



**International Confederation  
Society of Saint Vincent de Paul  
Council General International  
16th President General**



**Letter 40/2020**  
**Paris, 9 September 2020**

*To Superior/National Councils,  
Members of the International Structure,  
Members of the International Board,  
Staff members in Paris,  
To all fellow members of the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul around the world.*

## **Four years in post: offering service**

*“Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last of all and servant of all” (Mark: 9, 35)*

### **1. Introduction and Acknowledgements**

My dear fellow members and friends, may Our Lord Jesus Christ bless us, and Our Lady protect us. I could not believe it when I realized it, but we have already completed four of the six years of this term of office, by God's grace. It has been four years of hard work, and many successes, but also times of challenges and struggle, especially with our limited resources, and in this time of pandemic.

First off, I would like to thank God for my health and understanding, and my family for their unconditional support from the very first day I accepted my role. I would also like to thank all members of the International Council and the Structure, the staff at the head office and the member countries of our Confederation, for their prayers and support. Together we have undertaken some marvellous work. I will not mention herein the names of any members or associates specifically, because I don't want to miss anyone.

### **2. Planning**

During these last four years, thanks be to God, we have achieved excellent results based on the strategic plan drafted at the beginning of this period, continuing the legacy of my predecessors. Some of the 10 strategic items have been achieved, and even surpassed. Others, of course, still need further work, but they are moving in the right direction. This international plan was developed with the democratic participation of our members, through a survey, so we could redefine our mission, vision and values.

Over these four years, we have had the happiness of adding 2,200 new Conferences to our Confederation, truly meaningful results. With the changes to the employment contracts for the staff in the Paris office, the organisational model seems to be improving all the time. We have created several special working committees that have completed their work and presented their final reports to the International Board, thus helping in the decision-making process.

The creation of the General Ombudsman position is also something to celebrate. It is the first time in the history of the Council General that this kind of service has been provided to receive criticism, comments, suggestions, praise and complaints. It improves transparency, dialogue and the democratic process for our management. The cases coming to the Council General have first to be handled at national level, then if there is no resolution, they can be escalated to the international level. Some 50 cases have been examined and completed in the past four years.

### **3. Autonomy and Administration**

Shortly after I took on the role of President General, the team had to address the discussion about a proposed canonical status for our Society which would radically change its basic foundations. We appointed a working committee to help us take the right decision, and after months of intense study and consultation with various experts, it concluded by rejecting any attempt to change our identity, so that we maintain our independence and our nature, with no modification to our original status (a civil association of the lay faithful), remaining faithful to the Rule, the Papal Brief of 1845, and the Vatican Resolution “*Corrientesis*” of 1920. This means we have kept our Society united and aligned, as the seven founders wished.

As regards administration, we have had to make slight changes to the working team (Board and personnel) over these four years, but this is natural in any institution, to put the right people in the positions for the services which Council General is delivering. I am really grateful to the current personnel and to those who have served on the Board in any position, commission, service or area. I thank you all, from the bottom of my heart!

The Board has increased its membership from 8 to 12, hence increasing transparency, and helping to “do good well”, through consensus and collegiate discussion, for the health of our Society. Today, for the first time in the history of the Council, we have a member of the SSVP as Secretary General. The conciliatory and diplomatic spirit of our leaders helps to ensure that Council General’s resolutions are implemented with full transparency. We presently have a very eclectic, faithful and harmonious Board, made up of members from all over the world.

I am very pleased with the progress made by the Structure members, and with the work of Territorial Vice-presidents and Zone coordinators. Several territorial meetings have been held (Ibero-American and Portuguese-speaking) and others are planned before 2022 (Asiatic, South American, French-speaking and African). The Structure members, especially Territorial Vice-presidents, have my unconditional support, and I am very grateful for their devotion, loyalty and service.

### **4. New head office**

The Council General's assets have quadrupled. After a very favourable negotiation process, the International Superior Councils, meeting in plenary session in Oporto (Portugal), in 2019, approved the sale of the offices in Rue de Londres, and the purchase of the new head office in Rue de la Glacière (Paris). We now have a new home, double the size of the previous one, with many rooms, an auditorium and a chapel, ready for the growth of the SSVP, God willing, in the next 50 years. I am very pleased to have been the President General who directed this process, and my thanks to all those who collaborated in making the decision. The “Ozanam Museum”, funded by France’s National Council, will be housed in the new offices, and open to all members.

## 5. International journeys and expansion

During this time, I have visited some 40 countries, reaching every continent, on my missionary journeys. In most of these nations, especially Africa, it was the first visit ever from a president general. I have learned a great deal in every country I have visited, because the SSVP is full of brilliant people, and really encouraging initiatives on behalf of the most vulnerable. In many places, it is impressive to see how much the SSVP can do for those in need, even with few financial resources.

