

CHAPTER 9  
WORKING  
WITH YOUR PASTOR

INTRODUCTION

We should regularly pause to express our gratitude to God for the great work that has been done in those years for the poor, hungry and homeless. God is good.

What we enjoy today is the result of a marvelous spirit of cooperation between the Society and the Parishes where we have taken root. There are many to whom we are indebted, from Pastors to Vincentians, whose generous gifts of time, counsel and resources have enabled God's needy to be served so well. It is fitting we remember that God works best when our efforts exhibit a spirit of harmony.

Our Society calls us to "*adapt to the changing conditions of the world*" and we must acknowledge that the world today is quite different from what it was in 1946.

For many of its early years, Pastors were almost always our Spiritual Advisors. Pastors and Presidents saw each other often and shared the problems of the conference and those it served. Often just by being present at our weekly meetings, Pastors came to know as much about the Society as members did (many, in fact, had themselves been Vincentians before entering the Seminary).

As we moved into the Twenty-first Century, we found all of this had changed. Today a Pastor is often a one-man team, facing a growing number of increasingly complex problems in his parish with decreasing resources and too few hours to deal with them.

While we are now blessed with Spiritual Advisors who are Deacons, Sisters or lay Vincentians, some may have lost that regular contact with their Pastor, and pastors may have lost that intimate glance into the workings of the parish conference.

We need to do a better job of reconstructing that relationship.

## HOW TO RUN A CONFERENCE

***“Independent of Ecclesiastical jurisdiction...  
we are part of the Life of the Church”***

### SITUATION

- The Society is a voluntary association of lay persons, fully approved by a succession of Roman Pontiffs. A member drawn to the phrase *“Independent of Ecclesiastical jurisdiction”* misses the more important second part of that charge, *“the Society is, at the same time, part of the Life of the Church.”* Conferences have always been closely identified with their parish communities. Fulfilling those responsibilities requires goodwill, respect and filial devotion by conference members and their leaders.
- Every conference has the right to grow where it was planted; that is, within its own parish community. With that right, however, come serious responsibilities.
- Each conference must work to become a recognized presence within its parish. Servant leadership is what we claim to provide, and we are judged by our actions, not by our titles.
- A good working relationship with the Pastor, with his parish staff and with other ministries is essential. It is **our** responsibility to make this work.
- The conference and its members must enter into the Life of the Church fully, generously and enthusiastically! This implies active involvement in parish life beyond the works of the conference. We are not a ‘stand alone’ organization within our parish community.

### OBJECTIVE

- **Attain the highest level of cooperation with and respect for the Pastor, the parish staff and other ministries.**

The relationship you have with your Pastor is critical for the success of the conference and its Mission. The Pastor is not obligated to support the conference financially. You earn his support as you help him minister to the needs of those within his parish boundaries, and as you lighten his load and enable him to spend more time being shepherd, priest, counselor and confessor. If you are always looking for more of his time (or money), he may not be there for the conference.

A simple cordial relationship is adequate, but hardly what we want since it will leave many opportunities unrealized. An active, positive working relationship is to be sought, one that is mutually-beneficial. Such a relationship will utilize the strengths each party brings to the parish and to the community it serves.

### STRATEGIES

- **Understand the Pastor's role and responsibilities.**

The Pastor is responsible for both the spiritual and material welfare of all the people living within his parish boundaries. This is an enormous responsibility, obviously beyond what he can do by himself. He is, therefore, dependent on a wide variety of people and organizations to fulfill this responsibility as best he can. These include other clergy assigned to his parish; parish employees; the parish council; and people serving in various unpaid ministries.

Almost all Pastors make some provision to help the poor. This may take on varying forms -- a "*Paz de Cristo*," "*Good Samaritan*," or "*Helping Hands*" ministry, or simply having the housekeeper make sandwiches in the rectory kitchen for those who appear at the door. Some Pastors give cash to those needing shelter (often out of their own pockets), write parish checks to repair vehicles, and make calls to well-off parishioners asking them to help families he finds in desperate straits.

- **Understand our role in the Ecclesiastical Plan.**

The SVdP conference is a voluntary apostolate organized by lay people who want to serve God by serving His poor. In many parishes, the Society counts its birth from when a wise Pastor called together a group of parishioners to start a conference. Despite what the Rule suggests, the Society today simply does not start a conference without the Pastor's permission.

