



## NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED STATES SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL, INC.

June 7, 2017

Archbishop/Bishop  
Diocese  
Your Grace, Your Excellency,

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, along with the entire Vincentian Family around the world, is celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Vincent de Paul's realization that he was called to serve the poorest of the poor. After giving a simple but grace-filled sermon in the little church in Follerville outside of Paris, Vincent heard confessions of those who were working the fields owned by the de Gondi family. There were so many penitents that he needed the assistance of pastors in the area. He felt called to assemble a band of priests to continue giving missions. From this humble beginning came the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity and our Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

The theme of this anniversary year is from the Gospel of Matthew: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." In 1833 this gospel story inspired our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, to recruit fellow students to go out into the streets of Paris to bring food and other necessities to the very poor, strangers no more! The Society of St. Vincent de Paul seeks, in a spirit of justice and charity by person-to-person involvement of its members, to help those in need.

The grace given to Blessed Frederic was to invite lay men and women to take up this good work following the charism of St. Vincent. These groups or Conferences were centered in parishes and had their own statutes, raised their own money and distributed the supplies as the needs required.

This work of service is still carried out today. There are nearly 900,000 members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in 150 countries around the world. We hope that you have found the Society helpful to your mission to serve the poor of your diocese.

The founding organizational principles of Blessed Frederic have been enshrined in our current Canon Law. Our Canon Law tells us that it is a right of all the faithful (clerics, religious and laity) to "freely found and direct associations for purposes of charity or piety or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world and to hold meetings for the common pursuit of these purposes" (canon 215). The Canon Law also states that all the Christian faithful "have the right to promote or sustain apostolic action even by their own undertaking, according to their own state and condition" (canon 216). These rights flow from the Church's teaching about the nature of baptism and the call of the baptized to exercise the apostolate (cf. Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, nn.18-20).



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In Canon Law, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is known as a free association (canon 299 §1). This means it is not a juridic person in the Church. It is subject to, and only to, those canons that apply to free associations. It is governed by its own by-laws and statutes. All the goods and property, including money raised to serve the poor, belong to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul itself and are administered according to its norms and statutes by those officers so designated in the same statutes. Of course, it is subject to the vigilance of the local Ordinary to preserve the integrity of faith and morals and to avoid all abuses.

The Conferences, under Canon Law and Civil Law, are entities separate from the parishes but have a mutual relationship in which neither has responsibility to or for the other. Sometimes there might be a lack of understanding regarding the relationship between the host parish and the local Conference. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul reminds the Conferences of this unique relationship and we ask you to remind the pastors of your parishes of the same. If you believe it appropriate, sending them a copy of this letter might be the simplest and we would be very grateful for that.

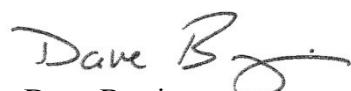
During this anniversary year, we would like to take this opportunity to express the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's gratefulness for the welcoming spirit of the parishes to the conferences of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It is a wonderful relationship that serves the poor well. Please remember us in your prayers that we might remain faithful to the charism of St. Vincent and to the genius of Blessed Frederic.

If there is anything that we can do to make the Society of St. Vincent de Paul more effective in your diocese, please let us know.

With gratitude,



Sheila K. Gilbert  
National President



Dave Barringer  
Chief Executive Officer

