

Within the Vincentian Tradition, building upon our traditional modes of reflection and formation as Catholics, we have a tool designed to help build our Conferences by reflection on our experiences enlightened by faith. As we invite the Holy Spirit into our lives to illuminate the presence of God's words and actions, we come to a greater understanding of just what it is we might be called to in responding to our neighbor's needs.



The tool we are going to explore today is called Apostolic Reflection, and when properly utilized, it allows Conferences to dive more deeply into the heart of an issue by connecting it with the words of Christ or a spiritual aspect. The tool is already something that your Conference is likely doing and is meant to help drive discussion and the building of consensus naturally within a Conference.

The tool fundamentally moves carefully from one stage to the next, enabling the ideas brought forward in one area to influence and guide those ideas within the next. When trying to build consensus, make note of which ideas gain relative acceptance/approval from the wider group, which ideas or comments are ones which people may disagree with yet can live with, and which ideas seem to bring either disunity or are clearly opposed to the sense of the group.

To build genuine consensus among a group does not mean a unanimous vote; instead, what is called for is an idea/approach which enables each person to not only live with the idea but find a means of engaging in supporting it to some extent. By paying attention to comments and writing them down, you will often notice themes begin to emerge, perhaps indirectly, which is often a sign that consensus is forming, or that agreement is taking shape.

The core elements, or method, has been handed down to us from the time of St. Vincent de Paul and he invites us to do the following:

1. Share our personal experiences connected to those we serve.
2. Listen to each other with a deep openness.
3. Reflect on feelings connected with those whom we serve.
4. Pray together with scripture and the teachings of the Church, discovering where the Vincentian values/spirit make their presence most known to us.
5. Discern together what actions we are called to do.

For today's engagement of the Apostolic Reflection tool, we will take on the exploration of a theoretical scenario as a case study. Each table can engage with this scenario as though they are a Conference.

Scenario for Apostolic Reflection

For many years now, your Conference has been a beacon of hope in the community, a place where everyone knows that they are able to turn to for assistance when times get difficult. Neighbors in need know that a Vincentian is someone who can be counted on to treat them with respect and dignity, someone who genuinely cares about them, offering to get to know them on a level deeper than any other social assistance group will – to the Vincentians of your Conference, a neighbor in need is simply, and truly, another opportunity to love Christ.

In the last few years, the community has gone through several shifts due to recent property development deals – neighbors previously in their homes for many years are now moving to other parts of the neighborhood, or simply leaving altogether; stores which once knew you by name are being bought up by major corporations – life has seemingly begun to shift. Your Conference has managed to walk with neighbors through all these changes, giving assistance, when possible, yet always treating them with a deeper level of dignity, so much so that your Conference is now one of the first phone calls for many in the community and you see both new and familiar neighbors on visits. Now, it has been announced that a new property is being developed in the area which will bring about a large potential influx of people eventually needing assistance from the Conference.

As this deal was announced, several members of the Conference have wondered if they should just shut off the phone when things get busy and walk away – not everyone can be taken care of. Others have said that they need to meet less frequently and simply focus on streamlining the home visit so they can meet with people more efficiently, meanwhile, some others in the group have suggested to just continue plugging along and doing what has always been done. As a Conference leader, you have decided to approach this topic as the point of reflection for the next meeting and decided to utilize the Apostolic Reflection approach as a gateway to tackling the issue, for this situation and others that may be ahead.

After selecting who will be the facilitator for the meeting, use Model 1 to engage in Apostolic Reflection as a group.

Model 1

Common Reflection on a Common Experience

***This model is best suited when there is a common experience for all members that invites a deeper discussion as a collective group. ***

Preparation: Take some time to reflect on the nature of the situation and what you are looking for in addressing it this way. For this scenario: Is the issue at the heart of the concern really the housing development itself, or is it how we engage with the Home Visit, is it the services we provide, is it a procedure related to interacting with our neighbors? Select the core issue you would like to examine and gather consensus on, and identify who will moderate the reflection.

Step 1: Pause to remember that God is present in each experience; you may utilize a relevant scripture passage to “set the stage” for the discussion or save it for step 4 (preferred).

Step 2: Following the use of scripture or another method of prayer, invite the group to reflect together on a common experience – in this situation, the new housing development.

- Aim to keep the focus on the spiritual element instead of extraneous elements (political decisions, economic income, etc.).
- Go around the group, inviting each person to share their experiences, ensuring that no one is interrupted, and people do not interject their thoughts or experiences while it is someone else’s turn. Only allow questions regarding clarification.

Step 3: Invite the group to reflect on how the experiences mentioned, and the discussion that has happened, impact the lives of those we serve.

- What are their thoughts and feelings, their pains and joys?

Step 4: At the end, pray together and reflect on the reading for the Reflection:

- What stands out for you?
- Where do you find your heart moved/touched most as a Vincentian when thinking about this experience in relation to our scripture passage?
- Do you have a new awareness, or feel challenged to undertake a particular action?

Step 5: *Discern together and come to a consensus on how to approach the issue at hand, deciding as a group if the answer did not already clearly emerge.*

Model 2

Individual Experience Sharing with a Common Reflection

***This model is best utilized when someone has experienced a particularly moving experience which could help benefit the group by a deeper sharing of the experience. ***

Preparation: Be aware of the experiences/lives of your members and know when something may have occurred, or they are now likely ready to discuss such an event, which may benefit the group as a whole. Check in with the prospective person in advance of the meeting to see if they are willing and able to share an/the experience with the wider group. The experience should be particularly relevant, typically within the last few weeks, and connected with their Vincentian life.

Step 1: Invite the group to take a moment and pause to be aware of God's presence, coming together in a sense of prayer and letting go.

Step 2: Outline the conversation, stating that someone will share their relevant experience and then the group will be asked to reflect on it together. Be sure to turn the floor over to the experience-teller. Particular points to reflect on:

- What was their reaction and feeling in the moment/experience?
- What was the reaction of those being visited or encountered?
- How did they feel?

Step 3: Invite the group to ask any critical questions they need to clarify any unresolved questions they have. Points for further discussion:

- What other feelings might the neighbors have been experiencing?

Step 4: Tie the experience and conversation into our spiritual life and Vincentian approach by asking questions like:

- Is there a particular scriptural passage, image, or idea that comes to mind for anyone?
- Is there a quote or image from one of our Patrons/Founders that comes to mind?
- What is one insight that you gained from this reflection?

Step 5: Invite the group to look towards next steps, asking them if there is a particular course of action or approach that seems to have readily emerged, or a question that needs to be looked at more for us as Vincentians? When conversation has ended, or at the appropriate time, close the reflection period in prayer, thanking God and asking for His intercession as needed.

Model 3

Personal Sharing with Group Listening

*** This model is best utilized when there is not time, nor a need, for a larger discussion and engagement. A variation of this is likely to be common for most Conference meetings. ***

Step 1: Invite the group into a moment of silence and reflection, allowing the presence of the Lord to be more known and enable people to let go of the pressures in their life.

Step 2: In a group, invite each person to share his/her story or experience.

- All we do is share it, without dialogue or comments, without critique. We welcome each person's story as it is experienced and shared. It is a non-judgmental, non-critical, non-evaluative way of letting people speak out of their own lives.
- It is permitted to ask a question for clarification.

Step 3: Ask people to reflect on "What did we hear ourselves saying"? "What did we, as a group, hear ourselves say"?