



SERVING IN HOPE MODULE III

Our Vincentian Heritage

SESSION 3.3:

The Rule

Learning Objectives

After completing this Session, you will have greater insight to:

- 1. Appreciate the Rule as a gift of the Holy Spirit.**
- 2. Understand the wisdom of the Rule.**
- 3. Recognize the Vincentian Heritage found in the Rule.**

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

"Yet God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit. The Spirit scrutinizes all matters, even the deep things of God...No one knows what lies at the depths of God but the Spirit of God. The Spirit we received is not the world's spirit but God's Spirit, helping us to recognize the gifts he has given us. We speak of these, not in words of human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, thus interpreting spiritual things in spiritual terms. (Corinthians 2:10-13)

INTRODUCTION:

(Each section is read slowly and reflectively, by different members.)

Shortly before he died in 1853, Blessed Frederic inaugurated a new Conference in Florence, Italy. At the meeting, he told the new Vincentians the story of the establishment of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul twenty years earlier. Frederic then said: "You see that we cannot in truth take the title of founders, for it was God who willed and who, founded the Society."

These words should make us Vincentians feel justifiably proud and humble at the same time and invoke feelings of deep gratitude as well: "God willed and founded our Society." Frederic's words echo the same sentiment of St. Vincent de Paul when addressing his religious communities, for Vincent always reminded his followers that it was not he but God who founded them.

Earlier in his life, Frederic stated that the "Society of St. Vincent de Paul was indeed a Providential fact." Frederic was convinced that God in his Providence had brought the Society into existence and was directing its rapid expansion throughout Europe, the Near East and the Americas.

If the Society is a gift of God - "willed and founded by God" - then it is also true that the Rule is also a gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moved and prompted the original authors with his inspiration, insights and clarity in the composition of the Rule.

The Rule is a great gift given and passed on to us by Blessed Frederic Ozanam and the pioneers of the Society through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Rule is a gift originally authored by three men: Emmanuel Bailly, the first President of the Society, Francois Lallier, the Secretary General, and Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

The Rule was adopted by the membership of the Society on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1835.

(Each section is read slowly and reflectively, by different members.)

The Rule is amazingly simple, immensely practical and based on good, solid common sense. It has a wealth of wondrous direction and guidance, which is invigorating for our spirit and purpose. The Rule keeps us honest and true to who we are and what we are about in the service of God's poor. The Rule roots us in God. It forever keeps before us our spirituality and our need to advance in it. The Rule is not an end in itself. It is a means a means of assisting us in our spiritual lives and in our ministry.

The Rule calls us to solidarity with Vincentians locally, nationally and internationally. The very first paragraph of the Rule reminds us that we are "an international Catholic organization." We are more than a local association, parochial or diocesan; we are more than a national group. We are an international Catholic organization.

St. Vincent said to his community: "If you keep the Rule, the Rule will keep you." A Rule does keep us: keeps us unified, keeps us properly focused, keeps us authentic. The Rule provides us with a standard of uniformity and connectiveness. One of the ways solidarity within the Society is achieved is through fidelity to the Rule.

As any viable and reliable association, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has borders, directions, guidelines; otherwise, it would have died years ago. But the fact that our Society has existed for so long and done so much good for so many of our suffering brothers and sisters, proves that it is indeed a "Providential fact." The Rule is the adhesive that has kept the Society from unraveling.

The Rule is a gift of the Holy Spirit and as is the case with any gift, it must be accepted, otherwise it is not a gift. Freedom and grace is involved. A gift freely given, must be freely received. The Rule has honored the fidelity of its followers to the spirit of the Founders for over 170 years and thus testifies to the Rules credibility, effectiveness and worthiness.

Pause in silence for reflection-underline the words/phrases that touched you-make notes in the space provided.

DISCUSSION:

In what ways does our Conference live the Rule?

CLOSING PRAYER: Let us close with the words of Blessed Frederic Ozanam:

Father, grant us the wisdom and integrity to persevere in fidelity to the Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Committed to growing in spirituality, living in a community of faith and serving those who are poor and suffering, may we follow those who have gone before us, becoming a visible sign of Christ and a witness to your boundless love. Amen

ENRICHMENT READING:

(For your prayer and reflection before the next session.)

THE RULE OF THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

By Ronald Ramson, C.M.

The growth of the Society from a single Conference into an organization of many Conferences necessitated regulations that would help preserve the objectives and spirit of the original foundation. In 1835, two years after its founding, the Society formulated its Rule, a series of Articles, based upon the practical experiences of the first Vincentians.

