

AIC INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2017

Round Table – History of AIC – 12/03/2017

Moderator for the Presentations of Former Presidents: Alicia Duhne

Introduction:

Continuing with our program, let me present to you our former presidents who will narrate the history of the AIC. Some of you might not know these individuals, so let me present:

- Patricia Nava (President from 1994-2002)
- Anne Sturm (President from 2002-2005)
- Marina Costa (President from 2005-2009)
- Laurence de la Brosse (President from 2009-2015)

We also have in the Assembly Hall, Marianne Chevalier, who held the position of Secretary- General from 1994-2002 and is presently President of AIC Solidarité... she continues to make a great contribution to the AIC. I would also ask the following former Secretary-Generals and the present Director of the Secretariat to please stand:

- Marta Esser (Secretary General from 1985-1994) who continues to support our Vincentian work, especially in the area of translation and through her contacts with the former members of the Executive Committee.
- Agnès Dandois (Secretary General from 2002-2009) who, week after week, continues to support us through her service as Coordinator of Projects in AIC Solidarité.
- Natalie Monteza (Secretary General from 2009 to 2014) who is unable to be with us.
- Tayde de Callataÿ (Director of the Secretariat since 2014) who has been a great support for me.

In chronological order, we will listen first to the history of the AIC from 1617-1995. Then, each of the former presidents will give a brief summary of the work of the AIC during the time that they held office.

Patricia de Nava:

INTRODUCTION

AIC, one road, one path, one history. Initiatives, realities and dreams, ideals, lines of action, attitudes, people and wishes interlink to give shape to today's AIC. I will talk about the period I have lived through, when I had the privilege of being the president, encouraged by two exceptional women, Claire Delva and Dilde Grandi, who have left an indelible mark, not just on me but on the association as a whole.

When I took on the leadership of the Association in 1994, we had a committed, lively AIC, full of energy, questions and hopes, with lines of action directed towards prioritising solidarity and self-help, arousing huge enthusiasm among AIC Volunteers. These volunteers, aware of the importance of their role in

the world and the power of belonging to a great association, influenced us with their enthusiasm and gave us the strength and drive needed to move forward with a vision of the future.

TRAINING

Continuous training has been a constant theme, to which those of us forming the Presidency, the Executive Board, the International Secretariat and the delegates' team devote much effort. Visits have been increased, always with a training aspect included. Documents, international newsletters, seminars and workshops focus on strengthening the operational lines, public relations, the international reach and **above all** the work, in the form of projects, where we reinforce the importance of the team as well as evaluation, not just quantitative but also qualitative and forward-looking. Worksheets and training booklets on spiritual, Vincentian and technical subjects were produced. The awareness of belonging to AIC was promoted, with participative leadership and training for multiplier agents to be generators of social change, in a prophetic and Vincentian sense.

The lines of action, "**Towards a Culture of Solidarity and Self-Help**", train Volunteers to succeed in developing a new society, where the excluded can be protagonists, a culture in which authentic Christian love, freedom, justice, solidarity and hope are an integral part of the cultural heritage. (Self-help letter, art. 11)

The Cultural Transformation Policy led AIC to step forward **from the local to the global**, undertaking concerted action against poverty of all kinds. It trained and enabled volunteers to be multiplier agents of good news in a world looking for hope, giving ethical, doctrinal and formative guidance, not just as proposals, but also for implementation and monitoring.

COMMUNICATIONS

The Representatives team promoted external communications, bridging the local with the global. Within the Association, the importance of direct contact with the volunteers, who are the foundation of AIC, was emphasised, to strengthen the work of the base groups, their actions, their training and reflection process, their direct contact with those in need, as active subjects, the beginning and end of our actions. The Contact Letters, sent not only to presidents but also to the AIC volunteers across the whole world, appeared, along with the AIC-INFO, the use of e-mail, the first, embryonic webpage and a database was started which could be constantly kept up to date.

The "**Expansion and Creation of New Groups Policy**" was a priority. It placed great importance on the visits, which enabled direct contact for volunteers with the president, members of the Executive Committee and the International Secretariat. 41 countries across four continents were visited, a remarkable task for the four vice-presidents.

