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Patricia Palacios de Nava

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The Actions of the International Association of Charity Collaboration with the Other Branches Of the Vincentian Family

*by Patricia Palacios de Nava
International President AIC*

As members of the AIC, it is a great pleasure to be here, at the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. We are grateful to Fr. Robert P. Maloney for having invited us, but above all, for the way in which he has animated all Vincentians, to seek out common paths so that together we can fulfill our mission, as it was envisioned by St. Vincent de Paul, who founded us, with collaboration in mind.

On this occasion we have been asked to present the works of the International Association of Charity and our collaboration with the other branches of the Vincentian Family. This is a broad theme whose lines of action are so diverse and numerous, as the poor we encounter on our way, which unfortunately increase day by day. In no way do I want to fall in the trap of enumerating our actions and projects which may seem similar to works of other groups of assistance and social promotion. It seems to me to be more interesting to point out some of the characteristics of these actions, and share with you the philosophy that motivates us, what our attitude is confronting poverty, a reality that multiplies the poor in our midst, and how we want to draw closer to them as friends.

We are conscious that there are groups of the AIC, with a great resistance to change, and without leaving aside their desire to serve, prefer to maintain the old forms, the old systems of unjustified assistance, that are not forward-looking, often due to: boredom, a lack of analysis, and fear of a commitment. These groups of charities continue to exist, each time smaller in number, because they have not bettered the life of the poor, and on occasions have helped to perpetuate the marginalization of the people that they encounter. To improve this situation we have been committed to actualizing the mission of the "Charities."

On this occasion, I will speak about our ideals, the goals that we desire, and what we can achieve. I will speak of what we will accomplish by means of our lines of action, and what we have learned through the experience of many volunteers in the world, now committed with enthusiasm and with a passion for social transformation. I will mention our convictions that have become criteria in our analysis. We want our criteria to be present in all our actions so that we can choose projects that will directly transform the lives of the destitute. These elements were present in the 17th Century, in the inventiveness and strength of St. Vincent de Paul, who achieved what was always valid and real. St. Vincent did his part and it is up to us to attentively read the signs of the times, so that we will discover their true meaning.

It is necessary to point out that we must always keep in mind that the evangelization of the poor is the central element of our action.

We could in no way be faithful to the charism of our founder if all are actions and projects were not oriented toward the evangelization of the poor. St. Vincent recommended among the principal virtues "zeal for souls." He recommended announcing Christ everywhere, by means of the word but also by deeds, by affective love but also effective. We, members of AIC, commit ourselves to evangelize the poor and to be evangelized by them. We must commit ourselves to make the gospel alive and to give witness to Christ's love for the most deprived.

It is only in this way that our faith can transform itself into a sign and make the gospel concrete. The evangelization of the poor is at the center of each of our actions.

After this essential affirmation and taking into account the criteria and convictions that have given life to our programs, we will make reference to two fundamental aspects: watching the signs of the times and being attentive to the person of the poor. These are the starting points which must orient all our actions.

I. Conditions, a priori, that should be present in all our actions.

1. Attention to the "signs of the times"

Situating ourselves in the time and reality that we live globally in this moment, we are faced with a serious preoccupation about the future of the poor. The neo-liberal project that has extended to the most diverse places and cultures does not take into account the poor and the homeless. The rejected of the planet are considered unproductive, "unexploitable," and for that reason useless.

When we attentively analyze neo-liberalism we become convinced of the validity of our actions. The poor are at an enormous disadvantage because of the politics of the State, which intervenes, limits, and takes away responsibility for the minimum goods that should be enjoyed by all citizens, from the fact of being a person. The elimination of programs which created opportunities for all obliges us to evaluate every one of our actions. We will never face an actual situation without having to reevaluate our former way of responding, which we have used for a long time.

This calls us to:

1. Insist on the need for periodic evaluations.
2. Seek out a formation that will personally transform "volunteers," so that they have a vision less simplistic of historical events, and that they will be committed to the poorest of the poor and to social transformation.

3. Promote the poor so that they are conscious of their own dignity, rights, their own capacities, and the importance of self-determination.
4. Establish a dialogue with civil leaders, institutions, and ecclesiastical bodies, in order to influence decisions especially in public policies which effect the excluded.
5. Use and exercise pressure in the mass media.

