



Didactic Booklet

Booklet n°3—June 2004

AIC'S IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING

*A clear idea of
our mission
and our
vocation.*

INTRODUCTION

In order to make St Vincent's project more concrete and current, AIC has developed methods and strategies which we call Guidelines. They are the product of AIC volunteers' experiences throughout the world. After the Nice assembly, we thought we would offer a tool – the Training Booklet – to facilitate the application of the 2002-2006 Guidelines, and to help groups and volunteers to better understand them and apply them.

In the first booklet of 2004 we tackled the theme of Empowerment, in the second that of "Twinings", which is one of the strategies offered by the Guidelines. As far as the current booklet is concerned, we decided not to treat one guideline in particular, but rather reexamine the theme of the identity of our Association. We made this decision because we are convinced that the basis contains the feeling of identity and belonging to the Association and that it is the indispensable core on which to lean the other two guidelines, "Social Co-responsibility" and "Institutional Reinforcement".

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- ⇒ The Vincentian identity
- ⇒ AIC : definition, mission and vision. The Institutional Document
- ⇒ AIC and the Vincentian family
- ⇒ AIC- Vietnam, a new association with a strong sense of belonging.

How can we feel co-responsible, in an association, if we are not aware of its identity or our own identity, and if we don't feel a strong sense of belonging to this association? How can we strengthen our Association if we don't have a clear idea of our mission and our vocation, if we don't feel we are living parts of its trajectory, and if we don't participate in its development?

That is the goal of this Training Booklet. Not only will it reinforce your sense of belonging to the Association, but also help you participate in it with the objective of transforming societies. By reading this Booklet in your teams, by thinking together about its contents, you will be able to go from the current state to a better state, thanks to a better knowledge of the Association. Once deeply understood and transformed into action, this knowledge will help you meet challenges and prove your sense of belonging to AIC through verifiable signs. Similarly this knowledge will help each member of AIC to **make up a strengthened association, in solidarity and co-responsibility, able to have an impact on the eradication of poverty, and transform society to achieve more justice and equity.**

These booklets will generate questions, challenges and proposals conducive to reflection, which in turn will become didactic supports to internalize contents and to generate further questions adapted to the concerned group. These points, which lead to reflection, are meant to provoke action and increased commitment.

We are presenting below the general format which we shall follow. In order to cooperate in solidarity, and maturity to the building of peace, we must first better understand the Vincentian spirit which animates us, the characteristics and expectations of today's AIC, its links with the Vincentian family, with the various social actors and the Church.

General Format :

1. Identity and sense of belonging
2. The Vincentian identity
3. AIC : definition, mission and vision. The Institutional Document
4. AIC and the Vincentian family
5. AIC- Vietnam, a new association with a strong sense of belonging.

1. IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING

In life some questions are considered existential, because in the answer to those questions, the sense of existence itself is at stake : Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? Where does my life lead me? What are my motivations in life?

It is not easy to answer these questions, and yet it is important not only to ask them, but also to find answers little by little. It is only when we become able to answer these questions that we can be people who live their lives with a project, a direction, a meaning. Only someone who positions herself in relation to those questions and tries to answer will be able to live responsibly and freely.

Personal Identity

A first step is to be aware of one's own being and understand the meaning of personal identity. Each person, as part of her personal world, has memories, experiences, motivations, interests and expectations; those are the elements which in turn will determine the particular shape in which this person will appear in the eyes of others, and recognize herself. Knowing oneself takes time, solitude, concentration, and often dialogue with those with whom we live or act. By focusing our attention on the various aspects of who we are and what we live through, we discover the reality of our personal world. We see where we stand in relation to the point we want to reach. Maybe we realize that we don't have clearly defined objectives, or maybe they are clearly defined but in either case, we have not yet transformed them into specific actions or tasks, we have not planned them and we have not established priorities.

Who am I?

