

THEME:

400 Years of Service to the Poor in the Vincentian Family



Approaching the 400th Anniversary

How We Have Lived and Adapted the Vincentian Charism
During Recent Years

Alicia Duhne

AIC International President

Everything began 400 years ago in Châtillon

Much has happened since the time when Vincent de Paul preached that famous sermon which resulted in the establishment of the first Confraternity of Charity on 23 August 1617.

During his lifetime Vincent de Paul, with the support of Louise de Marillac and many volunteers, promoted the Confraternities both inside France as well as beyond the borders of France.

Today we are called the AIC – the International Association of Charities and we form an international network composed of more than 150,000 members who are ministering in 53 countries on four continents. It is in those places that we continue to struggle against poverty and its causes.

Our mission: following the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and, in accord with the Church's teaching, we have defined our mission as follows:

- To fight against all forms of poverty and exclusion, by actions and projects of transformation;

- To accompany women in specific ways in their search for empowerment and autonomy;
- To speak out against injustices, to put pressure on the structures and the decision-makers, to fight against the causes of poverty.

In light of our mission, we want

- To be a force of transformation within society and in the fight against poverty;
- To be involved first and foremost with women worldwide;
- To reinforce the participation of the poor;
- To encourage collaboration and networking; to be involved in local political issues, aware of the responsibility of all the players.

Specific activities of the local groups of the AIC

In the 53 National Associations of the AIC there are more than 13,800 projects that involve the members in the struggle against poverty.

Our strengths and priorities are the following:

- **Local roots:** projects in the field are initiated exclusively by members who work together in AIC teams. The members, mainly women, are experts in the fight against poverty. Their activities in their immediate environment give them knowledge of the local reality. This expertise is often recognized by public authorities as well as local and international partners.

- **Attention to the person as a whole:** AIC projects place fundamental importance on the person. Members establish individual relationships with the people with whom they work. They follow methods taught by their Founder, Saint Vincent de Paul: attention given to persons as a whole, respect for their cultural identity, ongoing concern for their self-promotion, understanding the need to engage in a struggle against poverty and injustice, and knowledge of the economic, political, social, and religious realities of each community.

- **Special attention to women in poverty:** 80% of the beneficiaries of our projects are women and their children. The world of women is often a reality that is marked by poverty and injustice. Therefore, there is a great need for social, political, evangelizing, and Vincentian activity in order to develop gender equality and to promote the rights of women. The condition in which so many women live is, without a doubt, one of “the signs of the time.”

- **Education as a priority:** education is a primary component of the AIC projects and is essential in our struggle against poverty. Local activity creates the opportunity for a mutual exchange between the

members and the beneficiaries of our ministry. This exchange leads to a discovery of one's gifts and talents and leads both the members and the beneficiaries to engage in activity that enables people to break the chains of poverty.

- **Creation of social bonds:** the causes of poverty are not just rooted in economic factors but arise from the isolation of people. The projects that the AIC promotes are intended to help people move out of their isolation so that they can begin to feel that they are a part of the community.

Forming Public Opinion

The AIC attempts to form public opinion with regard to the situations of poverty and exclusion. The AIC challenges local, national, and international governing bodies, civil and religious leaders, while at the same time denouncing situations of poverty that are encountered everyday by our members. On an international level, the representatives of the AIC exert pressure and present proposals to various bodies of the UN (UNESCO, ECOSOC, the Human Rights Commission) and to the European Council. We do this with the hope that the voice of the poor will be taken into consideration during the deliberations of these various administrative bodies. The AIC is also a member of the Pontifical Commission, *Cor Unum*, and participates in the activities of the International Catholic Center of Cooperation as they interact with the various agencies of the UN.

Projects

Within the context of the different local situations, each project is unique and geared toward the people of a specific area and initiated by the members of that area. Though unique, we have noticed some similar tendencies with regard to the numerous projects:

Education:

Many of the AIC projects are focused on education/formation. Many adult educational projects are literacy programs and professional formation programs that attempt to reinsert individuals into the work force. Many other educational activities take the form of workshops that are offered at various times of the year. For children we offer day-care centers, pre-school educational centers, assistance in doing school work, scholarships.