2. Attention to the person of the poor

The preferential option for the poor implies a commitment to justice and peace. To opt for these values is not a romantic ideal, nor something intangible. To be committed to these values means to take risks in order to obtain them. It means understanding one's needs, expectations, and desires, expressed or not, so that starting from a serious analysis of reality and one's surroundings, the community can choose without fear and with a creative spirit, methods and lines of action that respond to our time and our society. The reemergence of the person's social conscience is one of the signs of hope facing an uncertain future. As volunteers we have taken advantage of this awakening and we support efforts at organizing that have grown out of marginalized groups.

This calls us to:

6. Revise our way of approaching the poorest of the poor, promoting better understanding, solidarity and friendship.
7. Evaluate our actions and projects so that the immediate economic resources do not interrupt the formation process of individuals and communities in their own process of growth and self-determination.
8. Promote respect for cultural identity of the persons with whom we work.
9. Change our concepts of poverty and demonstrate that extreme poverty and exclusion are violations of the most fundamental human rights, and cannot be considered as something casual nor natural, the product of hopelessness.
10. To be conscious that the poor and poverty have changed and as a consequence call for participation and respect for native leaders and the emergence of the community as the subject of its own history.

The new elements included or that we should include in our actions, so that they can be truly transforming are:

11. The promotion and defense of human rights
12. Actions of denouncing and placing pressure on decision-makers
13. Actions for cultural transformation
14. The creation of networks to fight against poverty
15. Actions using the mass media
16. Participation in international organizations.

In speaking about these new elements, I will refer to one example which can be used as a model to explain the way the AIC proceeds in respect to each one of the actions that will help us to obtain the change of social attitude, which is our goal.

The promotion and defense of human rights are the actions that we have tried to include in the different projects, with the conviction that it is not enough to give alternative solutions to the violations against these rights, but it is also necessary to be committed to their defense.

- * One example of a traditional action is caring for the elderly in an official institution or home, where the volunteers are limited to obtain funds and to visiting the elderly. In the AIC we do not want to be satisfied only with the indispensable. One of the collateral actions that we accomplished was to promote the rights of the elderly by means of pressure on those responsible for the administration of the home, in order that there could be better treatment of the elderly and their families, so that, treated with care and respect, the conditions of hygiene, nourishment, medical treatments and training for the workers improved.

The actions of denouncing and pressure constitute a political dimension of our mission. This is based in our obligation to be prophets. We are committed to announce and denounce and to point out all that works against the dignity of men and women.

- * Many times we, members of AIC, detect unjust situations against which we must act. In the case, for example, of abused women, it is not only to be compassionate about their misfortune, but also to make them aware of the injustice of the situation. We must motivate them so that they will denounce those responsible to the competent authorities in order to prevent the repetition of the deed. Let us take the example of an AIC center which specializes not only in attention to these women's needs, but also in setting up a real educational campaign for the women themselves and the various marginalized communities in order to combat sexual abuse and try to bring the problem to

the Parliament so as to amend the law. There are many other cases of this type in which we can and must intervene to arrive at greater justice.

The actions for cultural transformation never mean a lack of respect for people's customs nor intrusion into their way of life. To the contrary, actions must be combined with a desire for progress, justice, solidarity, and with the respect for the cultural values of each social group. The Volunteers of AIC commit ourselves, along with other social actors, to a cultural action that creates a new model of values, that helps the society live out the principles of solidarity and promotes the common good, in order to respond to the needs of each one by welcoming the challenges of relationships between peoples, the authenticity of values, and the respect of each one's dignity.

* To involve other people in the care of the poor is very Vincentian. So we formed groups of the AIC in the same places where we work. In the Home for the Elderly we installed a group of AIC volunteers, including senior members of the Home, in order to help them with their greatest needs.

We can cite as an example the case of a European association which, aware that there was an important lacuna in the law on immigrants, brought this problem to the level of the volunteers, to which the association belonged from the beginning. The volunteers studied the alternative propositions and succeeded in having the law amended to provide better conditions in the life of the immigrants.

The Volunteers are committed to forming a network to fight against poverty. It is clear that a worldwide network in solidarity with the poor can and should exercise common projects, in accordance with specific needs and the goals of organizations. Actions of political pressure question the political decisions of our day and those responsible. The principle network, which has existed for more than 300 years, is the Vincentian Family and our commitment in the present moment to grow and influence on behalf of the poor is being realized every day with greater force.