**What is the
meaning of my
life?**

**Where does my
life lead me?**

**What are my
motivations in
life?**

Questions to think about

- ✓ *What do I want from life, what are my objectives?*
- ✓ *If my current actions don't get me closer to my objectives, what other actions am I prepared to take so I can reach them?*
- ✓ *Am I clearly aware of my own identity and of what I wish to bring to others?*

Group Identity

In this Booklet we shall not dwell either on the analysis of cultural identity, or on that of collective identity, which are linked to heredity and traditions, and to characteristics of each community and each group. However it is important that we take it into account, since personal identity is mostly defined by those two dimensions, which have a major influence upon it. Societies inherit customs and principles and form their own identity. **Group identity**, which is almost always related to personal identity, is connected to those. This fact changes its connotation because it implies that adhesion is free. We belong to a group by choice, and we make this choice as a willful act, and not because life put us in this particular spot.

The dimension of a group is often perceived by us either as a problem, or as a safety; either a source of stress, or a boundary that generates comfort and enables personalities to reassess themselves. If human beings exist and mature as such, it is because they belong to communities that stimulate them, challenge them, motivate them, nurture their growth and build their personalities; communities which build mechanisms through which they will react later, in the face of realities, interpersonal relations and life events in general. In many cases, the fact of belonging to a certain group is a question of fashion or habit, or even convenience. In other cases however, belonging to a group means **choosing a life option, adhering to certain values, searching for common objectives, being faithful to a vocation and also accepting the responsibility for a mission and respecting a commitment made freely.** Then the group becomes a source of riches and a stimulant which helps self-realization. Within the group, human beings reaffirm their specificities, their characteristics, which make them different and unique, and at the same time, they discover others. This mutual discovery is one of the most important elements of belonging to a group.



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The sense of belonging

To presuppose a personal awareness of belonging, and the representation of a determined identity, it is not enough to take part in a common collective reality. Even the fact of having common ethnic features or sharing the same socio-cultural heritage is not enough. **There needs to be a sense of belonging as voluntary adhesion to a given group.** There must be an understanding of the deep meaning of this group, its policies and strategies, its mission, its vision and perspectives for the future. Without a real sense of belonging it is impossible for a person to take on, as their own, the values promoted by the group or the organization, its ideology, its individual or collective tasks that are being or will be undertaken.

The sense of belonging, with the emotional and factual load this entails, is the factor that roots and motivates the group; more importantly, it is the indispensable generator of cohesion for the group. Thanks to it, the interaction bonds within the group are more solid, whether outside or in terms of references. A collective identity is established, which delineates and regulates the internal mechanisms for action, conservation and development of the group, and is a go-between in the relations with other groups. Each member, when she feels a real sense of belonging, feels she represents the group, whose other members she knows; she knows its foundation, proclaims its values and spreads its proposals, which she takes on as if they came from herself. She is concerned by the needs of the group and feels co-responsible for the present and future of the group.

We only love what we know and understand. We need to know in order to discover and recognize; but in order to be integrated in the Association for good, we need to take a firmer step, a more definitive step. Not only is a theoretical knowledge of the group needed, but an awareness of its being and our loyal belonging, which leads to responsibility and security. It is necessary that we realize what it means to belong to the Vincentian Volunteers, or AIC Volunteers. We must have a thoughtful awareness of this. We must value our identity and act and respond accordingly.

2. THE VINCENTIAN IDENTITY

**What would
St Vincent
do today ?**

Defining identity and sense of belonging is not easy. It is important to have a better idea of what the words mean, not only as concepts, but also as integral parts of an important process in life which imply certain commitments. On the other hand, defining something means limiting it, framing it and taking away some of its flexibility. Identity is a dynamic reality which we don't want to close in, on the contrary : we want to leave it free. Through discovering identity, we try to find the sources, so that we can bring to today's world the eternal values, which we wish to be current and active. That is why questions such as : "What would St Vincent do today?" or "What type of AIC would St Vincent favor, here and now?" are valid questions.

Knowing the identity, adopting this identity, means to live the sense of **belonging** to the Association. It means **feeling part of**. As the Basic Document says, to be a conscious member of AIC means to be a person who :

- ✓ is shocked when she notices injustices, sufferings and poverty, at her door, in her country, throughout the world;
- ✓ chooses to act within AIC, freely, in union with other Christian volunteers, in a pastoral and social action, within society and the Church, for the benefit of the poor;
- ✓ does this by following the spirit and dynamics of St Vincent (Basic Doc. 2.11/80/1)

There are several aspects to the Vincentian identity, which make up the foundation of AIC, and on which we must reflect in order to be a truly well identified member, with her values and principles. We suggest that you reflect in your groups on these aspects, and draw practical conclusions, which will help reinforce the personal and group commitment.



