

Spiritual Advisor Toolkit
Retreat-in-a-Box

***Discerning like a Vincentian:
Balancing Service & Accompaniment***



Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Cincinnati District Council
2023

Facilitator's Guide

Introduction

Thank you for being willing to facilitate a retreat for your Vincentian Conference. As we go about our daily lives, we often get wrapped up in momentary needs or pressures, pushing off the need to spend time with our Lord and one another; yet, as Vincentians, it is part of our calling to encounter our Lord in times of personal prayer just as much as in our communal prayer and works. In taking the time to offer this retreat, you are helping your fellow Vincentians carve out that time and space to be present with our Lord, bringing their own needs, as well as the needs of our neighbors, to Him.

The retreat has been designed as a template to assist you as the Spiritual Advisor or the retreat leader. We understand that you know your community in a particular way and can help tailor the presentation of an annual Conference retreat to the needs of your membership best. Each of the items suggested are meant to help guide your presentation and discussion. You need not do everything which is presented in this guide; in fact, you may also choose to add other devotions, readings, reflections, etc. which you believe will help your members to deepen their awareness of, and presence with, our Lord. **This year, the format offered strives to balance between offering guided reflection and active discernment discussion.**

A key part of any retreat is silence. It is in the silent time with our Lord that we see our deepest growth and connection begin to take place. As you move through the retreat, please keep aware of this need for silence with your members, building in moments of respite throughout the time together – whether that is taking a minute or two in silence after the reading or reflection before opening for discussion, taking a silent break for 10 minutes at some point (perhaps going so far as specifying a place where retreatants may have conversations, or not, in order to respect someone else's time of silence), or incorporating a chapel visit.

In the following materials, the primary effort has been made to include options to customize a retreat to be offered within the context of one monthly meeting (~90 minutes). If your Conference would like to spend more time together in prayer, you may add in additional elements and times of prayer, or extend the time allotted for each segment of the retreat.

Please note, should you desire a longer retreat, you can use the reflections contained within as a prompt to guide your own development to the specific needs of the situation. Should you need space to hold a retreat, or would prefer to venture somewhere else this year, please consider reaching out to the Ozanam Center (1125 Bank St.) about potential availability. The Ozanam Center was designed to be a place for Vincentians to come on retreat, to share their experiences with community partners, and help advocate to youth and community leaders about the needs of our neighbors. There is no cost for a Conference to come down and utilize the space; we hope you will see it as an extension of your own home and Conference.

If you desire an outside leader for the retreat, please contact Christopher Kelley, *Formation & Service Learning Director*, at ckelley@SVDPCincinnati.org, as we would be happy to assist in facilitating upon request.

Instructions

1) Opening Prayer

(This may be any opening prayer which you desire to share, if it is desired to pray the Archdiocese of Cincinnati's prayer for Beacons of Light; it is included on the last page.)

2) Facilitator Welcome: (in these or similar words)

Welcome everyone! Thank you for taking the time to participate in our Conference's retreat this year. By the end of our time together, it is our hope that we will come away from this experience as a more closely bonded family, rooted in our faith, and refreshed to help our neighbors encounter the Risen Christ through our time together. In our time as a Vincentian, we know there are often difficult experiences where we cannot always help a neighbor or are limited in what is able to be provided; it can take a toll on us personally and spiritually. As we reflect on this retreat, we will look towards discerning our call as a Vincentian family and strive to come away refreshed for the road ahead.

3) Readings and Reflections: (Please feel free to invite someone to read the opening reading for the reflection to the group.)

- a. It may be helpful to invite a second person to read aloud the scripture passage again, this time inviting retreatants to write down words or phrases which popped out to them. In such cases, inform the group prior to the first reading and then build in a pause before the second person reads the reading again.
- b. *Example: "As we begin our reading, take a moment to quiet ourselves, close our eyes, and listen to the reading. When we read through it a second time, see if there is a word, idea, or a phrase which stood out for you. Feel free to mark or write down that which stands out."*
- c. The guided reflections may be broken into parts for various readers if preferred or read by a single individual. To facilitate this, numbers have been added to the paragraphs to easily assign readers. Following the reflection, time should be given for private reflection and group discussion as members feel comfortable.

