraging us to face our own prejudices:

Striving to change attitudes

Vincentians oppose discrimination of all kinds and work to change the attitudes of those who view the weak or those who are different with prejudice, fear or scorn, attitudes which gravely wound the dignity of others. (Rule 7.7)

Strategies:

- Seek to move beyond judgment towards understanding and compassion.
- Tell yourself people are doing the best they can with the information and perspectives they possess.

- Remind yourself that your experiences and worldview may be different from those you serve.
- Attempt to find out the “why” behind the behavior.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

What strategies of the five theories have you found most challenging?

OUR RULE CHALLENGES US TO BECOME ADVOCATES

The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions

The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity. (Rule 7.1)

Vincentians help with the immediate need: food, rent or shelter, utility bills, furniture, clothing, medical care and transportation. And as we know:

Any form of personal help...

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.”(Rule 1.3)

And, we also need to think about systemic needs, the underlying root causes of the person’s problems: language problems, job skills deficit, low self-esteem, not knowing how to run a household, lack of skills in caring for children, drug and alcohol addiction. Indeed, Vincentians embrace both systemic **and** immediate needs as part of their ministry and that humbles and inspires us to discernment and prayer.

Our Rule challenges that for Vincentians this all starts with:

Facing the structures of sin

Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements. (Rule 7.6)

THE MANUAL SHAPES OUR VINCENTIAN HEART

Conference members should never adopt the attitude that the money is theirs, or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it. Although common sense in distribution is expected by those who support the Conference, members need to remember that, by and large, they are dealing with individuals and families who may be desperate, who often have dysfunctional histories, and who are at a point in their lives when a multitude of problems weigh them down. These are precisely the people whom the Society is called on to serve by bringing them support and hope. **Erring on the side of compassion is always advisable.** (p. 26)

Some of the questions Vincentians need to ask:

- How can we best help this family or individual for the long term...not just for the next few days but for the rest of their lives? After discovering the underlying causes of their current problems and their dreams for the future, what are the next steps needed to help them realize those dreams.
- How can we support this family to meet the challenges and long process of becoming economically self-sufficient? Nothing is accomplished overnight.
- How do we nourish, encourage, assist, support, stimulate, and unleash within them the realization that things can be different so that they will have the hope and courage to begin?
- What federal/state/local government assistance and support programs might be best for them during this period of recovery?
- What community resources are available to help them while they are building the skills that will enable them to get a job with family sustaining income?

EMPOWERMENT

The challenge to all helping programs is found in the question: *Does our work contribute to people's ultimate freedom and independence?* A fundamental principle of community organizing (or of parenting or of teaching, for that matter) is: "Do not do for another what that person can do for themselves." While this practice might seem expedient and helpful, it sends a message that we don't have confidence in the person's ability to participate in their own plan for sustainability.

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Perhaps the best model of empowerment is Jesus himself. Scripture is full of examples in which Jesus insists that people take responsibility for themselves, while at the same time alleviating their immediate need. Jesus does not allow people to remain victims. He forgives and heals the very worst sinners, but always admonishes them, "Go and sin no more." May we be guided by Jesus' example to offer others both healing love and support while holding them responsible through a loving relationship for respecting themselves and honoring their dignity by participating fully in a plan for sustainability.

A neighbor's own strengths are central to the helping relationship. Yet often those in helping professions only talk about "dysfunction" and obstacles. Vincentians must focus on the neighbor's; strengths and empowerment. Human beings possess the strengths and potential to resolve their own difficult life situations. They also contribute to society and to their community by doing so.

The role of the Vincentian is to nourish, encourage, assist, support, stimulate, and unleash the strengths within people. These strengths may come from religious beliefs, from a moral code, from personal pride, from concern for the children, or the example they see in others—you, perhaps. Besides the example you set, the Vincentians role is to help neighbors articulate the nature of their situations, identify what they need, explore alternatives for achieving those needs, and help them down the road towards their goal.

Neighbors are ultimately responsible for the spirit and energy that can bring significant change. Vincentians bring an empathetic heart, temporary material assistance, a long term supportive mentoring relationship, and connections to a collaborative network of community providers that help people build the personal resources needed to realize their dreams. Ultimately our most important gift to the neighbor is loving presence inspired by the charitable sacred heart and love of Jesus Christ. We are committed to walk with our neighbors in need and willing to share our knowledge in a manner that helps people realize their own power, take control of their lives, achieve their dreams.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

In your home visits how do you contribute to your neighbor's ultimate freedom and independence by empowering them to be self-sufficient?