* The volunteers of AIC are not limited to work with the elderly of the home, but to create a network among all the local groups that work with the elderly. We divide up tasks and share responsibilities, establishing contacts with other organizations so that each one is responsible for different areas: the homebound, seniors who are active, the physically sick, those with diminished mental capacities, those who cannot help themselves, etc. We would hope, for example, that a contract could exist between different institutions so that seniors could choose between services of one place or the other, as their needs arise.

In the struggle against poverty, the mass media can be our bitter enemy or invaluable ally. The Volunteers of AIC that we have prepared to work in the media can use their expertise to teach others about situations of poverty and injustice, as did St. Vincent de Paul in his own day, with the thousands of letters that he wrote, or

through the "*friendships*" that he enjoyed. Moreover, we are called to confront the media when their reporting has moved away from the truth.

In face of the problem of the elderly, abused women, or the multiple forms of violations against human rights, certain AIC groups have made reports for magazines and television, denouncing the injustices detected. In the case of abused women, for example, the volunteers carried out a media campaign using radio and television spots, reports, interviews, and call-in programs to sensitize society and prevent sexual abuse. Another example is the campaigns and cooperation in the struggle for the insertion of the elderly into the social life of a specific community.

Our presence in international organizations, through representatives of AIC that are trained for this work, is one of the greatest possibilities and strong points of AIC for social action. In these organizations we are obliged to participate in the name of the poor and be committed to their defense. In this work we take positions as those who know the poor as friends and are their defenders, and we act in the name of those suffering, offering a commitment of announcing and denouncing, maturely and vigilantly, to achieve goals of justice. That is to say, we assume a prophetic role, working in this place to transform society.

For example, in connection with the housing problem, on the occasion of the program "Habitat II" of UNESCO, which was held in Istanbul in order that the desires and concerns of the poor with regard to housing might be brought to the attention of this organization, we collected, with the collaboration of the local volunteers in different countries of the world, more than 1500 testimonies from the poor themselves. Their replies were handed over at the conference itself which studied them very attentively. These contributions from the poorest, classified by the AIC representatives, were a determining factor in bringing to light the real situation and in developing the programs which came out of this meeting.

In summary, we can say that our manner of working, our works in the concrete, and the principles which animate us, are based on the reflections that come from our different AIC volunteers. These dedicated people give validity to our Association and they constitute our greatest resource. Their direct contact with the poor, their friendships in diverse contexts, are key elements for transforming our vision of the world and of the human person.

17. In some developed countries, there are volunteers fully inserted in modern society, and they assume models of social advancement and use methodologies of work according to the needs of the times in which we live. These volunteers work in direct relation with civil authorities and other institutions and they employ specific models in the struggle against poverty. Using modern technology and the mass media, these groups are up to date and effective.
18. There are other volunteers whose fundamental characteristic and whose primary means of exerting influence is through participation in networks and

platforms of social action in which, in many cases, they have played a pioneer's role, setting the goals for eliminating various causes of poverty and creating valid models to be used both nationally and internationally.

19. Others, fully inserted in the life of the communities, represent a new way of being volunteers. Committed to their own communities they are involved in a very interesting process of self-determination and promotion. These types of groups, integrated by volunteers that suffer poverty in their own daily lived experiences, are everyday more common in different countries, above all in the third world.
20. Many volunteers, also poor, are fully connected to the processes of their communities and the natural events that occur. They are volunteers who work the land and ensure by their own hands the support of their spouses and children. These volunteers harvest the lands of rice, tapioca and peanut plants, and many other products, in order to meet their basic needs. They meet their expenses as well as help others poorer than they, in order to cover quotas of production needed to sustain the associations in which they participate, whose work is indispensable on the local scene and also nationally and internationally. These worker volunteers labor in many farms and in many ways, starting early each morning, in order to raise funds for organizations serving the common good.
21. Finally, in order to give a clear idea about the different types of volunteers in the AIC, I would like to quote the words of our regional animator for Africa and Madagascar: *"In the 10 years of life of the Association, the Holy Spirit has been present to the group of Madagascar... it is the Spirit that has flown to our aide after every fall, after every apparent setback,... always there to animate us in advance when everything inside of us wanted to standstill because of doubts and discouragement. It is the Holy Spirit that whispered that we should smile and remain smiling when all our insides cried out in tears and desperation. The Spirit said "mission" while in us there existed the word "resign." During these 10 years we have not ceased to be: "creative unto infinity" changing ourselves into harvesters of rice, raisers of fertile chickens, promoters of new ideas, workers of large or small projects, diplomats before the powerful civil authorities, teachers of the poor, and many other roles which we never had thought of doing 10 years ago when we started the AIC in Madagascar, with the support of the Daughters of Charity."*