Caring for older adults:

A constant concern is providing care to the elderly who in many cases have been abandoned by their family and/or who do not receive

adequate care. Members have established homes and drop-in centers for the elderly.

Shelter for children:

In Africa, as well as in Latin America, we have established housing for children who have been abandoned and/or abused. In the majority of these homes we seek ways to reintegrate these children into society. We do not want the children to feel disconnected or as though they are living in some unknown place.

Temporary shelter:

As we provide assistance to immigrants we have various centers where people are able to rest before continuing their journey. We provide these individuals with information that will help them arrive at their destination.

Nutrition:

Since education is a priority with regard to the development of persons, many of the projects of the AIC involve "health care and nutrition" because we are aware of the fact that the whole person must be cared for and bad nutrition and ill-health are serious obstacles with regard to education.

Thus, various groups provide hot meals in soup kitchens that minister to children and the elderly.

Many groups of the AIC also exercise their ministry by distributing food to those who are in need.

Health:

In many countries, especially where there is no health insurance, to become ill is a serious problem. In Latin American our members have opened dispensaries and convalescent homes that provide for people during the time of their treatment as well as after they are released from the hospital.

In almost all the countries where the AIC is present the members organize visits to the infirm who are hospitalized and also are attentive to the needs of invalids and their families.

Welcoming centers:

The community centers of the AIC are places of understanding, listening and welcoming. The members establish social relationships with those individuals who frequent these places. In many parts of the world there are thrift shops and drop-in centers for those who are unemployed or retired, for immigrants, for drug addicts and for homeless persons. There are also centers that provide assistance to the family members of those who are imprisoned.

Individual accompaniment:

There are many different programs of accompaniment. Some of this accompaniment is accomplished through home visits, hospital visits, and visits with those persons who are imprisoned. All of these programs are intended to break the chains of isolation and to promote the integral development of the person.

Formation of members

Following the example of Saint Vincent, who from an early age was concerned about education (in fact, education was a lifelong concern of both Vincent and Louise), we engage in an ongoing process of formation.

Here we invite everyone to reflect on the words of Father Celestino Fernández: *for a Vincentian, formation is a matter of justice with regard to the poor whom we wish to serve.* We are aware of the fact that we have an obligation to form ourselves in an ongoing manner.

Therefore, we offer ongoing technical, human, and spiritual formation. Each two or four years we focus on specific themes which we call **“Priority Lines of Action.”** For the years 2011-2017 we have decided to focus on the following: **education, reciprocity, ministering together, and an exchange of gifts and talents.** Formation is accomplished through sharing documents and through national, continental, and international seminars.

As we prepare to celebrate the 400th anniversary of our charism, we have developed material that will enable the members to deepen their understanding of this charism. These brief reflection papers are sent out each month and usually the groups reflect on and discuss these papers during the time of their meeting.

Recently we have offered courses: *Formation for institutional strengthening*, the objective of which is to provide the members with the necessary tools and knowledge in order:

- To ground themselves in the fundamental concepts that make them members of the AIC (that is, the essence of what constitutes them as members of the AIC).
- To develop those competencies that will enable the members to minister in a more effective manner (that is, we want to provide the members with the tools that will enable them to minister in an organized and coordinated manner).
- To provide the members with better knowledge in the area of developing projects, fund-raising, social communication, strategic planning.
- To develop leadership and professionalism among our members.

During our recent Assembly (March 2015) that took place in Guatemala, we gave out 434 certificates to members in Latin America who had completed their studies (a nine-month period). This course is offered in Spanish and Portuguese.

As a result of the enthusiasm of our members we decided to offer this course again and there are presently 148 participants. We are preparing to offer this same course in English and French.

Significant elements and challenges that our Vincentian Heritage presents to the members of our Association

As members of the Vincentian Family we are aware of the fact that we are part of the Church. Nevertheless we have significant elements that distinguish us as we opt to minister primarily on behalf of our brothers and sisters who live in a situation of poverty. We base our life on the teachings of our Founders and on the Church's teachings.

We attempt to be sensitive to the suffering of our neighbor and we are also aware of the fact that as human beings, even though we are different, we all share the same dignity.

