

A “Foundational” Vincentian Family Document

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August 2024

Introduction

It all began with St. Vincent de Paul (1581- 1660). In 1617, the two events we know so well that shaped his life gave rise to the Charism, the foundation of who we are today. In Gannes and Folleville, he heard the confessions of destitute persons living in the remotest areas of France. Later that year, in Châtillon-les-Dombes, he organized the people of his parish to help alleviate the sufferings of a family plagued by sickness and impoverishment. These two events shaped Vincent’s Charism: the service of God in the person of our Lords and Masters, the poor, through the preaching of the Gospel (mission) and the alleviation of poverty (charity).

St. Vincent de Paul said, “The poor suffer less from a lack of generosity than from a lack of organization.” He could not ignore these people or their hardships and realized that only coordinated, collaborative efforts could begin to address their issues. Vincent’s vision began an international movement uniting men and women, ordained and lay, to combat poverty in individual lives and in the societal structures perpetuating it. Vincent had a direct hand in founding four congregations or associations, which were his attempt to create lasting means by which he would both evangelize and serve those most easily forgotten in his day.

The congregations and institutes comprising the Vincentian Family are called **Branches** and number over 170 serving in 168 countries today. Most came into existence as a direct response to the cries of the poor in a particular place and time. They are united by a shared spirit (the spirituality of Vincent) and a common purpose (service, through mission and charity, on behalf of those living in poverty).

With all modern society's scientific and technological advances, the collaborative imperative rings truer today than it did in 17th-century France. The current proclivity to work in isolation, and often in competitive silos, has a marked negative impact in places where resources are scarce and where the ravages of poverty are experienced the greatest.

The international Vincentian Family, coordinated by the work of the Vincentian Family Executive Board (VFEB) through the international Vincentian Family Office (VFO), is a counter-cultural effort to reverse this trend. In Vincent’s spirit, the international Family has been working through the Office for the last ten years to organize its international efforts.

The Branches of the Vincentian Family

As we read about the foundations of the Branches of the Vincentian Family, we see how that charismatic gift given to Vincent continues to compel men and women of all cultures and ages to continue to respond to the challenges created by the ever-changing face of poverty. While many of them are congregations or institutes of consecrated life, lay men and women comprise approximately three-quarters of the membership of the Vincentian Family.

I wish to refer you to three documents either on the 2024 Convocation App or on the Vincentian Family Office Website:

- ***“Vincentian Family Historical Overview”*** an article written by Fr. Joe Agostino
- Database of the Branches of the Vincentian Family published by the VFO
- ***“Vincentian Family By-Laws”***

The criteria for designating a Branch as a member of the Vincentian Family is outlined on page 9 of this last document. It is crucial to note that approval comes solely from the Vincentian Family Office, acting on behalf of the Vincentian Family Executive Board, and is not subject to the endorsement of any individual Branch. Membership is conferred for the entire international Family, even if a group, at the time of its foundation, only works locally.

On page 9 we also speak about Vincentians who do not belong to a Branch of the Family. Today, a growing number of devoted individuals are deeply committed to their faith and serving others, but they choose not to join a formal Vincentian Family Branch. Like Vincent, we welcome anyone who desires to embrace his Charism and offer support and companionship to all who wish to journey with us.

The Vincentian Family Executive Board and Vincentian Family Office

Efforts to collaborate within the Vincentian Family began in the 1990’s. The Vincentian Family Executive Board, which consists of representatives from nine branches of the Family, currently oversees the international Family’s work. This collaboration encourages enthusiasm and motivation among the branches to embrace the Vincentian Charism and spirituality.

It is important to note that the Executive Board is not a legal entity. However, it does make decisions and recommendations for the activities of the international Vincentian Family, such as organizing gatherings, providing formation opportunities, and suggesting themes for reflection. The Board meets at least twice a year.

Founded in 2015 in Philadelphia, the Vincentian Family Office serves “As the administrative arm of the VFEB, it accompanies the Vincentian Family in its development and growth of our shared Vincentian charism.” (Mission Statement)

The Office ensures the continuity of the Board’s work, coordinates activities, provides information, and delivers formation experiences. The Office promotes communication and collaboration among the various Branches of the Vincentian Family and creates opportunities for leadership to meet and work together. The Office also supports the Commissions and National Councils.