In 1971, AIC had 20 associations, 11 of them in emerging countries. At the end of the term of office, we already had 50 associations, 41 in poorer countries, a great blessing and a huge challenge. We were no longer an "**association for the poor**", **we had converted ourselves into an "association of the poor"**. (Marianne's report)

At the initiative of Claire Delva, the Foresight Group began, which subsequently began the **Image Group**, responsible for **Operation Visibility**, created to examine the financial problems of AIC and

collaborate in resolving them, in order to promote the image and position of AIC both within and outside the organisation.

WOMEN AND POVERTY

As regards the topic of Women and Poverty, always a priority for AIC, the prevention and combating of violence against women is at the forefront. Regional seminars with the theme of “**Women, Violence and Prevention**” were held in Europe and Latin America, leading to cascade multiplication. Via national to local associations, the contents gave rise to numerous meetings, seminars and workshops, with publication in newsletters.

A statement of intent was written and signed after the Latin American seminar, and widely distributed, including via the internet.

FIGHT FOR JUSTICE AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

During this period, priority was given to the **condemnation of injustice and action on structures**, emphasising our prophetic mission, our commitment to the other, the desire to transform the world, with deep respect for cultures, so that those living in poverty occupy the place in the world that is right for them as Children of God. We focus on imbuing into the hearts of our volunteers that poverty is not just a casual phenomenon but is the product of unjust political, social and economic situations, and therefore needs to be attacked.

Political actions were promoted, with education for citizenship, civic and transformative commitment. These lines of action drove us to adopt a radical position. We did not restrict ourselves to doing charitable work, not to projects aimed at the development of individuals and communities; we also had to commit ourselves to carrying out transformative actions for establishment of a culture of solidarity, fairness and fraternity, founded on human, ethical, civil and gospel values. We proposed **transforming poverties and transforming society, thus generating a culture of friendship, a cultural charity**. In order to evangelise cultures and inculcate the Gospel, we had to be part of a shared process of **analysis, reflection, dialogue and action**.

RELATIONS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Faithful to the intentions of our founder, who formed us to work in collaboration and to achieve greater impact in the fight against poverty and its causes, we strengthened relations with the Vincentian Family. AIC took an active and positive role from the start in the meetings organised by the then Superior General of the Mission, Fr Robert P. Maloney, C.M. It was represented at international and national meetings of the various branches, especially the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

These relationships, direct and on-line contact with directors and national spiritual advisers, had a positive effect with the formation of new AIC associations and groups, with the training offered by AIC and the Spiritual Advisers’ document being highly valued, later on adopted and adapted by other branches of the Vincentian Family. Over the years, AIC’s Priority Lines of Action were included among the strategies proposed by the Commission for promoting Systemic Change.

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING

The Institutional Strengthening Process began with a questionnaire sent to national presidents, generating a participative process, planned for the whole of AIC. The data produced were included in a report, with very specific data, graphs and statistics. A SWOT analysis was then carried out (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). The **AIC Institutional Document** was produced, based on these results, together with several documents intended to define and publicise the mission, vision and values that inspire AIC's action: Action plan, schedule, flow chart, Executive Committee Procedures Manual, Participatory finance plan.

An important step in the strengthening of the association was the move of the International Secretariat offices from Brussels to Louvaine-La-Neuve, managed by our Secretary General, Marianne Chevalier. This helped to strengthen the association's image and reputation, leading to the Doctorate Honoris Causa, awarded to AIC for its commitment to the poor, women and society, and to the defence of the rights of excluded persons. This change of headquarters began a process of professionalising the association, driven by its insertion into the university environment.

AIC, OUR COMMON HOME

I conclude the review of this stage in the life of AIC, with a message that comes from the bottom of my heart. I wish to speak of AIC as a second "Common Home" for all volunteers. A home where we may echo the words of Pope Francis: LS No. 86 "*...countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other*".

I'd like to reach the heart of each of you present here who live and shape our association, so that together we contribute to make our association a place inspired by the earliest Christian communities, breathing fraternity, love and harmonious relationships. A space where an authentic commitment to peace reigns, where each volunteer feels welcomed and respected, where she can develop as a person, feeling the support and respect of her group, a space with no internal conflict, full of light, harmony and peace. My dream is that our brothers and sisters, seeing the peace that reigns among us, will be influenced themselves and also make their world and their surroundings a place of peace.

