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The International Association of Charity

*by Patricia Palacios de Nava
International President AIC*

You are all acquainted with the history of the AIC and the circumstances of its foundation. Vincent de Paul possessed great intuition when, by a global strategy, he created a network of Vincentians to serve the poor. So we need not dwell on this point, but just limit ourselves to presenting a few characteristics which are essential to our objectives today.

By analysing our charism, our identity and our mission, with a vision of a just, stable and pleasant future we hope to achieve, arise what we consider to be the policies of our association. These policies could be classified a pedagogy, but are actually something deeper, with solid spiritual roots.

1. Bringing up to date the mission of the Charities

Since its inception, the AIC has based its policies on two constant elements: first, a commitment of fidelity to our mission and the project of our founder; and, second, commitment to ongoing renewal in order to respond to the exigencies of the times.

As we have evolved, we have progressed from assistance to development and to auto-development, conscious that our role in this process is not to make decisions for the poor in those affairs that concern their own lives, but to stimulate and support their search for autonomy, until they become active subjects of their human and social development.

In committing ourselves to the auto-development of the poor, we, the AIC volunteers, have found valuable allies among the women in the communities, who have, in general, shown themselves to be sensitive to family and social questions. Solidarity between volunteers and subjects is evident in active participation in community projects. Both groups plan and execute in agreement and, furthermore, many of the women have become AIC volunteers themselves, committed to the auto-development of their communities.

2. Policy of cultural transformation

During the past few years, we have seriously attempted to effect a change of mentality which should lead to a cultural transformation by living our charism and the Gospel.

A cultural transformation requires radical changes of mentality in order to overcome fears, selfishness and disdain for the weak and the different. It calls for a new mind-set, more open and more respectful of others, greater solidarity, capable of recognising and defending the rights of every person to be the author and guide of his/her own life. This goal can be achieved through sensitising society, by diffusion of new ideas through word and documents, by intelligent and ethical use of the mass media, by pressure brought to bear on existing structures and, especially, by a coherent, efficacious testimony of life.

For a Christian, the best and most efficacious form of changing a culture is the proclamation and witness of the spirit of the Gospel. To evangelise a culture is to bring about the internal growth of the values announced in the Gospel; that is, of justice, solidarity, love and respect and, thus, permeate the mentality of a society.

3. Policy of extending and creating new AIC groups; Missionary pedagogy

To achieve this extension, intimately related to zeal, one of the five Vincentian virtues, we have relied on the invaluable assistance of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, whose support has been a determining factor in our development. Right now, we are desirous, in a special way, of spreading to the countries of Europe and the Orient, and also to certain countries, like Cuba, which have remained outside our evangelising efforts. Thanks to the encouragement and collaboration of the priests and sisters, the AIC has been able to offer a testimony of love by means of lay women who have made a Vincentian commitment.

4. Policy of Liberating Formation

Another undertaking of ours, one which is a constant worry to us, is formation, which must be Vincentian, technical and specific, oriented towards the defence of human rights, that is to say, liberating. This implies liberation from slavery to customs and indifference, seriously analysing reality so as to determine the causes of injustice and acting optimistically to change our mentality and methods, and accepting new concepts with enthusiasm and hope.

Based on the aforesaid, AIC formation aims to create a spirit of discernment in each volunteer so that she may be able to evaluate reality and her own actions in an objective, critical spirit without prejudice. In this method of formation, the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity have a key and, often, transforming role.

5. Policy of Creation of Networks

The AIC is a network of projects against poverty which interact first of all with their network of origin, the great worldwide Vincentian Family. The network has intensified thanks to the interest and the dedication of Fr. Robert Maloney and of those responsible for the different branches and joint plans of action. This network, which is of great interest to us, goes back in its origins to the foresight of St. Vincent de Paul, who established the first foundations to work together harmoniously. In this most recent period, many of the efforts of the AIC, both international and local, have attempted to further this collaboration, considering it to be an important alternative for bettering the quality of life of the excluded and marginalised, and for making God's plan more effective.

6. Policy of Representation

We also form a network of interchange, diffusion and information. One of our objectives has been to bring our works and concerns to the attention of international organisations, so as to use them as sounding-boards and so bring pressure on them to come to the defence of the poor and thus fulfil our role in international affairs. To this end, we now have representatives in several organisations and a consultative voice in UNESCO, the ECOSOC and the European Parliament. AIC volunteer groups, both in their own localities and internationally, exert pressure on people responsible for making political decisions. Furthermore, the AIC takes steps to stimulate the conscience-raising of its members, that they may realise the importance of taking part in public life and in the struggle against the causes of poverty. We also disseminate information on opportunities to participate in big international events, like the preparations for the World Summit in Copenhagen, the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty and the projects of UNESCO.

7. Policy of Ecclesial Insertion

Finally, we must mention the AIC's efforts in relation to the Church's guidelines, which have indicated for us, since the seventeenth century, the standards which should orient our activities. We are inserted in the 1999 preparatory document; "International Year of Charity and the Coming Third Millennium." We have been working on this for several years and are making it a principal axis for our coming Assembly of Delegates. The title of this Assembly, taking place in November, is:

**"AIC 1998: Confronting the Third Millennium
Challenge _ Commitment _ Hope"**

The AIC is alive, in constant motion, in a continual process of adaption. Its development goes hand in hand with integral progress, that is to say, with advances relating to its sphere of influence as well as to its projects and plans of

constructive action, always Vincentian and evangelical, adapted to the rapid pace of the times at the dawn of the third millennium.