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A.I.C. From the Origins to the Present Day: 380 years, 1617-1997

Mauricette Borloo

Marie Claire Guichard

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A I C from the origins to the present day
380 years
1617-1997

Mauricette Borloo, AIC Vice-President
Marie Claire Guichard, Executive Board Member

Origins

Châtillon-les-Dombes : 1617

On August 1, 1617, Mr. Vincent takes possession of his new parish. It includes about 2000 people. In a few weeks, he will turn everything around.

A small event, apparently trivial, grabs his attention. He tells the story :

"Although unworthy, I was priest of a small parish. I was fetched to go see a poor man, ill and badly put up in a barn, just as I was about to go to church to read the announcements. I was told of his illness and his poverty in such terms that I was seized with compassion and recommended him with such feeling that all the ladies were moved. More than fifty left town; as for me, I did what others did, I visited him and found him in such a state that I decided to hear his confession; and as I was bringing the Holy Sacrament, I met a group of women and God gave me this thought: "Couldn't we get these good ladies together and encourage them to give themselves to God in order to serve the poor who are ill?" (IX, 208-209).

I suggested to all these good women brought there by charity that they could collect money, each give a day and form a group, not only for themselves but for those who would follow: and that was the first place where Charity was established (IX, 244).

This August 20, 1617. Three days later, on the 23rd, Mr. Vincent organized the first team of women in charge of visiting the sick in their houses. He wrote the first rules of the association. It contains the gist of all future rules. The goal is clearly defined: "to assist the poor, physically and spiritually". The reason given is that "charity is the infallible mark of God's real children." The method is set up: the poor don't lack charitable people, they lack "an organized manner of helping them"; priorities are set: to go to the poorest and most isolated.

The first "*Confraternity of Charity*" is established, it is officially recognized by the Archbishop of Lyons on November 24, 1617 and set up on December 8.

Fast Development

In September 1618, while preaching in Joigny, he tours a small hospital. He meets many abandoned ill people and proceeds to orient the "Joigny Charity" in the direction of this new crisis (XIII, 441). In 1619, following the intervention of Mr. de Gondi, he is made "General Chaplain of the Galleys." In this way he discovers the horrible situation of galley slaves and immediately launches another Charity to answer the needs of these prisoners (XIII 475).

His ministry, his relations, his observations make him discover other catastrophic situations: the extreme poverty of street children, that of old people, of adults without work, of orphans, of abandoned children, of widows, of those he calls "the bashful poor," those ruined by war. Everywhere he adapts the structures of "Charities" in order to meet all those needs and soon all of France will know this new association.

In addition to the huge work of the Charities, Mr. Vincent founds the Congregation of Mission priests in 1625. He would tell each of his missionaries: Establish a Charity everywhere you preach a mission. If it is already there, visit it, restore enthusiasm, recruit new members. Let your passage be a source of renewal...(Coste, The Great Saint of The Great Century - t. I, 312).

He had also met a remarkable woman who was to become his most valuable assistant: Louise de Marillac. He entrusted her with the running and coordination of the Confraternities of Charity. For several months, she will travel throughout the country, visit, encourage, solve conflicts, remind people of fundamental objectives. So she was the first coordinator of the Charities and all through her life she never ceased to be attentive to their actions and work at their development.

In 1633 she opens her house to girls wishing to devote their lives to serving the poor. This was the beginning of what was to become the Company of the Daughters of Charity, united with the Ladies in the service of the poor.

In 1634, the first Charity is established in Italy. On September 27, 1660, Mr. Vincent leaves this world. The page of his life had come to an end. It was the first page of a book which is still open. Today the Châtillon foundation stretches to all five continents. Under the name "International Association of Charity" (AIC) it includes 250 000 women who, faithful to their founder, are committed to fighting poverty. They believe that "serving the poor should be preferred to all things at all times" (IX, 216). They try "in the light of the faith" to discover Christ in them, in answer to his call (XI, 32).

What are St. Vincent de Paul's "Charities"

They have three characteristics: composition, mode of action, objectives.

- **Composition:** they are essentially women's organizations
- **Mode of Action:** they operate in teams

- **Objectives:** all poverties but especially the most hidden and most forgotten.