When a conference is created, it is essentially asking that it be given the primary responsibility for taking care of those who are in need locally. It offers the Pastor its help, "*trust us, we will take care of the poor.*" Because we are a "proven commodity" within our church, Pastors usually are glad to accept our offer. For 173 or more years, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has helped the most fragile and vulnerable in a quiet, efficacious way.

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It is an act of great faith when a Pastor gives a part of his ecclesiastical responsibilities to a group of lay people who have organized themselves and elected their own officers. The conference should feel complimented and work hard to retain their Pastor's confidence.

- **Be realistic about the level of understanding everyone has.**

In the Society, Council leaders regularly have to contend with members who do not know the Society's Mission, with conferences who fail to follow the Rule of the Society, with guests who think we simply hand out government entitlements. This is because we have often failed to communicate the *who, why, where, what,* and *how* of our ministry.

Why does it surprise us, then, when we find Pastors who see us as "through a glass darkly"? And, upon finding them unacquainted, do we lead them to knowledge by our works, or do we try to educate with words? Frederic Ozanam himself found that actions, not words, bring people to the truth.

We have an obligation to our Pastors and their staffs to help them understand the Society and how it works in the parish environment to serve the parish and the poor, so that knowledge replaces misunderstanding.

Pastors have a natural desire to know as much as they can about their parish, its people and organizations. You should have the same curiosity about parish goings-on. Relationships work both ways. Provide information in small amounts, slowly at first. Constantly show by *doing*, by following our Mission, by living out your faith in your parish community.

- **Understand how our actions today can have long-term consequences**

The Pastor who trusts SVdP to serve the poor is then free to go on to another one of the many things he has to do. He will depend on the conference to do what it promised. Nothing is more destructive of the relationship between Pastor and conference than the failure of a conference to do its job. This forces the Pastor to reassume responsibility for the poor and to reestablish some parish system to do so. It increases his workload, his financial burden and his stress level. He loses confidence in more than the conference; he loses confidence in the Society.

A Pastor who has been misled or left out of the loop will often be cynical about the Society and even unsupportive of the conference. He will carry this attitude with him as he is transferred to other parishes in the diocese. This will require us to work twice as hard to repair the damage his past experience(s) with the Society may have left him. We must show ourselves both (a) capable at the moment, and (b) committed over the long haul to being there.

- **Understand the potential conflict inherent in our situation**

The conference needs the parish for its meeting rooms, office and pantry space, as its primary source of new members and for much, if not all, of its income. It often provides the conference's Spiritual Advisor, and is the principal source of its sacramental spirituality and sense of faith community.

Yet the Society, as a Catholic association, is a lay movement, founded by lay people, led and managed by lay people. It is an ecclesial spiritual fraternity, established by the Church and officially recognized as an instrument of the lay apostolate, through the witness of charity.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the "*dynamic tension*" that flows from this duality. We have the formality of our independence from direct ecclesiastical jurisdiction coexisting with the reality of our near-total dependence on our Pastor and parish community.

Some conferences may place too much emphasis on "independence," even flaunting its identity as an independent lay organization. It forgets its role as part of the Life of the Church, and that its members are all part of their parish community and must act as such. In fact, in some dioceses where there is no corporate entity for the Society from a district or diocesan council, conferences may even be dependent on their parish for their 501(c)(3) non-profit status.

The conference should work to become an intrinsic part of the parish community. In the best conferences, members also serve their parish in other ways, including being extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, lectors or greeters, members of the Knights of Columbus or Sodality of Our Lady, teaching RE or RCIA classes, serving on the parish council, finance board or festival committee.

# HOW TO RUN A CONFERENCE

## STEPS TO TAKE

- **Communication is Essential**

The relationship between the conference and the Pastor requires continuing communication between the two.

- ◆ The Pastor needs to know what conference activities are being planned and what is being accomplished within his parish. Conversely, the conference needs to know what the parish is planning that might impact its ability to serve those in need.
- ◆ The best way to nourish a healthy relationship is to have the Pastor or his appointed staff member attend the conference meetings. If this is not possible, the president should meet regularly with the Pastor, monthly if possible, or at least quarterly, to keep him updated as to conference activities. It is best to have a regular set date so that the communication will be ongoing.

- **Face up to Problems**

We sometimes hear stories of “problems with the Pastor.” When investigated, these are usually the result of simple personality conflicts and only rarely serious authority disagreements.

- ◆ **Personality Conflicts** are common everywhere in our world today. Perhaps the Pastor has difficulty communicating with the conference President or seems to rub members the wrong way. Try minimizing the number of Vincentians who try to meet with him by designating the conference Secretary as the sole contact with the Pastor.

