

## The Basics of SVdP Governance

By Michael Syslo

Governance in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is focused around two basic documents: the Rule and the Bylaws. In 2003, when the current version of the Rule was adopted, it was effectively broken into two parts. The basics (spirit/philosophy) of the Society were placed in the Rule, and the structure/operations of the Society were placed in Bylaws.

There is only one Rule, but it is separated into three parts.

- Part I contains the articles of the International Rule. Every member of the worldwide Society must comply with this part of the Rule.
- Part II contains the statutes of the International Office. This governs how the International Office operates.
- Part III contains the statutes of the Society in the United States. Every member of the Society in the United States must comply with this part of the Rule.

Every Council and Conference must adopt one of the official versions of the Bylaws. Simply indicating in the Conference Annual Report that you follow the officially approved bylaws does not mean you have adopted a set. Every Conference and Council must formally adopt a set of Bylaws and give a copy to the next higher Council. There are 10 official versions of the Bylaws. There is one set of Bylaws for the National Council and there are three sets of Bylaws each for Conferences, District Councils, and (Arch)Diocesan Councils.

- For Conferences, one set is for Conferences that use the EIN and Tax-exempt status of its District Council or (Arch)Diocesan Council). One set is for Conferences who are separately incorporated and have an integrated Board of Directors. And one set is for Conferences who are separately incorporated and have a separate Board of Directors.
- For District Councils, one set is for District Councils that use the EIN and Tax-exempt status of its (Arch)Diocesan Council. One set is for District Councils who are separately incorporated and have an integrated Board of Directors. And one set is for District Councils who are separately incorporated and have a separate Board of Directors.
- For (Arch)Diocesan Councils, one set is for (Arch)Diocesan Councils that have their own EIN and Tax-exempt status and chose to operate without a formal Board of Directors. One set is for (Arch)Diocesan Councils who have an integrated Board of Directors. And one set is for (Arch)Diocesan Councils who have a separate Board of Directors.

It is the responsibility of the Conference President to ensure that every member of his/her Conference has read the Rule and their adopted Bylaws and is in compliance with them.

It is the responsibility of the District Council to ensure that every one of their Conferences has adopted an appropriate set of Bylaws and is in compliance with both the Rule and Bylaws.

It is the responsibility of the (Arch)Diocesan Council to ensure that every one of their District Councils and Conferences has adopted an appropriate set of Bylaws and is in compliance with both the Rule and Bylaws.

In addition, the National Council, (Arch)Diocesan Councils, and District Councils may pass resolutions that must be complied with appropriately by all subsidiary Councils and Conferences.

Conferences are encouraged to have a written set of guidelines to define operational processes that the Conference as a whole has agreed to.

No written guidelines or changes to Conference or Council Bylaws may contradict any part of the Rule or Officially Approved Bylaws. Those changes are void. Period.

It is the strong recommendation of the Society that every member of the Society be given a copy of the Rule and appropriate Bylaws, that they read them and discuss them at meetings to ensure proper understanding. This is now specified as part of the recommended agenda of a Conference meeting in Statute 7 of Part III of the Rule.

One final point of importance: it is the experience of leadership in the Society that the problems encountered within the Conferences and Councils have generally been due to:

- Non-compliance with the Rule and/or Bylaws of the Society;
- Non-enforcement of the Rule and/or Bylaws by Conference and Council leadership; and
- Leadership in Councils not visiting their Conferences and Special Works and simply allowing them to do what they want.

In summary, to ensure the proper growth of the Society, it is necessary to ensure knowledge of and compliance with the Rule, Bylaws and Resolutions of the Society by all members at all levels.