

Role and tasks of Advisors to AIC Groups and Associations (*)

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(*) **Editor's note.** We are publishing in its entirety, with the due permission, the AIC booklet developed and published under the same title in Brussels in March 1999. It will be useful for the confreres and all who exercise this service of "advisors" to the AIC. At the same time, it could enlighten those who carry out this same task for the other Lay Associations of the Vincentian Family or even for other lay groups and associations. The second part of this study, "Presentation of the International Association of Charities," which is of a more specific nature, has already been published, for the most part, in other places (Cf. *Vincentiana*, July-October 1995, pp. 247-253; General Curia, *The Vincentian Family*, Rome, December 1995, pp. 4-10; *Vincentiana*, July-October 1998, n° 4/5, pp. 291-298). Nevertheless, we believe it opportune to publish it here because it is an integral part of the study and because it updates and systemizes the preceding document. In this way, we will also facilitate access to the document as a whole for those interested and avoid them having recourse to the publications cited above which, sometimes, might not be within easy reach.

January 25, 1999

To the Advisors working with AIC and its many groups.

My very dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am delighted to see the publication of this document setting out the role of Advisors who help members of the International Association of Charity. There are many people offering this service: Priests of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, other priests and sisters, and many lay people. The document uses two words to define their role: their mission consists of 1) formation and 2) animation.

Today I wish to encourage all of you who are advisors as you work at carrying out both aspects of your mission

1. There is no call that I have heard more frequently in recent years than the call for formation. Even though the members of AIC are responsible for their own formation a good “counselor” or “formator” has an essential role to play. We all learn from other people. A good guide can use his or her knowledge to open up for us new horizons. Recently I visited a museum in Rome and thanks to the enthusiastic young lady who was our guide, I learnt more in an hour and a half than I would have learnt from a week’s research in a library. She knew how to help others in their formation.
2. These days we often define the term “leader” as “formator” or “animator.” This last word literally means that such persons have a “soul” (anima) and that they can communicate this “soul” to others. The word “soul” also signifies breath, life and spirit. This document urges the Advisor to breathe life into the group, into its meetings and into its work. We can hope that every AIC group that has received a good formation will be “spirit”-filled

I encourage all who receive this document to come together and study it. Coming together in a town where there are AIC groups or in a region, or even at national level, could be a very effective means of helping you to fulfil your role to the full. In another letter I am asking the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission and the Visitatrices of the Daughters of Charity to collaborate in organising such meetings.

An advisor is, to use the terminology of AIC’s guidelines 1998-2002, a “multiplying agent.” He or she takes the time to help others to grow in the life of the Spirit and in the ability to provide better service for the poor.

I pray that the seeds sown by AIC’s advisors may bear abundant fruit in the lives of the association’s members. This is surely a role which is close to the heart of St. Vincent. I ask him to bless all of you who engage in it so generously.

Your brother in St. Vincent

Robert P. Maloney C.M.

Superior General

Congregation of the Mission and Company of the Daughters of Charity

Introduction

Today we have to recognise a new and very clear sign of the times: the existence of the Church of the Laity, those people who are going to be the great protagonists of evangelisation.

Fired with this conviction, and together with those in charge of international groups belonging to the Vincentian Family, Fr. Robert P. Maloney has convoked several international meetings to which other branches of the Family have gradually been integrated. In the course of these meetings, AIC, convinced that effective animation from ecclesiastical Advisors can bring about a radical change in the way of practising charity, found it necessary to define more clearly the task of formation with regard to teams of Vincentian lay people.

The role of Advisor was one of the principal themes discussed at several meetings held not only in AIC but also at gatherings of Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity who realise that the liberating leadership of Advisors represents a real *“apprenticeship process which gives rise to dialogue, formation of a right and critical conscience, the development of self-confidence and personal responsibility.....the teams can become agents of social transformation.”*¹

One of the commitments stated in the Final Document of the 39th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, is connected with the cooperation in the work of formation. This document states that in our times, the different branches of the Vincentian Family, conscious of their common heritage to serve the poor, *“can nourish one another in their efforts at formation. At the same time each group in the family has understood Vincent from its own experience and so has a unique wisdom about him to hand down to its own members...The Congregation of the Mission desires to collaborate in common formation projects, while respecting the autonomy of the different branches as they go about forming their own.”*²

With regard to formation work within the Vincentian Family, the members of the Congregation of the Mission commit themselves to:

Helping the different teams in their formation by:

- a) collaborating in the initial and ongoing formation of their members;*
- b) helping to revitalise groups that are weak and offering spiritual assistance to those that are alive and active;*
- c) establishing a formation team from both the Congregation of the Mission and the wider family to design the elements of a common formation programme and promote gatherings for the purpose of deepening Vincentian spirituality and strengthening the sense of belonging to the Vincentian Family;*