AIC : a gift of the Spirit for the Church and for today's society

The Association doesn't belong to you, rather you belong to it, from the moment you freely chose to integrate into your life the project it offered you. Belonging to an Association such as ours is a grace.

St Vincent and the first AIC foundations

AIC has an identity and the goal is for volunteers to identify with this world represented by AIC. It is a world of values, principles, projects, a lifestyle, etc, which is presented as an opportunity for you to live your life and your faith.

Living within AIC means being called by God

It is important to become aware that God called you to live your faith from this space represented by AIC. Living one's faith and following Jesus from a practical charisma, has a first name : Christian; and a last name : Vincentian. Your presence in AIC is an answer to the call of the Lord : *"You did not choose me, I elected you..."*

Life in AIC and the mission are lived with a personal as well as a group lifestyle

The vocation and mission within AIC imply attitudes and dispositions which give shape to the person and make her service mission more efficient.

A member of AIC :

Lives in good judgment

When John the Baptist asks Jesus if he is the Messiah or if they have to wait for another one, Jesus responds by sending him back to the facts so he can analyze them. By analyzing them he can know the truth, and thereafter he will be able to choose life and service options. Mt 2, 2-11.

Sees things as they are in God

Faith is the "dependence" on He who is at the origin of good and bad harvests, of rain and wind, of cold and hot. Faith is what enables us to see things the way they are in God. That is what St Vincent used to say : *"I ask our Lord that he grants us the grace to see all things the way they are in God, and not the way they appear outside of Him, because in the latter case we could make mistakes and act differently from what He wishes"*. Looking at things from God's point of view is to give them a meaning. Through faith, events and people are instruments through which God speaks and makes us discover his will. AIC through faith, is attentive to the voice of God and the clamor of the poor.

Puts Jesus Christ and the poor at the centre of her life

It is not possible to separate Jesus Christ from the poor : Christ is in the poor, and the poor are in Christ. For a member of AIC, Jesus passion translates into concrete and efficient compassion for the poor.

Lives to serve the poor through her faith

Within AIC not only do you serve the poor, but in addition to that, and through this service, you experience God. Faith is not having a certitude in your hands, it is interpreting on the basis of events.

Refuses injustices and fights against them

The huge inequalities and the lack of equity are considered by AIC as injustice, as something against which we must fight, even at the expense of our own life. A member of AIC is someone who is shocked and indignant at injustice. She asks God in her prayers that she be given the grace to feel indignation in the face of such injustice.

Knows the Social Doctrine of the Church perfectly

For a member of AIC, as for all Christians, it is indispensable to know the Social Doctrine of the Church, in which she finds a foundation for her commitment to the poor. She needs to know the fundamental values of people so that she is able to defend them.

Lives with gratuity, availability and generosity

She gives herself to the service of others without expecting remuneration. She is aware that there is more joy in giving than in receiving (acts 20, 35).

Creates the community

A member of AIC doesn't do things by herself, but in teams and even more in communities. She gathers with members of her group, not only in the service of the poor, but also in order to grow as a community of faith. Gathered around Jesus, the group members respond to his call to continue the mission.

Believes in the possibilities and potential of others

She doesn't serve **for** but **with**. Her confidence in human beings, the fact that she recognizes that the poor have potential, bring her to favor processes of self-management. These processes will enable them to become agents of their own history, their development and that of their communities.

Expresses her love for the poor through direct contact and proximity

In addition to being concerned by the need of the poor, AIC members does the impossible to give them love and be witnesses of Jesus' love for each of his children. Home visits are the most Vincentian way of doing charity.

We will not really belong to AIC until we have a real inner knowledge of the transformation which can promote and develop it, and until our convictions are firm, our conscience and feelings real. We shall be co-responsible for its project and mission, and we shall have the opportunity to strengthen our association at all levels, with pleasure and generosity.