Our Vincentian Home Visit

SESSION 7.4

*Discerning With A
Vincentian Heart*

Learning Objectives

After completing this
Session you will:

- ① Understand the challenge and tension between Charity and Stewardship
- ② Recognize the conditions of poverty in order to identify creative solutions and attitudes
- ③ Appreciate the grace and importance of Vincentian Discernment
- ④ Deepen knowledge of the four steps of Discernment:
 - Imitation of Jesus Christ
 - Unrestrictive Readiness
 - Significance of Events
 - The Decision
- ⑤ Comprehend the deeper meaning of the Rule and Manual in our call to always be Discerning with a Vincentian Heart.



SESSION 7.4 DISCERNING WITH A VINCENTIAN HEART

Notes

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

"And the Lord God said: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will take out your heart of stone and give you a new heart of love...and I will put my Spirit within you so that you will obey my laws and do whatever I command." (Ez 36:26)

INTRODUCTION

Discernment of our Charity and Stewardship Responsibilities

As Vincentians we are faced at times with difficult decisions around how to share our charitable charism with neighbors who are experiencing chronic problems with situational or generational poverty, while living out our fidelity to stewardship of time and financial resources in service to Love.

When our Conference faces repeated requests for assistance from the same family, it is a signal that we must gather in discernment and prayer to assure we are engaging their deeper needs.

In some situations it is clear that we must engage in thought partnership, encouragement, empowerment, and moderate the assistance we provide in the context of the willingness of the able neighbor to help themselves. This is at the heart of the holistic goal of the Society, to leverage financial assistance that positions the person to access and build on their spiritual strengths, talents and gifts. Our goal is to help our neighbors find the confidence to realize they are capable of self-sufficiency, self-efficacy... while appreciating the very real obstacles they face on the journey from poverty to sustainability.

In other situations our neighbor has so few marketable skills, is limited in education or emotional maturity, suffers from physical or mental problems and is among those whom Jesus was describing when he said, "the poor you will always have with you." These individuals, no matter what kind of agency or Conference help is given, have limited independence, and periodic help is the most effective and Loving support the Conference can give.

Serving our neighbors on the journey to sustainability is not a science with clear rules, easy formulas or provable facts. God has called us to be artists, rather than engineers, in meeting the needs of people with

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a Vincentian heart. The Holy Spirit will provide us with the gift of wisdom through our experiences in this St. Vincent de Paul ministry. We must accept that moving deeper than the surface request for repeated help, that doesn't seem to be helping the neighbor improve their situation, is necessary. A "no" to a particular request flows from true love and concern and is a greater "yes" and invitation to assistance at a deeper level of relationship.

Similarly, we must also take care not to limit the amount of financial assistance to a family based exclusively on Conference "guidelines" for helping a family up to a certain financial limit or frequency. In some instances, an "investment" in building skills or education can make a transformative difference in their life...or helping to cover some basic living expenses during the period when they are building capabilities and moving up the income curve (and losing benefits) may be necessary.

The tensions we face in discernment of our obligations for charity, justice, systemic change and for stewardship are at the heart of our prayers as a Conference, to offer unconditional love while establishing appropriate boundaries based on the specifics of the situation.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

What charity-stewardship tensions have you felt?

The Home Visit is central to the process of meeting our neighbors where they are, and offers the best opportunity for thoughtful and direct observations that lead to creative solutions and attitudes. We learn more and more about the conditions of poverty and put ourselves as best we can in the shoes of our neighbors, finding the balance between offering financial or other material support and taking the time to provide ongoing encouragement and thought partnership as they journey. When we automatically "go through the motions" and offer support because "we've got the money," we must stop and discern the best approach to stewardship.

As a Conference we must also consider:

- Helping Conferences even more needy than our own.
- Keeping good records of neighbors so we can discern patterns and find more creative ways to promote systemic change with them.
- Notifying the District Council or the Conference where a family is moving, if it is an on-going case.

- Maintaining a constant prayerful discernment to balance enabling vs empowering charitable love.

From the Vincentian perspective, we always begin with providing prayers, understanding, information and caring. We avoid the reduction of our ministry of “serving” only to giving financial or material assistance. The greatest gift we can offer our neighbors is the gift of our time in an ongoing relationship.