Throughout the AIC network we accomplish our ministry as a group and we combine actions with prayer.

The challenges are numerous. Here are those that seem most important to us:

I. We rely more and more on promotional projects

We know that providing assistance (and nothing more) will never resolve the situation of poverty, but in fact aggravates the situation and very often makes the beneficiaries of such assistance dependent on us. Vincent, in his writings, expressed this same concern:

I can tell you that their original intention was to assist only those who cannot work nor earn their living and would be in danger of dying of starvation if someone did not assist them. In fact, as soon as anyone is strong enough to work, tools of his trade are bought for him and nothing more is given to him. Accordingly, the alms are not for those able to work on the fortifications or to do something else, but for seriously ill sick persons, orphans, or the elderly.¹

They would also like to enable all other poor people who have no land – men as well as women – to earn their own living, by giving the

¹ VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, C.M.; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume IV, p. 188; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:IV:188.

men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning – but only the poorest (CCD:VIII:82-83).

II. To clothe ourselves in a Vincentian attitude

To respect the freedom and the dignity of the person who is being assisted;

Not to stain our purity of intention with any form of self-interest or any desire to dominate others;

To be aware of Christ's presence in those who are poor;

To be contemplatives in action aware of that fact that *to serve those who are poor is to go to God (CCD:IX:5).*

III. To work tirelessly on behalf of the spread of our charism

The words of Jesus are still valid today: *the harvest is great but the laborers are few.*

This is indeed a constant concern for every branch of the Vincentian Family which sees a decrease in its membership. Yes we are presented with a great challenge in our attempts to increase our numbers so that we might continue Jesus's mission. Let us recall here the words of Saint Vincent:

It's not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor doesn't love him. I have to love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love (CCD:XII:215).

IV. Develop a deep faith

Only faith can enable us to view, with a proper perspective, the good that we are able to accomplish.

V. To trust in the strength of others

To trust in the strength of others implies a change in our attitude. This new attitude of appreciation should be shown not only to those persons whom we accompany in our ministry but also to our Vincentian brothers and sisters.

When considering those persons with whom we minister, we should develop two basic attitudes:

– To view all people (without exception) as the subject of rights and duties; to trust in the ability of each person to better him/herself and to move forward.

– In our activity we are not attempting to resolve problems but rather we want to engage in a process of accompaniment.

On 9 July 2014, during his participation in the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia, Pope Francis stated: *I have heard a phrase which I like: "Process of change". Change seen not as something*

which will one day result from any one political decision or change in social structure. We know from painful experience that changes of structure which are not accompanied by a sincere conversion of mind and heart sooner or later end up in bureaucratization, corruption and failure. There must be a change of heart. That is why I like the image of a "process", processes, where the drive to sow, to water seeds which others will see sprout, replaces the ambition to occupy every available position of power and to see immediate results.

VI. To recognize the poor as a gift that is given to us

Through our relationships with the poor we discover our limitations and our own prejudices, while at the same time we also become aware of our own growth. In the poor we are able to admire some of the following:

- Their ability to develop gifts that enable them to survive;
- Their ability to develop positive relationships, to maintain physical and emotional distance without falling into isolation;
- Their ability to utilize those relationships in order to obtain some basic needs; their ability to be empathetic with others;
- Their sense of humor which enables them to find comedy in the midst of tragedy.

VII. A sense of belonging

Each branch of the Vincentian Family has its proper identity. The members of each branch ought to provide for the material and the spiritual needs of those who are poor and yet we must be mindful of the fact that we are related with various institutions:

- First of all, we belong to the Church, our Mother.
- Second, we are members of the Vincentian Family. *Charisms are given to specific individuals and yet other individuals are able to participate in those charisms. Thus in the present era those charisms remain alive and are to be treated as a precious inheritance that creates unique bonds among people.*
- Lastly, there is a group of people who are also members of the AIC.

This is a brief presentation of who we are and what we hope to be. We pray that our celebration of the 400th anniversary of the establishment of our charism might deepen our understanding of this great heritage and might unite the whole Vincentian Family as, together, we serve those men and women who are poor.