Anne Sturm:

Dear friends,

When Patricia came to the end of her mandate, she had given invaluable service to AIC, while we had to start with new Operational Guidelines, to be put into practice worldwide and at all levels of AIC: **Social Co-responsibility, Institutional Development and Empowerment – a challenge for the new Board, which was called to encourage AIC volunteers to turn these words into action.**

1) **Institutional Development:** As Patricia mentioned, the new millennium was a time of important changes: The implementation of new information technology. AIC's Website was reworked and the Bulletin turned from paper to electronic. What first was meant as a means of saving money turned out to be a means of spreading the message faster, more easily and much more widely.

Communication took speed: The Internet came to the grass-roots. At the end of my mandate there was only one Member Association without e-mail. Once again, AIC volunteers demonstrated readiness to learn, to try new things, to be inventive and they were ready to share their knowledge with the poor.

Communication gained a new quality – it became up to date and detailed. AIC was able to listen to the grass-roots volunteers and in fact there was so much they had to share. For now my vision is that all member associations create their own website - it is possible: Let us take initiative here in Châtillon!

One of the results of this new quality of communication was **twinning**, which already existed, but now reached a new level: that of a better organized, mutual and qualified partnership and here again, our Anniversary could provide new ideas.

Visits to member Associations (list on the screen) continued, we promoted teamwork and offered training and sometimes we were troubleshooters. However training was mutual and never in my life have I learned as much as I did meeting volunteers from all continents: The indigenous woman from Vietnam talking about violence in her family: I see her face whenever violence against women is at stake. I will never forget either the deep spirituality I encountered in Mozambique. And I learned: Every single volunteer all over the world is important and contributes to the great work of St. Vincent. And there were new countries (**list**) contributing to the cultural and human wealth of AIC.

A growing Association and closer relations of course required better financing. **Fundraising** became an important issue at all levels. And again AIC pursued its strategy: To search for information, to learn, to have small teams working on the issue, sharing their knowledge within AIC, and at the same time ensuring closer relations with donors and funding institutions and better presentation of what we are, what we do and why.

2) Empowerment: fostering the right and the capacity especially of women to make use of their own resources to instigate personal and social change via capacity building, communication, and access to information.

When we look back at what I said about communication, twinning, visits to member associations and fundraising, it is evident that all of these are very concrete means of contributing to personal empowerment by sharing values and experience, and to the Association by making it better known, greater, more powerful and more efficient. The world moves together and so do we, working as a team, networking and sharing responsibility, work and reflections, allowing in the same way steadiness, reliability and renovation.

3) Social co-responsibility: The consequence of an increasing awareness of mutual interdependency within communities, countries and in the world. Based on empowerment and institutional development, social co-responsibility became a challenge for AIC on all levels: To change the lives of the poor, we decided to speak out against injustice and discrimination: locally through participation in networks because poverty is local, nationally through advocacy and campaigns, raising public awareness e.g. on violence against women, and internationally through the commitment of AIC representatives accredited to the UN, the Council of Europe, the Church and civil society organizations, and through volunteers who for example spoke on the situation of refugees in the **Council of Europe**.

Thanks to the relentless work of Andrée Thomanek, in 2003 **Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC** was granted to AIC, enforcing collaboration with UN Bodies such as the CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) where AIC representatives collaborate actively in committees and commissions, valued for their firsthand testimonies on poverty affecting women. At UNESCO they insisted that informal learning became part of the budget. **(List of Representations on the screen).**

At the 2005 NGO Conference in New York, Cruz Maria de Leon from the Dominican Republic spoke on **“Voices for Peace: Violence against women – a violation of Human Rights and Dignity”** and in 2004 Rose de Lima Ramanankavana from Madagascar spoke on **“Children and the Millennium Development Goals: Eradicating extreme Poverty and Hunger”**. And there was an impact - of course no presentation changes the world – but before Nkiru Aruno from AIC Nigeria gave her workshop at UNESCO on the deplorable situation of widows, this issue had not been on the radars of international bodies. Now it is and it was only some years later that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated *“The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda with its pledge to leave no one behind has a particular resonance for widows, who are among the most marginalized and isolated.”*

The Millennium Development Goals opened a worldwide discussion on what the most important goals for the human community to achieve are and AIC volunteers felt it concerned themselves and had to do with the poverty they had experienced.

The **Social Doctrine of the Church**, presented by Father Bob Maloney in 1999, became one of the pillars of AIC with its most important statement: ***“A just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person”***.

