

From Your Servant Leaders

October 4, 2017

“Come, Holy Spirit, live within our lives, and strengthen us by your love.

Send forth your Spirit, and new life will be created.”

We begin many of our meetings with this familiar prayer. Emmanuel Bailly led our founders in a similar prayer at their first meeting in 1833. It is also how I began my speech as a candidate for president a year ago, and I return to it again in this first letter to you as your new National Council President.



The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has relied upon the Holy Spirit to guide our journey for the past 184 years. As we begin this journey together, I am committed to listening to how the Spirit is speaking today, through you and Vincentians at every level of the Society.

It is not quite accurate to say “as we begin this journey together.” It would be more appropriate to say that I am joining you on a journey that you may have started many years ago, and now I am privileged to be one of your servant leaders on that journey.

My first step during this time of transition has been to listen and learn as much as I can from Sheila Gilbert and the board members who have served us so well for the past six years. I am grateful for their service and wisdom. My second task has been to put together a new team of servant leaders to provide the guidance we will need to advance the Society’s mission. I am grateful to the women and men who have agreed to serve with me on our board and committees. Over the next few years, you will meet and work with this talented group of dedicated Vincentians to create plans to strengthen and expand our network of charity in the United States.

We are starting this planning process at a time when we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian Charism. Many have asked, “What is this Vincentian Charism we are celebrating?” Briefly, St. Vincent had several experiences during 1617 that changed the direction of his ministry, and he began then to organize efforts to work with the suffering and poor. Those experiences were simple events that convinced him that the poor were spiritually hungry for better pastoral care and that parishioners were willing to put their faith into action by aiding their neighbors in need.

From that date forward, St. Vincent de Paul was keenly attentive to how the Holy Spirit was at work in the people and in the events around him. Trusting in God’s providence, Vincent organized the faithful around him to bring good news to the poor. To advance this mission, he founded an order of priests, an order of women religious and an association of lay women. His clear understanding and articulation of the charism of service to the poor continued to inspire people long after he died. Now, there are over 250 organizations in the Vincentian Family that share this 400-year-old charism.

As a founder of the Society named after St. Vincent, Frederic Ozanam articulated a bold vision that really describes the entire Vincentian Family – “a network of charity embracing the whole world.” We are called to continue building and strengthening that network of charity in the United States.

As servant leaders planning for our Society, we can trust the words St. Vincent de Paul wrote to a young priest he sent out on mission: “Do not limit your vision any longer to yourself, but see the Lord around you and in you, ready to put His hand to the work as soon as you ask for His help. You will see that all will go well.”

I invite you to grow in your vocation as a member of the Society named after this great saint. Be attentive to the needs in your community, and then share your observations with those in your Conferences and Councils. In this way we can strengthen our network of charity and improve our service to neighbors in need. Let us rely on the Lord and ask Him to put His hand to our efforts. If we do that, I think Vincent is correct – all will go well.

Ralph Middlecamp

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ralph Middlecamp". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

National Council President

P.S. Dave Barringer and I will be sharing this column with other servant leaders from our National Council to provide a diversity of voices and perspectives to our membership.