

Practical Guidelines Concerning Ten Important Relationships of the Local Superior

Practical Guide for the Local Superior
VINCENTIANA (2003), pp. 195-256

With the Visitor and his council

41. Smooth collaboration and good communication between the local superior and the Visitor and his council are crucial, both in the animation of the house and in the implementation of the Provincial Plan (cf. C 123 § 2).

42. The local superior has the duty to keep the Visitor informed about the state of the house entrusted to him (S 78, 1°). The superior can do this informally, through frequent communication, and more formally during visitations. It is recommended that he also do this, from time to time (e.g., once a year), in writing.

43. Our Constitutions encourage the Visitor to visit the houses frequently and oblige him to make an official visitation at least every two years (C 125, 6°). The local superior should facilitate such unofficial and official visits and inform the confreres of the house about them so that they will have the opportunity to speak with the Visitor. St. Vincent valued such visits highly. He wrote: “In a word, it can be said that visitations, made well and exactly, do what the sun does: they give light ... Just as the sun spreads its influence over all creatures, it can also be said that the visitation benefits the entire family visited” (SV II, 616).

With the local community “ad instar Consilii” (S 79 § 3) or with the house council (if one exists)

44. Our Constitutions and Statutes envision two different situations:

- a. *Houses where no council is named.* This is the usual situation envisioned by the Constitutions and Statutes, particularly in houses where the number of confreres is not too large; that is, there is no formally appointed house council. Rather, the local superior meets frequently with all the members of the house “ad instar Consilii” (S 79, § 3).
- b. *Houses where the Visitor, with the consent of his council, judges it necessary to constitute a house council* (C 134, § 2). Various reasons might lead the Visitor and his council to this conclusion; e.g., the size of the house, the frequent absence of its members for the sake of the mission, the special nature of the house (a house of initial formation, a house for the infirm, etc.). In such cases, the house consultants, who help the local superior in the animation, government, and administration of the house, are designated according to the Provincial Norms. Practice in the provinces varies: sometimes the consultants are appointed by the local superior, sometimes they are elected by the confreres of the house, sometimes they are named by the Visitor.

45. In either case, the local superior should dialogue with all the members of the house or with the members of the house council about all important matters related to the life and mission of the community and should make his decisions in light of the reflections offered. Some matters (e.g., certain expenditures) require the formal consent of the house council, whether the council is of the type described in a or b above.

46. The local superior should prepare councils well. A written agenda should be distributed to all the members of the house at least a day ahead of time, along with any relevant documentation, so that the confreres might prepare for the meeting. During the meeting, all should have the opportunity to speak and all should listen well, especially the superior.

47. Final decision-making authority rests with the local superior, after he has listened to the confreres. A wise superior will work hard at incorporating into a final decision, as much as possible, the ideas emerging from the discussion.

48. While a local community cannot impose its judgment on the superior or force him to act if he should be unwilling, nonetheless Canon 127, § 2, 2° offers sage advice; namely, that the superior should not act against the vote of his council, especially if it is a unanimous one, unless he has what is, in his judgment, a serious overriding reason.

49. Sometimes, when little or no consensus is reached in discussions about important matters, it is desirable to delay a decision, unless it is urgent, and take the matter up for discussion again at a future council meeting.

50. After meetings of the house council, the Acts, recording all important decisions, should be distributed to the members of the local community so that they might have a written account of what was decided. Besides guaranteeing a record of decisions made, this is also helpful for good communication, especially when members of the house are absent from meetings.

51. In a letter of November 21, 1642, St. Vincent tells the impetuous Bernard Codoing: “I have always recognized in the two of us this fault of pursuing our new ideas too readily and becoming at times too strongly attached to them. This has made me impose on myself the yoke of doing nothing important without seeking advice. That is why God gives me new insights every day on the importance of acting this way, and more devotion to doing nothing except in this way” (SV II, 313).

With the domestic assembly

52. The domestic assembly is distinct from the house council. It is a formal gathering held in preparation for the provincial assembly. Our Constitutions describe it as follows (C 147):

§ The domestic assembly is convoked by the superior of the house or by the assistant who is exercising the total office of superior, and is held to prepare for the provincial assembly.

§ All those having active voice are to be called to the domestic assembly.

§ It is the function of the domestic assembly to deal with those things which the house wishes to propose to the provincial assembly as well as those things which the preparatory commission for the provincial assembly has proposed for discussion, and to deliberate about proposals.

53. This assembly, like other meetings of the members of the house, should be very well prepared, with a written agenda distributed (or sent to confreres attached to the house but living outside it) in ample time before the meeting in order to allow all the confreres

(including those attached to the house) to read and reflect on all the materials sent by the Preparatory Commission and to formulate proposals to the provincial assembly.

54. It will often be necessary to have several sessions of the domestic assembly in order to treat the preparatory materials thoroughly.