Finally the 2011 UN NGO Conference in Bonn with the active participation of AIC and Rose's presentation on **Civic Engagement and Sustainable Development – the Role of Voluntary action for achieving Sustainability paved the way for what we are discussing today**. AIC representatives were part of the commission drafting the papers at the end of the Conference, presented to the governments in Rio, cornerstones on the way to the Sustainable Development Goals.

And in fact the Sustainable Development Goals do concern us: Women's Rights, Decent Work, Sustainable Cities, Affordable and Clean Energy – all of them **important issues for AIC grass-roots volunteers as the poor are affected most by environmental damage**.

Political action takes time, needs commitment and enthusiasm, as well as **feedback and support from all of AIC worldwide**. We, AIC – and this is our strength and wealth – speak based on the experience of 150 000 grass-roots volunteers, who know about discrimination, poverty and violence from firsthand experience. That is why the international representatives need you and you need the international level to bring up the sufferings of the poor, **and you will be heard**.

Our values date back to 1617, our mission has developed over the centuries, our challenge is to respond to the needs of today, our tools are to be the latest and most efficient, and our vision is the vision of a better tomorrow.

Let me close with the words Pope Francis gives us at the end of his Encyclical: ***God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth,***

and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. Praise be to him!

Marina Costa:

1. ATTEND TO THE WOMEN

Our everyday presence on the ground is one of the pillars of the Vincentian Project and a vital requirement of our service as volunteers. From the beginning of the association, this attentive presence allows us to experience at close hand the feminization of poverty, affecting not only women, but society as a whole.

Day to day contact of AIC volunteers with so many women and the conditions of extreme poverty in which many of them live, lead us to take up a position with regard to poverty that is far from a simply theoretical and intellectual one, but instead is a concrete, participative and constructive position. We are convinced that *women must have the opportunities to develop their own abilities, discover and develop their strengths, in order to ensure progress in society as a whole.*

Since 1975, AIC has been especially committed to supporting women, and since 1997 to combating violence against women.

Between 2005 and 2009, specific training was available for AIC members, so that they could undertake not only to provide palliative care but also to offer transformative responses. At the same time, a number of different actions were implemented, offering both affirmation and challenge. These included:

- Many practical projects for women in trouble, placing particular emphasis on the participation of the recipients,
- Launch of an AIC-wide, shared message on the theme of “Women and poverty”, the purpose of which was **to promote the joint responsibility of society as a whole for women living in poverty**
- **An international campaign against violence** towards women, proposed by AIC International and taken up by many national associations that undertook powerful awareness-raising and pressure group actions.
- **Global events on 25 November**, international Day for Eradication of Violence against Women
- **Creation of a prize** intended to stimulate and give financial support to AIC groups around the world who engage in the fight against violence against women, through innovative projects. This prize bears the name of **Jean and Claire Delva**. (PHOTO)
- An Assembly (2007) to explore this theme in depth, entitled “**Women and poverty in cultural diversity**”. This meeting convinced us that while cultural aspects often cause poverty, they can also be converted into challenges, and act as the starting point for sustainable development.
- In 2009, at the Mexico Assembly, we affirmed that, with the active commitment of everyone, “**We women can change the world**”, in the conviction that every woman, volunteer or beneficiary, has the ability to evolve, and make her own culture evolve.

Many projects born in those years, feeding back to base groups, showed us how the stimulus and formation of AIC comes truly reaches to the grassroots, making them stronger, giving both volunteers and beneficiaries greater motivation, so they feel valued, supported by the international association and have a greater awareness of their dignity and the important part they can play in society.

2. SOCIAL STRATEGIES

At the same Assembly in Mexico in 2009, the importance of being able to implement social strategies was also highlighted.

We are working on the issue of **discrimination against women** and how to deal with it, and we recognise that we often try to respond to a social phenomenon using personal strategies: but to achieve real change we need to broaden our strategies, moving on from individual or single group responses to adopt social strategies that could achieve structural change.

AIC passed on the fruits of this reflection to the base groups, giving them the strength which comes from the support of an international body to apply pressure **at every level, aware that** each team, within its own environment, has the task of being “representative”, and must take action to raise awareness and apply pressure on the authorities and institutions in its own country, thus making the most of the strength of the AIC network.