We are present in 151 territories, and so we have many different cultures. However, the SSVP is the same, with the same Rule, the same flag, the same logo, and the same essential principles, based on the virtues of Saint Vincent and centred on charity towards those who suffer, and on the growth in holiness of our beloved fellow members. In this way we respect the legacy of our seven founders.

Indeed, every country is different, since economic, social and environmental conditions can vary. But charity is always the same. Knowing how to serve those in need, sometimes with few financial resources, is the reality in many places. But there too, dedicated charity is active, because love attains anything. A friendly hand for the helpless, loving advice at the right moment, an embrace for those who are suffering, all this is charity too.

We have managed to expand our Confederation with members now in five new territories: the Vatican, Liberia, Albania, the Cayman Islands and Cyprus. All part of the “SSVP Plus” project. Thank God we have great hopes of bringing the SSVP into further new areas by the end of this term of office, including Greece, San Marino, Morocco, Kazakhstan and the Scandinavian countries.

## 6. International Aid

The humanitarian, international nature of our Society has developed and grown annually, through some large financial donations from Superior Councils to other needy regions of the world. This is charity across borders, creating a real network. The Council General provides the International Solidarity Fund (ISF), the international Twinning department and the Commission for International Aid and Development (CIAD), which together spread solidarity throughout the world, supplying 1 million euros a year in donations and sponsorship of social projects. In the last few months, because of the Coronavirus pandemic, donations have increased, and have been fairly significant.

We held a meeting on international action, with all regional delegates for special projects, forming the 12 territorial vice-presidencies, to align the work of Council General supporting preparation and proposals for projects from National Councils with CIAD’s funding processes and procedures.

## 7. Institutional relations

Relations with the Church and with the Vincentian Family have never been closer or better. The SSVP belongs to various official “dicasteries” (a kind of “ministry”), pontifical councils and bodies of the Holy See. Through the Council General, our organisation has taken part in the major events and discussions promoted by the Church. I have had the honour of meeting Pope Francis four times; although brief, I could always give the Supreme Pontiff reports on the SSVP’s work around the world. As for the Vincentian Family, I have taken part in all the executive meetings and events, both

continent- and world-wide, as well as the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vincentian charism, showing our total support, cooperation and joint work.

We have also worked actively at the United Nations, seeking protocols for collaboration, exchange of experience and new efforts to better serve those most in need, expressing our views and opinions on the proposals and goals which may be in line with the Vincentian charism. I have visited our UN delegations in Geneva and New York, liaising with ambassadors, government authorities, politicians, social workers and international consultants. In fact, we are thinking about setting up an office in New York to enhance the SSVP's advocacy on behalf of the poor.

Another focus for our institutional action is our close relations with various international charitable bodies such as the Scouts, Caritas and the Rotary Club, to share experiences. The “Charity in Hope” Medal, which we established in 2017, has contributed greatly to closer collaboration between the SSVP and these organisations, improving our care for those most in need. Finally, the SSVP has also been recognised and rewarded by various legislative bodies around the world, through honorific titles received both by me, and by other Council General members.

## **8. Spirituality and Training**

As spiritual counseling, we rely on the constant attention of the Congregation of the Mission, guiding us from the beginning of this term of office. Our adviser, Father Andrés Motto, as well as being a great scholar, with a deep spirituality, is the director of the IFC (International Formation Centre for the Congregation of the Mission), thoroughly versed in the origins of the SSVP, and especially Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam. The SSVP has excellent relations with the Congregation of the Mission and with the other Vincentian branches. Moreover, we have already signed a cooperation agreement with the Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul (RSV) for historical, vocational, training and administrative matters, and we are seeking further collaborations with other branches.

Another highlight is formation and training. We are holding an international meeting with the training and formation delegates of the 12 territorial Vice-presidencies, where we can exchange experiences, and work out how to act together, with proposals for future improvements. The “Universal Training Programme” has increased from 12 to 16 online modules, available in four languages. Some 10 new Vincentian books have been launched in the last four years. The President General’s circular letters, five of them since 2016, also help to improve the training of our members.

## **9. The Seven Founders**

The memory and legacy of the seven founders is another focus of this term of office, through the work of the “International Commission for Historical Research”. There has never been so much in-depth study, so much discussion, so much research on our beloved founders. We began the “themed years”, with international writing competitions and the film festival. Furthermore, we are promoting visits to the tombs of the founders. And we are also blessed by God with the discovery of the portrait of Félix Clavé, and with the “Seven Founders” song. We will soon be publishing a book of the winning essays from the annual competitions, expanding access to the biographies of the founders. I believe that all these initiatives bring us ever closer to the foundational times of our Society.

We have also turned our attention to the role played by Amélie Soulacroix Ozanam in the story of the SSVP, as we mark 200 years since her birth this year (1820/2020) on 14 August. To that end, this

day has been declared 'The International SSVP Women's Day', and an essay about her life has been published.

