

Spring 1995

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, Margaret J. D.C. (1995) "Decision Making: Councils of the Daughters of Charity (1646–1659)," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol16/iss1/4>

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Decision Making: Councils of the Daughters of Charity (1646-1659)

BY

MARGARET JOHN KELLY, D.C.

Discernment, while traditionally a scriptural value and religious activity, emerged as a personal process and management method in the post-Reformation, post-Tridentine period. At that time, Saint Ignatius' famous discernment method appeared and was undoubtedly known to Vincent DePaul, who had great respect for the Jesuits. Vincent, himself, was given to establishing structures and recommending processes for communal activities as diverse as mental prayer, service contracts, investment returns, and the initiation of new apostolic endeavors. While this interest in formalized corporate decision-making may have been the result of the post-Tridentine *zeitgeist*, it also reflects Vincent's training in canon law, his preoccupation with seeking the will of God, and his insistence on strong foundations for pioneer projects. Vincent, aware of the risks and challenges inherent in establishing an apostolic community of women, revealed his philosophy and method of discernment through his leadership in establishing the Daughters of Charity. This project demanded a decision-making method marked by careful study, prudent timing, and appropriate participation. These criteria are validated in the fact that he and Louise de Marillac delayed drawing up the final documents of the Company of the Daughters until it had been in existence for over two decades and their proposed guidelines had been subjected to lived experience.

A good source for studying Vincent's discernment and decision-making method lies in the early council minutes of the Daughters of Charity. In the twenty-nine meetings from 1646 to 1659, re-

corded in volume 13 of Coste,¹ there is direct exposition of Vincent's methodology and techniques as well as innumerable examples of implementation. While the number of councils is small, the consistency of practice over those years confirms the method and the style. The first meeting of 28 June 1646 introduced the method as well as many of the assistive techniques Vincent utilized and encouraged as he participated in those councils during the formative years of the Company. This article relies heavily on that first meeting which seems to be the cornerstone document, but examples can be drawn from the entire canon of councils recorded in Coste.

By reducing this Vincentian discernment to simple, discrete steps and utilizing contemporary language, one can extract from these council minutes the following action steps or method of decision making:

1. Describe the situation which requires discernment.
2. Consider the values and the goals involved.
3. Recognize the hierarchy of values adopted by the Company.
4. Consider alternative responses to the situation.
5. Provide reflection time.
6. Discuss options and offer opinions.
7. Render decision.

For very complex questions or issues where a general consensus was not forthcoming, Vincent often delayed decision making and thus provided an additional reflection phase between steps six and seven. These logical simple steps provided "the light, discernment and resolve" Vincent viewed as essential to responsible leadership and stewardship.

Vincent gradually introduced the necessary technical issues such as quorums and competence as he provided leadership at the councils. On 29 February 1658 two standards for a council quorum depending upon the seriousness of the issue were cited and the decision makers

¹The council minutes appear in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 13: 587-760. (Hereinafter cited as *CED*). The council minutes are also available in the 1989 French edition of the documents of the Daughters of Charity edited by Sister Elizabeth Charpy. The council of October 5, 1655, which does not appear in *CED*, is included in *Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise*, ed. Louise Sullivan, D.C., (New York: 1991), 799-800.

The English translations used here are drawn from those twenty-two council meetings which have been made available in translation to English speaking provincial councils of the Daughters of Charity. The author is also indebted to Sister Louise Sullivan, Daughter of Charity, who translated the first council meeting which had been omitted from the English translation.

identified. Monsieur Vincent “had already informed us that this number [Vincent, Antoine Portail and those sister-officers] would be suitable for ordinary meetings. The former officers and the ancient sisters would be summoned only for extraordinary matters and when it was judged necessary by the Superior General.”² While in Vincent’s method, the opinions of all were generally sought in a truly democratic way, the ultimate decision was most often reserved to the appropriate authority figure, either himself or Mademoiselle Le Gras. However, in some cases, actual votes were taken, presumably by written ballots.

