

The Vincentian Laity

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The **Fiches Vincentiennes** (vol.6. The Church 3, The Laity) has summed up the relationship between Vincent and laity as follows;

- The lay people revealed to St. Vincent his mission and responsibility as priest (the old man and Mme. de Gondi in Gannes, the women in Chatillon-les-Dombes, Marguerite Naseau in Paris)
- St. Vincent revealed to the laity their mission and responsibility, in the church and for the poor.
- St. Vincent organised the activity of the lay people in the Church - in favour of the poor
- most especially, Vincent gave back to the women a role and responsibility which is theirs in the Church, especially in a Church that is for the Poor.

Statute 7 tells us that the **Associations of lay-people instituted by St. Vincent himself or following his spirit** have a right to our care and our support. Therefore, we have the **duty** to help them and some of us must specialise in this area. We will give to this guidance a dimension which is spiritual, ecclesial, social and civic.

Meetings of the four main branches

On the 3rd June 1995, in Paris, and on the 2nd and 3rd February 1996, in Rome there was a meeting of; the Superior General, who invited the others; the Superior General of the Daughters of Charity, Sr. Juana Elizondo; the International President of the Volunteers of Charity (AIC), Mme. Patricia Palacios de Nava; and the International President of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Prof. César Augusto Nunes Viana¹. The next meeting takes place on 24 and 25 January 1997, probably in Paris. For this next meeting, we have already invited 2 representatives of the Marian Youth from France and Spain, a young man and a young woman. We have also considered practical solutions in order, at future meetings, we might have representatives from other groups (religious or lay) which have St. Vincent as a patron.

The purpose of these meetings is "to look for ways by which, while preserving the particular identity of each branch, we can cooperate more effectively with one another, in the world, in order to serve the Poor better" (from the letter of Fr. Maloney, 20th April 1994)

Some conclusions from these meetings:

a) to promote mutual awareness, we have prepared a booklet of essential information: the Charism and character of each branch, its origins, historical development, present situation

(statistics, geographic distribution, types of work, those with whom they work etc.). This booklet has been distributed by the Daughters of Charity in nine languages and in three languages by all the others. In future, this text will be up-dated and enlarged to include the other members of the Vincentian Family.

b) In general, there is quite a high level of collaboration between the branches of our family. There are few enough cases of tension and they arise mostly when people neglect to respect the autonomy of a particular group. We will have a formal evaluation, before the next meeting, of the level of cooperation existing in various countries, with the intention of strengthening our shared service of the Poor.

c) On the subject of collaboration in our works;

- it would be good to inform the other branches of what we are doing or have done together in certain places; e.g. the popular missions:
- most especially, we should keep one another informed about ecumenical collaborations in which we are, or have been, involved
- given the multi- or transnational character of the four groups present at the meetings, we spoke of exerting pressure on structures, on local and national government, by acting together:
- when urgent or crisis situations arise, the four branches must communicate with each other via fax, in order that each can write to its members, informing them of the facts and seeking their collaboration: we must work on this, in order to see how we can respond together to the urgent situations of which we become aware.

d) We decided to develop five common projects, one in each continent, for the year 2000. These projects will serve as models in order to stimulate greater collaboration within our family.

e) We discussed formation at length. The members of the A.I.C. and of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, thanked the confreres and the Daughters of Charity for the help which they offer them at the level of formation. In his letter of 20 February last, Father General, encourages us all to continue collaboration in formation programmes. On top of that, with the approval of the presidents of the two lay groups, Father General invited the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity to call on members of the AIC and the SVP to collaborate with them in the setting up of popular missions, the service of the sick poor, work for refugees etc.

f) In the future, the four branches will collaborate in a time of scientific reflection on world problems, seeking and proposing Christian and Vincentian responses.

g) Each branch will do all that is possible to be well informed about the others, spread information about them and promote vocations for them.

h) We must make the confreres and Daughters of Charity more aware of their duty to encourage and form vincentian groups either in their works or linked with their houses.

i) It was decided to meet together on 27 September 1996 for a shared day of prayer. Father General will write later to give us more information on the lay-out of the day.

j) The four branches will invite one another equally to participate in their General Assemblies and to various other international gatherings, for example to Vincentian formation meetings.

k) It would be good, in future, during visits of the Superior General, to organise "a Vincentian Family Day", to involve everyone in mutual understanding, awareness and collaboration.

The volunteers of charity (aic)

The Confraternities of Charity², founded in 1617 by St. Vincent, now number 42 national associations in; Europe; North, Central and South America; Africa and Asia, with more than 250,000 members. Their motto is the fundamental idea of St. Vincent. "Against poverty, we must act together"³. The name adopted at international level in 1971, AIC (International Association of Charity) expresses its direct descent from the work created by St. Vincent and its fidelity to his prophetic teaching.

