



SERVING IN HOPE MODULE VI

Our Vincentian Conference

SESSION 6.1:

Our Spirituality

Learning Objectives

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

- 1. Appreciate the Essential Element of Spirituality in the Conference.**
- 2. Comprehend the importance of Prayer and Spiritual Formation.**
- 3. Recognize the role of the Spiritual Advisor**
- 4. Understand the Vincentian Discernment process.**

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

A lawyer stood up to pose this problem to Jesus: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit everlasting life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the law?" He replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" Jesus said, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you shall live." (Luke 10: 25-28)

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS HOLINESS

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

Rule, Part I: 2.2 states:

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

...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."

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is an international organization of lay persons, Catholic in character, who seek, in a spirit of justice and charity and by person-to-person involvement, to help those who are suffering.

To provide this personal and neighborly help, Vincentians organize themselves into small working groups, known as "Conferences," which are the first line of action. Vincentians regard the Conference as the paramount unit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It is at this grass-roots level that the great majority of Vincentians find themselves engaged in the person-to-person service with troubled persons and families in their immediate neighborhood.

From the foundation in 1833, the Essential Elements of the Society have been Spirituality, Friendship and Service. That is why the Rule calls us to make the journey together towards holiness.

Therefore, Spirituality is the first purpose of the Society. Our goal is not to bring help to the poor, at least when defined as material or financial assistance, but **to bring the love and peace**

of Christ to those who are suffering. Vincentians enhance their own spirituality by finding their Master, Christ, in the person of those they serve.

SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality serves as the life of a Conference, its vitality. Vincentian spirituality is based on the very real presence of Christ in those whom we serve. God became man through his Son and, in doing so, He brought great dignity to all humankind. He also brought good news to the poor, hungry and oppressed. Vincentians understand and believe this and also know that when they come to the aid of poor friends or neighbors, they are serving Jesus, their friend and neighbor. This is the core of Vincentian Spirituality.

Without Spirituality, our Conference becomes just another welfare organization dispensing food, clothing and money. By bringing God into this picture, the dispensing turns into loving help and concern for the individual we are trying to assist.

Rule, Part I: 2.2 continues:

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

- **Visiting and dedicating themselves to the poor, whose faith and courage often teach Vincentians how to live. Vincentians 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."

And so, Vincentians share a marvelous vision of the love of God extended to both rich and poor. Vincentians are thankful for the grace of serving the poor and finding the face of Christ, often disguised in so many ways, in the faces of those they serve.

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE CONFERENCE

Rule, Part I: 2.3 states:

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

Therefore, it is essential that all Conference meetings open with a Prayer, a spiritual reading using the **Vincentian Reflections** and a discussion with everyone participating. The normal time for this part of a Conference meeting is 10 to 15 minutes. The **Vincentian Reflections** are found on www.svdpusa.org (under Spiritual Resources).

After the Conference business meeting is concluded, a closing Prayer is said. This can be from the standard Vincentian prayer card or the Conference can innovate.

Rule, Part 3: Statute 4 and 9 calls:

Conferences and Councils to deepen the spiritual dimension of their vocation through the commissioning of leadership, the annual renewal of our commitment, and celebrating Vincentian feasts throughout the year.

"Vincentian Celebrations: *Rituals and Ceremonies*" is a resource from the National Council which offers prayer services for: Annual Commitment, Commissioning Ceremonies, Funeral/Wake Services, Feast Day Celebrations and Vincentian Meetings.

