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AIC: INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHARITIES

Dilde Grandi
Outgoing International President

AIC - The oldest lay association of women:

AIC is the oldest lay association of women in the history of volunteerism. It dates back to 1617 when, for the first time, Vincent de Paul gathered a group of women in Châtillon-les-Dombes (France) and gave structure to their first initiatives to come to the aid of the poor families in the parish. To this first group and those that followed, St. Vincent gave the significant name of "Charities".

St. Vincent encouraged the spread of the "Charities" not only in France, but gradually, also in Italy and Poland thus creating an international association. In a desire for unity in this new foundation, St. Vincent drafted common rules, to find the best possible ways to help the destitute, based on the imitation of Jesus Christ, on evangelical love that goes beyond borders, and on organization and creativity. Furthermore, in a desire to ensure communication among the different groups making up the "Charities", St. Vincent wrote numerous letters and even edited a Bulletin entitled "Relations" which is not very different from our AIC Bulletin. Therefore the Bulletin of St. Vincent not only organized the charity, but also established a means of communication, one of the features of the genius of our Founder.

Saint Vincent de Paul's first foundation becomes international:

After the death of Vincent, the Charities spread to many countries thanks to the efforts of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. National associations were created, linked together and coordinated by the President of the French Association. At the same time, in other countries, groups which sprang up spontaneously, were integrated into the association of Charities as they realized they shared common goals. This international collaboration was interrupted during the XVIII century when, because of the 1789 French Revolution, the French association was obliged to discontinue its activities. Nonetheless, as early as 1840, contact was renewed with the other associations. The first international congress of the Charities took place in Paris. Other congresses followed. During the Second World War (1939-1945), international activities were discontinued. After the war, congresses were resumed.

1971 - Renewal of AIC along the lines of the Second Vatican Council:

During the 1960's, the association began to feel the need of renewal. In many countries, the word "Ladies" which appeared in the title was seen to be no longer suitable and so was dropped. Being attentive to the signs of the times, the associations in many countries acknowledged the changes undergone in society and in the post-conciliar Church and therefore, in fidelity to the teachings of St. Vincent himself, they decided to change their methods and structures and to request international status in conformity with the circumstances of our times.

In 1971, delegates from 22 associations met in an Extraordinary Assembly and voted a new Constitution and By-Laws and officially adopted the name International Association of Charities (AIC). By deciding to maintain the word "Charities" in the new name, the members wished to emphasize the fact that their organization is a direct descendant of the Charities created by St. Vincent and to give proof of their fidelity to the prophetic teaching of their Founder.

1971 was a turning point for the Association. Its recognition as an international association and its adherence to the innovating spirit of the Second Vatican Council gave a breath of new life to AIC. Since that time, it has continued to develop and grow, thanks to continuous renewal of reflection and action, and also thanks to its awareness of its own role within civil society, the international community and the Church.

With the theme "Against all forms of poverty, acting together", AIC became a network of projects throughout the world:

AIC is now present in many countries of Europe, Latin America, North America, Asia and Africa. It counts 42 associations, with more than 250,000 members, all committed to carry out, in a way adapted to our times, the fundamental plan of St. Vincent de Paul, their Founder **"Against all forms of poverty, acting together"**.

To further this common goal, AIC is committed to form volunteers, by organizing seminars at the world and regional level, by visiting the associations, and by publishing and distributing reflection and formation documents. It coordinates the activity of volunteers for more effective action in favor of the poor and the marginalized; by so doing, it also helps these volunteers to carry out local projects, to find subsidies from international bodies and to encourage exchanges and collaboration among similar projects.

AIC asserts itself as a world network in the combat against all forms of poverty and in favor of the promotion of the poor. It endeavours to share this same conviction within its associations.

Finally, concerned by the situations of poverty, AIC strives to create new groups in countries where the association is not yet established. In these countries it is often necessary to have the presence of well-prepared volunteers, such as provided through the inestimable collaboration of the Daughters of Charity whose support in this field is determinative.