The means used by the AIC for the formation of its members are; regional and world seminars; visits to the Associations; and formation and reflection documents. The AIC encourages the Associations to work at local projects, for which they seek subventions from international organisations. They seek also to set up common projects in various countries, such as those for refugees, for street children, for the unemployed and for families.

In order to form new groups in countries where the Association does not yet exist, they need well-trained Volunteers. Therefore they owe a lot to the Daughters of Charity for their support.

The AIC has consultative status to UNESCO and ECOSOC (the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations) and also to the European Parliament. It is a member of CIAS (The International Committee for Social Action), to the conferences of OIC (the International Catholic Organisations) and of UMOFC (The World Union of Catholic Womens Organisations) and other womens organisations.⁴

The lines of action adopted in Assisi in Italy in 1990 and detailed, developed and consolidated in Antigua in Guatemala in 1994 are; Formation, Communication, Solidarity and Self-development.

In Antigua, the assembled world associations of AIC decided to become involved in 'political' action, by denouncing the injustices which strike at the poor, especially women, while also bringing pressure to bear on public structures in order that the rights of marginalised people, families and communities might be recognised and defended.

The Society of st. Vincent de Paul.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul,⁵ founded in 1833 by Frederic Ozanam and some friends, now numbers more or less 47,000 conferences, in 130 countries on the five continents, with about 900,000 members. The Society hopes to enter the year 2000 with a million members.

The groups, the majority of which are mixed, with men and women, old and young, operate in different ways: at parish level, in the city and the country, local areas, large gatherings, schools or colleges and professional or cultural associations.

The Society seeks to bear witness to the brotherly love of Christ through personal service to the poorest. It seeks, both with them and others, to help them to overcome their misery in a variety of ways: to restore their dignity to them, assure them of their value as a person, to give them hope and, if possible, a reason for living, through spiritual, moral and material support. Vincentian involvement requires a solid christian formation and a balance between prayer and action. Some members of the Society have given themselves in religious life, as sisters, deacons and priests.

Sr. Rosalie Rendu, Daughter of Charity, who was already famous for her endeavours among the poor, both in over-coming and preventing their miseries, understood what Ozanam and his friends were about and, guided by her wisdom of heart, she led them in the ways of charity towards the most abandoned.

All the activity of the Society is directed towards those whom society has hurt, broken, isolated, rejected and marginalised: e.g. works for children and youth, schooling, professional technical and agricultural training, initiatives for the victims of unemployment and their families, job creation and job searching, moral and material support for those who are cut-off and isolated, for families in difficulty, for unmarried mothers and deserted wives. There is also health action: visits to the sick, the blind, the physically and mentally handicapped, the setting up of hospitals, dispensaries and medical centres. They work with alcoholics and drug addicts. They visit prisons and provide after-prison care. They help those who have been marginalised to reintegrate into society. They work with migrants; welcoming them, helping them to settle and teaching basic literacy skills, while always respecting their identity, culture and traditions. In the same way they offer help to refugees and those driven from their homeland. They have housing programmes and ones also for better housing conditions. They have development projects: especially in agriculture, animal husbandry and fishing. They encourage over 5,000 twinnings between teams in rich and poor countries. They organise campaigns of solidarity etc.

A real school of social teaching, especially for the youngest, the Society, through personal contact with the very poor, conscientises them to the huge problems of our times. The individual act of love, far from cloaking the reality, opens the heart and the spirit to the reality of suffering in the world, to the demands of justice and the absolute value of human dignity.

Marian youth

The Marian Youth Movement is to be found in five continents, with about 200,000 members and various names: Marian Youth, Marian Vincentian Youth or Marian Vocational Youth, The Association of the Children of Mary Immaculate, The Association of the Children of Mary, The Marian Association or Marian Vincentian Movement.

The movement gathers together young people from the age of five to university age and includes adults in some countries. The greater number of the members come from poor and simple backgrounds, the majority of them girls (about 60%). They meet together regularly in small teams or groups in different locations, according to where they operate: parish halls, institutions, basic communities, schools, local districts and chapels. A structure is provided by having people in charge, and, according to place, these can be; young or adult lay-people, seminarians, priests or sisters. The presence of the movement in various countries seems to be linked, in large part, to the presence there of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Elsewhere we note that other congregations, lay-people and diocesan clergy are attracted to the goals of the movement because of its marian spirituality, its closeness to the poor and the solid formation it offers.

In all countries, the movement is a special place for human, christian and apostolic formation, following catechumenal guidelines set out in different ways (team life, weekends, gatherings, camps, retreats or personalised guidance). Marian formation is given through marian celebrations and deepening their doctrinal and pastoral understanding, most especially deriving from the 1830 revelations, without neglecting novenas, processions, pilgrimages, the Rosary and distribution of the Miraculous Medal. Continuous and more in-depth formation is given to those in charge, and future leaders, through sessions, congresses, seminars etc. (this includes: study of the sacraments and the bible, liturgy, theology, mariology, ecclesiology and socio-political studies along with a deeper understanding of church documents).