For more details on the work of the Board and of the Office, please see the document **“Vincentian Family By-Laws”** which came into effect in June 2023 and are published both on the 2024 Convocation App and on the Vincentian Family Office Website.

National Councils

Building relationships is crucial in all our endeavors. Understanding our presence in the 168 countries where we operate globally is our first and most challenging task.

Members of the Vincentian Family share a common DNA: sharing the Good News of Jesus through their service to those on the peripheries of society. This marriage of evangelization and charity lie at the heart of the Charism of St. Vincent de Paul. Our shared Charism simplifies some of our work, at least in theory: we recognize our shared purpose of establishing service networks for and with those living in poverty, addressing both immediate needs and seeking long-term solutions to poverty.

To work effectively, everyone involved must get to know one another, establish trusting relationships, create well-organized systems that use our human and natural resources, and secure the necessary funding to support these endeavors.

The VFO supports the different Branches by encouraging interaction and facilitating the assessment processes necessary for their success. Many in leadership have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to work collectively rather than in isolation.

The main goal is to empower (i.e. better organize) the different Branches within a country or region. They often come together for prayer and celebration, formation, and hopefully service. We strive to help them better utilize their resources – especially the talents of their members and the people they serve. To encourage their growth, a training process is being developed for these coordinating committees or councils.

To support these efforts, an international Council has been established, with representatives from different regions, serving as liaisons between the Office and the Councils. They provide direct support and facilitate communication within the Vincentian system.

There are two important documents contained in the **“Vincentian Family By-Laws”** (on the 2024 Convocation App and on the Vincentian Family Office Website):

- p. 12: **“Rational for National / Regional Councils”**
- p. 16: **“Vincentian Family Office Advisory Council (VFOAC): Terms of Reference”**

Confraternities

One of our dreams for the National Councils is to be able to create international networks that parallel the Latin American Vincentian Family, FAVILA. Through collaboration at national, regional, and global levels, we can more effectively tackle the complex challenges of poverty.

In 2019, the members of the FAVILA Board met in Bogota, Colombia, where they proposed creating groups comprising individuals with similar professions willing to utilize their expertise to aid those in need. The growing popularity of these groups underscores the significance of uniting individuals actively engaged in offering practical assistance to others.

Today, there are 25 Confraternities, each dedicated to utilizing their talents for various charitable purposes they have undertaken. These groups work to serve God by assisting those in need and addressing a wide range of humanitarian issues. This approach provides a meaningful way for members to connect their professional skills with their Vincentian calling, making them a valuable asset for both Mission and Charity. We are just beginning to understand the full extent of this initiative's blessings.

Based on the FAVILA model, our goal over time is to create a Global Vincentian Network. Ultimately, we seek to create an international Vincentian Ecosystem that will enable us to respond effectively to emergency crises and the everyday needs of the people we serve. Using technology, we aim to extend our Vincentian organizational capabilities to this broader context.

This is of crucial importance when an area is devastated by natural or civil calamities, which is one of the greatest challenges that we face as an international Family. We simply do not have the resources to respond to every disaster – whether manufactured or natural – in a given year. We hope that with strong National Councils we can effectively fulfill the role of first responders and work with others from within and outside our community.

Vincentian Family Commissions

Effective communication is crucial for all our activities. The Family has ten official languages: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, German, Dutch/Flemish, Polish, Chinese, and Arabic with many more vying for that status! We translate every official communique into all of these – and we are totally dependent upon an international volunteer staff to manage this work.

Communications

The Communications Commission oversees all communication-related tasks. Our dedicated team manages our website and social media and creates formation materials. Their latest achievement is the development of the FamVin app, accessible

on both Android and Apple devices. This team also assists some of our Branches with their communications needs. To view their work, visit FamVin.org.

Formation

The Formation Commission is working on a training method to effectively educate people on collaborating to create sustainable projects in line with the Spirit of St. Vincent. The team will incorporate past work on Vincentian spirituality, collaboration, and systemic change to develop a comprehensive curriculum for all Vincentians.