A third area which saw much development during those years was that of training:

3. TAKING THE LEAD IN OUR OWN TRAINING

Training has always been a feature of AIC’s path since its foundation, leading to deeper reflection on the daily aspects of Vincentian service, suggesting methods, organising seminars and providing information and formation on the topics debated at an international level, in a “**never-ending process**”, as AIC says.

One aspect which I see as important to highlight is that over the years, the need for training began to appear not just as a suggestion and stimulus from AIC to the groups, but as a **powerful requirement coming from the base groups**. Many project reports highlighted the importance for volunteers to be well-trained. On the one hand, AIC’s **Priority Lines of Action** stated that each volunteer can *contribute to creating the conditions favourable to the personal development of people in need, supporting them in constructing their life plan and engaging in awareness-raising and application of pressure.*

While at the same time, **the concrete experience of the groups** showed that providing this integral support is a great responsibility requiring of us that each volunteer has continuing, focused training.

Continuing training is not just about increasing our technical knowledge, or about taking courses or reading many books and documents, it is much more than that: it asks for strength and a personal undertaking to acquire a way of being, a style of living and service consistent with the spirit of Saint Vincent. There is no training without the personal choice, the commitment and the effort made by each one of us. **Every volunteer must take the lead in his or her own training.**

Another area to which AIC devoted much attention was the technical training of base groups in project planning: starting with the initial documents from Marianne Chevalier, and the 2001 paper “Initiation into project working” by Patricia de Nava, times for specific training were provided in all visits and Assemblies.

In 2... **AIC Solidarité** was founded, devoted to on-going training of volunteers in methods of working on projects, and supporting various projects in emerging countries.

Over the years, we moved from case study training booklets to shorter, outline worksheets. Special attention was also given to spiritual worksheets, brought together in cycles: “On the road with Saint Vincent”, and “Change with Saint Vincent”, aiming to provide a practical tool for meetings of base groups. *(These continue to be widely used and some copies are available on the press table.)*

4. SETTING OUT ON THE ROAD TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE (2007)

In 2007, AIC produced the first Training booklet on Systemic Change.

The Systemic Change method involves looking at each situation of poverty from a global perspective, and identifying the links between the various elements of each system, to see how to act or react in order to achieve the objective of positive change.

Systemic change teaches us that everything we have is a resource, and that every relationship between parts could be important to initiate change in a situation.

It does not so much matter what we do, as how we do it. Every project, including urgent ones, needing our immediate attention, can be transformative, depending on how we do it. What matters is not so much the personal point of view, but to look at the system as a whole and ask what I can do to initiate not just personal change but change of the entire system.

The Vincentian Family created a Commission to examine and present this method and enable its application in specific actions. Patricia de Nava represented AIC on this Commission, which is still in existence and work, and Rose de Lima represents AIC there.

Both AIC and the Vincentian Family Commission have made a major commitment to this method, but we are aware that many AIC groups continue to have problems applying Systemic Change to their own work and situation. There remains, therefore, the challenge of developing this technique still further, given the added value the Systemic Change method can give to our actions and projects.

All these topics (advances) of which we are speaking challenge us greatly, but as members of AIC, we know that challenge is a major part of our volunteering activity: it helps us stay committed, active and fresh, strengthening our will and giving us new enthusiasm every day.

Laurence de la Brosse:

Let's start with a brief recollection. At the start of her presentation, Patty showed you a photo of the international assembly held in Guatemala in 1994; that's where I found AIC; there were eight of us team members in the French delegation.

We came home inspired by AIC, admiring the commitment and energy of the volunteers, the depths of reflection and the thorough training: in short, we realised the strength of the AIC to which we belonged.

This first experience has strengthened in me over the years, and I am going to expand here on 3 of AIC's strong points:

- *Continuous reflection to ensure our actions are truly transformative.*
- *A spiritual path in the Church, for mission.*
- *The power of a network in space and time.*

Continuous reflection to ensure our actions are truly transformative:

AIC offers us the objective of being a transformative Christian force in society.

And we do this by "taking action together against poverty in all its forms".

Taking action against poverty means working locally with people in need, to put in place actions to transform their lives – actions which bring real and sustainable change in their lives.

And at the same time, it means being involved in political programmes, in public life or civil society, and collaborating with the other networks around the world.

