

Dear Fellow Vincentians, Greetings and best wishes.

The Christmas holidays and festivities are now over and we are returning to ordinary time in our church and in our Society. My Christmas season included a two-hour visit to Hope Cottage, a SSVP run soup kitchen where many volunteers, Santa Claus and Halifax Archbishop Prendergast, joined me. We served a traditional Turkey dinner to 125 people on Christmas.

I also had the pleasure of being the "guest chef" cooking a salmon dinner for Hope Cottage early in November. Following is a Hope Cottage Newsletter report on the event. Thanks to several generous contributions, the staff of Hope Cottage was able to serve Poached Salmon with Hollandaise Sauce to its 80 guests on Friday November 1. A thoughtful person who won three large salmon this past summer delivered them frozen to Hope Cottage in late July. Another benefactor dropped off a \$100.00 gift certificate to Clearwater Lobsters in September. The staff used these two contributions to have enough salmon to feed 80 people with some left over. Michael Burke (second from the left in photo) was the guest chef for the day, poaching and preparing the salmon, as well as preparing the Hollandaise sauce. The staff prepared Caesar salad, rice and peas to round out the meal. A very special thanks to Glen Eagle Bakery for their kind contribution of 100 very nice deserts for the event. All those who came to eat, as well as those who prepared and served the meal, had a very good time.

I mention both of these events for a couple of reasons. First of all, I firmly believe that we should provide the very best service and meals possible. Secondly I believe that all Vincentians, including Conference and Council Presidents should have regular contact with the poor. We are all very busy these days, and the added responsibility of Conference or Council presidency can really put a squeeze on our free time. However serving the poor is what we do as Vincentians. We work with and serve the poor. Serving the poor is not something that we can turn on and off. If we really believe that the poor we serve are the suffering Christ, meeting them and serving them face-to-face should be our first priority. If we go for long periods of time without contact with the poor, we start to think like the rich segment of our society, and become aloof and indifferent to the daily plight of the poor. I am convinced that six Vincentians who have not had contact with the poor in a long time (or ever) will make different decisions than six Vincentians who have just returned from a home visit to a single mother or an individual living in a run down rooming house. Administration of the Society is important, but person-to-person contact with the poor is much more important. If you want a litmus test of what I am talking about, ask yourself how many poor or homeless people can you call by name.

Members by Right

I want to reiterate some comments I made in the last couple of magazines. I cannot emphasize enough, the importance of members by right (or their substitutes) attending the AGA. Members by Right of National Council are defined in Article 28 Schema II of our Rule and are as follows: "The President and the Vice-presidents of the National Council, the Presidents of Regional/Provincial Councils and Central Councils and the Presidents of Isolated Particular Councils and isolated Conferences are members by right of the National Council and may, when unable to be present, appoint their own substitute". When one accepts a position, as President of a Council or Isolated Conference, thereby becomes a Member by Right of the National

Council, it carries with it a number of responsibilities. One of these responsibilities is to partake in the Statutory Meeting and governance of the Society. I am certainly aware that at times family and other commitments within our daily lives will prevent us from being able to attend the AGA. The Rule does allow for substitutions in these cases. I would strongly encourage all 'members by right' to think about this important part of our Society and to exercise their rights and responsibilities at future AGA's.

Recent Meetings

St, John's, Grand Falls Nfld.

In early November I met with representatives of St. John's Particular Council, then on to Grand Falls, Nfld. to meet with members of St. Joseph's Conference. While in Grand Falls David Grant and I were guests of Bishop Martin Currie (former Spiritual Advisor to Halifax Particular Council). David and I met with the members of the Conference, visited their clothing outlet and discussed the activities of the Conference with President Shelia Barnes and the members.

IEC Alameda Spain

In December, as President of the National Council, I attended a meeting of the International Executive Committee (IEC) in Alameda Spain. International President General Jose Ramon Torremocha Diaz chaired this meeting. Agenda items included the International Council General's (ICG) year-end financial statements and budget for 2003, as well as discussions on the International Rule revision. There will be an international General Assembly in Rome in October 2003 to finalize the new rule. This meeting will be attended by all National Presidents (76 in the world) and where National Councils do not exist, the Presidents of the Superior Councils (19 in the world), this could be a Central or Particular Council. This "extraordinary Plenary Meeting" has been called by the International President General specifically to deal with the ratification of the new International Rule. International President General Jose Ramon Torremocha Diaz also presented an up-date on the proposed move of the operating office from Paris to Rome. The ICG made an offer on a building in Rome this summer but the building was sold to other interests. As a result there are no prospects on the horizon at this time. The President General told the gathering that if no building could be located within the next six months he would shelve the idea, as he did not want to saddle the next President General with this type of "work in progress". Following the presentation by the President General, the members of the IEC met (without the President General) to discuss the president's report, the Rule, format for the October meeting, Twinning and the operation of the ICG. As was the case last year, I acted as the recording secretary (I was the only person with a computer) and presented the report (Power Point) to the assembly.