The Board is currently working full time on Ozanam's canonisation. At the beginning of our term of office, we received an e-mail about a really impressive cure in Brazil, and we immediately tried to speed up the process, appointing a Vice-postulator, working with the postulator in Rome, Fr Giuseppe Guerra, of the Congregation of the Mission. As well as this Brazilian case, there are some other possible miracles, from Venezuela, England and France, which could also be presented to the Vatican later on. We have also proposed that Ozanam could be declared as "Doctor of the Church". This is helping us a great deal on the road to his canonisation.

## **10. Communication and Youth**

The quality of our communications has really improved. The website has been revamped, much more attractive and informative. The logo, approved by a vote at the Council General assembly in 1999 in Fatima (Portugal) has been slightly modernised, and is now being used by 70% of Superior Councils. Published quarterly, the digital magazine "Ozanam Network" is packed with news, training materials and information about Council General's ongoing projects, programmes and initiatives.

We are producing a new institutional video, with inspiring stories. The number of hits on our social networks is growing, and the number of followers on all the Council General's communications media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) increases every day. Ozanam TV broadcasts the Council General's main meetings and events live, and provides services to the Vincentian Family. For the first time in our history, the President General has taken part in online interviews (talk-show type) with members around the world, at least twice a year. There have also been several public statements about social and organisational topics, speaking out, among other moral issues, against abortion, intolerance, violence against women, on behalf of the promotion of peace around the world, and following Ozanam's example as a forerunner in the Church's Social Teaching.

In the area of youth, childhood and teens, Council General has also made great progress. The "SSVP International Youth Day" was established on 4 July (feast day of Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati). We launched a 'Special collect for the Youth' (to be held in July each year), celebrated the 2nd SSVP International Youth Meeting (Salamanca 2018), and have set June 2024 for the 3rd Meeting. We are producing manuals, programmes and booklets to help National Councils to move into the university environment, as well as to invite more young people into the SSVP.

When I joined the SSVP, I was only 15, and so I am sure that investment in training and integration of young people into Conferences is essential for the future of our Society, and for its service dedicated to those most in need. Indeed, you can all expect much from me in youth matters.

## **11. The New Coronavirus Pandemic**

These last few months of the Covid-19 pandemic have been tough for mankind. The whole world has been affected, and so has our Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. There have been deaths among the people we help, among members and friends in the Vincentian Family, and members of the Church, as well as relatives and friends. We have all suffered a great deal; the pain of this is huge. But hope is in the soul of the Vincentian, as our Rule says, and as it appears in our logo and our flag: "Serve in hope". Countries have been extremely generous in their response to the appeal for

donations from Council General, and so charity has spread across borders. During the pandemic, Council General has continued its work unceasingly.

The pandemic has shown us that life has changed, and that the SSVP will also certainly have to adapt to new times, without ever departing from our fundamental principles. Our rules, our procedures, our campaigns and the way we work have certainly already been affected, and we have to reflect very seriously on our opportunities for future improvements.

## 12. Closing Words

Over these four years, God has been very kind to us. He fills us with the strength we need to overcome adversity and trouble, keeping us out of situations which may cause confusion through misinformation, unjust criticism and unnecessary stress (Jeremiah, 20, 10-13). God protects and strengthens us (Phil. 4, 13), allowing all our plans to be achieved (Prov. 19,21). I am the most fortunate President General in the world, and I rely on all Superior Councils to continue on this path.

From the beginning of our term of office, our wish has been to bring the Council General International closer to all the members, offering Superior Councils more services, and being more effective for all the member countries of the Confederation. The Council General is the “protector of the Rule and guardian of unity”; the more this Council is valued and loved, the more it will be understood and recognised as the main link in the great network of charity.

It is a great privilege, a great honour and a huge responsibility to serve as President General for all my fellow members around the world, as well as a great compliment to the Brazilian SSVP, which has the largest membership and number of Conferences and social works. I come from a developing country, with many social, moral and economic challenges, and I bring with me this outlook, this culture and this way of seeing the world. I will never please everyone, but I know that I always give my best to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Finally, there are three things I ask of you: pray for me, serve the poor with true love, and maintain unity within the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. May the Blessed Virgin Mary enlighten us, and Saint Vincent show us always the virtues we need most to serve the poorest people in the world. I sincerely hope that the post-pandemic world will be more generous, more tolerant and show greater solidarity, and that our members can work more effectively, in practical ways, to reduce material, moral and spiritual poverty for everyone. May God bless us.

I would like to devote the results of this term of office to the memory of our deceased, respected fellow member Amin Abouhamad de Tarrazi, 12th President General, who passed away in January 2019, and whose example as a Vincentian I have followed.

**Renato Lima de Oliveira**

16th President General of the SSVP

Paris, 9 September 2020

Feast day of Bl. Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam.