



## **Not Just a Warm Body | By Mike Syslo, St. Vincent de Paul USA**

All of us who are citizens (by birth or naturalization) have an opportunity to choose our leaders. We exercise this right on a regular basis through the election process. For months and sometimes years, the media is blitzed with information in favor of or against particular candidates. It is our job to muddle our way through all of the information and misinformation to select the right people to lead us through the next phase of our lives. Wow -what an awesome responsibility!

In the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, all Full Members of the Society have a similar opportunity. Within each Conference, we are expected to elect an individual who will lead us through the next three years of our Vincentian lives - without the advantages of an election campaign. Lead us, guide us, and serve us. Wow - what an awesome responsibility!

What we should NOT do is elect the first warm body willing to be President. Yet, this is what so often happens. Because someone is willing to be President does not mean he/she is qualified to be President. Because someone wants to be the leader does not mean he/she would be a good leader. Even if no one else is willing, maybe in some cases the best choice is no one. How do we know when someone will be a good leader?

There is no absolute way to know. Our elections are supposed to be based on a lot of prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit. In the 2002 version of the United States Manual, on pages 57 and 58, there is a description of the qualities of a Conference President. The importance of the selection of a President cannot be too much insisted upon.

While the President should never be more than a kind of animated leader in the Conference, first among equals, experience provides that as the President is, so is the Conference. To find a President who may be able to discharge the President's duties adequately, it should be considered not so much whether the person is rich and generous, but much more, whether that person possesses the personal qualities that are indispensable.

The President should have sufficient time, zeal, energy of mind, as well as maturity of judgment, should be animated with the spirit of the Society, in order that the person may know how to surmount any difficulties instead of being overcome by them; should have a conciliatory spirit to prevent or to appease differences, and that personal piety and living faith which are a silent influence for good. The President is, as it were, the soul of a Conference; but should not, however, absorb, through excess of zeal or dedication, the activity of the Conference to oneself.

The President should see to it that every member of the Conference is given a sufficient amount of charitable work to perform, ensuring also that the various tasks are distributed evenly among the members and carried out in the spirit of the major objectives of the Society.

Well, I am speechless. Is that too much to ask for in an individual? It seems like a lot. After all, there are no perfect people in this world. The answer is "yes" and "no." There are no perfect people in this world, but does that mean we should not look for the best fit. There are lots of people within our Vincentian community who fit or can grow into most of what is described above. We have to look for them and find them. When we've found someone who is a possibility, we need to nurture them, encourage them and help them grow into the person they can be.

We can provide you with uncountable pages of experiences based on the wrong person being President. We owe it to ourselves and our fellow Vincentians to select the right person to lead us for the next three or six years. Take time to look at the qualities of the people who come forward. And, please, don't elect the first warm body who says "yes."