AGA 2003

The plans for the AGA 2003 chaired by Halifax Particular Council President Maureen MacIlsac, are progressing well. The workshop program with a list of presenters and topics with the Registration Form. Book the dates now and plan to spend some time visiting the region.

The Rule of the Society

The on-going revision to the International Rule of the Society, as well as some events relating to Council development in our country has given us the impetus to discuss and think about the stature and relevance of our Rule in the Canadian Society.

During my visit to Montreal in November for a National Board Meeting, and over the Christmas holidays visiting family, I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of Montreal Central Council and Laval. Following my election as National President I believed that a resolution to the Montreal Laval problem could be reached. I now believe that the two groups are farther apart than when I was elected. I have spent many hours on this on-going situation, as have other people, along with prayer and meditation to seek guidance and a resolution and reconciliation to this dispute. I have now formed a committee to work on this file, composed of first Vice-President Clermont Fortin, Pierre Morissette from Quebec City and Andre Boyer, former Provincial President of the Quebec Provincial Council. Given the Superior Court ruling last year, "that all Conferences in the Archdiocese of Montreal come under the jurisdiction of the Montreal Central Council" we have asked the International Council General to rescind, or place in abeyance, the Institution of the Central Council of Laval. It was felt that even though this Central Council had no Conferences attached to it, it was developing a life of its own. Our main concern with this issue is that 90+-year-old corporate statutes of the Montreal Central Council are taking precedence over our Vincentian Rule. It is our contention that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Rule should have supremacy when it comes to issues of the management and development of the Society in this country. We have many Councils that are incorporated in this country. The main reasons that these Councils are incorporated are; a) to provide liability protection to the members of the Boards of the Councils and b) to conform to the tax laws of the country. We do not incorporate to establish statutes that restrict the expansion and development of the Society. The primary purpose of this new committee is to re-patriate the Rule in Canada. This committee will be looking at the options available to the National Council (including the petitioning of the National Assembly of the Provincial Government of the province of Quebec) to change the 1916 law. This committee will also be looking at the incorporations and statutes of other Councils to determine if they should also start procedures to petition changes to their By-laws. The intent of these efforts is to facilitate the management, the development and the expansion of the Society in Canada. One of the goals of this administration, from day one, has been the expansion of the Society. This goal is still a very high priority for the National Council. We believe that the present existence of certain corporate By-laws that curtail the powers of the National Council are an impediment to these goals of expansion of the Society, and thereby counterproductive to our service to the poor. In closing this discussion I must reiterate that our actions in this area are only directed to the goal of re-patriating the Rule and in no way are a criticism of the operations of the Councils in question. Our efforts reflect those of our principal founder Frederic Ozanam, when he was attempting to split the first Conference into two or three. There were great debates and arguments, but in the end the Conference split, and the rest is history. We believe that we are at a similar cross road today, and we are being restrained by "corporate By-laws". For the good of the Society, and more importantly the good of those we serve, we must move on, but we must do so within the rules of our civil society, and the rule of our Society. We are not going to take this debate (dispute) back into the civil courts. Please pray for a peaceful resolution and reconciliation.

Money – Money – Money

I must tell you how much I hate talking about money, I really do. However the National Council always seems to be in a precarious financial position. We are again

facing uncertain times as our incomes are lower than normal. We have commitments to our International Council (who are also facing financial difficulties), as well as our ordinary operating expenses. We encourage all Conferences and Councils to think about the requirements of the National Council with regards to funding (always sending any excess funds up to the next higher Council). We do have lofty goals at National Council – Expansion, Twinning, Advocacy, Strategic Plan, Youth Development etc. all of which require some funding. We thank you for your past support, and again ask you to continue to support us in the years to come.

Michael Burke
President, National Council of Canada

"It is only with the heart that one can see.
What is essential is invisible to the eye."
The fox in "The Little Prince" by Antoine De Sainte Exupery