55. A member of the house should be chosen as a secretary. The Acts of the domestic assembly should be carefully drawn up and approved by the members of the assembly itself. They should then be forwarded to the Preparatory Commission.

With the assistant superior

56. The Assistant aids the local superior in the animation, government and smooth running of the house (S 79 § 1).

57. In the absence of the local superior, the Assistant takes over and has full authority in accord with the norms of our own law and the law of the Church (S 79, § 2).

58. The Assistant is named in accord with the Provincial Norms (S 79, § 1). Practice varies in the different provinces: at times he is named by the local superior, at times he is elected by the local community, at times he is appointed by the Visitor. The duration of his office also depends on the Provincial Norms.

59. A good relationship and good communication between the local superior and the Assistant is very important for the spirit of the local house. In 1656, St. Vincent emphasized to Antoine Durand the importance of the Assistant: “Do not settle any business matters, however unimportant they may be, until you have first sought their (the confreres’) advice, especially that of your Assistant” (SV VI, 66).

With the local treasurer

60. The local treasurer administers the goods of the house under the direction and vigilance of the local superior with his council (S 102). He is named according to the Provincial Norms (S 79, § 1). Practice varies in the different provinces: at times the local treasurer is named by the local superior, at times he is elected by the local community, at times he is appointed by the Visitor. The duration of his office also depends on the Provincial Norms.

61. Our Constitutions offer a number of important principles that are useful for local superiors and treasurers to reflect on frequently. Among these are (C 154):

§ Administrators should remember that they are only stewards of the goods of the Community. Consequently, they should expend these goods only for uses suitable to the status of missionaries. Moreover, they should always act according to just civil laws, as well as according to the norms and spirit of the Congregation.

§ Administrators should provide willingly for the needs of members in all matters which concern their life, particular office, and apostolic work. Such a use of goods is an incentive for members to promote the good of the poor and to lead a truly fraternal life.

§ These administrators should, in addition, observe equity in the distribution of goods because they ought to promote community life among the members. They should provide for the individual needs of members according to the norms enacted by the provincial assembly.

62. The treasurer should communicate well with the local superior and the confreres of the house about all matters affecting the administration of the community's goods. Our Constitutions emphasize (C 134 § 1): "Under the guidance of the superior, and with the help of the members in dialogue and common concern, the treasurer administers the goods of the house according to the norm of universal law and the law of the Congregation and the province."

63. Before the beginning of the fiscal year, the local treasurer should present the year's budget to the local community for its discussion and for the approval of the local superior and his council. At the end of the fiscal year, he should present an account of the receipts and expenditures for the examination of the local community and for the approval of the local superior and his council.

64. The treasurer should present to the local superior a monthly account of the receipts and expenditures of the house and a report on its patrimony. The superior should affix his signature to this account and report after he has examined and approved it. The treasurer should also keep the members of the local community informed about the administration of the house's goods (S 103, § 1); this can readily be done at house meetings.

65. He should be especially alert that laws regarding work, just wages, insurance, social security, and in regard to persons working in the houses and works of the Congregation, are exactly observed (S 107, § 1).

66. With the local superior, he should make sure that obligations connected with Mass stipends are fulfilled and that gifts and grants are used in accord with the intention of the donor.

67. If members of a local house are entrusted with a special work, they should submit an account of its receipts and expenditures, as well as its patrimony, to the proper superior, who may be either the local superior or the Visitor, depending on the case (cf. S 103, §§ 3-4).

68. St. Vincent offered much sage advice to local superiors and treasurers about the administration of the goods of their houses. Excerpts can be found in Appendix V (cf. N° 1, 2, 5).

With the members of the house as individuals

69. St. Vincent calls us to live together like brothers who care for one another deeply (CR VIII, 2). As the local superior attempts to animate a community which engages in common apostolic projects, lives together joyfully, prays together faithfully, shares its goods, and relaxes together (C 25), he should be attentive to the personal development and activity of each confrere (C 129 § 2). He should communicate with each individual frequently. Much healthy interchange can take place in relaxed times together such as meals and recreation.

70. Besides these informal conversations, the superior should, from time to time, have a more structured, lengthier conversation with each confrere. While carefully respecting the privacy,

particularly in the internal forum, that the common law of the Church and the particular law of the Congregation guarantee to all members, the superior should show his concern for the overall welfare and growth of each confrere. In fact, a good human relationship, personal attention and concern are irreplaceable.

71. Such a more structured conversation, traditionally called a “communication,” is very appropriate at least once a year. During the conversation, the superior’s role will often consist mainly in listening to the confrere as he shares his successes and failures, his hopes and fears, his efforts and struggles in living out our Vincentian vocation. In that listening context, a superior can often make suggestions that will be helpful to the growth of a confrere.

72. A whole series of themes might be touched upon, some at one time, some at another: apostolate, community life, prayer, the vows, vocational stability, physical health, leisure and relaxation, ongoing formation, spiritual direction, friendships, other relationships and appropriate boundaries in them, as well as other matters pertaining to the confrere’s growth.

