NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

St. Vincent de Paul Society president steps down

Tom Gallagher | Sep. 3, 2011

Image not found
https://www.ncronline.org/sites/default/files/stories/images/oldimgs/mission%20management%20flannigan%20web.jpg

Mission Management

After six pivotal years, Joe Flannigan will step down as president of the National Council of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Those who have worked with Flannigan are quick to praise his outstanding leadership.

"Joe worked very hard to make the society's councils and conferences really feel connected to each other and to the National Council and the National Council to the International Council," said Sheila Gilbert, who was commissioned to succeed Flannigan -- the first woman to hold the position -- on Sept. 3 at the society's national meeting in Dallas. Gilbert, who has served as the society's national secretary, said Flannigan made these connections "by seeking dialogue, discussion and feedback prior to making significant decisions."

"Joe's faith leads him to reflect on what's the right thing to do for the right reasons -- the mission, vision and values of the society -- to serve those in need in friendship, to grow in holiness and see the face of Christ in everyone," said Roger Playwin, the society's national executive director.

"Joe is a 'convicted' Catholic, a true Catholic gentleman," Gilbert said. He continues to make home visits as part of his Vincentian commitment to serve the poor, she said.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society, founded in 1833, is a Catholic lay organization, and has as its mission to lead women and men to grow spiritually by offering person-to-person service to the poor and suffering, in the tradition of its founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and patron, St. Vincent de Paul.

The society has approximately 700,000 men and women throughout the world known as "Vincentians," located in 142 countries on five continents. In the United States, there are more than 172,000 members in 4,600 communities.

In 2010, the U.S. Vincentians provided more than $595 million in tangible and in-kind services, served more than 14 million people in need, performed more than 648,000 home visits, and delivered more than 7 million service hours to those in need or living in poverty.

Flannigan honed his leadership skills in the comfort of his own home. An East Brunswick, N.J., resident, Flannigan and his wife, Patricia, are the parents of seven children, 13 grandchildren and another one on the way, and have volunteered as foster parents for 39 newborns over the years.

A graduate from Connecticut's Fairfield University, Flannigan received a master's degree in business administration from Baruch College of the City University of New York. His professional career was spent in marketing at the NYNEX Corporation. He retired in 1994.

A Vincentian since 1991, Flannigan has held a number of leadership posts within the society and became president in 2005. He is also a member of the board of directors for Catholic Charities USA.

"I had a mentor at NYNEX, Jim Hennessy, who modeled servant leadership," said Flannigan. "I really tried to implement an inverted pyramid where I was at the bottom serving the parish conferences, the diocesan councils and the national council."

The Vincentian charism includes viewing other Vincentians as friends, working with one another. "Friendship is so important to the Vincentian charism," Flannigan said.

Strategic plan

During much of the past six years, the national council has been focused on updating and implementing its strategic plan. According to Gilbert, Flannigan was instrumental in developing and implementing the plan's six goals: spirituality, communications, solidarity, relationship-building within the church and the Vincentian family, and development.

Systemic change has been a major focus by looking at how the society can better serve people living in poverty. It began with the view that people living in poverty are in the best position to know the best way to change that reality.

One example of systemic change fostered, in part, by the society, occurred at Sacred Heart Parish in New Brunswick, N.J. In the immediate aftermath of a parish priest being robbed at gunpoint, the parish and the local St. Vincent de Paul conference began a plan to reclaim 40 blocks surrounding the parish from crime and to revitalize the community. Residents themselves developed strategies to achieve this goal.

It's been a substantial success and is now being replicated in an impoverished community near Philadelphia.

"Joe is a man of deep faith," said Ray Sickinger, director of Feinstein Institute for Public Service, professor of history, and chair of the Department of Public and Community Services Studies at Providence College in Rhode Island.

After working together for more than 12 years in the society, Flannigan tapped Sickinger to be the vice president of Vincentian Services, a volunteer role overseeing disaster relief, Twinning (a program that pairs St. Vincent de Paul councils and conferences with needy counterparts) and the national stores.

"Joe has a fabulous sense of humor which has defused tension and allows Joe to even laugh at himself," Sickinger said.

"I've always said that a Vincentian meeting has to include laughter," Flannigan said.

Sickinger also noted, "Importantly, Joe has a real sense of what the society should be doing now and in the future, and at the same time, he knows what steps to take to get there."

"When you get a calling, listen to the Holy Spirit, reflect on it and say yes," Flannigan said. He also credits his wife, who has been his partner in his Vincentian vocation.

Diversity initiative

A key element of the strategic plan has been the Multicultural/Diversity Initiative. Flannigan focused on identifying people with a deep investment in the initiative and entrusting them to deliver concrete results.

"Joe identified the good the society has been doing in this area and then built upon it," Sickinger said.

The society will be publishing an 80-page manual on multiculturalism and diversity in April 2012.

"Joe understands how important this is for the church and for the society, especially as it relates to the Hispanic and Native American communities and in getting women in leadership positions," Sickinger said.

Flannigan and the society also consider the relationships with Catholic Charities (at the diocesan and national levels), Catholic Health Association, and the U.S. bishops to be of critical importance.

"Joe has brought to the leadership of the society a deep faith, clear vision and immense compassion for the service of the poor," said Fr. Larry Snyder, president, Catholic Charities USA.

Flannigan was re-diagnosed with colon cancer in 2006. The tumor traveled to his liver. He and his worldwide Vincentian family committed themselves to praying to the society's founder, Blessed Frédéric, for a miraculous intervention. The tumor was shrunk with chemotherapy and surgically removed, though the success rate of this strategy was in the low single digits.

Later that year Flannigan was inexplicably cancer-free.

Flannigan's healing has been submitted as a potential miracle attributable to Blessed Frédéric. If approved, Blessed Frédéric will be declared a saint.

[Tom Gallagher writes NCR's Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

National Council of St. Vincent de Paul Society: www.svdpusa.org

'My goal is no more poverty'

With her election as the next president of the National Council of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Sheila Gilbert becomes the first woman to hold this position. Gilbert, 71, a divorced mother of three adult children, has been a Vincentian since 1981.

"Poverty is a choice our country has made," Gilbert said in a recent telephone interview. "We can build 'Vincentian hearts,' which are hearts that are moved by compassion at the suffering of others to relieve such suffering. My goal is no more poverty."

Image not found
https://www.ncronline.org/sites/default/files/stories/images/oldimgs/Sheila%20Gilbert%20web.thumbnail.jpg

Gilbert, who resides in Indianapolis, has held numerous leadership roles in the society, including conference spiritual advisor, president of a district council, an archdiocesan council, and currently, national secretary and lead responsibility for Strategic Plan Goal #1 -- Spiritual Growth and Leadership Development.

Gilbert has been an educator in the Indianapolis Public Schools; administrator of the Alverna Franciscan Retreat Center in Indianapolis; a parish director of religious education; spiritual director at the Benedict Inn in Beech Grove, Ind.; an instructor at the Denver Catholic Biblical School; and an adjunct faculty member in the master's program at the St. Mary-of-the-Woods College in Indiana.

Gilbert received two degrees from Indiana University, including a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's in public and environmental affairs, along with a certificate in public management. She also has a master's in pastoral theology from St. Mary-of-the-Woods College.

--*Tom Gallagher*

Source URL (retrieved on *08/28/2016 - 17:51*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/st-vincent-de-paul-society-president-steps-down