In the council of 28 June 1646, Vincent not only presented the Vincentian discernment theory directly, but he also provided advice to the participants and established the importance of the council meetings and the value of each opinion in the fledgling community.

Here, my dear Daughters, we have, by the grace of God, a beginning of order and stability which the Providence of God wishes to provide for your Company by the establishment of this little council. We are assembled here to deliberate on some necessary matters, as is done in all well-regulated communities as well as to determine how you should comport yourselves during these meetings and to see how Mademoiselle Le Gras or the sister servant should act.³

Vincent reiterated the value of communal discernment just a year later, 19 June 1647. “Since these business matters are consequential, we must have more than one opinion. When we consider things together, we are less apt to fail in judgment and God blesses in a particular manner the decision one makes regarding affairs which pertain to His service!”⁴

At the first council, Vincent advised that all such meetings must begin and end with prayer and suggested an opening prayer to the Holy Spirit and an antiphon to the Blessed Virgin for the conclusion. He cautioned the sisters about deciding issues outside of council. “If, before the meeting, you have made up your mind one way or the other, you will not be free to make an enlightened judgment on what

²CED, 13: 737.

³Ibid., 589-90.

⁴Ibid., 629.

is proposed. Moreover, if you follow your aversions or inclinations, O my Daughters, the Spirit of God will no longer preside over your little councils, it will be your own whims."⁵ He also pointed out that the purpose and values which must prevail are the greater glory of God and the betterment of the Company.

Hierarchy of Values

In the council meeting of 19 June 1647, Vincent presented three priority values to guide decision-making: the glory of God, the interests of the Company, and the interests of the individual.

In order to teach you how to analyze these matters, I must remind you, my Daughters, how you should act when questions are proposed. *Before* anything else—consider the *end*, which should be the glory of God. After that look for the interest of the Little Company and then the good and advantages of the persons in question. For example—take the case of Sister Anne who is named to go to Montreuil. Let us see why she is going there! She is going to a new house which is being opened for the reticent poor of the city and also for orphans. What is the *end* or *purpose* of the work? In order to determine the means necessary for the accomplishment of this end—look first to God! Will God be glorified in this work? Then—is there an advantage for the Community? Will the children be helped?

We must always look for God's interests first. There are some Communities which consider only their own interests, saying that this coincides with God's interest. For myself—I think God deserves to be considered by Himself first. After that, one sees more clearly the rest of the question. Don't you think this is the way we should act when we come to Council?

All were questioned and one after the other answered in the affirmative. Mademoiselle said there was a danger—which would be to consider only *our own interests*.

⁵Ibid., 590.

"Oh! my God yes indeed," replied our Most Honored Father, "I forgot to stress that point which is very important. Alas, we spoil *everything* if we are attached to *self*. Sometimes when I am questioned, I feel this self-interest rise up in me—but, right away, I look at God. Would He be offended? Does His glory suggest thus and so? In this way, I adjust my reasoning process. It is natural my Daughters, to look to one's self—but you must promptly *turn around* and look at God."⁶

To assure that these values animated the decision-making, Vincent stressed the necessity for simplicity and objectivity and identified specific failings in this regard. For example, he warned against trying to please Mademoiselle by affirming her opinion, holding back negative observations to avoid offending him, the ladies, or a cleric, or hesitating because of a family relationship of a sister and a confrere.

Method of Decision-Making.

Vincent's method and the proper attitudes for participants were introduced at the first council of 28 June 1646 and well-implemented in the subsequent discussion of six discrete issues. The following lengthy excerpt from the minutes reveals the structure and simplicity of both his proposal and his style.

Let us turn now to the manner in which Mlle. is to act since it devolves on the sister servant, the role she fills at the present time, to propose the business. Now, in any affair there are always pros and cons. It is, therefore, her responsibility when she presents a matter for discussion first of all to give the reasons for doing what has been suggested and she must give the reasons against it. For example, "We must do such and such a thing for such and such a reason but there are other reasons that oppose our doing so and they are such and such."