Aware that problems of poverty are worldwide, AIC is part of the life of important international organizations:

As a worldwide association, AIC is conscious of the fact that it has a role to play on the international level. To fulfill this role, its associations are represented with governmental and nongovernmental organizations. AIC has consultative status with UNESCO, ECOSOC and the European Parliament. It collaborates with many other bodies, at a supranational level and it participates in networks and exchanges. It is a member of CIAS (International Committee for Social Action), the ICO Conference (International Catholic Organizations), and of WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations).

AIC, as an association of women, pays particular attention to the problems of women:

Participation in initiatives in favor of women is coherent with AIC's goals. Being from its origin an association of women, it pays particular attention to the situation of poor women, doubly penalized because they are women and are marginalized. AIC always strives to gain greater knowledge of the needs of these women, as well as the situations of injustice and violence in which they live. To remain faithful to this option and aware of its responsibility, AIC participates in all the important world initiatives in favor of women. Through its representatives, it collaborated in the initiatives of numerous nongovernmental and Catholic bodies, in preparation for the World Conference of Women which took place in September 1995 in Peking. AIC knows that it can make a specific contribution, thanks to the concrete experience of its volunteers and also thanks to the development of its concept of the importance of the role of women in the poorest and most marginalized families; its experience and its project offer a useful basis for reflection. Even in a subaltern position, it is women who take responsibility for family problems. And often they play the role of mediators, agents of pacification in a context marked by disruptions and opposition.

AIC has adopted the following action guidelines: formation, communication, solidarity, self-achievement - all taken as the focus of its action with poor families:

To remain faithful to its mission, AIC feels the need to update constantly to find the best means for the promotion of the poor in a given period of time and culture. To achieve this goal, at its 1990 Assembly of Delegates in Assisi, Italy, AIC outlined its action guidelines as aiming to work together in favor of formation, communication, solidarity and self-achievement. These guidelines were defined, developed and consolidated at the Assembly of Delegates in Antigua, Guatemala, in 1994, taking into account the progress of the Association. Over the years, while remaining faithful to its fundamental choices, AIC's self-reflection has opened up new paths and new objectives have been adopted.

The former option, which consisted in being close to destitute families who are often marginalized and forced to experience dramatic social situations, has undergone a profound change; when it was realized that simple assistance was insufficient and resulted in new **dependencies**, it was understood that the destitute themselves must share in their own **promotion**.

This led AIC to a new understanding of the global importance of family in its role as the first cell of the human community and as the primordial elementary network of the social order. New and more profound motivations of a sociological order emerged. Prompted by these motivations, an idea was born; it was understood that it did not suffice to support the destitute, but that they must also be aware of the value and rights of the family. We must combat alongside them in order to defend them. During this campaign the AIC volunteers found precious allies in the women of these communities who, in general, proved to be fully aware of the familial and social dimension. Thus a new solidarity among women took shape, in a concrete way by means of the active participation in community initiatives supported, planned and executed, in common agreement, by the volunteers and the women of the local communities. In turn, some of these women became AIC volunteers, committed to the promotion of their community.

The idea of self-achievement of the poor, which became one of the primary objectives of AIC, was promoted within the Association due to an intuition of the Latin-American volunteers who were alarmed by the suffering of the marginalized communities where individuals are not respected in their dignity and their rights - above all, in the right to take their own decisions concerning their lives.

To combat this denial to the poor of the right to be agents of their own promotion, the Latin-American volunteers undertook a campaign of community animation, the object being to encourage the poor themselves to launch initiatives and to plan self-achievement projects. With more or less difficulty, this fundamental intuition spread throughout the world. Now, in every country, there are AIC volunteers committed to projects of this type.