Vincentian Experience and Heritage

The Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was derived out of the deep truths of the first Vincentians experience, tradition and certain bedrock spiritual principles. The lived truths of Vincentian experience were the matrix of the Rule. The experience of working with the poor gave them firsthand empirical knowledge of what worked and what did not. The experience of collaborating together, of relating together in meetings, of governance, all provided firsthand empirical knowledge. They learned from the school of success and failure and brought that to the composition of the Rule.

The founders brought to the Rule a two-hundred-year tradition of ministering to the poor as done by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. One of their original, major mentors was Sr. Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity who gave the charter members of the Society the insights and spirit of the Vincentian tradition as taught by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac.

The Rule of the Society is therefore derived from the bedrock spiritual principles of St. Vincent and St. Louise: their mind, heart and spirit. These principles teach us their incarnational spirituality which is to be Christ to others and to see Christ in others, especially the least of our brothers and sisters.

The Rule

When Emmanuel Bailly, Francois Lallier and Frederic Ozanam authored the first Rule, their experience told them that it was time for regulations. The Rule helped to stabilize a rapidly expanding Society. The lived reality of growing numbers told them that it was time for order and to put things down on paper. The actuality of having hundreds of men doing ministry warranted a Rule. The Rule would give structure and organization, clarity and definition. The Rule identified them as Vincentians: who they were and what they did. The Rule gave authority and set the boundaries.

The "Explanatory Notes" of the original Rule dated December 1835 verifies this: "We are now entering upon that formal organization we have long wished for. It has been delayed, for our association has already existed some years. But were we not bound to ascertain that God wished that it should continue, before determining the form which it should assume?"

Was it not necessary that it should be well established—that it should know what Heaven required of it—that it should judge what it could do by what it had done, before framing its rules and prescribing its duties? Now we have only to embody, as it were, in Regulations, usages already followed and cherished; and this is a guarantee that our Rule will be well received by all and will not be forgotten."

"Our association originated in religious motives; we must, therefore, look for the rules of our conduct nowhere but in the spirit of religion—in the examples and words of our Savior - in the instructions of the Church—in the lives of the Saints. Such are the reasons why we placed ourselves under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin and of St. Vincent de Paul, to whom we owe particular devotion, and whose footsteps we must perseveringly endeavor to follow."

Revisions of the Rule

The Rule is stable but not static. When Vincentian experience from time to time revealed the need for clarification or reinterpretation, commentaries to the individual Articles of the original Rule were appropriately introduced. In 1935 and in 1953 a thorough reworking of the Rule and Commentaries was undertaken by the Council General in Paris. Substance was not affected.

One could readily discern in the Society's Rule and Commentaries of the 1950's, the Rule of the 1830's.

In the 1960's, the President General of the Society put before the Society a challenging program of "renewal" based on considerations of spirituality, universality, extension, youth, training, adaptation and cooperation. The Society throughout the world responded enthusiastically to the challenge of the renewal, and the directives of the Second Vatican Council (1963 - 1965) brought about a further intensification of effort.

Then at the 1973 International Assembly the Society promulgated the latest version of the Rule which is divided into three principal parts:

- Part I: Focuses on basic principles of the Society. This is known as the Charter of the Society. It applies to all Vincentian members and units throughout the world. These five Charter statements define the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, discuss Vincentian spirituality, relate poverty to the Vincentian, describe the organizational network of the Society and look at the meetings of the Conferences.
- Part II: Deals with Conference and Council structures.
- Part III: Specifies the organization, functioning and authority of the Council General, the international governing body of the Society.

As we walk into the new millennium, the Holy Spirit will continue to call forth revision and renewal of the Rule.

Gift of the Holy Spirit

The Rule of the Society stands as a rallying point for celebration and thanksgiving. It is truly a gift of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a blessing. With only a few changes, the Rule of the Society has continued as the guide and blueprint for the Society for more than 170 years.

This, alone, is a tribute to its efficacy and to the Spirit who inspired it.

The Rule has worked effectively in countries on five continents, in diverse cultures, in a variety of languages and dialects, sometimes amid horrific civil upheavals and under chaotic conditions, through benign monarchies and audacious dictatorships, through atheistic communism, republics and democracies. The Rule has kept the Society alive and productive. The Rule has honored the fidelity of its followers to the spirit of the Founders. The Rule works.