¹ PALÚ Lauro, C.M., “Future Paths for the Vincentian Laity” - Vincentian Formation Week, Salamanca, August 1998

² Final Document of the 39th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, Rome, 6th-30th July 1998

d) opening our existing programmes for ongoing formation to the other members of the Vincentian Family where possible.³

The different branches have contributed to these efforts to provide a common formation program and AIC, in keeping with the commitment of its lay members and conscious of the impact a Advisor could have on the teams, has committed itself to drawing up this document which it regards as a working tool and material for reflection. This document is also meant as a contribution to a new step towards the transformation of the lives of our brothers and sisters who suffer poverty and exclusion.

This document is addressed to the Advisors of AIC groups and it comes just at the time when interaction between the different branches of the Vincentian Family has been specially promoted “with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and vitality;” motivated by Fr. Maloney who, with truly prophetic intuition, has realised the impact that joint action can have on the lives of the most deprived. This document also comes on the eve of the Third Millennium, the Jubilee Year 2000, which presents us as members of the Vincentian Family, with challenges that we must face together in the clear knowledge that, as Fr. Maloney says, *the jubilee was established to be a time of joy for the poor.*”

Patricia P. de Nava
International President of AIC

³ Ibid

Role and tasks of ecclesiastical advisors in the associations and AIC groups

1. The advisors to associations and AIC groups

The role of advisors to AIC groups, be these priests, sisters or volunteers appointed to this work, has always been a very important one and in recent years it has been the subject of conferences and of articles in different reviews. Several of these articles have been used in the compilation of this present document and we are grateful to the authors for their contribution to our work. (See bibliography). Our special thanks go to Fr. Lauro Palú, C.M. for his advice, his help and his valuable collaboration.

ADVISORS ACCORDING TO THE MIND OF ST. VINCENT

St. Vincent believed in the laity and had great confidence in them but he demanded of them a response to their vocation of developing the charitable work of the Church. He showed his faith in the laity by founding various associations. He delegated to lay people responsibility for directing these associations and the rules that he drew up when founding the first confraternity clearly define the role of a good Advisor. *“The confraternity should be composed of lay people and it should be autonomous with its own specific form of governing body elected by all the members.”* (Cf. Rule for the Charities at Châtillon les Dombes, November/December 1617, V. 575-577). The members are to be responsible for organising the works of the Confraternity as laid down in Chapter X, 571. *“Those in charge will have complete responsibility for directing each confraternity.”*

In the rule that was drawn up for Châtillon and for subsequent Charities, the advisors are presented as “animators.” Their responsibility is to maintain the original concept and spirit of a confraternity: these men and women Advisors are not to concern themselves with organisational matters or the carrying out of the various tasks because the confraternity is an autonomous body. The role that St. Vincent decided on for the advisors to the confraternities founded by him, was originally limited to that of being “animators” according to these confraternities.

Vincent de Paul, the model advisor for lay people, was a man who paid attention to the laity and was quite prepared to receive from them, not only enlightenment about the spirituality of the confraternity, but was also ready to be influenced by them on fundamental aspects of it.

It was lay people who first suggested to him the idea of making the first foundation and over the years his own spiritual outlook was enriched and influenced by the manner in which the ladies he directed lived their faith. St. Louise is an example of this and so, too,

are the Daughters of Charity: the work that they developed for the poor contributed largely to St. Vincent's integration of the corporal-material element into his ideas on the integral evangelisation of the poor.

THE ADVISORS AND THE RULES FOR THE WORKS FOUNDED BY ST. VINCENT

St. Vincent's ideas about the role of the advisors is reflected in the rules of the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity and in the statutes and international rules of AIC.

The Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity have a constitutional mandate to animate Vincentian movements, a mandate which is only one aspect of their particular vocation and fidelity to St. Vincent.

The Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission prescribe that the members should, with regard to lay movements, *devote themselves to motivating and suitably preparing lay people for pastoral ministries* (C. 15), *that they should collaborate with them* (S. 3) and that they should have particular concern for lay associations founded by St. Vincent, such as AIC volunteers, or those inspired by his spirit such as the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences, the Vincentian Marian Youth Movement and the Association of the Miraculous Medal (C. 49 & 2).

This gives added weight to the reason why the missionaries are motivated to take an interest in Vincentian associations, for *"as such, they have a right to our presence and support"* (S. 7). This is an obvious right, and consequently a duty incumbent on the missionaries.

As for the Daughters of Charity, their Constitutions and Statutes state that they must support *"those who strive for the recognition of the rights of every individual."* (S. 4) and do *"all they can to promote and encourage leadership among the laity who are responsible for Vincentian groups"* as a witness to their fidelity to their origins, that is to say, to their founders (S. 5).