4) Closing Prayer, Comments, etc.: Time should be given for participants to offer closing thoughts or ideas, as well as ensure any notices which the Conference President wishes to mention are brought to everyone's attention. Following any closing comments, the group should end with a collective prayer.

5) Post Retreat Fellowship Activity: Take time as a group to return to the social element of our Vincentian Vocation. An easy idea is to share a meal together, grab a dessert, or some other social outlet to transition from the retreat.

Retreat Schedule Sample Template

Time	Activity/Event
5 minutes	Welcome, Opening Prayer, Housekeeping details
5 minutes	Group Activity
15 minutes	Reading & Reflection #1 (<i>They will always be with you</i>)
5 minutes	Private Reflection Time
20 minutes	Group Discussion
15 minutes	Activity: Discerning What is Best
20 minutes	Group Discussion on Activity
5 minutes	Closing Prayer, President Comments

Possible Icebreakers:

1. **Two Truths and a Dream** – Each person speaks of three personal “facts” about themselves, however, one of the facts must be a dream they have. The dream may be as grand or simple as they wish, either an accomplishment, life experience, or other aspiration. The idea is to foster an air of connection and support among members.
 - a. This is a variation of the Two Truths and a Lie game, alternatively you could also play that. If so, each person lists three facts about themselves to the group, one of which must be false, and the group must guess which is the lie. Give enough time for each person to think through their responses before starting, this way the lie is not accidentally revealed early.

2. **Pennies** – Each person is to receive a penny, or other coin, from the past 10 to 15 years and reflect on the year listed upon the coin. The memory can be either personal or related to a given topic as the facilitator desires. Shining moments is a similar game.

First Option – Mk.14:3-9

A Reading from the Book of Mark

When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard. She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head.

There were some who were indignant. “Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil?

It could have been sold for more than three hundred days’ wages and the money given to the poor.” They were infuriated with her.

Jesus said, “Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me.

She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for burial. Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

**** Reflection for First Option ****

1 Each day, we as Vincentians wake up and go about the efforts of helping minister to our neighbors through providing some relief from their troubles. We sit in their homes and talk with them as they come to share their hopes and dreams, even those that they may have for their children amid what are seemingly the key parts of their life unraveling before their very eyes. Can we too become like the disciples wondering why there has been so much waste in these moments? If only a few decisions were made differently, then maybe a visit would not have been needed and we could help one of the many others who has called or put the money to “better use” like the disciples wanted to do.

2 Our Lord hears those concerns and challenges those intrusive thoughts; he tells the disciples that they are making trouble for the woman and invites them to look at her, as well as the situation, with a set of fresh eyes – to see not with the eyes of the world, but as God sees, as He sees.

3 Every human life we are privileged to encounter is unique and special; it is an opportunity to see the beauty of God’s creativity unfold in previously untold ways, since each of us has a unique path to walk in this world which will never be repeated. As we take the time walk alongside our neighbor over the phone as the call comes in or in the home as we visit, we have the chance to see how the Lord has made His presence known with those in our midst. We also come to recognize there is no price for the gift of a life, no matter how difficult of a situation the person finds themselves in.

4 At the same time, we also must come to the deep realistic understanding that Jesus’ words also point out, “*The poor you will always have with you*”. These are words which offer a stark reminder for us as Vincentians that even with unlimited supplies of funds or means of assistance, there will always be some deeper reality of poverty within our communities needing to be addressed. The answer ultimately becomes a slow realization that money or direct assistance is not always what is truly needed. Yes, we are called to help if we are able and we should never withhold assistance – we believe that people come to us for a reason and that God will ultimately provide what is needed.

5 Feeding the body is not the same as feeding the soul. Our Society, and our lives as Vincentians, is ultimately about feeding the soul so that the person comes to know Christ’s deep love for them. The deeper kindness is sometimes simply spending the time with a neighbor as they come to terms with what is likely to emerge next, preparing them like the woman prepared Christ, anointing them in such a way as to prepare the way for the next chapter in their journey.