In order to have their point of view she shall address herself firstly to the person on her right and then to the

⁶Ibid., 629-30.

next person and so forth—sometimes by order of vocation. The sister whose opinion she has asked shall nod before beginning and then say, “Mademoiselle, it seems to me that for such and such a reason, it is appropriate to do or not to do that.” It is essential always to give your reasons. If the second sister to speak does not agree with the first, she should say, “It seems to me that for such and such a reason this matter should be carried out in either of the ways proposed but in this manner for this reason which goes against the earlier suggestions. It seems to me that this manner of acting would settle the matter.”

It then devolves on the sister servant, after she has heard all the points of view, to follow the one she feels is the most appropriate. If she does not want to follow any of the suggestions made, it is up to her to say “We will not settle that today. We must reflect upon it before God.” If, on the other hand, she wants to seek advice, she can say, “I will talk to Monsieur Vincent about this. We will see what will be best.”⁷

The six issues addressed in this first council of June, 1646, covered a wide range of situations including the dismissal of “poor Jacqueline” and “likable Catherine,” the placement of a sister at Saint Paul, the missioning of sisters at Nantes, the request of an applicant to return home to say farewell to her family before entering, and the creation of a parlor at the motherhouse. In each of these discussions, we see the same method employed. Some issues, the dismissals and the parlor, consume much more print than others such as the sister’s request to return home. This was answered quickly and definitively by reference to the parallel situation in Scripture. Throughout the Councils, Vincent alludes to scripture, the experience of the saints, and the example of other communities to elucidate the questions and suggest responses.

The discussion on “poor Jacqueline” reveals Vincent’s method. A decision had to be made as to whether Jacqueline should be dismissed because she has a “difficult temperament,” “causes a lot of disorder,” “complains a lot,” “makes up ridiculous tales” and “is insupportable and incapable of accepting correction.” She apparently is in the Company “only reluctantly” and “has no common sense.” On the other

⁷Ibid., 591-92.

hand, she “has rendered much service to the poor and is among the oldest.”⁸ In working through possible solutions to this difficult situation of a sister who has been a good servant of the poor but difficult and even dangerous in the community, the group identified and explored four alternative courses of action. They cited the advantages of each: (1) send her out to serve alone; (2) keep her at the motherhouse indefinitely; (3) support her outside the Company in service to one of the ladies; (4) place her at the *petites-Maisons*. Vincent, after summarizing the problem and the proposed solutions, determined that the decision needed more time, but he also expressed the hope that Jacqueline would leave the Company of her own accord. Vincent’s further musings on the issue show the sensitivity and the complexity of the problem and his gracious disagreement with Louise’s observations. They also reveal that placing persons in institutions presented the same challenge in seventeenth-century France as it does in the twentieth-century United States.

After Monsieur Alméras had finished speaking, Monsieur Vincent continued. Oh, blessed be God! I think my Daughters, that, for all the reasons given, she should leave. But how? I have some difficulties in this regard. To keep her here, continuing her current behavior, is out of the question. To do so, allowing her full liberty is even less a possibility. This would give too much bad example and other sisters, not knowing the reasons behind it, would want to do the same believing that we would also allow it. In a village she would continue to relive the presented injuries of which she considers herself to have been the victim and would constantly complain about them. What Mademoiselle proposed about the *Petites-Maisons* would be very advantageous for her and she was right to suggest it. However, there is no solution with which I see so many difficulties. There would be no problem if there were a Confraternity of Charity established there. However, to be admitted to the institution, first of all, either there is a long wait or it is a very long process. I can tell you that it has been more than twenty five years since I first tried to

⁸Ibid., 593.

place someone at the Petites-Maisons and I have never succeeded. Nevertheless, we might find a way.