Patty, Anne and Marina have shown us the path AIC has followed since 1994 to help volunteers accompany people in need in a respectful, participatory way:

AIC's lines of action in turn have emphasised participation, self-help, co-responsibility, empowerment (allowing each person to develop their own potential) and systemic change.

And as Marina reminded us, AIC, attentive to the signs of the times, has been very aware of the feminisation of poverty.

This new challenge has particularly affected our mainly female association.

When over 70% of the poorest people are women, how can we restore them to their rightful place in society?

In 2009, the international assembly in Mexico highlighted one of the causes of poverty for women: the **discrimination** from which they suffer.

This discrimination begins very early: from primary school age, boys actually have more chance of going to school than do girls.

So it is entirely natural that since the AIC 2011 assembly, we have chosen to examine in more depth the subject of Education as a means of preventing poverty for women.

On the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March 2013, Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, observed:

"The more education women receive, and the more their rights are recognised, the less likely it is their children will be hungry".

The Lines of Action for 2011, 2013 and 2015 concentrated on **Education as a means of preventing poverty for women.**

AIC's objective is to teach women how to develop themselves, to become aware of their own potential, making themselves better understood, building fair and equal relationships, gaining appointment to positions of responsibility more often within local, regional and national bodies.

In short, to help women to be aware that with THEIR HELP, the world can become a fairer place.

On 3 and 4 November last year, our president, Alicia, attended the International Forum of official partner NGOs of UNESCO in Queretaro, Mexico.

The chosen theme was: "from promotion to building Peace with NGOs"; education emerged as a powerful means for building peace and for development.

Alicia introduced 4 AIC projects in Latin America. Creative activities intended for children, but with the participation of parents, especially mothers, in city districts with high levels of violence in society. The work is carried out together with public authorities and other local organisations, and the children learn to dream about a world very different from the one where they live.

These 4 projects can be seen on the AIC website.

AIC offers a personal SPIRITUAL PATH for mission

Geneviève Grangy, former international president, recently said to me *"AIC offers a way of finding a personal balance between one's desire to engage in life as a citizen (doing something to make the world a fairer place) and one's spiritual life."*

As AIC volunteers, with our various languages and cultures, we are united in a common project:

Paying attention to those most in need, as Saint Vincent de Paul did, in faith in Jesus Christ, servant of the poor.

The 1st encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI is called Deus Caritas Est [God is Love] (last year was the 10th anniversary of its publication). In paragraph 31, the Pope Emeritus wrote:

"When caring for people who suffer, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient.

Those who work for the Church's charitable organizations... need a "formation of the heart": they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others."

AIC understands the need for this formation of the heart. It has often appeared in the lines of action: in 2013 we chose: "The need to strengthen spiritual, ethical and Vincentian training".

Spiritual direction for AIC groups is often provided by Daughters of Charity or Vincentian Fathers. It is essential to ensure that AIC groups retain the Vincentian character of our mission; and we are very grateful to all those sisters and priests who walk the path with us (it is likely that in future we will be inspired to train lay Vincentians in spiritual direction).

The preparation for the 400th anniversary has been a great opportunity, one might even call it a grace, for AIC.

There have been 3 stages:

- 2013 and 2014, re-acquaintance with the project of St Vincent, to interiorise it. Fr Eli Chavez, our international chaplain at the time, invited us to be subjugated, “amazed” by Saint Vincent.
- 2015 and 2016: proclaim what gives us life, the AIC charter was redefined
- 2017: Celebrating together with the friends of St Vincent,

And 2017 is not a final goal, we are now looking ahead to 2117, towards 500 years in our common home: (Throughout AIC’s history, we have seen how the thinking of the Church nourishes AIC’s own reflection).

It is true that AIC offers us a spiritual path, but the development of our spiritual life is focused on our mission: providing spiritual and practical support for people in need.

It has always been a challenge to provide spiritual support: now more than ever, the question remains, how do we provide spiritual support?

We could say, like Saint Pope John Paul II: how can we be “sparks” for our contemporaries searching for meaning?

In the midst of global upheaval, AIC can disseminate the values we have always held:

Simplicity, humility and charity; each one is always worth revisiting, to be understood thoroughly and lived out.

These values must be the life of our groups; people in need are very sensitive to the atmosphere around them, the least disagreement in a group affects them.

These people who often live in a violent world want to find peace and serenity with us.

In our times, Vincentian values have become a real necessity: let us dare to live them and proclaim them.