A Women's Organization for a Women's Mission

Through doing this, he came to discover more pointedly the vocation of women and their place in the church. In 1657, not long before his death, looking at the Charities already spread out through the world, he rejoices of the place and role thus given back to women:

It has been about eight hundred years since women have not had public functions in the Church. There used to be women called deaconesses. Around Charlemagne's time, this custom stopped and was not replaced; and then some of you ladies, today, get the call: you yourselves can tell, from your good deeds, how terribly these would be missed if they were suppressed (XIII, 810).

Indeed the "Charities" give to Christian women a role to play in the Church, a ministry in the service of all wounds, wounds to hearts, bodies and souls.

The "Charities" have a mission that is both social and pastoral, and through their participation, women are able to return to a real feminine vocation.

Women's "genius" does indeed lead them to be particularly attentive to human elements. John Paul II does not hesitate to state that they are more capable than men of attention to the individual human being and that this commits them to a mission of service and love (Apostolic Letter on the Dignity of Women, No. 29-30). Women find themselves by giving themselves.

Team Action

Another characteristic of St. Vincent's "Charities" is their mode of operation.

The "Charities" were born out of the observation that "the poor suffer more from lack of organized help than from lack of charitable helpers" (XIII, 423).

Because no one person can solve the problems of poverty efficiently, St. Vincent de Paul organizes another type of response: it is collective, organized and somewhat "planned."

St. Vincent's idea was that a "Charity" is not simply a group of charitable people but a community engaged in planned activities. "Acting together" is his essential goal.

Structure

Each "Charity" has its own activities related to local needs, but all the "Charities" of a country are gathered in a national association. In turn, the national associations are joined to form the International Association of Charities (AIC). Thanks to these structures, AIC provides national and international coordination and activities, and several general services.

This flexible structure, planned by St. Vincent, is probably the reason this association has lasted almost four centuries.

Community Spirit

The common action of "Charities" implies common ideals and friendships. Nothing can be accomplished without a common marching with the same ideal.

It is also indispensable to adhere to the essential objectives of the association and to the pedagogy of charity that it offers. Together volunteers must discover the requirements for solidarity, respect and sharing that are the framework of our activities. No community can exist without life as a team.

Beyond warm friendship there is a common plan. Mr. Vincent insists therefore on monthly team meetings, on times for thinking and praying, on the necessary training to accomplish the services required. Nothing will last, he said, if there isn't "this common spiritual union." That is why he writes a detailed body of rules in 14 pages.

Each "Charity" becomes the visible sign of Christ and the Church. Its existence says more than any preaching. It answers Christ's wish: "that they be one so that the world recognize that You sent me."

St. Vincent also insists on the special place of the Eucharist. He asks each team to have it celebrated every month (XIII, 430). It is not an individual act of piety but the very source of Charity.

Towards the poorest and most forgotten

After Châtillon, Mr. Vincent was thinking of starting, in every village on the Gondi land, a team of women dedicated to visiting ill people at home. He thought these were the most forgotten people; however in 1618 he discovers the sufferings of poor people in hospitals and in 1619 those of prisoners. He will immediately adapt the first Confraternities. His reflex is already obvious. We must discover the different types of poverty then adjust plans and adapt structures.

The mission of "St. Vincent's Charities" is to discover hidden sufferings. The important thing is to be attentive to the most forgotten miseries, to generate solidarities, to create friendly places where those who are excluded or marginalized by society can meet.

The Charities are not specifically spiritual associations but the social actions that they carry out are based on faith requirements. St. Vincent does not usually separate personal "sanctification" from serving the poor. For him there could be no Christian life without concern for suffering brothers, wherever or whoever they were. "That is the infallible mark of God's children" (XIII, 423). The love of one's brother is a test of the love of God.

The spirituality of the "Charities" is that of their founder. Mr. Vincent is obviously a child of his century. He is influenced by the religious and sociological circumstances of his time, but his main objectives and the inspiration for his work remain those we follow today.

Dimension of service

"To go to the poor is to go to Christ," but there are different ways of going to Christ.

There is a danger in our relations to the poor: that of centering on ourselves, in order to feel good, to turn our actions into a sort of spiritual lever. St. Vincent was very aware of this. "A man, however charitable, does not have charity if he is not humble; without charity, even if he had enough faith to move mountains, even if he gave his possessions to the poor... all that would be useless" (Spiritual Conferences, April 18, 1659, p. 627).