The work of the Marian Youth involves everything from an involvement in ordinary daily life to immediate interventive action: visits to shanty towns, to leprosaria, to the aged, prisoner, the sick in hospital, poor families, the blind, those living alone, and basic literacy, support education, working with groups of children, summer camps for the young, popular missions, catechesis, involvement in the liturgy etc...

The Miraculous Medal Association

There are two main types of Miraculous Medal Association: the one in the United States, especially in Philadelphia and St. Louis, and the one in Spain.

A) SPAIN⁷:

piety and devotion to the Mother of God were always features of the Association of the Miraculous Medal but, often, it was limited just to these qualities, without any noticeable ecclesial or social dimension. Since the Second Vatican Council and the apostolic exhortation "Marialis Cultus", an updating of our Association took place. In Spain, the Bishops were concerned about the evangelisation of various groups: intellectuals, workers, the young, people who had become distanced from the church (the 'lapsed'), those affected by a wide-spread agnosticism, with all its negative effects on personal and social behaviour.

Adult catechesis is organised in the Association's groups. They also offer a systematic approach to christian formation for those who have no other way to develop the faith of their baptism. Today there are more than 200 groups of adult catechesis although other centres have decided not to form such groups, due both to lack of trained catechists and also of preparation. To increase its effectiveness, a priest or a Daughter of Charity explain the catechism to people who will, in turn, teach the faith to adults.

The Superior General has asked the Association to have, in each of its 400 centres, a place of prayer, faith formation and charity for those in need (letter of 7 April 1994). Uniting its marian tradition with the Vincentian charism of evangelisation of the poor is the objective of the groups of christian formation which gather once or twice a month. The purpose of these groups, which gather around an image of the Immaculate Virgin, is to be an adult catechuminate, the goal of which is to become more actively involved.

The Association of the Miraculous Medal is directly linked to bringing (the image of) the Blessed Virgin into the home. The priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity have born witness to her ability to draw in the simple, the humble, the poor and the marginalised. The offerings which are collected in the box which accompanies the image are intended for the church, the apostolate, charity to those in need and the formation of members of the association. The Association also cooperates in our missions 'ad gentes' and in the AIC. Often the image of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal is the only religious emblem in many homes and, sadly, the one link these families have with the Church.

In 1992, the Association drew up an initial pastoral plan for 1993-'94. It was centred on the rediscovery and living out of baptismal faith as well as freely given service to the poor. In the Association you can find people with a prophetic ministry (especially for catechesis of adults and the alienated), liturgical ministry (involvement in eucharistic worship) and the ministry of charity (the sick and needy). The plan for 1995-'96 goes a step further in involvement with the development of people, help for the needy and solidarity in the struggle against injustice.

B) THE UNITED STATES.

In our provinces of Philadelphia and St. Louis there are millions of catholics associated with the Association of the Miraculous Medal. Various things characterise these associations: the number whose names are registered, the Medal novena, especially in Philadelphia, with thousands of participants, magazines and bulletins which maintain a link between the confreres and the members of the association, and especially their subscriptions, often symbolic (25 cents a year) which, however, yield millions of dollars, which are used; for the construction and support of seminaries in various countries; for the

foundation and support of missions; in help to sick and aging priests etc. In the General Curia we receive a large amount from them for distribution to our missions and our seminaries.

(Translator: Eugene Curran, C.M.)

- ¹ The instructions were contained in the Superior General's letters of 30 June 1995 and 20 February 1996.
- ² This is taken almost verbatim from the text of Dilde Grandi;
"THE AIC, International Association of Charities, Vincentiana, 1995, n.4-5, pp.247-253.
- ³ The names vary from country to country:
Volunteers of Charity, the Charity Volunteers, Vincentian Voluntary Groups, Ladies of Charity, The Teams of St. Vincent etc. Some groups have adopted neutral names like The Volunteers, in order to be able to accept men in their membership.
- ⁴ The AIC is also a member of the Pontifical Council COR UNUM, of which the Superior General, a Daughter of Charity (the Visitatrix of Cuba) and the International President of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are also members.
- ⁵ I have drawn this mostly from the text of Amin A. de Terrazi
"Presence et Actualité de la Société de St. Vincent de Paul", Vincentiana, 1995, n.4-5, pp.254- 261.
- ⁶ c.f especially an article by Vincent Grodziski and Antoinette Marie Hance, D.C.
"Marian Youth in the world in 1995", Vincentiana, 1995, n. 4-5, p.262-268.
- ⁷ This development is well set out in a article by Fr. Jesús Rodríguez Rico
"From Devotion to Evangelization, the Miraculous Medal Association in Spain", Vincentiana, 1995, n.4-5, pp 269-276.