AIC: THE STRENGTH OF A NETWORK in space and time:

150,000 volunteers around the world, united by the same project of St Vincent for 400 years: what a force!

AIC International is there to coordinate the work, share experiences, link people together, answer questions, give a vision. And this is team work: the president is always in contact with the Secretary General – I have had the opportunity of working with Nathalie Monteza , then Tayde de Callataÿ, with the past president, Marina , advice from all bodies, members of the EB and the secretariat; I can’t name them all but it is good that we work together.

We have already spoken about the need for training among volunteers. Recent years have been marked by the Diplomado AIC. Since 2010, the Diploma for AIC members has been in preparation. I

can tell you it has been a tough journey, but thanks to the tenacity of Alicia and Maru, we came to the conclusion that the on-line AIC diploma could be prepared by AIC volunteers. And this was done.

In 2014 over 580 volunteers from Latin America followed the Diplomado AIC; in 2015, a pilot group took the AIC Diploma in English and adapted it for volunteers in English and French. A further session started in January 2017, with xxx participants and xxxx tutors. The AIC diploma is now followed in Africa, Asia, Europe and the USA. It is a huge success; and I have to tell you that other associations are envious of us, so if you haven't yet passed the AIC Diploma, sign up for the next session!

Coordination is ensured by AIC through constant contact with national presidents, and I would like to highlight the importance of visits in the field.

All 4 of us, during our term of office, have had the opportunity to come and meet you where you are.

These are unforgettable experiences of sharing, work, friendship, and mutual openness to the world.

Personally, I have had the opportunity to visit 19 AIC associations, some of them several times, usually accompanied by a member of the EB/CA or the secretariat, to give a complementary view.

AIC Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, USA, Thailand, Taiwan, Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Ukraine, UK, Slovakia, Switzerland and China.

These visits allow in-depth discussions, better understanding, mutual acknowledgement with volunteers, members of the Vincentian family and people in difficulties:

In a very poor village of Nigeria, one woman said to me: "it is wonderful for us to know that far from here, other women are concerned about us".

"You are the strength of the poor".

Isn't that a great dream for AIC in the future?

We have come to the end of this presentation of the history of AIC. We wanted to share our enthusiasm with you, our commitment to AIC, our pride in being part of this great family, and our gratitude.

Let us all be convinced ambassadors of this, and wherever we are, continue to help each other to find a just and proper place which respects the bonds among human beings, the planet and God.

The future of AIC remains to be written, and Alicia is going to outline this for us, based on the encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

Alicia Duhne:

Conclusions

As heard in the various presentations, the AIC, from the time of its foundation, has carried on a marvelous work.

If we reflect on some of the words of the encyclical, *Laudato Si* and Objective #17 of the UN sustainability goals, we will be able to see how we have been able to give life to the principles that are enunciated in these documents (even though both of these documents have been recently published).

Let us then reflect on these words of the encyclical and these words of the Goals for Sustainable Development:

#86 of Laudato Sí: The spectacle of the countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.

#92 of Laudato Sí: Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.

Objective #17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

As a result of this reading and reflection we can conclude that the Pope and the United Nations have invited us to accept our differences so that as we recognize our strengths, we join together and work in collaboration with others (and do so because we recognize the fact that we are all loved by God).

In the presentations that we have just listened to, we notice that each president has attempted to give a continuity to the work that has been accomplished. Our goal has always been to continue to build upon the foundations that were established by previous generations. Thus, the role of our leaders does not come to an end when they conclude their term of office. Indeed, the various former presidents continue to accompany us and share with us their knowledge and wisdom. Yet there has always been a respect as found in the adage: *they accompany us, but not so closely as to prevent our forward movement and not so far away so that we cannot see them!*

When speaking about our work in networks, it is important to recognize the incredible support that we have received from our spiritual advisors, namely, members of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. During all these years, they have helped us to preserve our Vincentian charism and to be faithful to the teachings of the Church. They have provided us with a living example of what it means to work together as a Vincentian Family.

We must also state that the role of the Secretariat has always been an important element in our collaborative work. The fact that this group is located in a set place (Louvain-la-Neuve) and that they support all our activities enables us to provide a continuity to our work. Speaking personally, I do not know how I would be able to do all my work without them (individuals who have worked with various presidents and who have an incredible experience).

I hope that these reflections have been helpful... let us then continue with our program.