The international Statutes of AIC do not give a very explicit definition of the functions of an Advisor. In January 1971 the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission invested the International President of AIC with the "direction" of the association, something which until then had been the prerogative of the Vincentian priests. After this the directors became "advisors" or chaplains.

Article 4 of the International Statutes states that AIC "offers its members the social, civic and spiritual formation and information necessary to adapt their action to meet concrete needs." All the statutes and rules of national associations reiterate the members' right to this formation, a right which presupposes a duty on the part of others who are in positions of responsibility at various levels, and particularly the advisors.

Article 3 of the Bylaws specifies that at international level “*a priest, Advisor, is appointed by the Holy See, after several names have been put forward by AIC, with the consent of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. His mandate is for three years, renewable for a further three-year period.*”

Article 8 states : “*The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, successor of St. Vincent de Paul, and the Mother General of the Daughters of Charity are invited to meetings of the Assembly of Delegates, with a consultative voice,. In this way AIC shows its fidelity to the spirit of its founder.*”

Article 14 goes on to add: “*The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, successor of St. Vincent de Paul, and the Mother General of the Daughters of Charity, are invited to meetings of the Executive Board, with consultative voice. They may be represented by a person of their choice.*”

THE ADVISORS⁴ IN A VINCENTIAN LAY ASSOCIATION

The word “assistant” comes from the Latin and signifies “*being seated beside someone.*” The assistant, or advisor, is someone who accompanies and who must be sitting with his brothers and sisters to help them discern God’s will and, above all, to help them fulfil it in solidarity with others.

The Advisor has a duty to help the Vincentian volunteers to remain faithful to the Vincentian charism and to the specific identity of each group or association.

The mission of the Advisor, whether priest, Daughter of Charity, or lay person, is to form and animate groups and associations.

1. Formation

Liberating leadership is based, primarily, on the essential and fruitful convictions that the Pope reminds us about in “Christifideles Laici” (n° 63), when he says: “*One cannot offer a true and effective formation to others if the individual has not taken on or developed a personal responsibility for formation; this, in fact, is essentially a “formation of self.” We have to remain faithful to the conviction that each of us is both the author and the object of formation.*”

Formation is wide-ranging and includes, among other areas, spirituality, the Vincentian perspective, pastoral and social preparation and the development of a political conscience.

- The Advisor is requested to collaborate in a special way in the area of Vincentian formation. Other aspects of formation can be catered for by other people or through specific and occasional activities.

⁴ The advisors (priest or sister)

- In formation work with Vincentian groups or associations, the Advisors must strive to bring lay people to be leaders in this task so that they, too, will be prepared to be both promoters and workers in the apostolate. This would be of particular benefit to those groups and associations that do not have the help of a priest or a sister.
- In the work of formation the Advisors should be helped by lay people themselves, by other interested groups or by experts from outside.⁵

It must be made clear that the work of formation does not mean just giving a talk or a spiritual reflection at the beginning of a meeting, or saying Mass, but it is more a question of helping the group to make the connection between theory and practice by evaluating its actions and decisions in the light of St. Vincent's teaching. This type of accompaniment requires constant work which the chaplain does by collaborating and actively participating in the periodic meetings of the group that he is leading and through maintaining contact with the members of the group in their daily lives and apostolic activities.

2. Animation

To “animate” means to make an association come alive, to encourage it to be dynamic and creative, to encourage it to grow and develop, and to help it engage in reflection and research.

For this purpose, the quality of the relationships and interaction between the group and its advisor is an extremely important factor.

The relationship that exists between the group and its Advisor should reflect “*an ecclesiology of the people of God*” where we are all regarded as equal in spite of each one having different tasks to perform. We must all actively participate in helping the group to grow: in this way we will be helping each other as we move forward together.

So it is clear that there are both Advisors, and those in charge of the groups and associations. There should be no confusion about the function of each: those in charge of groups or associations are responsible for the planning, the carrying out and evaluation of what is done by the group. The Advisor's function is to animate, assist, clarify and accompany the group. Both have to be concerned with the all-round formation of the members.

In his talk during the Vincentian Formation Week in Salamanca, Fr. Santiago Azcárate Gorri C.M. said that through working for the integral formation of the group the chaplains can have a decisive influence on it. Effective results will be achieved by “deepening people's knowledge of the faith and reinforcing some ways of acting as communities, by praying, celebrating and working together in the common mission of evangelisation according to the Vincentian tradition. The chaplain's task is not to replace or to standardise the richly diverse Vincentian Family but to offer its members and those who come within the scope of his ministry the possibility of a serious Christian initiation which

⁵ PALÚ Lauro C.M. Synthesis of the working groups of advisors present at the AIC International Assembly 1998, Querétaro, Mexico

will produce a faith community where prayer, liturgy, celebration and commitment are united, leading to a deeper level of the evangelising service of the poor.”