The second danger is to position ourselves as mere donors. St. Vincent again reminds us many times of the Gospel text that inaugurates Christ's public life. St. Luke describes this event for us.

The mission that St. Vincent assigns the "Charities" is first and foremost a mission of liberation.

When we start, we commit ourselves to taking the good news of the Gospel to the poor, to liberate them from a series of bonds, to lighten up the way for the blind, to work for freedom from all kinds of oppression.

This will take us not only to a relationship with the poor, but also to an action of pressure on institutions, in order to defend and liberate the poor.

Mr. Vincent was not only a man of emergencies, he was also a man of development. For him, service was only meaningful if it led to more security and respect for human beings.

As he often said, the purpose of a service for the poor is to ensure that "they are not a burden for anyone." We cannot just give away material things. There are many conversations and letters dealing with this point.

He always preferred giving tools, seeds, skills, rather than regular help. Faced with the rejecting attitude of 17th century society, which locked the poor away, he reacts strongly. With this in mind he founds the Hospice of the Name of Jesus to free beggars through training and work. In the same spirit, he asks the Daughters of Charity to be able to teach (XI, 43).

Intervention in Society

The mission of liberation of the poor brings the Charities to action within society. Mr. Vincent discovered the horrifying situation of prisoners: that brought him to work at reforming the prison system. He met the sick and played a part in reforming the hospital system. He met victims of war and fought for peace in his relations with the higher authorities of the state. On January 6, 1649, he does not hesitate to ask Mazarin, Prime minister of France, to step aside. Today, social structures built on economic domination and exploitation cause marginalization and injustices for many populations. If priority attention to the poor sends us back to efforts of reinsertion and reintegration, it also redirects us toward intervention before opinion and public authorities. "There is no charity, St. Vincent tells us, that is not accompanied by justice" (II, 54).

These are the essential requirements of our relationship with the poor:

- he is Christ on our road,
- our mission is one of liberation,
- this mission requires solidarity and brotherly sharing,
- it brings us to institutional and social actions.

The Mission ***"To assist spiritually and materially"***

St. Vincent summarized in these words the Charities' mission: "To assist the poor spiritually and materially." The word "assist," in the XVIIth century, has a totally different connotation than it has in our modern times.

It is linked to the Latin verb "assistere" which means "to stand next to," "to be with" more than "to help." It includes notions of sharing, accompanying, bringing solidarity with the person as a whole.

The objective is to rescue the poor from all their sufferings, with special emphasis, as we mentioned before, on promotion and empowerment, liberation and access to God.

When he started this plan in 1617, Mr. Vincent probably did not realize its potential. Vatican Council II and its own objectives allow us to understand its meaning more and more.

Using St. Vincent's terms today, we can say that the Charities' mission includes a socio-charitable aspect and a pastoral aspect.

Social Action - Charitable Action

Even if states are in charge of social actions, the Church has not given up its mission in this field. It has even become more and more involved in it even as states increased their involvement.

Therefore the Church is developing a social doctrine: it invites Christians to tackle the evils which disfigure Man, as well as their causes; there is no charity without justice. Charity goes beyond justice, but justice is a requirement.

In accordance with the views of their founder, the Charities' action is at the same time charitable and social. The issue is not only to assist people in need but also to build a world in which all men can live a life that is fully human.

A Pastoral Mission

Pastoral work is the means utilized to spread the Gospel within realities lived by today's men and women.

For St. Vincent there is always a link between spiritual and material assistance; the relief of sufferings of body and soul normally leads to spiritual enlightenment. In the religious context of his time, he goes into details that could surprise us today.

The first effort to spread the Gospel, for us, is called "charity." It is first through a type of relations, a state of sympathy (in the Greek sense of the work "sun patein" to suffer with) that we get to express our faith. Everything goes through this relation first; that is where the Spirit acts as it wishes, beyond all our plans.

St. Vincent had a sharp sense of belonging to the Church, which he loved with all his soul. In his mind, any charitable activity is carried out within a Church context. Our pastoral mission therefore leads us to a double action:

- to express Christian charity in the world
- to participate in building the Church.