Once there, however, she would not stay and that could be harmful to the Company. First of all, she would be known as having been in the Company. Secondly, all the patients are insane or suffering from severe mental illness and are so disturbed that they are always sulking. There are constant quarrels. Oh! There is nothing like it. I cannot describe it. Finally, there is so little sociability that only two can be together and even then they have been obliged to separate them. They each do their own cooking. Jacqueline would not be there perhaps a month before she would be quarreling with someone as disagreeable as herself. Immediately you would be hearing about complaints to the administrators and this could be very harmful to the Company. If, on her own, she could decide to go someplace and live peacefully, as has been said, I think that that would be desirable. Oh, well! We will not solve that problem today.⁹

If “poor Jacqueline” was difficult to deal with, “likable Catherine” presented a challenge from a different perspective. While she had poor health, she was a good teacher, very docile, and had the added claim of having a brother in the Congregation of the Mission. After Vincent had concluded the discussion on Catherine, he made a summary statement which he repeated many times at subsequent councils when a vocation was being assessed. Several times he reiterated this message in what appeared to be a tone of frustration that his convictions on this point had not been grasped by the sisters and particularly not by Mademoiselle. Some of Vincent’s strongest expressions refer to lost vocations, as he described them as scabby sheep who can infect the flock. Good mental and physical health were required in members of the company. The ability to be flexible, available, and open to various services, a foreshadowing of contemporary cross-training, seems to have been another basic criterion for the first Daughters. In developing a plan for Catherine, Vincent again placed the good of the Company ahead of the interests of the individual and identified flex-

⁹Ibid., 595-96.

ibility and adaptability as essential qualities in the Daughters. Vincent also put emphasis on the long term effects of a decision rather than on the short term, immediate gains.

The poor child, how I pity her! Nevertheless, I think it better to dismiss her because you could intend her for the school and perhaps she would not adapt to it or perhaps she would do so for a time but not permanently. She could become bored or even dissatisfied seeing her companions in diverse works, sometimes in one, sometimes in another. I think it is better to hold to the Rules, that is not to accept girls who are not suitable *for all sorts of employments*. Yes, I think that this is the better way to act both concerning the physical infirmity of Catherine and the mental state of the sister of whom we spoke previously. You must consider, my Daughters, how necessary it is, in order to preserve your Company, for it to be composed of persons who are completely suitable for it both physically and mentally so that they may carry out all of its functions. Especially in cases where there are persons who are mentally unsuitable they should not be kept.¹⁰

Techniques and Characteristics

Vincent's decision making thus began with the values driving the Company and the hierarchy he had established which put the glory of God and the end of the Company before the individual need. He also presented specific techniques and described personal characteristics consistent with the values and supportive of his method. He vigorously and consistently imposed the obligation of absolute secrecy about the deliberations. Vincent also warned against "arguing for your own opinions" and stressed the need of "presenting reasons without trying to impose them." In that first council, Vincent adopted the round robin clockwise method of expressing views, but in later councils the method of having the youngest speak first was also utilized. While in the first council Vincent theoretically assigned to

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 597-98.

Saint Louise the task of presenting the situation and the pros and cons of various courses of action, in practice Vincent himself generally introduced the issue and the advantages and disadvantages of each response. He appears to be completely engaged as a participant-leader as the group works through various issues rather than as a facilitator or traditional chairperson.

Several times throughout the various councils, Vincent repeated the purpose of the method and reiterated the need for great simplicity of speech. This was probably necessitated by new members entering the group as well as by Vincent's insistence that the process be followed and by his conviction that objectivity and rationality should prevail. The following advice, presented over two years apart in April 1651 and 9 November 1653, illustrate this guidance and his goal of discerning God's will through the practice of simplicity, his own personal Gospel.