On the other hand, *perhaps you, the conference leader, are the problem.* Are you aggressive when you deal with your Pastor, rather than supportive? Do you hate change, and are you critical of his new ideas? Are you inflexible in your plans, wanting others to change their plans for your convenience?

The issues surrounding personality conflicts can be many and difficult to overcome. They require a concerted effort by all the individuals involved in order to work out a solution.

*You are responsible for working out a personality conflict with your Pastor, not vice versa.* Remember that the Society exists and operates in the parish only with the permission of the Pastor. Keep in mind that it is not the Pastor or the SVdP conference that will be impacted by a failed relationship. It is those in need who will suffer. It is the parish community that will fail in its witness to see Christ in the poor.

- ◆ **Authority Disagreements.** Since we use church facilities and regularly collect money during church functions, SVdP can easily be perceived as not only part of the parish church, but under the immediate control of the church's Pastor.

However, the Society is governed by its own rules of operation. These have proven themselves over the years and must be followed. The conference makes the decisions it feels are best to assist people in need, not those the parish staff feels should be made.

Should the same, rigid rule be applied to our Pastor? Both logic and reverence say, “no.” No one would deny the Pastor the right to assist someone at his door at late hour or holiday when the conference is unavailable, and to be reimbursed for any costs he expends. It is the exception that often proves the rule, and the love and respect in which we hold our Pastors moves us to grant him that privilege.

We generally counsel a conference to respect the request of a Pastor to help someone, within reason, but to ignore any order that assistance be denied someone. That decision rests alone with the conference after a Home Visit.

There are serious conflicts which could arise over the issue of authority and, if not resolved, destroy the conference or be a major violation of the Rule of the Society. The conference leader is expected to give ground when trying to resolve a personality conflict with the Pastor, to honor as best s/he can the Pastors' wishes regarding helping individuals and families, *but is expected to hold her/his ground on serious matters involving the points below.*

- **Maintain rules for independence**

1. SVdP funds should not be co-mingled with parish funds. However, under Diocesan rules, a collection taken up by the parish for the conference may be counted by the parish, accounted for by the parish (contributions of \$250 or more acknowledged by the parish according to IRS regulations), and the amount from the collection issued promptly to the conference by parish check.

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2. The conference must have its own bank account, separate from the parish's account(s).
3. Members of the ordained clergy (priests or deacons) cannot be Officers of a conference, although they can serve as Spiritual Advisor. Members of the clergy cannot be authorized signers on the SVdP checking account.
4. The conference does not need the approval of the Pastor, of any other member of the clergy, or of the parish staff before helping an individual or family. That decision is made by the conference itself, usually after advisement by one of its Home Visit teams.
5. Parish staff should not verbally or otherwise commit the conference to assist certain people. The decision to help or not help is made solely by the conference itself or by one of its teams after a Home Visit. The conference, however, will likely give special attention to the recommendations of staff since it recognizes we are all common servants of the poor in the parish.

The conference honors their Pastor by paying bills he has incurred or reimbursing him for expenses taking care of the hungry, homeless or otherwise in need when no SVdP volunteers were available.

Finally, some conferences provide parish office staff with food bags, bus tickets, gasoline vouchers and referral forms for the homeless and desperate who walk in off the street when SVdP teams are not available. We work together to serve God's poor. Eventually, however, parish offices typically decline such things because they draw increasing numbers of supposedly homeless to the parish, and tie up staff doing what we should be doing. We make home visits and that enables us to separate the conmen, greedy and lazy from those with legitimate needs.

- **Use understanding, cooperation and prayer to solve all conflicts.**

Issues of conflict should be approached in a humble, prayerful manner. If a resolution cannot be reached between the Pastor and the conference, there may be a need to raise the issue to a higher level. Contact your District Council President to begin the process of involving others to mediate the disagreement. The Diocesan Council Spiritual Advisor will initiate contact with individuals assigned by the Bishop to address such conflicts.



*Never, ever call outsiders such as the news media!*

Resolution to any conflict lies in the truth and the truth will prevail. Hopefully, the ongoing conflict will not cause irreparable damage to the relationship between the Pastor and the conference. Once the authority issue has been satisfactorily defined for both parties, it is assumed that the conference will continue its efforts to serve the poor and will be able to work cooperatively with the Pastor.