Our primary goal is to create "Vincentian Schools of Formation" in every country or region where the Vincentian Family operates. These formation schools, guided by the local National Council, will offer training to all members of the Vincentian Family in that area.

“Charity”

Since 2017, the international Vincentian Family’s primary charitable focus is homelessness. Working both on the local level as well as internationally with the United Nations, we are addressing all its aspects – slum dwellers, displaced persons (refugees), and street dwellers. The Vincentian Homeless Alliance spearheads these efforts, including the 13 Houses Campaign.

Even as this is our major focus, it is important to say that there is no aspect of poverty that is not addressed by some Branch of the Family somewhere in the world. These include combating human trafficking, women empowerment, education on every level from nursery to postgraduate studies, job and skills trainings, health care from clinics to major hospitals to hospice care, work with youth, adolescence, and the elderly, social work, prison ministries, and of course supporting parishes.

For as much as we do, there is so much more to be done. The VFEB is currently examining proposals for the establishment of a permanent Charity Commission.

Resources

Every time the VFO Team visits a country, we are questioned about the availability of funds to support vital services. Unfortunately, we cannot provide financial assistance or the resources they need– at this moment. However, with the creation of our new European Association, we aim to change this situation gradually. We are creating a fundraising arm to enable us to think globally as we act locally to help those in need. In addition, we are establishing a US-based endowment fund to be of greater service to enhance our ability to further support the Family.

In today's technological and digital era, Vincentians should lead in matching needs with resources, including personnel, services, and financial support, both locally and internationally. Such a database of information would greatly benefit those living in

poverty and all those endeavoring to serve them. If the members of the Vincentian Family cannot undertake this work on their own, itself, we should seek partners to assist us. Since our umbrella encompasses various educational, healthcare, and social service agencies, forming a coalition for this should be feasible.

Vincentian Foundations and PJP's

One such partner can certainly be found in the newly emerging Vincentian Foundations. They represent a new expression of the Vincentian Charism birthing in many parts of the First World. As religious congregations come to completion, those with the financial means create these entities to continue their mission to the people they have served in their locale. Lay run, the consecrated members accompany them initially, offering spiritual formation and practical guidance. They prepare the Foundation members for the day when community members will no longer be able to assist them. We have a familial obligation to support with these Foundations so that they recognize themselves as an integral part of our Vincentian Family.

We are committed to supporting the work of the Foundations. They have already indicated how crucial formation is for their ability to serve in the spirit of our Charism. Providing them with the resources they need and helping them adapt to their local circumstances will be essential to the vitality of the Charism in the future. They have also expressed a need for professional development. The VFO is uniquely positioned to convene them to explore Vincentian approaches to the urgent issues they face, whether in the medical, social, ethical, or legal fields.

Evangelization

Vincent de Paul taught his followers that we cannot separate evangelization from service. They are essential to our existence and our proclamation of God's love for His people. Vincent believed that Jesus was proclaimed through both words and actions. Methods for evangelization, such as popular missions, confessions, catechesis, prayer, and faith sharing, were considered instruments for spreading the message.

Over time, different methods for evangelization have been utilized. However, the Vincentian Family must commit to developing modern communication, technology, and social media. One effective means developed by the Vincentian Family and showcased at the 2018 Festival of the Arts in Castel Gandolfo was the Vincentian Family Film Festival. The collection of shorts, a modern form of parable or storytelling, as well as other media which we update periodically can be found at <https://VinFlix.net>

While missions are carried out in various regions, incorporating local cultures and customs, the effective use of contemporary communication tools still needs to be improved.

This reality directly impacts an effective Vincentian evangelization of youth and young adults. They live in a land where many older people have little experience and where

instant access and a technological environment shaped by TikTok, Snapchat, Vine, Kik, and gaming are the norms and not the exception. A new generation is forming with a different way of thinking and processing life and relationships. Are we truly prepared to evangelize them and also be evangelized by them?

I agree with those who say that technology is not everything. It is important to remember the essential nature of relationships. That is one reason why we developed a Vincentian Volunteer Website called <https://famvin.help/> in English, Spanish, French, Italian, Polish, and Portuguese, but it is still a well-kept secret. We seek resources to develop and promote it further within the Family and beyond.