My sisters, when we have these little meetings, we should speak in the presence of God. Pay great attention to what is being said so that you may give your opinion and avoid useless repetition. If you are of the same opinion as your sister, then say: "It seems to me that what has been proposed could be done and for the reasons already given." Or again: "I thought such or such because of this reason." "You see, my Daughters, when there is question of the glory of God, there must be no human respect, although you must not contradict, but simply give your opinion when Superiors ask it of you."¹¹

In his charity, Monsieur Vincent told us that when we were called to a meeting to give our opinion, we should first recommend this to God and be prepared to answer in this way: "I am of such an opinion for such and such reasons." But, he said, "Note well, sisters, that you must give your opinion before stating the reasons which caused you to think in this way. If another sister has spoken before you, and her opinion is different from yours, you must reply to the reasons which she has proposed by

¹¹Ibid., 674.

other reasons, and say: as for what has been said which is such or such a thing, I answer with this or that reason."¹²

In the council of 28 June 1646, Vincent introduced the technique of separating the aspects of an issue or dividing the question. This device is quite consistent with Vincent's legal mind and appears often in the council minutes and in the conferences to the Daughters. When the council had to decide if a parlor should be provided in the motherhouse to allow for privacy for visitors and the community, one sister introduced the related question of whether a sister should have a companion in the parlor with her. Vincent reminded her, "First, we must see if we will have a parlor and then if the sister visited should have a companion." However, a further tangential question of whether the parlor should have a grill was strongly rejected by both Monsieur Vincent and Monsieur Alm ras because the religious connotations "could overthrow the entire plan that God has determined for the Company."¹³

Another example of gaining clarity by dividing the question appears in the council of 29 April 1656, when the participants discussed the related questions of expanding the ministry and establishing a second seminary. The minutes merely record Vincent's delineation of the questions followed by a summary of the final decisions with the discussion being omitted. Vincent's logic and administrative skill, as well as his sense of justice, are apparent.

I shall reduce this to three questions dealing with the substance of the matter, namely: first, should we listen to this proposition and satisfy this good bishop? Secondly, if we should decide to send sisters for this work, do we have any who are suited for it? Thirdly, should we wait until the house for the seminary is established, or should we still consider it? There is a fourth question, one of the most important that will ever be discussed in your Company, and that is whether or not the sisters should be recalled if those who asked for them do not keep to what is agreed upon, or if they demand something contrary to their Rules and manner of life. If the Daughters of Charity do not

¹²Ibid., 680-81.

¹³Ibid., 602-03.

perform their duty, or serve the poor well, they should likewise have the right to send them away.

On the first question, it was decided that, if God was calling us to serve the poor in those places, it did not seem right to refuse this work, and that if, after reflecting upon it, we feel that it is God's will, we should carry it out.

As to the second, that there were few sisters and that it would be hard to find any. It was thought that, since they were asking for only a few sisters, it would not be impossible, provided we did not have to supply sisters so promptly for other places.

On the third question, it was decided that it would be well to find out the decision of these good people.

On the fourth, it was thought to be entirely necessary to continue the practice which then existed in the Company, namely that the sisters could be recalled, if necessary, and that they could all be sent back if they did not live as Daughters of Charity are obliged to do.¹⁴

In a similar fashion, in the council of 9 February 1659, Vincent delineated the issues as the council reviewed the request of a sister whose brothers were asking her to turn over to them a house which belonged to her. Vincent's analysis reveals his wisdom as well as the manner in which the Daughters retained the right to own property. "The question is then to know whether our sister should give up this house. If she does so, should she give it during her lifetime, or by will. There is this difference; something given during life is completely transferred; she could not return to that house. If she were in need, it would be in vain for her to have recourse to law; in such cases, the owner loses all right to what has been transferred. But when property is transferred by will, it is not the same."¹⁵ The facts not only opened the question but also provided the answer.

Another technique Vincent frequently employed in the decision making process was the use of resource persons for complex questions and unfamiliar issues. These resource persons at times were councilors themselves or outsiders brought in for their special competence or direct involvement in the case. When a decision was to be made about

¹⁴Ibid., 718-19.

¹⁵Ibid., 743.

sending a sister to Saint Paul, Mademoiselle requested Sister Anne Hardemont to provide a description of the situation there which did indeed require the sisters to be consummate diplomats as well as high-energy, versatile workers.

Mademoiselle said that they needed someone with many qualities which were not common to all and because of that it would be a good thing for Sister Anne [Hardemont] to explain something of what must be done there so that they might make a better judgment.