This deep and authentic feeling of belonging, the pleasure and joy of feeling that one belongs to AIC, are not acquired rapidly or easily. Legally, to be an AIC volunteer, you need a formal acceptance, and in certain cases, a registration and official recogni-

tion. You also need the work of a team, a communion with other volunteers, and you must render a type of service which is within the objectives of the association. However, firm convictions and personal awareness, as well as sense of belonging, imply a slow process, which is born amongst us through gospel service and sisterhood. It must be fed with lectures and with the roots of Vincentian spirituality, by attending group reunions, and through direct service to the needy. We must participate in seminars, meetings and retreats. We need a loyalty and constancy, which generate firm conviction, assurance, faith and a deep Vincentian spirituality.

Eventually we feel we belong to the Vincentian Volunteer group; we taste and live this noble vocation of brotherly love to the point that we can't do without it. Serving in the association becomes a life commitment, a fundamental duty to which we dedicate the best of our own human and spiritual means.

The team : a place where identity is reinforced

The sense of belonging enables us to have a clear awareness of the importance of team work. The Basic Document clearly mentions the need to take part in organized team work, which favors dividing the work into tasks, experiences and sharing. Team work enables us to get enriched by others' experiences. The AIC team must be and is a space that encourages friendship, reflection, organized work, meeting of spirits, common prayer. The success of projects depends in major part on the teams' attitudes and preparation. In order for a team to be fruitful, there needs to be a real fraternal spirit within it, with evangelical and Vincentian values. It is only through union, solidarity and mutual understanding that the team will be able to transmit to others, specifically to the poor, the testimony of love, which is the essential part of God's Plan for each and every one of his children.

Serving in the association becomes a life commitment, a fundamental duty to which we dedicate the best of our own human and spiritual means.



Conflicts

conflicts become challenges and bring the group, after it solves the conflicts, to more cohesion..



Our groups are not exempt from various conflicts and tensions. However we believe that there is a relation between these tensions and the sense of belonging. Conflicts are stronger when identity is not clearly defined and the person doesn't experience the sense of belonging in her deepest self. When identity is clear, the person becomes receptive, open to dialogue; she shows an ability to listen and she adopts a "proposing" attitude (able to bring proposals for solutions) in the face of conflicts and tensions in group relations. She is able to detect these tensions, and accept her share of responsibilities. She seeks solutions and doesn't feel alienated from the conflict. It is normal that there be conflicts in groups but it is important that we, armed with a real spirit of charity, seek a way to manage them and reach solutions. In this way conflicts become challenges and bring the group, after it solves the conflicts, to more cohesion. There are many interesting techniques on managing and solving conflicts that we, AIC volunteers, can take advantage of. We cannot accept that a conflict be an obstacle to the mission of the Association. If they are managed in the light of faith, conflicts always have a solution. This solution will enable group members to work in peace and harmony – two of the most important characteristics of the groups created under the inspiration of St Vincent de Paul, the great saint of charity.

Questions to reflect upon :

- ✓ *Regarding your decision to belong to an AIC group : what are your motivations, what aptitudes and talents do you have that could contribute to the achievement of the group's goals? What are your limits and your faults which could hinder your group's development?*
- ✓ *Are you aware of the importance of the human factor in the group? Do you understand the importance of its members' attitudes towards achieving the group's objectives?*
- ✓ *What is your attitude when facing problems in the group ?*

AIC : INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR FIGHTING POVERTIES AND THEIR CAUSES.

- DEFINITION, MISSION, VISION

Since its international reorganization in 1971, and in order to adapt to current needs and to offer better responses to the call of the poor, which are always at the center of all its actions, AIC went through a process of reflection and change.

AIC's Institutional Document expresses in summary the "how to be" and "what to do" of the Association, its mission, its policy and its vision for the future. This Document is one of the results of the Process of Institutional Reinforcement developed by AIC in 2000. It is important for all members of AIC Volunteers throughout the world to be familiar with it. Not only can this document help strengthen and deepen our identity and reinforce our sense of belonging to the association, but it can also help others become acquainted with it. This document is part of a new presentation of AIC put at the disposal of National Presidents. We present this document below ; it was officially adopted in December 2001.

