

President's Word – January 2006

As I write this article I am listening to the results of the federal election in Canada on Jan. 23. While as a charitable organization we cannot partake in “political” action, as individuals we do have a civic right and duty to cast our ballot in municipal, provincial and federal elections. We also have the right to question the candidates in our ridings, before, during and after elections advocating on behalf of those we serve. Policies dealing with issues like affordable housing and more global issues like Canada's involvement in Haiti are always of concern to Vincentians. In addition we can make our voices heard nationally by joining groups like “Make Poverty History” which has been very effective in advocating for the poor as well as to participate in Development and Peace through our parishes and supporting their annual Lenten campaign to provide potable water in third world countries.

National Council Election – This June at the AGA in St. John's I will be celebrating my fifth year as National President, which means it is time to begin the process of electing the next president, the fourteenth national president. As we did during the last election, the candidates for the position of President will be introduced to the general assembly in St. John's and they will be given the opportunity to address the delegates and present their plan for the Society should they be elected. Past President Ellen Schryburt will be Chair of the election committee and will be preparing the call for nominations to be sent to Members by Right over the next couple of months. Please offer your prayers for those who allow their names to stand, as well as to offer encouragement to fellow Vincentians who you think might make a worthy candidate.

National Rule – The national Rule Committee will be meeting in February to review the first draft of the new National Rule. At this time we wish to thank all members of the Rule Committee and at this time especially Jacquelyne Lord President of the SSVP Conference in LaPocatiere, Quebec who generously agreed to take all the individual drafts and write a single document. The Committee felt it was important to have the entire rule written by one person to provide better continuity and readability. Once the original draft is reviewed by the Committee it will be forwarded to the members by Right for their review and comments. The process for submitting amendments will follow the process utilized by the International Council General during their Rule development in 2003. Amendment forms will be included with the draft Rule which will include a section to identify the passage of sentences to be amended, then a section to provide the proposed wording finally a section giving the logic/explanation for the recommendation. Proposed amendments will be reviewed by the Committee and a second draft produced. This second draft will be presented to the General Assembly on Friday June 23 and voted on Saturday at the Statutory Meeting in St. John's.

President's Pin – There are many Vincentians who have provided tremendous service to the Society over the years, many of whom go un-noticed by most people in society, while some others are very visible in their contribution acting as Regional/Provincial or Central Council Presidents etc.



within the Society. I think about people like Tony LaPierre (who passed away this past year) who was such a driving force in the Society in Atlantic Canada and who is responsible for the growth in the Society in the 60's and 70's. In an effort to recognize some of these individuals I have inaugurated a special Pin which will be presented to some of these people as a small token of our appreciation and in recognition of their service to the Society and especially (and more importantly) their service to the people we serve. Please submit the names of people you know whom you believe have made significant contributions to the Society as builders, administrators or as every day Vincentian workers (the heart of the Society) serving the poor.

Screening – As reported in previous magazines the National Executive Committee has established Screening and Duty of Care Guidelines which will be presented to the 2006 Annual General Assembly in St. John's. I include the following article that recently appeared in the Ottawa Citizen for your information and as an example of the typical reactions in a community when the topic of Screening is introduced. As you will see it is not unlike some of the reaction we have encountered. It does however provide an added perspective of the situation in society today for you to consider.

Bob Rupert, The Ottawa Citizen

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An audit of a new program that aims to screen out potentially predatory volunteers in churches has found there needs to be more focus on "high-risk" relationships between volunteers and children or seniors. The Ottawa audit is one of the first tests of a screening program being done in church dioceses across Eastern Ontario. In 2002, the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops ordered their parishes to closely check the backgrounds of volunteers who want to work with children, the elderly or handle church money. This includes a criminal record check.

The archdiocese of Ottawa recently finished auditing screening practices at the Baseline Road parish of St. Augustine. Monsignor Len Lunney said the St. Augustine audit suggests the church now knows a lot more about its volunteers and where they should or should not be active, he said. St. Augustine's parish priest Vincent Pereira said the audit indicates a need for more focus on "high-risk" volunteers who work with children or the elderly. Rev. Pereira says screening has already saved his church from a predator who came from another province and almost immediately moved into high-risk volunteerism. "We caught it before it got serious" after some church volunteers became suspicious, he said. "I called him into the office and asked a lot of questions. I realized he had a hidden agenda and my heart started to pump. I was shocked. He was a sort of con artist. This man will not be allowed to serve at any level -- not even to light a candle." Rev. Pereira declined to say what prompted the suspicions of church volunteers, and said police were not called. Screening came in for special attention seven years ago after a series of national scandals led the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation to team up with Volunteer Canada in the Ontario Screening Initiative. Sports, home-care and religious groups informed a consortium. In a draft-screening brochure released in late 1999, churches were advised to mince no words: "As people of faith we reach out to those in need. ... Some people may feel that terrible things could not happen here. Yet, terrible things do happen, and they happen in congregations just like ours. We cannot close our eyes to the facts. Pedophiles seek out environments where they can gain easy access to children. Abusive predators find their way to the frail and needy." The