It is absolutely essential that the Advisors should have a thorough knowledge of the association. They should know its history, its problems, its aims, its mystique, its internal dynamism, its identity, its spirit ... its potential and also its particular limitations. It is evidently not enough to have a theoretical knowledge of these, though this is essential; the Advisors must have concrete experience such as pastoral work among the poor and a sensitive knowledge of their suffering and of their spiritual and material needs. It is only from practical experience of evangelising the poor that the Advisors will have the sensitivity they need in order to direct lay movements.

3. Implementing the Advisor's functions

The duties of an Advisor:

- *To take part in meetings of the different Councils* (at all levels) in order to help the members make suggestions and help to find an answer to problems; they are not to take over the responsibility invested in the lay people who are in charge, but should support these people and form them so that they may fulfil their duties in the best possible way.
- *To maintain contact with the Visitor or Visitatrices*, especially when Advisors are needed for local and regional groups.
- *To help set up local teams.*
- *To promote the works, projects and formation initiatives, in collaboration with other branches of the Vincentian family.*
- *To give the volunteers support and encouragement in maintaining contact with the civil and Church authorities.*⁶

Some new aspects of an Advisor's work with Vincentian groups:

- They have to help the members to *become aware that they belong to a large, international family.*
- With this in mind, the Advisors will try to offer a common *formation programme to the different groups within the Family but they will also devote time to the formation of each specific group.*
- They have to help the members of these movements to be open to the *missionary aspect* of the Vincentian charism.⁷

Some special circumstances that apply to the Daughters of Charity

We are aware that in reality the Daughters of Charity often have to fulfil several different roles at the same time when working with the teams. It is quite possible, therefore,

⁶ PALÚ Lauro C.M. Synthesis of the Working Groups of Advisors attending the AIC International Assembly 1998, Querétaro, Mexico.

⁷ Ibid

that some Daughters of Charity would not define the role of Advisor in exactly the same way as we have done. Indeed it very often happens that sisters develop some tasks in the field and also collaborate with the volunteers in practical activities such as home visiting, project leadership, social centers, etc.

Sometimes a Daughter of Charity is Advisor for a team and at the same time she participates in their work. In such circumstances the Daughter of Charity will be acting as Advisor at times and on other occasions she will be working with the volunteers and collaborating with the service they give.

As we said earlier, sharing specific experiences can be extraordinarily enriching for both the volunteers and the sister, and this enhances the sister's role as Advisor because she is animating the volunteers by being a strong witness and example.

On the other hand, it may happen that the team has an Advisor and that the Daughters of Charity collaborate in the service. So there are two possible situations :

- The group has an Advisor who is a Priest of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity work with the volunteers on a project and are involved in the organisation of specific works for the poor. In this situation the sisters can work very closely with the Advisor and serve as the connecting link for volunteers with regard to specific works and particularly with the animation and evaluation of the work in the light of St. Vincent's teaching.
- The group has an Advisor and who is not a Vincentian though a priest. In this situation the Daughter of Charity has the very important role of affirming and spreading the spirit of St. Vincent and of helping the volunteers to preserve their identity. Even though she does not have the specific role of Advisor, she can make a very useful contribution to the formation of the volunteers by giving a different input and animating the group in a way that is Vincentian.

In every situation the Daughters of Charity have the very important task of *helping the volunteers to develop a sense of responsibility and autonomy*, for these are essential in every group and in every form of service.

There is a very real danger that the group may become too dependent on the Daughters of Charity and this could have serious consequences for the functioning of the group and its service of the poor.

Some interesting experiences in the animation of Vincentian Lay Movements

- In some countries there are occasions when *animation takes place at a national level for all the Vincentian Lay Movements*.
- In other countries there are “*National Coordinating Teams*” consisting of the Visitor, the Visitatrice, and those in charge of the various branches of the Vincentian Family.
- Sometimes the Provincial Director of the Daughters of Charity is also chaplain to the volunteers so he can take advantage of his visits to the sisters' communities to maintain contacts and support AIC teams or other branches of the family. Some Directors include in the formation programme for Seminary Sisters and Young Sisters

information about Vincentian lay movements and they promote knowledge of these groups and contact with them.

- In certain countries the Advisors help to promote *formation meetings at regional or national level; meetings that are primarily for young people in the different branches of the family.*
- Some countries organise *formation courses or schools* to provide various aspects of formation for the laity (spirituality, Vincentian spirit, apostolate, catechesis, social action, etc.).

