

Evolution of Charity

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Down through the centuries, we Vincentians have been given the task to lead the project of our Founder in such a way that the gospel spirit of charity becomes a reality in the world. St. Vincent drew his inspiration from the imitation of Christ, whom he preached and he went far in his love for all, especially the lowly, the weak, and the poor. Today this precept is alive and active in the Vincentian Family, but times have changed, society has been subjected to a great evolution. That is why, we, the various branches of the Vincentian Family, are questioning how to transform our methods of intervening so as to better respond in an evangelical spirit of charity. Charity, as Vincentians understand it, is always the same for its essence includes transcendent values and unchanging universality. It is linked to mercy and solidarity, attentive listening to the cries of the poor, fighting to defend their rights and against injustice. All of these ideas have been present for over 400 years within a process of holistic liberation for the poorest.

When speaking of the evolution of charity, we allude to a manner of doing it by searching for new roads adapted to the realities and challenges coming forth from today's world. This journey is long and will never be completed. What is needed is an ongoing process of reflection, analysis, dialogue and action, always trying to live out faithfully the teachings of Jesus Christ in inventive and creative ways, as St. Vincent did in his time.

This evolution is in direct relationship to a consistent process by those who commit to live charity as well as by those who are the recipients; that is, those who are the poorest, our lords and masters. Today's poor are not yesterday's poor. We must listen to them in order to respond to their needs, requests, demands and to the complex situation of poverty that is increasing more and more in spite of the efforts of many.

Throughout this day of work, we are going to ask ourselves about our own responses to the cries of the poor, greatly linked to the evolution of various poverties and the reality of the poorest. Next, I am going to refer to the lived out experience of our Association.

The AIC has travelled a road riddled with hope, challenges and difficulties, but it has been invaluable for it as been our road, filled with deep analysis and awareness of realities. This road that is ours is part of another that is even longer

and wider, having different aspects that we have followed, sometimes on the side, sometimes following behind, other times pointing out the way, with other branches of the Vincentian Family, especially the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

I am going to try to lead you along the route that led the AIC to new conquests and to propose new objectives, through an analysis of innovative ideas that sprang up from the experience of volunteers within a country or the documents of large international organizations or the Church. We will deepen and study these ideas from the viewpoint of the fundamental project of St. Vincent.

From assistance to participation

When a new social culture began to move about in the world, we asked ourselves if the practical assistance up to now, having often forgotten the teachings of our Founder, corresponded to the needs of the poor or if their dignity required new forms of assistance. This is how we began to see that assistance, when it was not justified by the extreme conditions of the recipient, could even be negative. This had already been determined by St. Vincent, but we had forgotten it.

Journey towards promotion

In every circumstance, unjustified assistance must be replaced by promoting the person. It is indispensable to enter into a dynamic authentic solidarity, to “put on the shoes of the poor,” **taking them as the departure and arrival points of our action.**

This “worldwide” conviction, we could say, gave way to projects to promote persons, such as centers for professional development, schools, literacy programs, etc. We felt that these projects implied the participation of the recipients, but they, in most instances, were simply recipients of the educational process. Many times these initiatives, while positive, did not achieve the desired results as nothing changed, or very little changed in the everyday life and specifics of the recipients. Women learned to sew but they did not have any opportunity for work, they did not even have the possibility of buying the first materials to make clothing for their children.

Self-advancement among the poorest: a total change of mentality

An important development occurred in the mid 80s when numerous Latin-American Associations began talking about “self-advancement.” They maintained that the poor should be helped to become agents of their own

promotion and their own destiny. AIC International went deeper into this idea and the more AIC developed it the more AIC saw its innovative value. But to undertake this new road in order to collaborate in its success for the self-promotion of the poor, we had to update our entire way of being and acting, improve the contents of our usual formation and learn new communication techniques to improve and perfect our sense of solidarity. All of the preceding was an indispensable beginning in order to give the poor the possibility of self-advancement and participation in the various initiatives intended to improve effectively their quality of life individually as well as for their family and community.