6 May our efforts each and every day help to prepare the way of the Lord as we seek to break the chains which bind our neighbors and free them of their troubles for a newness of life, comforted by the presence of an authentic witness of Christ’s love.

Prompts for Small Group Discussion (First Option)

- 1) Jesus tells the disciples gathered with Him that *“the poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them,”* what does it mean for you to hear those words? In what ways may poverty be hidden and always amongst us?

- 2) As we serve our neighbors, it can sometimes become clear that a need is too great or we are unable to assist in a materially meaningful way. How do you help our neighbors through such moments? Have you come to see Christ and the Lord’s Divine Providence work through these times?

- 3) If the efforts of the Society are truly more about feeding the soul of our fellow Vincentians and our neighbors, how have you come to see your soul nourished in your time as a Vincentian? What has brought it the most life during your time so far?

Reflective Activity Discerning What is Best

Every day you come home from work and experience a great amount of joy in seeing your kids once more as well as your spouse. As the months and years go by you have always tried to provide whatever was needed to them – when your spouse’s car broke down, you quickly worked to fix it or even trade it in for something safer and more reliable; when your kids wanted to play an instrument, you went out and bought them their first one. After just a year and a half, when your oldest wanted to switch from the violin to the trumpet, you naturally said yes because you wanted them to be happy and were able to afford it. A year later, your oldest came back to you and said they want to switch instruments again – this time to the piano – and once more, you said okay. After another year, the latest request from your oldest has come forward – seemingly like clockwork, nearly 12 months exactly – and they now want to try their hand at the drums. While you are normally happy to help, a nagging suspicion has been entering your mind as to whether your child is truly growing from these experiences and if this is the best approach. This coming weekend, you are gathering with your relatives for a holiday party and decide to bring up with your extended family members a question: Is this the best thing to do? Am I really helping them grow and be loved? Is another way better?

As a Conference, take a moment to role play the scenario – choose one or two members to begin the conversation as the parent(s) questioning their path. The rest of the Conference should take on the role of the larger extended family. After 15 minutes, or when the Spiritual Advisor deems appropriate, the group should bring their attention back and debrief. The following questions are provided as a guide for prompting discussion.

Question 1: What did you perceive as the deeper concern at stake here? Was it the repeated requests, the amount of money being spent, the lack of commitment, etc? Why?

Question 2: What was determined as the best means of balancing love with the sacrificial sense of serving your child? What was the outcome?

Question 3: Do you find parallels with your experiences with our neighbors? How can we best moderate our sense of service and desiring to help with what love, even tough love like that of a parent, sometimes requires?

Second Option – Lk. 18:1-8

A reading from the Book of Luke

Then he told them a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary. He said,

“There was a judge in a certain town who neither feared God nor respected any human being. And a widow in that town used to come to him and say, ‘Render a just decision for me against my adversary.’

For a long time the judge was unwilling, but eventually he thought, ‘While it is true that I neither fear God nor respect any human being, because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me.’”

The Lord said, “Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them?

I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

***** Reflection for Second Option *****

1 The parable of the persistent widow is an all too familiar tale we see within our own lives as Vincentians each and every week. We are initially instructed to pray without ceasing, but what does that mean for us in our daily lives? For each of us, it is a call to bring the presence of the Lord more deeply into every part of how we live so that our all of our efforts are given life by our prayers, and so our work can help us connect better with God. In keeping the Lord at the center of all we do, we are more likely to discover the world through His eyes rather than our own, to think with His compassionate heart instead of our sometimes-questioning heart. It is a difficult call to ministry which we embark upon and seek to live out each day. Week after week, we seemingly can hear the same calls come in, the same requests for assistance on the same streets, the same buildings, maybe even the same neighbors; the moment we see the number or hear the voice – we sometimes instantly know who it is and why they have called.

2 What are we to do? What is it that Christ might desire of us in these moments when faced with the question of what is the most just and loving way to serve?