4. The relationship and the interaction between the group and its Advisor.

We present here, in form of a comparison, some guidelines for working together. These guidelines are taken from several documents and especially from “Profile of an Advisor” published in the review *CLAPVI*, n° 90-91, January-June 1996.

Guidelines for advancing together

PROFILE OF AN ADVISOR	CORRESPONDING ATTITUDES OF THE VOLUNTEERS
2. The ecclesial aspect	
<p>The Advisor as a member of the Church, Christ's Body, is at the service of others.</p> <p>With his brothers and sisters in the Church which is the people of God, he follows Christ, the Evangeliser of the Poor.</p>	<p>The volunteers would like the Advisor to help them to live their vocation of service in union with the universal Church and bring them to understand that within this communion, each individual action acquires a universal value.</p> <p>Helped by the Advisor, the volunteers commit themselves to deepening their knowledge of the word of God so that the service they offer may be steeped in the spirit of the Gospel.</p>
II. The Vincentian Aspect	
<p>The Advisor is animated by the Vincentian spirit and, together with the associations, will not lose sight of these three guidelines:</p> <p>To be conscious that he or she has been called to render the Gospel effective among the poor;</p> <p>To be continually growing in the missionary spirit which grasps what God is saying through events;</p> <p>To be mindful of his or her role and that of the association he or she is accompanying.</p>	<p>The volunteers would like the Advisor to be particularly concerned about helping them in implementing these three guidelines:</p> <p>To be conscious of the fact that they are called to see the face of Christ in the poor;</p> <p>To pay constant attention to the signs of the times and thus be on the alert so as to understand, by the light of faith, what God is asking of us in the different social and historic circumstances in which we find ourselves;</p> <p>To make sure that the group is living a life based on the Vincentian spirit that inspires all the actions of its members.</p>

III. What st. Vincent, who was a good advisor of the laity, teaches us

The Advisor must be like St. Vincent and know lay people and believe in their potential.

He must work and collaborate with lay people and use to advantage their particular identity.

He must have the same mind as the Church regarding the role of the laity and allow lay people to exercise their appropriate functions.

He must know how to value each person.

He must be careful to update his thinking.

The volunteers must get to know the other branches of the Vincentian Family, their history and special identity.

To achieve a good collaborative relationship, the volunteers must not accept to be dependent on the Advisor nor expect him to solve the group's problems by himself; they have to learn to be responsible for their own spiritual formation whenever this is necessary.

They must regard formation and evaluation as indispensable means for knowing whether they are fulfilling their role in accordance with the Vincentian spirit.

Together with the Advisor, the group must be able to discover and bring to light the gifts and capabilities of each of the members in order to allow each volunteer to develop personally and the poor to reach self-achievement.

The volunteers would like the advisor to help the group to adapt to what the Church puts forward as new aspects of working with the poor; not to hold on to old ways of working or to accept uncritically new currents of spirituality that are might not be in keeping with the Vincentian spirit.

IV. Characteristics of the advisor and Of the vincentian laity

The Advisor should act in accordance with the evangelising praxis of the Church.

He should have a good knowledge of the Church's social teaching and Vincentian spirituality.

Motivated by the Advisor, the volunteers should genuinely live in accordance with their Christian faith so as to hand this on to those who are materially and spiritually poor.

The volunteers ask their Advisors not simply to teach a doctrine but to

<p>He should know about the associations and how they differ from other Vincentian groups.</p> <p>He should be pleased to be doing this work.</p> <p>He should promote solidarity among the members of the association.</p> <p>The Advisors should clearly understand the values of women and promote respect for their rights.</p> <p>The Advisors should concern themselves with providing the formation that is necessary in order to guarantee the autonomy of the group and its continuity.</p>	<p>communicate a spirit, a spark, and increased awareness.</p> <p>Conscious of their own special charisma, the volunteers will strengthen their bonds of interaction with the other branches of the Vincentian Family.</p> <p>The volunteer should be able to communicate her joy to others and be able to pass on a message of hope.</p> <p>The volunteers ask the Advisor to promote solidarity within the group and with the other branches of the Vincentian Family as well as collaboration with other associations.</p> <p>The volunteers must be aware of their rights as women and should promote their rights and organising abilities in the service of charity.</p> <p>While respecting their Advisors, the volunteers should exercise their autonomy and independence; they should ensure the continuity of the group even if the priest or sister who founded the association is no longer there.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">The Advisors and the Vincentian volunteers should create bonds of respect, friendship and brotherly love which help to ensure that they give a better service to their deprived sisters and brothers</p>	

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHARITIES

II. Historical survey of AIC

1. THE AIC'S HISTORY.

The first "Charities", which were the forerunners of the present AIC associations, were founded in France by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617.