Suggestions:

- We pray to receive God’s wisdom and Christ’s love in performing our Vincentian work. Mass, the Sacraments and reading of the Scriptures are essential. We gather together in our Conference meetings in thoughtful discernment and prayer regularly. Vincentians must be contemplatives in action.
- We commit to spend more time, over time, with our neighbors and make follow-up visits, learning how to mentor.
- We endeavor to listen deeply and with sensitivity to underlying problems and their root causes.
- We keep abreast of the many services and resource-building programs available in our community for persons in need. This was the hallmark of the Society in Frederic Ozanam’s time and is still true today in the 21st Century.
- Vincentians are aware of different types of poverty and tailor their sharing of resources and services available in the community to the individual neighbor(s).
- Service provided for recurrent or problem cases can sometimes be used as an incentive to move some individuals, who are ambivalent about seeking outside help, to address and take action to solve their problems. Help in such situations would be given contingent upon their following through on sincere, well-thought-out plans created by the neighbor and home visit teams or their mentor with consultation and coaching by other Vincentians and community partners.
- We strive to create a loving and compassionate impression with a family and leave them with the feeling that we care for them, even though we may not give them all the material or financial help they requested. Follow up visits reinforce our commitment. Your presence in a home can give hope and help heal wounds that you don’t even know about.

Pause to Reflect and Share:
How have you found a balance between offering financial support and other ways of encouragement and assistance?

VINCENTIAN DISCERNMENT

Sometimes we simply are baffled by the needs of the neighbor, wanting to help but not knowing how. This opens us to the powerful practice of **Vincentian Discernment**.

Discernment is essentially a prayerful process through which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can come to discover the difference between what is our will and what is the will of God. It is rooted in the faith that God can and does direct our lives, that indeed, God loves us tenderly and he asks only that we trust him and entrust our lives to him.

The Key Components:

Vincentian Discernment is simple and radical, it demands faith and trust, and it is rooted in honesty and openness to the Holy Spirit in prayer. This requires two key components: first we must be led by the Spirit and second, we must stand in complete freedom.

- **To be Led by the Spirit**

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. Discernment is not a democratic voting process, or a decision-making process of the head. Indeed, discernment is not about negotiating a “good deal” with God.

Discernment is essentially of the heart. It is about listening to what God is calling us to do. This requires the inner journey to the heart as it must be rooted in our deepest way of being. Discernment is not a “thinking head” but a “listening heart.”

- **To Stand in Complete Freedom**

St. Vincent says:

“Only to souls who possess tranquility is true *discernment* given. Without tranquility of spirit, it is impossible to succeed

in any exercise; but as this depends principally upon God and our spirit of indifference, we must seek tranquility in these two sources. The nature of indifference is to strip from us all resentment and all desire, to detach us from ourselves and from every creature. Why haven't we the same liking for freedom that He has? O Savior, You have opened the door to freedom for us; teach us to find it. Enlighten us, my Savior so that we may see the things we are attached to, and if it please You, bring us into the freedom of the children of God."

Indifference sometimes has negative connotations, so a better translation is "unrestricted readiness." It is a total openness to God, a willingness to accept a "yes" or a "no."

And so Vincent knew that discernment demands both our mind and our heart. For it is true, that it is only when we have critical minds and listening hearts, that the Spirit can lead us from the contract of decision making, to the covenant of discernment. And there is a radical difference between a contract, which is rooted in the head, and a covenant, which is rooted in the heart.

Vincentians keep an open mind toward fellow members with different opinions. As every Vincentian understands our neighbor differently, it is important to be open to these different views on how to engage their needs.

Pause to Reflect and Share:

How have you experienced "unrestrictive readiness" in listening to God and in responding to your neighbor?

THE PROCESS OF VINCENTIAN DISCERNMENT

Discernment essentially consists of four important steps:

- **Imitation of Jesus Christ**
- **Unrestrictive Readiness**
- **Significance of Events**
- **The Decision**

The first two steps of the discernment process are very critical. For if we come to discernment without an open heart and open mind truly searching for the will of God in "holy indifference," then we must know that the process will essentially be one of decision-making

but will not be one of discernment. Decision-making leads us to a contract, but discernment leads us to a deeper covenant with God.

I. IMITATION OF JESUS CHRIST:

Vincent was driven in his discernment by the vision of Jesus as the Servant of the Poor; he never took his eyes off of Jesus. His passion was always to imitate Christ and to do the will of the Father. The first questions he would always ask are:

- What would Jesus do in this situation?
- What would Jesus do in these circumstances?
- How does this decision help me to better serve others?
- How does this decision affect my own self-aggrandizement?