More specifically, we are responsible for a Church that embodies service and solidarity with the poor. Today the Church talks about a "new Gospel" which requires the "creative love" St. Vincent talked about.

Vincent de Paul not only assigned a mission to the Charities; he also specified their mode of operation, which still remains today:

- to discover
- to be with
- to promote

- to work in teams
- to act on structures.

The organization of "confraternities of charity" was studied at length by Mr. Vincent. In 1660, not long before his death, he decided to write a body of general rules for the different types of Charities which he helped create.

However, rules were not enough. There was a need for a minimum of relations and harmonization. Vincent de Paul asked Louise de Marillac to visit the Paris confraternities. In addition the priests of the mission founded by St. Vincent in 1625 were also put in charge of this work.

Set up Charity wherever you preach the mission. If it already exists there, visit it, revive it, recruit new members. May your passage give it renewed life (Coste, The Great Saint of The Great Century, t. 1. p. 312).

In 1630, Monsieur Vincent recommends a number of girls from the countryside to Louise de Marillac to help Paris's Charities. This experiment led to the founding of the Company of Daughters of Charity. Without them the Charities would have soon wilted and might have died. Thanks to the work of the priests of the Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity, the Charities spread throughout the world.

This cooperation continues today. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity are involved in founding groups of volunteers in countries which need them, and actively cooperate with the existing associations. It is a fundamental cooperation with a deep motivation, since the Priests of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the AIC volunteers have the same father and belong to the same family.

AIC in the world

Associations, groups or local teams

Grassroots volunteers gather in local associations or groups. These teams which often exist within parishes, suburbs, welfare centers, etc., tend to specialize today in order to react more efficiently to problems and the reality of their living circumstances.

National associations

With the purpose of getting organized to better "act together," teams from a country gather in a national association which most often takes the form of a federation.

The structures of national associations vary according to countries and generally include a General Assembly which elects a national president and a national council.

If structures and organizations vary, the mission of these national associations is well defined. Indeed all national associations:

- are places of common reflection and cooperation,
- inform, form and animate the local associations (grassroots volunteers) thanks to news bulletins and documents, the organization of formation days, regional and national meetings as well as visits to the different groups of the country,
- coordinate the activities in the field, promote exchanges and experiences,
- represent all the teams working with State and Church institutions and collaborate with the various national movements.

The International Association

We have already seen that, at the time of St. Vincent the "Charities" became international and we have just rapidly recalled the history of the links which united them up until the official creation of AIC.

At Vatican Council II, the Church emphasized the importance of the role and the mission of the laity within the Church. The Association then understood it was time to revise its structures and its work. An important survey enabled it to define the situation of the "Charities" in the world and to undertake the task of updating.

When the extraordinary international meeting was held in Rome, Italy, in 1971, the association was baptized "International Association of Charity." This new name included the word "Charity" indicating the desire for renewal and fidelity to the spirit of its Founder.

At this extraordinary meeting, the delegates of the national associations elected an International Executive Board, and an International President and adopted action guidelines and common programs.

AIC chose Brussels, Belgium, for its international headquarters and a Basic Document was published. It organized international seminars (Assemblies of Delegates) and regional meetings (mainly in Latin America and Europe).

The AIC headquarters in Brussels is the center of the international association. Up to this date, the International Presidents have been Belgian, French, Italian and at the present time Mexican. The headquarters remains in Brussels, Belgium.

In 1976, the AIC Assembly of Delegates was held in Mexico; the theme was "From assistance to participation" and the objective was the promotion of individuals, with special attention to women who are the first victims of poverty.

In 1990, the Assembly of Delegates was held in Assisi, Italy; at this meeting AIC adopted operational guidelines in matters of formation, communication, solidarity and self-achievement. These guidelines are common to all the national associations.

In 1994, the most recent Assembly of Delegates was held in Antigua, Guatemala; the guidelines were clearly defined and developed, going from solidarity to the culture of solidarity, from self-achievement to the culture of self-achievement, emphasizing action on the structures.

The next Assembly of Delegates will take place in November 1998 in Santiago de Querétaro, Mexico.

Structure of AIC

The International Association is based on two essential structures: the Assembly of Delegates and the Executive Board.

The Assembly of Delegates is composed of the member associations.