What Must Be Done?

In every age, Christians are challenged to reinterpret their faith and to adapt to the present day. If you have any doubt, just examine the Church's changing teachings on slavery.

Similarly, we Vincentians are called to pay attention to the signs of the times and to the needs of the impoverished. This awareness of how the Spirit is moving in our midst also calls us to interpret and reinterpret our Charism so that we will remain responsive to the Spirit's guidance.

On the last day of the 2020 Vincentian Family Leaders Meeting, our First International Convocation, Sister Blandine Klein, SC offered a powerful summation of our time together in Rome. She said: "The charism is constantly evolving and adapting. The only constant over the centuries is: 'the charity of Christ urges us on.' The charism is therefore alive!"

In her keynote address to the Leaders in 2020, Sister Constance Phelps, SCL stated:

As we anticipate and birth new forms of living our charism in the various branches, we must assume that we are seeking God in contemplation to deepen the mystical life, that we are affirming and challenging each other in conversation, and that we find ways to support each other by deep friendship, mutuality, and trust. We must remember:

We are preparing ourselves not for the comfortable predictability of yesterday, but for the realities of today and all those unknown possibilities of tomorrow.

As we gather in Rome for the Second Convocation of the Vincentian Family in November 2024, our synodal process will help us uncover the new urgent needs and directions to which the Holy Spirit is guiding us. This process will also allow us to remain faithful to the Vincentian Charism entrusted to us.

Why are we doing this?

My simplest answer is - we have to! The charism of St. Vincent is a global phenomenon that continues to grow and evolve. Its freedom and breadth gives birth to and sustains our Vincentian Family. Our charismatic Family is greater than any of its individual parts, and greater than all of them combined, because ultimately it is the power of the Spirit at work among us.

We must confidently express our Charism, especially in today's world. I will explain why it needs to be done in three parts.

1st – that we might improve our service to the impoverished.

If our efforts do not improve poverty, we should stop now. If we are not living the truth that we can achieve more together than alone, we have failed to put our Charism into practice.

If we fail to recognize the power of our collective voice and our potential to advocate even more effectively on behalf of those who are systematically oppressed — in international forums, with national and local government leaders, at community meetings, and in our neighborhoods — then we have failed to fully embrace the grace that the Spirit has bestowed upon us. This moment in our history calls for us to respond to this grace.

2nd – that we might support one another more effectively in the organization of charity.

It is crucial to collaborate globally to address the challenges of a worldwide economy and the widespread issue of poverty. International cooperation within the Family is essential for determining whom we can work with and whether we can achieve significant progress. To achieve this, we need to gather in prayer and celebration, to behold one another and each other's gifts, to appreciate each other's contributions to the growth of the Charism, and to collectively strategize with the beneficiaries of our work.

Because we recognized the importance of being a "Family," events such as the 2017 Symposium, the 2018 Film Festival, and the 2020 Leaders Meeting were possible. "Future" endeavors will not succeed unless the ideas cultivated in these events take root and thrive within us.

3rd - that we might remain prophetic witnesses to the signs of the times.

The founders of each Branch of the Vincentian Family were prophets in their own right. They understood the needs of those around them and recognized the challenges of their time. The Spirit called them to boldly and innovatively embody charity in a new way. Like Vincent, they were unafraid to respond to the question, "What must be done?"

Conclusion

The participants of the 2017 Symposium emphasized that the future is already taking shape. Thus, we must ask ourselves some hard questions at this moment, as failing to do so will have significant consequences for the future of the Vincentian Family.

The Spirit has given us this moment of grace, not only for ourselves, but also as a gift to those whom we serve. Some of the questions raised during the Symposium that still require answers include:

- a) Are we willing to take risks?
- b) Are we willing to let go?
- c) Are we willing to acknowledge and work with new forms of poverty?
- d) Are we willing to redefine Vincentian Family membership?
- e) Are those living in poverty truly welcome at our planning tables – are they really integrated into our projects?
- f) Are we willing to engage in ongoing formation?

St. Vincent de Paul said: "...the fact that we have been called to accompany the poor and to participate in the mission of Jesus is something beyond our understanding... What greater motive could there be for giving praise and thanks to God."