3 Our parable from Jesus ultimately desires to drive us deeper into reflecting on what kind of heart do we bring to our service in the face of all the needs. The judge is rebuked by Jesus for his lack of genuine justice even though he ultimately decides to render a just decision. Why? Because the judge is acting from a place of his own personal convenience and desires, not from a place which is ultimately grounded in prayer and love. He is being called to see the persistent widow through the eyes of God as he discerns what to decide, even if the answer is ultimately a no.

4 Each time we pray, either alone or in a gathering, it is an opening of ourselves to the Lord mixed with an invitation to see the world, as well as our neighbors, in a new light. We invite the Lord to come and make His home in our hearts and transform our ways of thinking or serving to be more in keeping with a genuine conversion of heart rather than of convenience or ease.

5 Each time the phone rings, it is an opportunity to say “yes” to loving our neighbor with that generous gift of time and self. Money and food can be replaced, but our time is limited in this world. Yet, we also can come to bear in mind that sometimes the loving response which is called for is a gentle no to our neighbor’s request – speaking simply with them to say we cannot help in this moment can be a moment of love. If brought together with genuine prayer and accompaniment, with spending time together where the cost is not truly counted, then we can communicate with our entire self where our heart truly is at in that moment. If we are truly seeking to serve our neighbor in the ways they need, we can still offer to sit down with them, to hear their story even though we cannot extend help, letting them decide for themselves as to what they really need most.

6 As we go forth to serve our neighbors, let us be creative with our love – may we search for the many ways in which we can heal and minister to our neighbors, lifting them closer to the Lord as we walk alongside them with a genuinely compassionate heart.

Possible Group Activity Ideas


The following group activity ideas are meant to be possible ideas for engaging the group in a singular activity for a good portion of time. For groups inclined towards sharing personal insights and stories, feel welcome to add questions to the relevant reflection/reading which come to mind, and encourage further discussion on a topic.

For groups desiring to partake in a quieter, or focused activity, the following are possible suggestions:

- **Drawing/Sketch:**
 - o Reflect on who God is to you. What does He look like? Are there certain features which come to mind? Does he look distinguishable from the crowd, or is He rather plain, featureless, going unnoticed?
 - o Take a few minutes to reflect, then draw how you see God in life. After everyone has had time to complete their work, open the floor for discussing what elements have come to mind for the person and why they chose those elements.
 - o Supplies needed: Pens/pencil, paper, coloring items as desired (colored markers/pencils/pens), any other crafting supplies desired.


- **Letter Writing:** Reflect on your connection to a particular person in whom you have, or helps you to, come to see the presence of God and write a letter to them.
 - o This person may be a spouse, a fellow Vincentian, a neighbor you encountered, even one of your children, or possibly someone who has passed on to their eternal rest. Perhaps the person who comes to mind has been like a Peter feeding the sheep, encouraging you in your life through even the difficult times when you did not want to “go” somewhere, or helping you to find the words needed to be more present to others like Jeremiah was.
 - o Once you have reflected privately, write a letter to the person, and speak to the ways they have helped you in growing some part of your life. It is the writer’s choice as to whether to deliver the letter to them.
 - o This activity is suited for groups that may not want to share, or tend to limit sharing. As it is highly personal, group sharing is not necessary.
 - o Supplies needed: Pen/pencil, paper, envelope.

- **Group Devotional**
 - o Recite a rosary chaplet together, allowing it to sink into the minds of those present.
 - o Alternatively, take time to visit our Lord in the Tabernacle at the Church/Chapel if possible, sitting quietly and allowing the Lord to work on our hearts. Reflective discussion as a group towards the end of the visit may also be helpful, but remain sensitive to a person’s desire for quiet if they are feeling particularly connected to Christ in that moment.



RADIATE CHRIST

*Mary,
Mother of the Church
and our Mother,
present our prayer
of thanksgiving to your Son.
Beg from Him the graces we need
to be faithful disciples who follow Him
with enthusiasm and joy.
May our witness to the love of God
bear fruit in our archdiocese,
parishes, homes and hearts.
Teach us to be God's joyful witnesses,
to radiate Christ in all we do,
so that all people might know,
love and follow your Son
through this life
and into the next.
Amen.*



ARCHDIOCESE OF
CINCINNATI