The Executive Board is composed of the members of the different regions of AIC and is invested with power of decision and management and executes the decisions taken by the Assembly of Delegates. It meets once a year.

The Holy See appoints an international spiritual advisor on the advice and approval of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. The Spiritual Advisor and a Daughter of Charity representing the Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity attend the meetings of the Executive Board and have a consultative vote. The Executive Board is assisted by the Permanent Committee which is composed of the

International President, Vice-Presidents and those responsible for AIC Services. This Committee meets twice a year.

The International Secretariat is directed by the Secretary General, it is in charge of administration, management and the animation of the Executive Board; it is the center of AIC communication. Some AIC Services are also located in the secretariat.

AIC Services are directed by the Executive Board which ensures creation of these Services and appoints those responsible for them. The Services are in charge of important work sectors. Today there are seven AIC Services: Bulletin, Study and Research, Finance, Formation, Projects, Public Relations and Representations.

The International Bulletin is published in the three official languages of AIC (Spanish, French and English). It is also published in German, Portuguese and Italian thanks to the work and the collaboration of the Associations in Germany, Brazil and Italy.

The AIC Regions. To facilitate the animation and the formation of the volunteers, the national associations are grouped by regions and each one of them has a regional animator. These regions are: Africa/Madagascar, Latin America, Asia, Europe/Middle East and the United States.

AIC in the World

AIC is recognized in the world as an INGO (International Non-Governmental Organization), and an ICO (International Catholic Organization).

As such, AIC is invited to assist and participate in the preparation of important international conferences and meetings at which it represents its member associations and transmits its information and experience. During the past few years AIC has participated in preparatory encounters for the Meeting of the World Summit for Social Development, the World Conferences for Adult Education and Habitat II in collaboration with other INGO, and speaking at the World Conference on Women, etc.

As an INGO, AIC has consultative status with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and contributes to activities in different fields such as literacy, adult education, the Decade of Culture, the Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, etc. Through AIC, UNESCO brings its support to field projects and projects in favor of member associations and mentioned in its publications.

To ensure its presence at the international level, AIC counts on many specially trained and informed volunteers who are permanent representatives with the various international bodies whose headquarters are in Paris (France), Vienna (Austria), New York (USA), Strasbourg (France) and Rome (Italy).

As an ICO, AIC is recognized by the Holy See. It is also a member of the Conference of ICO and actively participates in the work groups of this Conference.

AIC is also a member of various Pontifical Councils and maintains close relations with Cor Unum, the Council for the Laity and the Council for the Family.

Mission of the International Association

AIC is the guarantor of the fidelity of its members to the common project defined by St. Vincent de Paul on December 8, 1917. This project is being updated constantly so that it clearly expresses the spirit of St. Vincent within today's context.

Policy of updating the Mission of the Charities and Expansion

This is a question of putting St. Vincent's fundamental project into concrete form and to spread the "Charities" to all the countries and regions of the world. At the present time, with the collaboration of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, there is hope for new national associations. Groups are being formed in Africa, Asia, Latin America. The support given by St. Vincent's other foundations is a sign of a future filled with hope.

Policy of Representation

This is a question of developing the vitality of the national associations and their capacity to animate their teams or local associations and help them to set up projects and innovate.

Formation Policy

This means helping national Presidents in their policies of formation of their volunteers: this task is becoming increasingly important in an environment concerned with more efficiency. Apart from the support given concrete situations, upon the request of the National president, AIC also organizes seminars and formation courses; it also publishes many documents and is ready to help the associations and the AIC Formation Service.

Coordination Policy

This means promoting the creation of an international network by organizing mini transnational seminars and joint projects.

At the end of this rapid presentation, we would like to quote St. Peter addressing the Christian Communities: "Be aware of the hope that lies in you." In creating the Charities, St. Vincent made these words his own. What could this mean but "building living stones" in a new world?

Our objective: act together for more justice and more solidarity, becoming artisans of a dynamic of charity.

"The service of the poor should always be preferred to everything else" (IX, 216).

N.B. For further information, please contact
AIC International Secretariat
rue Joseph Brand 118
1030 Brussels
Belgium

Tel.: (32.2) 245.89.33
Fax: (32.2) 245.75.65
E-mail: AIC@euro.net.be