- **Become part of the parish community**

Take four simple steps to develop a beneficial relationship with your Pastor.

1. *Help him.* Do more than help him take care of the poor. Be there promptly when he calls a meeting, or send another conference officer. Be reliable when he asks you to do something. Meet his deadlines. Agree to speak to the RCIA, RE, new parishioners, etc. when he requests that be done. If you are in a District that publishes a "Caution" list for conferences, provide him and parish staff with that list. It will save him time and money over the long run.
2. *Get his permission.* Ask before you pass out anything in or around the church. Give the Pastor a final version (not an outline or draft) of what you would like to print to insert in the parish bulletin or pass out at the church doors. Ask his approval. Give him at least two weeks or more to review it. This may seem tedious at first, but the Pastor will gain confidence in your work and eventually approve it quickly. And you will have won his confidence and respect.
3. *Don't make more work for him.* Remember, the Pastor may give permission, but *you* do the work. Don't ask him to write letters or articles -- you write them and submit them to him for approval, rewrite or signature. If the conference wants to do something, get the Pastor's permission, but then the conference should do the work. Don't dump it on parish staff. This includes everything from stuffing fliers into the church bulletin to setting up tables for a food or clothing drive, from cleaning up after conference meetings and activities to being good stewards of parish facilities and utilities.

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4. *Whenever possible, tie conference activities to the natural rhythms of parish liturgical life. **Our SVdP ministry is an extension of Eucharist.*** Be in contact with your Liturgical associate to find out what is coming up and how the conference might be a part. Have your table outside the church the week when the Gospel is about the Widow's Mite. Offer to run Bread and Soup suppers on the Fridays during Lent. Be a part of the Parish Festival with a booth raising funds for whatever the Festival's purpose is.

You are a part of your parish. ***Be a visible part!***

- **Actively seek out the Pastor's suggestions and listen to his ideas.**

A good Pastor is often also a good manager, a wise fund-raiser, a shrewd judge of people, and the most knowledgeable person about what is going on in the parish and neighborhood. Tap into that knowledge! People are supportive of things they helped create; get Father on board early, and he'll be an enthusiastic supporter of your activities!

The odds are fairly good that your Pastor has moved around and served at several parishes, many of which had SVdP conferences. If that's true, he may well have seen and participated in many successful SVdP efforts, including membership and fund-raising campaigns. He might be the conference's best information resource!

A good relationship with your Pastor can bring untold benefits to the SVdP conference, including his permission:

- ◆ for several second collections a year (perhaps moving from the typical "fifth" Sunday collection to the very generous monthly collection!);
- ◆ to distribute brochures and pamphlets which bring in new members and contributors;
- ◆ to permit Vincentians to address all the weekend Masses during the "*Invitation To Serve*" membership campaign;
- ◆ to place SVdP envelopes in the pews or at the back of the church (or even in the parish's regular envelope package);
- ◆ to stage events and activities involving parish facilities;
- ◆ to give SVdP the donations from the Poor Boxes (or to let SVdP install poor boxes in the church);
- ◆ to provide space for a generous pantry, perhaps an office and phone; and even printing access.

## **ADDENDUM**

The material on the next several pages is from the 1995 **United States Manual of the Society**, pages 276-278, authored by Amin A. de Tarrazi, former President-General of the International Council of the Society, and from **The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary**, commissioned by The Canon Law Society of America.

### **The Lay Character of the Society**

by Amin A. de Tarrazi,

former President-General of the International Council of the Society.

The Council General is often questioned about the lay character of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a matter which had been debated in their own time by Frederic Ozanam & his companions.

Considering this aspect constituted one of the original fundamental features of their newly created institution, our pioneers stood firmly for the recognition of this particular status within the Church.

This reflection may help to better understand the genuine significance of our organization. Living testimony of the Church's charity, it is in its (the Church's) very heart that the Society draws its inspiration, its justification and its aim.

Founded in Paris, in 1833, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society is not a clerical organization subject to any religious hierarchy. Instead, it is an ecclesial spiritual fraternity, encouraged by the Church and officially recognized as an instrument of the lay apostolate, through the witness of charity.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, as a Catholic association, is a lay movement, founded by lay people, led and managed by lay people. Since its origin, it has been recognized as such by Papal authority. Successive Popes have issued Briefs confirming these original and specific characteristics.