In 1994, AIC undertook the defence of the human rights of the destitute:

Through the years, the idea of self-achievement has developed. It has led volunteers to research carefully the social value of the individual. Thus we understand that self-achievement cannot be carried out alone; it can only be realized in the family and social context. Research was also directed to the injustices suffered mainly by the destitute. Today, many of these people feel repressed, excluded from all participation and rejected by society. This marginalization is fundamentally unjust because it prevents the individual from exercising his or her fundamental rights. The United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" affirms this. According to Art. 7, every individual has the right to be protected from discriminations. Art. 22 affirms the right to have sufficient means for the free development of personality. Every individual has the right to participate in the public and cultural life of his community (Articles 22 and 27). Consequently, as stated by Monsieur Vincent, this battle against social exclusion is an act of justice before being a work of mercy.

The volunteers carefully studied their duties in the face of denied rights. At the 1994 Assembly of Delegates in Antigua, Guatemala, the delegations of AIC from around the world committed themselves to "political action": by denouncing injustices affecting the destitute, above all women, and by putting pressure on public structures so that the rights of the individual and the family in marginalized communities be recognized and defended. For this "political action", the AIC volunteers collaborate with other volunteer organizations, with the institutions and social movements most concerned with problems of justice, being fully aware of the fact that this effort cannot be carried out by them alone. A vast campaign of sensitizing public opinion is required. Society must be aware of the fact that poverty is not a fatality to which one should be resigned; lightening the burden only by palliative remedies is insufficient. Poverty must be felt as an injustice to be fought beginning with appropriate measures of prevention as well as actions which heighten cultural awareness. By "culture", we understand the whole complex of ideas, of knowledge and of history and traditions which make up current thinking.

The AIC volunteers, therefore, widened their enquiry to find, in the cultural baggage of their milieu, concepts which create so many situations of injustices and of lack of respect for the dignity of the marginalized. They discovered a vast range of mentalities. There exists an explicit contempt for the weak, who are seen as failures and incompetent, therefore unworthy of exercising their fundamental rights. There is a great variety of attitudes with different shades of meaning, but what these attitudes have in common is a total lack of confidence in the poor which leads to efforts to take over from the poor and to offer an assistance which is often humiliating. Obviously, these types of

mentality are serious obstacles to authentic self-achievement, based on respect and equal partnership.

Towards a culture of solidarity and self-achievement, of respect and peace:

Thanks to this reflection, AIC realizes that to defend human dignity and justice, it is necessary to get rid of such mentalities and to transform widespread and firmly rooted convictions. We should learn to have an impact on existing cultures, adding to them a new culture of peace, respect, solidarity and self-achievement; this can only be done through slow yet tenacious effort.

Only when this new culture becomes more widespread will the wish expressed in the first lines of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" become a reality within the human community: "The recognition of the dignity inherent in all members of the human family and their equal and inalienable rights constitute the basis of liberty, justice and peace". This sentence is found in the Preamble to the Declaration.

AIC volunteers, members of a Catholic association, laying claim to the values of charity and Christian solidarity, cannot ignore the tremendous impetus which the message of the Gospel gives to this action. In fact, evangelization profoundly rooted in the culture of society is able to engender a conversion of mentalities.

The most recent texts from the Magisterium of the Church were of great help in this reflection. These texts bring to light the duty of Christians to evangelize individuals, communities and cultures. This new way to experience Christ's message and to announce it to the different communities is captured in the words of the Latin-American Bishops, "the Gospel, incarnate in their culture, manifests all its vitality so that one community may enter into dialogue with other communities for mutual enrichment" (Conclusions of the IVth General Conference of Latin-American Bishops in Santo Domingo; n. 299).

Importance of interaction with the Vincentian Family:

We have always followed this fundamental Christian and Church path by being united with the big Vincentian Family, especially with the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, who have always set us an example and stimulated us in our work. Now, after the meeting of June, 3rd, 1995, we have initiated a more profound relationship and interaction which will enable us to transmit the fundamental project of Saint Vincent de Paul with fuller meaning and closeness to our roots. It was our Founder's desire that the Vincentian Family work in close collaboration.