Deepening and taking on the process of self-advancement of the poor was not an easy task, especially since this required a true change of mentality for us. We had to abandon the feeling of self-satisfaction that gives birth to a feeling of gratitude regarding the recipients, sometimes even humiliation. We also had to avoid all paternalistic overtones, which are deeply rooted in volunteers. We had to decide to go to a second or third plan and give the poorest the opportunity to determine their own route, at the risk of being wrong. This road did not always respond to our expectations, nor to what our “preparation” and “experience” told us. It was difficult to allow them to build their own destiny, which in our thinking was clear and obvious.

AIC self-advancement groups

This is how the face of the Association began to change in many countries. Self-advancement groups began to appear, made up of volunteers coming from within the community itself. These new groups, at this time, became one of the main interests of the leaders of the Association. It was very impressive to see young volunteers, in a marginalized neighborhood in Lima, collaborate with other members of the community in order to feed 600 children, among whom were some of their own children. They established four dining rooms in their own homes. Some of the homes were made of corrugated tin and cardboard. They not only promoted the development of the children but the entire community.

A great challenge for us was also noting that the volunteers in Cameroon were getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning to go work in the fields. After selling the produce they had cultivated, they would feed their families and pay for little services that had been provided to families poorer than themselves.

The AIC takes on defending the rights of the poor

From this journey alongside the poorest arose a new experience that prompted requests from the recipients in the self-management projects. AIC listened to the

call of the poorest and took upon itself the need to deepen its knowledge of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights. This document asserts the right to suitable living conditions for human beings and the right of all to participate in the life of the community. Therefore, we became convinced that extreme poverty was not an inevitable evil that one must overcome without fighting against it. We began to look at it as a violation of the most basic of human rights, as a form of social exclusion that is not to be accepted with passive resignation without running the risk of becoming accomplices to injustice.

With this firm conviction we developed volunteers in numerous countries to defend and promote human rights. We organized children and adult workshops on human rights as well as specific workshops for women. These workshops were sometimes directed towards the volunteers themselves and society in general. Later they were adapted to the needs of the recipients. We have made an important step thanks to this formation of the poorest in defending their rights.

For example, in the town of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, after having participated in one of these workshops, a 13-year-old girl realized that her stepfather did not have the right to have an intimate relationship with her and asked the help of a volunteer in order to go and report this to Child Protective Services. From that point on her life was changed as well as the life of her mother and her little brothers who had gained greater awareness of what was acceptable and what to expect regarding their rights.

Awareness of a person's inalienable right to food, suitable lodging and, in general, to a life with dignity was critical during a time of developing numerous projects and contributed to improving the quality of life of the recipients.

Towards a culture of solidarity and self-advancement

Following this, we clearly saw that our traditional works close to the poor, without doubting their validity, were insufficient. For the good of the poor, we also needed to denounce injustices, make cultures and the ruling mentality sensitive to needs and apply pressure on structures. That is, we needed to have the courage to undertake a path that was unknown up to this point and to act within environments that were far from our traditional activities. We needed to become a voice, sometimes uncomfortable, in order to question society and make it more aware, more in solidarity and respectful of the rights of the poor. With this goal, we became committed to spread the culture of solidarity and self-advancement. In the years that followed, the AIC came to the conclusion that in order to spread a new culture and transform mentalities, it also needed to communicate these new values and reinforce existing values in relation to service, such as gratitude.

To illustrate this type of action I am going to give the example of a community in Germany where there was a group of people who were very poor, living in shipping containers. Immediately the community was against this and the people logically reacted in an aggressive manner. We tried to help them in various ways but always failed. Then a different strategy was envisioned and we began working to sensitize the society to their needs. Little by little, the community became aware of the problem and their attitude towards the poor changed. We came together to support them, taking the necessary steps to obtain educational vouchers for the children, finding work for some of them as well as various services and benefits through the local government. Currently these two groups are living together peacefully and have even taken the first steps in establishing an environment of mutual support.

The importance of networking

When the United Nations proclaimed the worldwide program to eradicate poverty, the AIC felt called. From its origins, it has followed the great teaching of St. Vincent, “work together against poverty.” Therefore, the Association could not fail to participate in this worldwide program and making this idea its own.