"Now Sister Anne," said Monsieur Vincent, "tell us a little bit of affairs there."

The sister said first that the Confraternity of Charity was not as well established as in other parishes, that there was no assured revenue and that the sister had to be certain to obtain money from the ladies every month, make all the purchases, pay the rent and render an account at the end of each month. She also had to have the medications prepared. Also, because there are ladies who send them out to beg, they must accommodate them because, if they refuse to do so there would be reason to fear that they would give the Confraternity nothing. She added that a great many poor who are not on the rolls of the confraternity come to ask for remedies or other things and that the Pastor had absolutely forbidden them to give them anything because their number is too great and they are not the responsibility of this Confraternity. The sister must also know very well how to prepare medications and to let blood.¹⁶

In his line of response to this issue, Vincent revealed his skill in contract management and administration. "It is essential, my Daughter, to draw up in writing the responsibilities of the sister and have it signed by the pastor, have it copied clearly and display it where it can be seen."¹⁷ A week later, on 5 July 1646, when the council was discerning the need to recall a sister because a lady was not satisfied with the

¹⁶Ibid., 599.

¹⁷Ibid., 599.

sister's work, a councilor whose opinion was sought provided a direct, forthright evaluation. "Having been informed that a sister present knew the sister in question, Mr. Vincent questioned the former. She said this particular sister was known to be stubborn, so much so that it was impossible to make her change her own opinion. Moreover, she was a bit worldly."¹⁸ On 27 November 1659, when the council was determining whether sisters who were not fully employed could do the church linens to fill their time, Vincent questioned the sisters as to the existence of precedents, "How do you manage in the country parishes?"¹⁹ The sisters shared their experience and then Vincent summarized criteria drawn from the sisters' interventions.

First-hand experience and observation frequently reinforced reports. On 31 July 1659, the question of admitting two girls from Serquex was advanced by observing the applicants directly after Mademoiselle Le Gras's report. "Mademoiselle described to Monsieur Vincent the qualities of each; they were then brought in, that his charity might observe them."²⁰

Conclusion

Vincent encouraged, and at times demanded, that the same basic method for decision making be employed. The council minutes reveal its implementation for issues as diverse as the need for councilors on the local mission to assist the sister servant (5 July 1646); the adoption of the Bellarmine catechism for the sisters' formation (22 March 1648); the age of boys who would be accepted by the Daughters in their schools and homes (30 October 1647); wartime relief in Picardy (15 April 1651); repairs on the house of Mademoiselle (27 April 1655); reacceptance of Sister Marie Joly who had left the community but had been one of the forty Daughters who, in addition to Saint Louise and Saint Vincent, had signed the act of establishment and nomination of officers in 8 August 1655 (27 July 1656); the acceptance of foundlings into the Company (13 August 1656); and the request of the queen of Poland for a sister to travel with her and to modify her habit (23 March 1658) as well as a host of other questions challenging the first sisters.

¹⁸Ibid., 616.

¹⁹Ibid., 752.

²⁰Ibid., 759.

Despite the diversity of issues handled by Vincent and Louise within the early community council, the same supportive techniques and behavior standards appear throughout the early Councils. These reflect Vincent's management skill, psychological insights, improvement goals, mission orientation and his desire to seek God in all things. His concluding prayer at that first council of June, 1646 where he first introduced and implemented his method of discernment in the Company holds the key to the vitality of his leadership and the efficacy of the method. Three and a half centuries later, councils of the Daughters of Charity throughout the world continue to deliberate in a similar fashion: "I beg God Himself to deign to preside at this Council. May He be its soul. May He never permit it to act other than through Him. May He grant it *light, discernment, and resolve* and, since He has willed these to be a virtue of counsel, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, may He grant it to you by this same Holy Spirit."²¹

²¹Ibid., 603.

I have a particular devotion and consolation in saying things as they are.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
24 February 1653).*

In case of necessity, you should prefer the service of the poor to making your prayer, but, if you take care, you will find plenty of time for both.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
2 August 1640).*