

Honor Thy Fellow Vincentians

(excerpted from *For Your Love Alone* by Michael Syslo)

For more than 25 years, I have been working with Conference members in various parts of the country, guiding them and answering their questions about being Vincentians. One of the themes that has come up fairly regularly over that time has to do with what I call “Honoring thy fellow Vincentian.” It is a simple theme, but we often come up with opportunities and reasons to break that concept. I will give a couple of examples of what I mean.

A Conference member once posed this question to me: I went on a home visit with my partner and we visited a family in need of help with a utility bill. We had recently helped them, and our guidelines would not let us help them this time. I really felt for the family and I decided to pay the bill for them out of my own money. Was I right in doing so?

The answer I gave him was: No. Every member is expected to honor the guidelines approved by the Conference. This is not your personal charity. You represent the Conference and must honor their decisions. You could have brought the case to the meeting and asked the Conference to override the guideline temporarily in order to satisfy this need. The Conference as a whole can override the guideline but not individual members. By paying the bill from your own funds, you dishonored the other members of the Conference and you also misrepresented the Society. If lack of funds was the problem, then you could have offered to donate those funds to the Conference. However, the decision to help still falls to the Conference.

Another situation was presented to me: We recently had a case where one of our new home visit teams said they would pay a bill for a client and it turned out that this commitment was against our guidelines. We contacted the family and explained that we could not pay the bill and then we reprimanded the visiting team. Is this the best way to handle this situation?

This is the answer I gave: Someone from SVdP visited a person or family in need and promised to help. As far as the family is concerned, the bill was going to be paid and they felt relief. When you cancelled that commitment, you placed them in further crisis. You made their situation worse. You also lowered the esteem they had for the members who committed to help as well as the Society itself. Obviously, the new team needed additional training and a better understanding of the guidelines. But the family in crisis should not be made to suffer additionally because of the mistake of a member. Guidelines under which Conferences work should be designed to give assistance – not deny it. The Conference as a whole can override guidelines under special circumstances.

Works of charity in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are the works of the Conference – not personal works of charity. The decision to help or not help is that of the Conference. Based on guidelines which the members

approve, home visit teams are usually given the authority to decide what to do or not do. The Conference decisions must be honored as well as those of the individual member when appropriate. When we do something contrary to the decision made by the Conference, we dishonor our fellow members. Conference members who regularly do their own thing and dishonor the decisions of the Conference should resign and move on to a different ministry. When the Conference as a whole reverses a member's decision (made legitimately), they dishonor the member and may hurt the person in need as well. Honor thy fellow Vincentians.