The idea of “acting together,” which also became part of the UN program, required a greater commitment from the Vincentian Volunteer in order to move forward with others and thereby achieve greater impact in a fight of such dimensions. At that time, we began to consider it very important to approach the Vincentian Family. The members of this large Family all have the same identity, follow the same goals and can set out their activities according to the various charisms that are identified within each group. If we work together we can gather immense strength for the good of the poor and society. But this is still not enough. The AIC is equally committed to participating in the actions promoted by the various forums or association networks sharing the same objectives. It is important to network in order to fight against poverty and communicate to society, and the authorities in power, an awareness of the debt of justice that society has towards the poor.

Participation in the initiatives of large international organizations

We have sought different means to augment the presence of the AIC in national and international organizations. The AIC has representatives in various organizations, such as UNESCO, ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council — UN) and the European Council, among others, and we have begun to intensify our participation through selected representation at all events that interest us because of their repercussion on the lives of the poor. These interventions were very valuable and continue to be so despite the discrimination that can exist in certain cases, given it is a Catholic organization. They take our opinions into

account at the conclusion of numerous international events. One very clear example is the intervention of the AIC at the time of the World Summit for housing, “Habitat II.” The AIC was chosen as spokesperson for a group of international associations through its participation with more than 2000 testimonies handwritten by the poor who are affected by housing problems.

Empowerment: to believe that the poor can develop and affirm their abilities

Currently, we are trying to take a very important step in going even further in the concept of participation in order to achieve in the poor the potential of their capabilities, self-esteem, ability for reflection and work and of course, to continue the process in seeking their independence and liberation. This is what we know today as “empowerment.”

Work in the form of projects

Currently at all levels, in governmental as well as non-governmental organizations, Catholic or non-Catholic, we give fundamental importance to **work in the form of projects**. Thanks to a specific methodology and to numerous studies carried out in this regard, this type of work has been very much encouraged at the heart of the AIC through different documents, always trying to put into practice the dynamism of Vincent de Paul, constantly taking his orientation into account.

Of course, in his time, St. Vincent did not use the term project because the term is current to today. We have some very clear examples, nevertheless, that show us that before carrying out an action, he would analyze it in depth, examining it within the reality of the recipients, taking into account, not only their needs, but also their sensitivity. For St. Vincent it was something natural, for he himself experienced the wounded pride of being poor and being given no consideration as a person.

Vincent planned each action for assistance step by step before beginning it. We notice this, for example, when he explained to the “Ladies” of his day how to visit the sick poor (SV XIII, 423). Each contact with the poor was for him an act of love, a sacrament. In the same way, we see how he tried to give it expression in all his actions. The rule of the first foundation “already contains the seeds of all that will subsequently characterize his charitable and social activity, that is, the criteria necessary for all works. We see in this his sense of observation and organization, his particular respect for the poor person and the concern that the poor be always in charge of their own promotion. Evidently Monsieur

Vincent wanted these ladies to understand that the sick poor have the right to the same care and consideration as the great ones of society.”¹

The need to fight together against poverty and injustice, holistic attention due a human being, respect for his/her cultural identity, concern for his/her promotion in knowing the economic, political, social and religious realities of each community or group, are the essential principles that can be safeguarded when, in place of carrying out actions without adequate planning, one develops a project based on these principles.

We have noticed that in countries where they are already working with this method, the services have been strengthened and are more effective and lasting. They can be organized in other countries through sharing experiences. When these projects are presented in writing, they are credible and economic aid is much easier to obtain at the local, national and international levels.

The “work in the form of projects” is a method of formation that necessarily involves carrying out new actions, but is also an invaluable guide that can help us evaluate and restructure some existing actions. Some of these actions have continued for years in the same form, **without taking into account the transformations that the today’s continuously changing world situation demands of us.** In formulating and presenting a project and following the different steps that orient us by various criteria, we enter into a process of constant revision and updating by which our actions become more efficient and creative.