They date back to 1617, the year when St. Vincent was indignant about the situation of the poor people in his parish at Châtillon–les–Dombes, and this indignation gave rise to the first "Charities" where he brought together a group of ladies, the first volunteers, in order to remedy the serious needs of the deprived by helping them materially and spiritually.

AIC is the oldest lay women's association

More than three hundred years have gone by since those valiant women, the first volunteers recruited by St. Vincent, began to take care of the poor sick in a concerned and organised way. Thanks to the confidence that St. Vincent had in them, these women took on a very important role in the exercise of charity, being particularly concerned about those human beings who, because they were born poor and women, were ignored, ill-treated and despised.

AIC had an international character right from the time of St. Vincent de Paul

St. Vincent was not a person to be put off by distance and he extended his ministry to other countries where there was dire poverty, such as Italy, Poland and Madagascar. Nothing could stop him, neither language problems, the distances involved, or different cultures and customs.

Moreover, to maintain communication among the various Charities, St. Vincent wrote a considerable number of letters and even launched the publication *Relations*, a bulletin which is not unlike the one we have today. This was already something more than just organising charity, it involved organising communication and this was one of the outstanding characteristics of our founder.

The Company of Charity is updated according to the directives of the Second Vatican Council and in 1971 takes the name International Association of Charities (AIC).

In 1971, the delegates from 22 associations gathered in Rome, Italy, for the first International Council, voted for the new statute and adopted the name AIC, International Association of Charities. In deciding to retain in this new name the word "Charities" the members wished to mark their direct descent from the work created by St. Vincent and their fidelity to the prophetic teaching of their founder.

1971 was a turning point for the association. We were animated by a new spirit which was confirmed and deepened at every regional and international meeting where we rediscover the source of the Vincentian spirit and gain new strength.

For more information on this subject, consult AIC documents:

- *The Charities of St. Vincent de Paul*
- *AIC from its origins to our own times.*

2. THE STRUCTURE OF AIC

The works undertaken by AIC require an internal structure, *an organising body*, comprising:

The Assembly of Delegates, made up of representatives of the member associations.

The Executive Board, composed of the President, the Vice-Presidents, and AIC members from the different regions: it is responsible for the management and administration of AIC and is fully empowered to implement decisions taken by the Assembly of Delegates. It meets once a year. The Executive Board is assisted by a Permanent Committee.

The Holy See appoints an ecclesiastical Advisor, with the approval of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. *The Ecclesiastical Advisor and a Daughter of Charity representing the Mother General* take part in the meetings of the Executive Board and have a consultative voice.

The International Secretariat is the communications core of AIC. Information from national associations and from outside bodies is received at the Secretariat which then passes on information and reports and serves as the contact point for the different member associations.

The services that AIC offers all its members are aimed at giving support to the associations and the volunteer helpers with regard to their commitment to the service of the poor. Within this framework different functions have been specified and developed and these will be carried out by specific commissions or services, by experts, or by members of the Executive Board. These functions or services are: the Bulletin, Study and Research, Finance, Formation, Projects, Public Relations, Representations.

Animation at regional level: in order to facilitate the animation and the formation of the volunteers, the national associations are grouped according to regions and each region has a regional animator.

AIC regions are: Africa-Madagascar, Latin America, Asia, Europe-Near East and the United States.

AIC documents: a large number of documents have been published by AIC in recent years. They deal with reflection, formation, organisation, working methods, and the presentation of the association.

The International Bulletin is published in the three official languages of AIC: French, English and Spanish, and it is translated into Italian, Portuguese and German.

For further information on this subject consult AIC documents:

- *Statutes and By Laws.*

3. THE CHARISM OF AIC

Our spirituality is based on the teachings of St. Vincent with Jesus as the centre and the driving force of all our action: we are more deeply committed to a preferential option for the poor which is fundamental to Christianity. “*Acting together against the different forms of poverty*” is the basic project that St. Vincent confided to the first volunteers at Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617. Its relevance for all time in the history of the association stems from the fact that it unites in one single project love of God and love of the poor: this is the most evangelical form of charity there is.

This project, which we will see from the copious correspondence of St. Vincent with those responsible for the Charities was present right from the time of the first foundation, has been able to survive over the centuries and withstand different regimes and changes in society thanks to its dynamic power; it does not look back nostalgically to the past or look towards an utopia and this is due to the ease with which it can adapt to needs and institutions, to its realistic attitude in being attentive to modifications and changes.

It is precisely the originality and the specific nature of this fundamental project that allows the members of AIC, even in our times, to use it as the basic point of reference all over the world: it is a means of achieving unity.

The Basic Document “*Acting together against the different forms of poverty*” has an important part to play in reinforcing this approach. It is a superb working instrument and basis for reflection and it expresses for all the members of the association the fundamental, common project.