II. UNRESTRICTIVE READINESS:

Holy indifference demands interior detachment, an “unrestrictive readiness,” to do whatever God will ask of us. It means that our mind cannot be already made up so that we are trying to change God’s mind and everybody else’s. We must be willing to give up control, to step out of our preconceived plans, and to stand in the freedom of accepting a “yes” or a “no.” And so we are called to answer the following questions in simplicity and honesty:

- Am I willing to let go of my prejudices?
- Am I willing to step outside my preconceived plan?
- Am I willing to give up control?
- Am I willing to accept a “yes” or a “no”?

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF EVENTS:

When we are centered in “unrestrictive readiness,” we are free to weigh the evidence, the pros and cons, with a listening heart. Therefore, we must reflect on our motives, our purposes, the means and then on the outcomes and consequences. This will involve questions of information, insight, facts and values.

Vincentian spirituality is especially characterized as a spirituality of the event, where we find that God manifests himself each day through our encounters with people and circumstances. Prayer alone allows us to place ourselves in a state of being able to recognize God and to listen to Him, as we look at the objective and subjective facts, and we weigh the disadvantages and the advantages.

Vincentian Discernment leads us to look at the following:

- What are the subjective/objective facts?
- What are the events and circumstances?
- What are my feelings and intuition?
- How is God speaking through events?
- How is God speaking through people?
- How is God speaking through Civil and Church authority?

IV. THE DECISION:

Discernment leads to action flowing from God's wisdom and love. Vincent's practical wisdom was that we must always be firm regarding the goal but gentle and flexible regarding the means. Vincent does not choose the middle of the road, but found wisdom in embracing extremes: love God and love your neighbor; love is affective and effective. And so we must now look at the decision, the action, in the following light:

- Is the decision reasonably clear?
- Is it rooted in peace?
- Is the decision just?
- Is the decision compassionate?

If these conditions are not met, and if there is no peace, then return and continue the discernment process. But,

- If these conditions are met, ACT...and do not look back.

Once the decision is reasonably clear, just and compassionate, just and rooted in a deep peace...then you must act and do not look back. No "if only" or "maybe we should" ...if you have done the best you could to truly discern the will of God, you can be firm in going forward with trust and faith in God in all aspects of our Vincentian life.

In discerning on how to help our neighbor we need to ask ourselves:

- Does this empower the neighbor?
- Does it contribute to moving them towards sustainability and their dreams?

Pause to Reflect and Share:

How can we use the Discernment process in our Conference?

OUR RULE CALLS US TO EMPATHY AND STEWARDSHIP

There is a natural tension between charity and stewardship. It is not a problem to be solved but a tension to be managed through discernment. What do our Rule and Manual say about Charity and Stewardship?

Striving to change attitudes

The Society strives, with charity, to foster new attitudes of respect and empathy for the weak, so that all are able to understand, recognize and defend the right of each person to be responsible for his or her own life. The Society promotes understanding, cooperation and mutual love among people of different cultures, religions, ethnic origins and social groups, and so contributes to the peace and unity of all peoples. (Rule 7.7)

God calls us to be His instruments of healing to others, to be His presence, to share His love and compassion, and to help others reach their full potential as human beings. He calls us to love one another. We fulfill God's call especially when we enter into the lives of a neighbor in crisis. Entering into the life of a neighbor requires empathy. Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other being's frame of reference, i.e., the capacity to place oneself in another's position. The practice requires true engagement, listening, taking the time to really understand what living in poverty must really be like.

Gratitude to those we visit

Vincetians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognize that the fruit of their labors springs, not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve. (Rule 1.12)

Vincetians are challenged to figure out how best to serve our neighbor. We balance our accountability for stewardship of the funds provided by our generous parishioners with the primary purpose of the ministry; to grow in holiness through our compassionate person to person service to those living in poverty, the vulnerable, and the marginalized.

The use of money and property for the poor

Vincetians should never forget that giving love, talents and time is more important than giving money. Nevertheless, the Society uses money and property to help relieve the suffering of those in need. The Society's funds must be handled with the utmost care, prudence and generosity. Money must not be

hoarded. Decisions regarding the use of money and property are to be made after reflection in the light of the Gospel and Vincentian principles. Accurate records must be kept of all money received or spent. The Society may not allot funds to other organizations, except occasionally for other branches of the Vincentian Family, save under exceptional circumstances. (Rule 3.14)

THE RULE FORMS OUR DISCERNING HEART

The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope (Rule 1.2)

Any form of personal help...

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. (Rule 1.3)

...to anyone in need

The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender, or political opinions. (Rule 1.4)

Adaptation to a Changing World

Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society. (Rule 1.6)

Empathy

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister. (Rule 1.9)



Serving in Hope

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