The above examples have reaffirmed in us the conviction that one isolated event cannot produce a change in the quality of life for the poor, nor contribute to social transformation. For this reason then we, the volunteers of the AIC, use our talents and resources to rethink our actions, complementing the work already being done with other services and actions, so that in the end a transforming effect is achieved.

Obviously, all of this means a greater commitment on the part of AIC to offer needed services on an international level. Furthermore, this clearly implies an explicit commitment on the part of the volunteers and their leaders to provide guidance and leadership for the Vincentian groups.

II. Collaboration with the other branches of the Vincentian Family

1. Present collaboration

Up to the present moment the interaction of the AIC has been with the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. However, volunteers are conscious of the need to widen the network so that other groups of the Vincentian Family may participate. This collaboration has been envisioned and supported by Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M. The four international meetings that he has convoked have opened new roads of collaboration in various countries of the world. Moreover, we are moved by the conviction that religious communities "*ought to share with the laity the charism of their own community*" and that "*the diverse members of the Church can and ought to unite their strengths... with the goal of participating more effectively in the Church's mission.*" (1)

With this firm conviction, the AIC has sought to widen bonds of existing collaboration, by means of many types of initiatives:

22. Invitations to seminaries and regional, national, and international assemblies.
23. Responses to the invitations of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity.
24. Mailing the International AIC Bulletin to interested persons.
25. Visiting Double Family and AIC leaders in their different countries.
26. Motivating seminarians and novices to become involved on our works.
27. Participation in common projects and initiatives of social promotion, evangelization and formation.
28. Working as a team while supporting local actions.
29. Economic support for a particular group or community.
30. Prayer and reflection in common.

2. Perspectives for the near future

It is important that we ask: "What is the vision of the Vincentian Family towards the future?" Before setting any goals, it is necessary to consider the opportunities, that exist: "Where are there chances for success in meeting the needs of the poor?" Moreover, it is necessary to consider the risks, that is, "What are the obstacles that can effect the objectives that we want to achieve?"

2.1 The Opportunities

This is a privileged moment for collaboration because this idea of working together has been planted and grown for many years. The following is a series of opportunities or factors that have positively influenced our goal of collaboration:

31. The interest of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, along with international leaders of the diverse branches of the Vincentian Family, who actively promote collaboration.
32. Many national leaders and organizations share our goal of collaboration in favor of the poor.
33. Our courses of formation are pilot projects which serve as models and stimulate interest.
34. The initiatives of knowing one another more personally, as brothers and sisters of the branches of the wider Vincentian Family.
35. The sustained interest and dedication of many Vincentians and Daughters to form lay Vincentian groups and the emergence of new initiatives among the poor with new social leaders such as native peoples and *Campesinos*, to promote their own communities.

2.2 Difficulties and Risks

Clearly, our experience teaches us that new initiatives bring about new risks and difficulties which, when faced with determination in a spirit of humility and service, help us to grow. Some examples of the risks are:

36. The fear of some groups that they will loose their liberty and autonomy, and find themselves in a submissive and dependent situation.
37. The immaturity of some lay people who do not desire collaboration and would prefer to depend on authority.

38. The lack of confidence of some priests and sisters in the talents and potentials of the laity.
39. The inadequate and obsolete goals and methods of some groups so that priests, sisters, and brothers, are not interested in collaborating with them.
40. Not knowing one another's charism and mission in each of the branches of the Vincentian Family and little interest in forming relationships.
41. The failure of previous initiatives of collaboration because of poor planning. At times we have rushed ahead to obtain goals without following an appropriate process.
42. The attachment of certain groups to continue using methods of assistance which are outmoded in social action and which do not favor the self-promotion of the deprived.
43. The lack of authentic Vincentian formation that allows people to grow in the spirit of our Founder.