For further information on this subject, see AIC documents:

- *Basic Document “Acting together against the different forms of poverty.”*
- *AIC Volunteers today (simplified text).*

4. CURRENT POLICIES OF AIC ⁸

The way that our charism has evolved, our identity and our mission, our vision of a future society that is just, shows solidarity and is welcoming; all these things have

⁸ de NAVA Patricia, “Presentation of the AIC,” Minutes of the AIC Assembly of Delegates 1998, Querétaro, Mexico.

contributed to the emergence of some lines of action that point to the current policy of our association. We realise that the word “policy” does not express exactly what we want to say: it is more a question of teaching, something more profound than policy, something that has very strong spiritual roots. But let us use the word “policy” as it is easier to understand.

1. Policy of updating the mission of the Charities

Ever since it was founded AIC has based its policy on two unchanging principles: the first is a commitment to remain faithful to our mission and to the designs of our Founder; the second is a commitment to continual renewal so as to respond, in a better way, to the needs of our times. These two policy directions are complementary and closely linked, for St. Vincent himself taught that we have to concentrate attention on new needs and be creative enough to find the most adequate ways of responding to them; in this way we will be looking for the genuine good of the poor at every moment in history.

This path of renewal during the years 70’s–80’s, brought the association to move from a position of giving *assistance* to one of *promotion* and finally, during the 1990 Assembly in Assisi, to adopt the concept of *self-promotion*.

The notion of self-promotion arises from the conviction that nobody can promote the welfare of the poor if these people are not prepared to take responsibility for their own lives. Our role in this process is not to take over from the poor in making decisions that affect their lives but to stimulate and support them to find out how they can become autonomous, until such times as they become the active agents of their own social and human promotion.

This commitment was developed still further when we were able to move from self-promotion on a personal level to self-promotion for communities. We found valuable allies for this endeavor in the women of those communities that take an active part in the projects and who often become AIC volunteers; they, in their turn, are committed to self-promotion within their own communities.

For further information on this topic see AIC documents:

- *Why self-promotion? (reflection on the roots of self-promotion)*
- *Self-promotion (practical guide).*

2. Policy of cultural transformation

After noting several obstacles that the volunteers encounter in their daily work, things that prevent them from defending the rights of the most deprived, AIC went on to question whether it was right for them to make these people want to work at self-promotion since this desire was destined to come up against the reality of a society that curbs their progress and marginalises them, excluding them from participating in civic life. We realize that our initiatives could end in failure if we did not, at the same time, use a different way of working within society in order to change its outlook.

This conviction has led to the development of another policy, that of cultural transformation.

Cultural transformation demands a radical change of outlook, the transformation of concepts that are deeply rooted in public opinion, in tradition and inner attitudes: working on the culture demands, first of all, the elimination of these prejudices, fears, selfishness and the undervaluing of the least able in society and those who are different, all of which seriously undermine the dignity of others. Cultural transformation will not come about solely with the eradication of these negative elements. We need to create a new mentality which is more open, more respectful of others, one that shows more solidarity and can recognise and defend the right of all people to direct their own lives.

The promotion of this culture of solidarity and self-promotion can be achieved in time through these means: sensitising society, circulating new ideas by the testimony we give, by word and by written documents, by intelligent use of the mass media, by pressure exerted on structures, and above all, by effective personal testimony.

For Christians, the most effective way of changing a culture is by proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to its spirit. Evangelising a culture means developing within it the values that the Gospel proclaims, that is to say justice, solidarity, love and respect so as to then penetrate the culture's mentality and achieve one of our objectives which is to change the way society thinks at all these levels.

For more information on this subject, see AIC documents

- *Why solidarity? (reflections on the basis of solidarity)*
- *Solidarity (a practical guide)*
- *Promoting justice: why and how should we do this? (defending Human Rights in the face of different forms of poverty).*

3. Policy of formation

For many years now, formation has been one of the most important operational procedures for AIC. This formation has not only to be on the spiritual level, it has to be technical and concrete: only an ongoing and focused formation will teach us how to:

- free ourselves from being slaves to habit, like regarding misery as a fact of life and not as intolerable injustice;
- cultivate in ourselves the capacity to wonder and be non-conformist with regard to any form of injustice whatsoever;
- confront each new situation with intellectual curiosity to analyze the reality in depth in order to detect any changes and thus understand the causes of injustices and measure their consequences;
- have a spirit of discernment in order to evaluate the reality without conforming to it, with an objective and critical outlook, and acting without prejudice or pessimism and combat a fatalistic attitude in order to confront those who are against our way of thinking: we have to start by changing our own attitudes, our methods without being afraid of novelty, but welcoming it with enthusiasm and hope.