During a general audience held in the Vatican on Feb. 7, 1968, Paul VI made such a declaration, which was significant in the particular character which it

attributed to the Society. He placed it somewhere between an "individual apostolate" and an "organized apostolate": "*apostolate through friendship.*" (See below, extract from "*Osservatore Romano*," Feb. 16, 1968.)

Vatican II resolutely laid claim to this approach about laity, clearly expressed through various Council and post-Council texts.

At the international level, through the intermediary of its Council General, the St. Vincent de Paul Society has continually maintained close, faithful, confident, respectful and regular relations with the Vatican: Secretariat of State, Pontifical Councils (notably with "*Cor Unum*," "*Justitia et Pax*," "*Pro Laicis*") and various other dicasteries in Rome.

The same applies, in various countries, at national and diocesan levels. Reciprocal ties of friendship and esteem unite our leaders with Bishops' conferences, of which their Pastoral recommendations receive our full support.

It often happens, moreover, that the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul also enjoys a sometimes privileged civil status as, for example, in France, where it is officially approved by the government as an "authenticated public utility."

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In the *Code of Canon Law*, there is no arrangement, relative to the "Private Associations of the Faithful" (Book H, Section V, Chapters 1-4), for their leaders to be appointed by Bishops' Conferences.

In Council texts concerning the laity, it is the spirit, rather than the letter, which recognizes lay responsibilities & initiatives in a truly "adult" Church.

Work, undertaken by the Synod of Bishops in 1987, on the "*Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World, Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council*," confirmed this tendency. Pope John Paul II's post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, "*Christifideles Laici*," strongly emphasizes the present-day role of lay Christians.

We finally make reference to the especially enlightened and valuable advice of Fr. Jean Passicos, President of the International Society of Canon Law & Comparative Religious Legislation, and Dean of Canon Law at the Catholic Institute in Paris. He played an important part in the reform of Canon Law and in devising the most recent "*Code of Canon Law*."

As an authority on the subject, he stated that leaders of "*Private Associations of the Faithful*," such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, are chosen in accordance with the statutory arrangements which have been freely agreed within each association.

But, over and above compulsory arrangements of a legal nature, the essential factors remain the kinds of motivation which inspire us. Indeed, after more than 160 years of existence, our Society is most intimately attached to the Church, not so much by conventions, protocols or regulations, as by love, fidelity and affection.

We live, thanks be to God, in a Church which has been renewed, rejuvenated and freed from conventionalism and which is open to dialogue. At the heart of the Church, the hierarchy, inspired by the Council, wishes to promote a laity full of life, active and dynamic, with a sense of responsibility and fully aware of its ecclesial mission.

The strongest bond uniting clerics and lay people, within the fraternal ecclesial community, is far more Charity and mutual confidence, than Law and legal arrangements.

**The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary**  
*commissioned by* The Canon Law Society of America  
**Association, Assembly and Apostolic Activity**

The emphasis in the 1917 Code was on the role of ecclesiastical authority in erecting or approving associations (*see CIC 684, 686*). In the 1983 Code, the emphasis has shifted to the right of Christians to take the initiative. Although this may result in a multiplicity of associations, it is within the rights of a Christian to organize or join associations as each may desire. It would be a violation of this right to prohibit membership in associations that are established in keeping with the law, even though they are not organized by or under the direction of a pastor or bishop.

This is a new way of thinking in some situations, but it reinforces such long-standing organizations as the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

*Apostolic Activity*

**Canon 216 – All the Christian faithful, since they participate in the mission of the Church, have the right to promote or to sustain apostolic action by their own undertakings in accord with each one's state and condition; however, no under-**

**taking shall assume the name Catholic unless the consent of competent ecclesiastical authority is given.**

Apostolic activity is discussed in detail in *Apostolicam actuositatem*. Three major forms of the apostolate are indicated therein.

The first is that individual apostolic activity is an obligation to which each Christian is called, no matter what condition the person may be in...

Working together in communities, whether parochial or other-wise, is a second form of apostolic activity...

**A third type is an association in which apostolic activity is directly and purposefully carried out...**

These initiatives are not dependent on the approval or authorization of the hierarchy, whether it be local clergy or the bishop. It is a right that arises from Christ's action in baptism and frequently is reinforced by the reception of charisms which themselves give rise to rights and duties in the Church and in the world. (AA-3)

*from a brochure*

***Working With Your Pastor***

*produced by*

The Diocesan Council of Phoenix  
**Society of St. Vincent de Paul**

*Vincentian Support Services*

420 West Watkins Road

Phoenix Arizona 85003

(602) 261-6803