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

DISCUSSION:

How do we live the Essential Element of Spirituality in our Conference?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord, grant us the wisdom and strength to persevere when disappointed or distressed. May we never claim that the fruitfulness of our apostolate springs from ourselves alone. United in prayer and action, may we become a visible sign of Christ, and may we give witness to His boundless love, which reaches out to all and draws them to love one another in Him. Amen

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

Jesus said to his disciples: "Live on in me, as I do in you. No more than a branch can bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, can you bear fruit apart from me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who lives in me and I in him, will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing...If you live in me, and my works stay part of you, you may ask what you will it will be done for you. My Father has been glorified in your bearing much fruit and becoming my disciples." (John 15: 4-8)

THE SPIRITUAL ADVISOR

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

Rule Part I: 3.13 states:

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

A spiritual advisor, besides leading the prayer, reading and discussion at meetings, is the person who constantly "brings us back" to the spirit of St. Vincent and St. Louise, Bl. Frederic and Bl. Rosalie during discussions and debates. The Spiritual Advisor takes an active part in the Conference meeting, observing and making recommendations in order that the Conference stay focused on its mission.

Therefore, each Conference of the Society must have an active Spiritual Advisor. The pastor or a member of the parish clergy is ideal, but often their parish obligations prevent them from serving in this role. A religious sister, brother or deacon can be invited to be the Spiritual Advisor. However, it may be difficult to find a member of the clergy or a religious who has the time to serve in this role.

Today, in the Providence of God, we stand in the grace of Vatican II which called forth the vocation of the laity. We also stand in the spirit of the first Conference of Charity where the Catholic layman, Emmanuel Bailly, fulfilled the role of the Spiritual Advisor for the founding members of the Society. Therefore, in this grace and heritage, we often find that in our Conferences there is someone, rooted in Vincentian spirituality, who is waiting for the invitation to be called forth to serve in the role of Spiritual Advisor.

VINCENTIAN DISCERNMENT

By Fr. Hugh O'Donnell CM

As our Conference faces decisions on the best way to serve those who are poor, we are called to make our choices and judgments through a Vincentian Discernment Process.

Discernment is 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. For St. Vincent, it was important that every decision he made conformed to what he believed to be the will of God. Therefore, as we look at the process necessary for the prayerful discovery of the will of God in the spirit of Vincent, we see that Vincentian Discernment is simple and radical, it demands faith and trust, and it is rooted in honesty and openness to the Spirit in prayer.

Discernment is not a democratic voting process - or a decision-making process of the head. It demands that we take the journey from our head to our heart—to a listening heart that is rooted in prayer. Discernment is sometimes thought of as a method, a teaching, and it has the image of being in the head where we figure things out, while we remain subtly in control.

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. Essentially, discernment is not a "thinking head" but a "listening heart."

St. Vincent knew that in discernment the Spirit can lead us from the contract of decision making, to the covenant of discernment. There is a radical difference between a contract, which is rooted in the head, and a covenant, which is rooted in the heart.

Discernment in the spirit of Vincent, calls us to listen to the cries of the most abandoned poor, the appeals of the Church, the signs of the times, and the vision and grace of our Rule. The process of Vincentian Discernment consists of four steps.

VINCENTIAN DISCERNMENT PROCESS

I. Imitation of Jesus Christ:

Vincent was always driven in his discernment by the vision of Jesus as the Servant of the Poor; he never took his eyes off of Jesus.

The first question he would always ask is:

- **What would Jesus do in this situation?**
- **What would Jesus do in these circumstances?**

The authenticity of discernment then leads us to keep the service of the poor as the focal point:

- **How does this decision help us to better serve others?**
- **How does this decision affect our own self-aggrandizement? Are we seeking our own ego needs?**

II. Unrestrictive Readiness:

"Unrestrictive readiness" 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 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?**

III. Significance of Events:

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. To Vincent, "events" were the revelations of the Will of God. So, we must also look at what is happening-the people, place, circumstances and situations. Therefore, we must face all of the circumstances, look at all the factors, and weigh all the evidence. It is important to pay attention to "feelings," and to your "intuition."

- **What are the subjective/objective facts?**
- **What are the events and circumstances?**
- **How is God speaking through events?**
- **How is God speaking through people?**
- **How is God speaking through authority-Civil, Community and Church?**

IV. The Decision

Vincent was always guided in a special way by legitimate authority, both Civil and Church. He also believed in asking advice from someone who had certain knowledge and who could be objective. Discernment leads to action flowing from God's wisdom and love.

After prayerful discernment we will find that there is reasonable clarity, and we can make a decision.

