



THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

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WORKING WITH YOUR PASTOR

*“We are Part of the
Life of the Church”*

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INTRODUCTION

Today we enjoy a spirit of cooperation between the Society and the parishes where St. Vincent de Paul has 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 our early years, our pastors were almost always the spiritual advisors to the conferences. 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 meetings, pastors came to know as much about the Society as members did.

All this has now 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 wavering support.

While we are now blessed with spiritual advisors who are deacons, nuns or lay Vincentians, we have lost that regular contact with our pastors, and they have lost that intimate glance into the workings of the parish conference.

It is time to reconstruct that relationship.

WORKING WITH YOUR PASTOR

“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. While we as members are *“Independent of Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction,”* at the same time we are part of the Life of the Church in our parish.

- 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 working relationship with all members of the parish community is essential. It is our responsibility to insure this happens.
- As conference members we should look for opportunities to be actively involved in our parish beyond our work in the Society. Within our parish community, we are not a ‘stand-alone’ organization.

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 parish 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.

Be realistic about the level of understanding everyone has.

Assume the level of understanding is low, then you can improve it by:

Writing articles for the Sunday bulletin (include success stories, thanking the parish for the SVdP collection, give updates on monetary distribution, include reminders about Society events)

Inviting the pastor to special events at the Dan O'Mera Center

Participating in other ministries in the parish and be a representative of the Society.

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 may become cynical about the Society and even unsupportive of the conference. He may carry his 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 have left him. We must show ourselves both (a) capable at the moment, and (b) committed to being there over the long haul.

Invite your Pastor to come to the Dan O'Meara Center for a "visit" and tour – *after* living out your conference Mission.

While the essence of the Society is found in the work of the conference in its own parish neighborhoods, the Dan O'Meara Center in Phoenix nonetheless helps visitors see the great span of our work and the tremendous resources we have access to for those in need. For pastors in

Maricopa County this also helps them understand that their parish conference is part of a larger “family” that is supportive on many levels.

A District hosts General Membership meetings approximately once a year. The hosting District should extend an invitation to the conference pastor to celebrate the Mass in the Hall of Banners.

Face up to Problems

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

Personality Conflicts are common everywhere in our world today. If the conference president has difficulty communicating with the pastor, try having another person communicate 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 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 most conferences 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 respect say, "no." No one would deny the pastor the right to assist someone at his door at a late hour or holiday when the conference is unavailable. However, the pastor should have access to conference officers' phone numbers so that he might refer the case to the conference after hours. conference guidelines should make provisions for this type of emergency.

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 follow

the rule when trying to resolve a personality conflict with the pastor, to honor as best as possible and to respect the pastors' wishes regarding helping individuals and families, *but is expected to hold his/her ground on serious matters involving the points below.*

Maintain rules for independence

1. SVdP funds should not be co-mingled with parish funds. *Manual 2.1 Conference p. 26*
2. The Conference must have its own bank account, separate from the parish account (s).
3. Members of the ordained clergy (priests or deacons) cannot be officers of a conference, although they can be members and serve as spiritual advisor. Members of the clergy cannot be authorized signers of the SVdP checking account.
4. The conference does not need the approval of the pastor, or 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 acknowledge the recommendations of staff since it recognizes we are all common servants of the poor in the parish. We work together to serve God's poor.

Use understanding, cooperation, and prayer to solve all conflicts

Issues of conflict should be handled in a humble prayerful manner.

Never ever call outsiders, particularly, the media.

Resolution of any conflict lies in the truth and the truth will prevail. Confine discussion to facts and practices not emotion. On-going conflict can do irreparable harm to the relationship between the pastor and the conference. Our goal should be to re-establish harmony in the relationship.

Become a trusted part of the parish community

Take four simple steps for developing a beneficial relationship with the pastor:

1. *Help Him.* Do more than save him the need for helping the poor himself. 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. Keep him informed of conference activities periodically. Agree to speak to other parish groups at his request.
2. *Get his permission.* Ask before you pass out anything in or around the church. Ask his approval for anything going into the bulletin with the required lead time. Get his permission for any collections, as well as, special seasonal activities requiring use of the church or altar.

3. *Don't make more work for him.* Remember the pastor may give his permission, but the conference does the work. Don't ask him to write letters or articles. You write them and then submit them to him for approval, rewrite or signature as appropriate. Don't dump stuff on the parish staff. If the conference wants to do something like stuffing fliers or set up tables for a food or clothing drive do it yourselves. Be good stewards of parish facilities: clean up after meetings and special activities.
4. *Be in step with natural rhythms of parish liturgical life.* Remember our Ministry is an extension of the Eucharist. Keep in contact with the liturgical coordinator to find out what is coming up and how the conference might play a part. For example, offer to run bread and soup suppers on Fridays in Lent, or participate in any parish festival events.

The Conference is a key part of the parish! Be visible!

Actively seek out the pastor's suggestions and listen to his ideas.

Get Father on board early, and he'll be an enthusiastic supporter of your activities. If he is newly assigned to the parish try to meet with him within the first two weeks. 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 (from the typical "fifth" Sunday to the very generous monthly);
- * 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 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.

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 the parish. Conversely, the conference needs

to know what the parish is planning to do that might impact its ability to serve those in need.

- 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.

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 more than 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.

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.

Objective

Attain the highest level of cooperation with and respect for the Pastor and the parish staff.

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 your 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.