3. A reflection on the agenda of our near future. The goals and challenges of the Third Millennium

As our future approaches, Pope John Paul II, invites us to participate in the International Year of Charity, the Jubilee Year 2000 which motivates us with urgency to seek out new forms of collaboration. The poverty that increases day by day and the difficulties we encounter and fight against make us all the more conscious of our need to form bonds of support, which help us work together and march forward confidently in new ways of service.

We can continue, as we have in these last years, to build friendships through praying, planning, and celebrating together. However, we should not be carried away by the initial enthusiasm into forgetting that all changes require sacrifices, and these sacrifices imply suffering and pain. To renounce our own interests in favor of looking for the common good is often so painful. The difficulties that come up in our daily work, in projects assumed in common, begun with much enthusiasm, encounter difficulties and often end in failure. We should not be deceived. For those convinced of the validity of our initiatives, the challenges of our work motivate us to sacrifice more.

In our collaboration, each branch of our Vincentian Family ought to be clear in what gifts he/she specifically contributes to the network and its members. We consider that the AIC by its lay character invites and challenges all to participate and have many organizations involved to eradicate poverty and its causes. We are invited because of our mission to be present in the places of political decisions where public

policies are determined and effect so deeply the lives of the marginalized. We also support among other things, specific documents on Vincentian Lay Formation.

With the goal of bettering our interactions, it is necessary to improve communication between us by opening specific channels and opening up new networks, so that "*we can live with a more profound knowledge, mutually helping each other to grow.*" (2)

Those responsible for the formation of AIC members have elaborated a document for leaders, with the invaluable help of Fr. Lauro Palú, who brought together various important texts written by members of the Congregation of the Mission. Hopefully this will be an instrument that will enable us to work more united and with a greater understanding of the formation process.

Our formation should always be evolving, so that it responds to the demands of our time and the creativity of our commitments. It must be integral, that is, corresponding to all aspects of the candidate's life, adequate to the signs of the times in different places and types of groups. Our formation consists in spiritual, social, and technical elements which require a specific and continuing deepening of our charism and our mission, with a clear understanding of our different works. The leaders of our lay groups, be they priests, brothers, sisters, or trained volunteers, should be committed to a constantly evolving formation process which responds to the needs of our times and the newness of our commitments. Only a solid Vincentian formation will permit our volunteers to be capable of serving our brothers and sisters and to participate effectively in this great worldwide network fighting against poverty.

The priests, brothers, sisters, and laity should be well prepared for their work which is a response to a true calling. At times when those responsible for formation do not feel that their work is very important, but rather view it as something that takes them away from apostolic works of charity, they often cannot inspire others nor meet expectations, and therefore do not always form the best servants of the poor.

4. In conclusion

Finally, I would like to point out that the intensifying of our relations between the branches of the Vincentian Family is one of the grand priorities of the AIC and mine personally. This initiative of collaboration I profoundly believe in because I am convinced of the wonders that we will achieve by being united, as a huge army fighting against poverty and its causes, and defending the rights of the poorest of the poor.

We pray that we will be given a liberating leadership. This leadership is defined by Fr. Alvaro Quevedo, and Fr. Raphael Ortega, as a leadership that: "*exalts in community values, solidarity, collaboration, creativity, and initiative. It is a leadership always open to dialogue, participation, reflection and co-responsibility. This leadership favors being conscious of one's own dignity, value as a person, and as*

a clear objective, the transformation of reality. This liberating leadership directs our steps to a social commitment and reminds us of our option for the poor." We pray moreover, for a greater awareness of our calling and identity, so often diluted by our daily work and worries.

The support and contacts we have had with you are great learning opportunities and have moved us to a generous sacrifice in favor of the poor. Through it all we have been enriched, we have grown and loved the poor, often following your example, a true donation and emptying of self. For these reasons and for what you represent, we have been privileged to make sacrifices, and we ask that we will be allowed to walk beside you, ever knowing you better. Your work, your faithfulness, help us to discern and open ourselves up to the prophetic history that announces new times and a fullness of life.

(Translated by Michael Mazurchuk, C.M.)

(1) *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal exhortation of John Paul II, 25 March 1996.

(2) Fr. Benjamín Romo, C.M. "Le caminar del Laicado vicentino en Mexico."