Sometimes the will of God is crystal clear, and sometimes there is only reasonable clarity where all we can say is "This is what the Will of God seems to be." And so, we 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, compassionate and rooted in a deep peace...it is then that you must act. 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.

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

DISCUSSION:

How can we use the Vincentian Discernment process in our Conference and Council?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord, grant us the wisdom and strength to persevere when disappointed or distressed. May we never claim that the fruitfulness of our apostolate springs from ourselves alone. United in prayer and action, may we become a visible sign of Christ, and may we give witness to His boundless love, which reaches out to all and draws them to love one another in Him. Amen

ENRICHMENT READING

The National Council of the United States Society of St. Vincent de Paul Minimum Requirements for Existing Traditional Conferences

The National Council of the United States Board of Directors recognizing the need for establishing minimum requirements for traditional Conferences throughout the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, created and approved RESOLUTION 71:

Minimum Requirements for Existing Traditional Conferences

Approved: Board of Directors-June 16, 2009

National Council-September 4, 2009

Existing Traditional Conferences must:

- **Adopt Bylaws within one year**, (National Council Approved Bylaws are available).
- **Review the following "Minimum Requirements for Existing Traditional Conferences"** and **develop a plan** to correct areas in which the Conference is not meeting the requirements of the Rule:
 1. **The Conference excludes no one from membership based on age, sex, race or ethnic background.** (Rule, Part I, 3.2)
 2. **The Conference meets regularly and frequently, and not less often than twice a month. Weekly meetings are desirable but not mandatory.** (Rule, Part I, 3.3.1, Part III, Statute 5)
 3. **The Conference has four or more active members and a full slate of officers: President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer.** (Rule, Part III, Statute 12)
 4. **Prayer, spiritual readings and reflection are a part of each meeting.** (Rule, Part III, Statute 7)
 5. **The Conference has an active, trained Spiritual Advisor who attends the full meeting regularly and accepts responsibility to promote the spiritual life of the Conference.** (Rule, Part I, 3.13, Part III, Statute 15, U.S. Manual Pages 48-49)

6. **The Conference is aggregated or has filed an application if it has been in existence for one year or more.** (Rule, Part I, 3.8, Part III, Statute 6)
7. **The Conference serves all those in need regardless of age, sex, race, ethnic background or lifestyle.** (Rule, Part I, 1.4 Part III, Statute 8)
8. **All home visits and other interviews are made by two Vincentians.** (Rule, Part II, Statute 8)
9. **The Conference has person-to-person contacts with the needy, whenever possible.** (Rule, Part I, 1.2, Mission Statement)
10. **Home visits are the primary focus of work for traditional Conferences.** (U.S. Manual Page 23)
11. **The Conference maintains a bank account separate from the parish, under the control of the Conference Treasurer.** (Rule, Part III, Statutes 12 and 24, U.S. Manual, Pages 26 and 30)
12. **The Conference attends District meetings and takes part in programs and events sponsored by their District/Diocesan Councils.** (Rule, Part I 3.6, Manual Page 36)
13. **The Conference sends its members to formation and training sessions offered by the Society, particularly the Ozanam Orientation.** (Rule, Part I, 3.6, 3.12, Part III, Statute 10)
14. **The Conference submits Annual Reports to the District/Diocesan Council.** (Rule, Part III, Statutes 22 and 23)
15. **The Conference presents at least an Annual Report of its activities to the Pastor and people of its parish, preferably through the parish bulletin.** (Rule, Part III, Statutes 22 and 23, U.S. Manual Page 30)
16. **The Conference maintains a positive relationship with the clergy.** (Rule, Part I, 5.1)
17. **All donations go to the works of the Society to maintain Society structure, both nationally and internationally. No donations are used to fund other charities no matter how worthy.** (Rule Part I, 3.14, Part III Statute 26)

18. The Conference provides required support for Councils/Region. (Rule Part III, Statute 25)

19. The Conference knows and follows the Rule of the Society. (U.S. Manual Page 14)