guidelines were released six months later with much softer language: "A small number of people take advantage of organizations that have lax or non-existent screening procedures. They gain access to vulnerable persons, win their confidence and trust and bring immeasurable harm to them and their families." The guidelines called for "thorough, appropriate, consistent and ongoing screening measures."

The Eastern Ontario archdiocese of Ottawa (392,635 parishioners) and the dioceses of Cornwall-Alexandria (55,570) and Kingston (116,845) have since acted on their orders. Msgr. Lunney admits it was a tough sell in Ottawa. "There was a lot of apprehension at first," he said. "We had always assumed that we knew everything about everybody, but, of course, we didn't. Times have changed." Rev. Pereira said the church "has been slow" to recognize the need for screening because Catholics "trust people." But he said too much trust led to unfortunate incidents, and "screening is absolutely necessary." He said many volunteers were "shocked" when screening was introduced. "They wondered where we were going with this." But, he said, he is screened as well. "I have to get a criminal record check and an ID card to minister to parishioners in the Civic and Queensway campuses of the Ottawa Hospital." Msgr. Lunney said most volunteers, including older ones who were particularly hurt, eventually came around. He says part of the problem was semantics. "People hate the word 'screening,'" he says. So Ottawa, and some other archdioceses, rejected the initially proposed "Screening in Faith" term and called it "Responsible Ministry." Helen Lambertus, a retired teacher and St. Augustine's parishioner for 40 years, said she was "surprised and even a bit shocked" when screening was introduced. "Volunteers were saying, 'If you trusted me yesterday, why don't you trust me today?' But we didn't understand the concept. We began to realize that, in this day and age, it has become a fact of life." In the Kingston diocese, the concept was introduced in reassuring language: "Some very good and kind volunteers ... may feel personally hurt or offended at being asked to submit to a process which they do not believe should apply to them. It is important to remember that, not the person, but the position being fulfilled dictates the process of screening." Monique Marchand, who runs that diocese's Office of Risk Management, said most volunteers' doubts are dispelled as they go through the process. Still, she said, one parish ran into opposition from a devout family that said, "If you don't trust us after all this time, it's insulting." In the Cornwall-Alexandria diocese, screening is particularly touchy. A provincial commission of inquiry is investigating allegations that Cornwall was the longtime centre of sexual abuse of teenagers by community leaders, volunteers and the clergy. August 2005 guidelines on how the diocese should managing allegations of sexual abuse involving the clergy called for a standing committee to investigate "every complaint" and advise Bishop Paul-Andre Durocher "on whether there are reasonable and probable grounds to determine that an offence has been committed ... in a process that is prompt, reasonable and fair." Still, many churchgoers still seem unwilling or unable to accept the possibility that some bad apples may be lurking among trusted church volunteers. At St. John's Church in Perth on a recent Sunday, lawyer Doug James, a member of the parish's new screening committee, tried to reassure the congregation. "This does not mean the church no longer trusts its members and volunteers. The church is demonstrating its willingness to be transparent about its activities."

Members by Right and AGA – As the 35th Annual General Assembly is in the planning stages I would like to encourage all Members by Right to book their calendars for the dates of June 21 – 24 in St. John’s Newfoundland. As MBR’s you have the responsibility to approve the National Council Budget as well as to vote on the motions put forward during the meeting. For those members who did not attend the last meeting I would encourage you to take time to think about your role in the Society and to plan to attend the 2006 meeting in St. John’s Newfoundland. When you were elected to your position as a Council President and Member by Right you accepted the responsibility to participate in the duties of a MBR, which includes participation at the AGA. If you cannot attend the AGA, we encourage you to appoint someone to attend in your place so your Council is represented. Your presence and participation are very important.

Peace

Michael Burke

President National Council of Canada