73. In their contacts with individual confreres, local superiors should be continually mindful that they must be at the same time leaders and members; truly fathers, but also brothers; teachers of the faith, but mostly fellow-disciples of Christ; masters of perfection, but witnesses also by their personal holiness (cf. *Mutuae relationes*, 9d).

74. Confreres need the permission of the local superior for the use and disposal of the goods of the Congregation and of their own personal goods according to the Constitutions (C 34-35) and Statutes (§ 17-18) and the Provincial Norms. The tradition of the Congregation, its law, and its practice in this regard are explained at length in the fourth chapter of the *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission*¹.

75. The local superior should be especially concerned about the ongoing formation of the confreres, encouraging them to find courses, programs, and other means for developing their aptitudes and personal gifts in the service of the poor.

With the poor

76. While he animates the life of the local community, the superior is also called to promote the ministries of the house (C 129, § 2). The houses of the Congregation should be noted not just for their ministry of evangelization, but also for their practical concrete service to the poor. In his conference of December 6, 1658, St. Vincent stated (SV XII, 87): “If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the gospel to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their temporal wants, I reply that we ought to assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others ... to do this is to preach the gospel by words and by works.”

77. Among the characteristics of the evangelization work emanating from our houses, the Constitutions list these (C 12, 1°-4°):

- § clear and expressed preference for the apostolate among the poor, since their evangelization is the sign that the kingdom of God is present on earth (cf. Mt 11:5);
- § attention to the realities of present-day society, especially to the factors that

¹ In *Vincentiana*, January-February 1996.

- cause an unequal distribution of the world's goods, so that we can better carry out our prophetic task of evangelization;
- § some sharing in the condition of the poor, so that not only will we attend to their evangelization, but that we ourselves may be evangelized by them;
- § genuine community spirit in all our apostolic works, so that we may be supported by one another in our common vocation.

With the members of the Vincentian Family

78. In recent years the Vincentian Family has grown remarkably, and solidarity among the branches has increased. The local superior should promote contact with and service to the various groups in the Family.

79. Our Constitutions state (C 17) that our members should be willing to assist the Daughters of Charity when asked, especially in giving retreats and offering spiritual direction. The Constitutions also urge us to show a brotherly spirit of cooperation in the works that our two Communities undertake together.

80. In regard to our lay groups, Statute 7 states:
We should have a special concern for the lay associations founded by St. Vincent (the Ladies of Charity, begun in 1617, which are today the International Association of Charities) and those which are inspired by his spirit (e.g., the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, begun in 1833), since they have the right to our presence and our support.

- § All members should be willing to undertake this work and some should be specially prepared for it.
- § Our animation of these groups should have a spiritual, ecclesiastical, social and civic dimension.

81. Recent General Assemblies, particularly that of 1998, and other documents also encourage us to initiate and animate other Vincentian lay groups, such as JMV, MISEVI, and the Miraculous Medal Association. The local superior, with the members of the community, will designate who will be the local advisors and animators of such groups.

With guests

82. The local community should receive confreres, priests and other guests in our house with warm hospitality (S 15 § 2).

83. In receiving guests into our houses, at times it may be necessary to find a *via media* that balances various values: hospitality toward those who are our guests, coworkers, relatives and friends; the need of the confreres of the house to have private space and a peaceful atmosphere that will favor work, prayer, and rest (C 24, 4°).

84. It may also be necessary for the local superior, with the members of the community, to decide on some general norms as to overnight guests. In formulating such norms, much will depend on the availability of space, the privacy of the confreres, and other prudent considerations.

With the local ordinary and the local clergy

85. The works of the houses of the Congregation should be integrated within the pastoral activity of the diocese, in close cooperation with the local bishop, with the diocesan clergy, with religious institutes and with the laity (S 3). Our Constitutions state (C 3, § 2): “The Congregation of the Mission, according to the tradition set forth by St. Vincent, carries on its own apostolate in close cooperation with the bishops and diocesan clergy. For this reason St. Vincent often said that the Congregation of the Mission is secular, although it enjoys autonomy which has been granted either by universal law or by exemption.”

86. Concern for the formation of the diocesan clergy is an integral part of the purpose of the Congregation (C 1, 3°). Our Constitutions urge (C 15) that we “afford spiritual assistance to priests both in the work of their ongoing formation and in promoting their pastoral zeal.” We should also “encourage in them the desire of fulfilling the Church’s option for the poor.” Likewise, efforts should be made to join diocesan priests in other social and apostolic activities and help in promoting bonding and a community relationship within the local presbyterium.

87. Our Vincentian presence in a diocese should be characterized especially by:

- § works among the poor and most abandoned;
- § the creation and animation of the various Vincentian lay groups;
- § a simple style of living and preaching;
- § hospitality to the local clergy and availability for their formation;
- § formation of the laity, leading them to a fuller participation in the evangelization and service of the poor.