4. Policy of extension and the creation of new AIC groups

At the present time AIC is established in many European countries, in Latin America, North America, Asia, Africa and Madagascar. It totals 45 associations and several groups are being set up: there are 250,000 volunteers who are all committed to living according to the necessities of their times, the fundamental project of Vincent de Paul, our founder: **“Acting together against the different forms of poverty.”**

AIC is deeply concerned about poverty in the world and it plans to set up new groups in countries where there are no associations up to now. This will be achieved with the invaluable help of the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission, whose support is the key factor in this project.

For more information on this subject, see AIC documents

- *AIC-Europe*
- *AIC- Latin America*
- *AIC- USA*

5. Policy of creating networks

AIC is conscious of being a worldwide network of solidarity interaction struggling against the different forms of poverty. To achieve concrete results AIC:

- is an umbrella organisation for the associations which in the different countries develop the same kind of activities and share the same global objective: the struggle against poverty and exclusion;
- forms a network for the exchange and dissemination of information and formation;
- organises meetings and exchanges between the volunteers of different countries, by means of seminars, formation visits, etc.;
- sends news of the volunteers' grassroots work to international organizations;
- works in partnership with other networks to exert pressure on decisions-makers;
- constitutes a network of projects since it ensures the interaction of projects carried out by its members: exchanging ideas and experiences is a very effective way of showing the enrichment that comes from interaction and the proliferation of initiatives. With a view to obtaining these results AIC forms its volunteers according to the model of **working in project forms**.

For more information on this subject, see AIC documents:

- *Working under project form*
- *Working in network and partnership*
- *Ongoing Projects*

Another important network for us is that of **interaction within the Vincentian Family**

This interaction has been intensified in recent years through regular meetings of those in charge of the different branches at an international level and by common strategies for action. This closer relationship will bring us to live a more Vincentian life and one that

is closer to our roots: the fundamental project of Vincent de Paul who founded us so that we would work in collaboration with one another.

For more information on this subject see AIC documents:

- *The role and the tasks of an Advisor (Part 1 of this document)*
- *The Vincentian Family: the four international branches*
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6. Policy of representation

The awareness that we are a worldwide network for social action within a reality where the problems caused by poverty are increasing every day has strengthened the conviction always held by AIC that we must play a part in international life.

One of our objectives is to see that the work and concerns of our volunteers at the grassroots level are brought to the notice of international organisations so that pressure can be exerted and the poor defended; this is the role we have to play in international life.

To make its policy more effective AIC represents its associations at the level of Governmental and non-Governmental organizations. We have consultative status at UNESCO, at ECOSOC (United Nations Social and Economic Council) and at the Council of Europe. At a supranational level, AIC is part of other networks fighting against poverty and sharing information.

AIC has another role: that of making its members more keenly aware of the importance of their collaboration in local public life and in the struggle against the causes of poverty; it provides its members with information and opportunities to participate in important worldwide events such as the preparatory work for the *Copenhagen Social Summit*, *International Year for the Elimination of Poverty*, the *Decade for the Elimination of Poverty* as well as the major initiatives of UNESCO.

For further information on this subject see AIC document:

- *Action on the structures (information sheets included with the international bulletin n° 69,70,71)*

7. Policy on insertion within the Church

Finally, we have to mention the AIC policy with regard to the position taken by the Church: from the XVII century to our own times the Church has given us guidelines on how to better direct our efforts.

AIC is an International Catholic Organization (ICO) and as such has links with several Pontifical Councils that work for the eradication of poverty:

- The Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Pontifical Council for the Family, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Pontifical Council for Culture.

We are participating in the preparatory work for the *1999 International Year of Charity and the Jubilee Year 2000*; we have been working on these themes in recent years and some of them constitute the essential basis of our current lines of action.

5. AIC ADOPTS COMMON OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

AIC is a living organisation that is in a constant state of evolution; this evolution is marked by a process of integral progress which is developing both in the sphere of its influence and in the quality of its projects and action plans which try to be constructive, Vincentian and evangelical, adapted to the rapid changes in our world on the eve of the third millennium.

At the present time the Association is directing its works in the light of the operational guidelines that are voted by the Assembly every four years. These operational guidelines point to an evolution that is in accordance with the signs of the times and the specific work performed at base level.

The three Operational Guidelines approved by the 1998 Assembly in Santiago de Querétaro, Mexico, are as follows:

- *To be a transforming force within the association*
- *To be a transforming force with regard to different forms of poverty*
- *To be a transforming force in society.*

For further information on this subject, see AIC documents:

- Operational lines 1998-2002 ⁹
- Minutes of AIC Assembly of Delegates 1998

⁹ The operational guidelines, even if they continue to be valid, need to be constantly updated; that is why every four years new operational lines are voted on at the Assembly of Delegates. The next Assembly will be in 2002.

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