I am not going to do an exhaustive analysis and even less, a course about how to use this methodology. That is not the intent of those who organized this meeting. I am only going to analyze two fundamental aspects.

- The conception of a project
- The essential criteria for the development of a project

Concept of project

In general, when we speak about projects, we understand them to be “developing actions directed toward the socio-economic expansion of the population concerned”; however, this is not always the case. There can be projects whose primary objectives are evangelization, holistic formation, formation of volunteers and others, etc.

It concerns:

¹ “Au temps de St-Vincent de Paul... et aujourd’hui,” Vincentian Animation Team.

- A program of action resulting from an analysis of poverty;
- Actions adapted to needs specified by the recipients;
- Actions taken up at various stages;
- According to a continuously updated intervention strategy;
- To obtain a development objective;
- With a determined cost.

It is necessary to underline that for us, in general, the recipients are always the poorest and it is to them that we must always adapt our methods. Consequently, we must, according to a process of genuine solidarity, “put on the shoes of the poor” **taking them as the departure and arrival points of our action.**

We always try to carry out projects in accord with our lines of planning. These lines, which we evaluate and analyze every four years, assist us in creating projects, in keeping with their criteria:

- that give primary importance to **complete formation** of individuals and communities;
- that are conducive to and **promote various forms of communication, contributing to positive relationships;**
- that foster **respect for human rights**, rights of women, rights of minority groups, immigrants, the sick and the marginalized of society;
- that include **the adequate use of the mass media** to expose forms of poverty, like St. Vincent did in his day, and to protect the truth of the information;
- that facilitate **self-advancement of individuals and communities**, avoiding paternalism and unwarranted assistance, that, even though this fosters appreciation (highly valued by many), also brings about humiliation and in many cases, generates apathy and conformism;
- that **manifest true solidarity**, which is not content with the pleasure of giving, but carefully and with great objectivity evaluates the importance of the action;
- where **prevention** occupies a fundamental role;
- where **denunciation and putting pressure on structures** contribute in an effective way to eradicate the causes of poverty;
- with the clear conviction that at the present time it is impossible to work alone and that **it is necessary to become part of a network** and collaborate with other organizations who have among their objectives the fight against poverty and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, sharing with us the same objectives of fighting against injustice and manipulation.

We cannot forget that all projects involve a process of evaluation, which could suppose making essential changes, and includes, renouncing projects that

do not achieve their objectives. We see that *St. Vincent was not limited to institutions or specializations. He spontaneously accepted the reality of the poor as it was. He was ready to modify plans, projects and structures in order to adapt them to the reality of the poor and to their circumstances.*²

Conclusion

Throughout this process, the AIC understood that it must be a crucial and prophetic presence in society, that it must promote the human, social and religious values that are the foundation of its action. Thus, in such a way, it will become a multiplying agent of the Good News. Above all, the AIC understood that society, the world, must be transformed and that we must commit ourselves to be a transforming force. In order to succeed, we must transform ourselves, our mentality, our world of work with the poor and our commitment within society and culture. If the campaign “The Fight Against Hunger: The Globalization of Charity” moves from projects of assistance to actions to denounce and to pressure systems, it can be a very clear example of these types of initiatives. Group Advisors must know their process and their lines of action in order to be able to guide groups in this direction. That is why it is important that the Advisor not be content to have a discussion about spirituality but that he or she participate with the group to analyze its actions and follow up with an evaluation, not only of the actions but also of the group process. It is also important that the Advisors be aware that the laity have gone through a process of change and adaptation and that they must encourage and stimulate them so that they become mature, committed laity, aware of the growing importance of their role in today’s Church.

Later, we are going to speak about the specific role of the Advisor. I will not, therefore, develop this topic. I would only like to allude to the necessity of counting on Advisors adapted to the needs of the laity with whom they work and of the fundamental importance of their role in this process of self-management and “empowerment” that we would like reach as laity as much as the recipients of our action.

In this “unending journey,” it is necessary to have a change in mentality on the part of the Advisors so they can adapt themselves and listen to the, sometimes imperceptible, cries of those whom they animate.

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)

² *Ibid.*