AIC INSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENT

DEFINITION

AIC, an association whose members are mostly women, is inspired by Vincent de Paul, its founder, who was the first to officially give an important role to women : that of serving the poor.

In more than 50 countries, thanks to the actions of its teams made up of local volunteers, AIC efficiently practices solidarity and proximity in the field, which enables the poorest to become agents of their own development and that of their communities.

MISSION

AIC's mission is to fight against all forms of poverty and exclusion, through initiatives and transforming projects.

AIC accompanies women, specifically, in their search for development and self-sufficiency.

It denounces injustices and generates actions to exert pressure on structures and decision makers, in order to fight the causes of poverty.

In order to achieve its objectives, AIC favors relationships and interdependence between local and international levels. As a civilian society organization it is part of world networks, through which the efforts of public and private institutions are articulated and combined; these networks are involved in the fight against poverties and exclusions, and try to defend the rights of the poor.

VISION

AIC wishes to :

- ✓ Be a transforming force in society and fight poverty
- ✓ Get involved primarily with women throughout the world
- ✓ Reinforce participation of the poor
- ✓ Favor cooperation and networking, and get involved in public policy programs, through favoring co-responsibilities of all agents.

VALUES

Ethical values, in the light of the Gospels, inspire the actions of the Association. AIC works specifically to promote justice, equity, social insertion, tolerance and respect for people's dignity and their right to participate in their own destiny.

Its STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE "Against poverties and their causes, acting together" commits it to :

- ✓ being a transforming force in the face of poverty
- ✓ being a transforming force in society
- ✓ being a transforming force within the association itself.

AIC'S GUIDELINES

Not only must we know and adopt AIC's Institutional Document, but we also must bear in mind that **AIC IS AN ASSOCIATION ALWAYS IN MOTION**. It never was and never will be a static organization. On the contrary it is an organization "in a never-ending process of change", in permanent motion, with firm and unchangeable principles, but flexible as regards its adaptation to the needs and challenges presented by the sudden increase in poverty and the attention required by the signs of the times. For that reason, and because it is preoccupied with training and updating the corps of volunteers throughout the world, AIC adopts new guidelines every four years. These guidelines adjust to the need of the excluded as well as to the needs of AIC volunteers.

These guidelines **which direct the association's actions**, were conceived and made official for the first time in 1990, and we have been ruled by them since then. They are very avant-garde guidelines and, when applied, they can lead to real social change, at least in our sphere of influence. Through the application of the guidelines, many AIC associations have managed to give life to this utopia whose destiny is to be converted into history, a history of justice and equity which is reflected in daily life, in concrete terms, in signs of hope for the poor and the marginalized.

The 1998-2002 Guidelines : To be a transforming force within the Association, in the face of poverties; and commit ourselves to live a continuous process of transformation in society. These lines, through their strength and modernity, have become fundamental objectives for AIC. In order to fully adhere to the Association, it is indispensable to know, deepen and apply the Guidelines which currently rule AIC, and which we present below :

GUIDELINES FOR 2002 – 2006

1. EMPOWERMENT

It commit us to question ourselves to our relations with others, and to recognize to each person the power of developing him/herself. We shall facilitate the growth of that power. Thanks to this attitude, we shall be able to consider people in situations of poverty as real collaborators, who have their own means and solutions.

2. REINFORCING THE ASSOCIATION

It commits us to build a more participatory AIC, through a process of reinforcement at all levels, in which we feel co-responsible in the fight against all forms of poverty.

3. SOCIAL CO-RESPONSIBILITY

It commits us to take on with determination our civic responsibility to participate in defining strategies whose goal is to reweave the social fabric and promote community networks, which demand the participation of all, from the poorest citizens to the civilian and religious authorities.

Suggested steps to give life to the guidelines :

- ✓ Evaluation
- ✓ Participatory leadership
- ✓ Twinning between associations or local groups
- ✓ Exchanges of competences
- ✓ Creation of and participation in networks against poverty, injustice and exclusion.

Guidelines and steps enable us to get involved **with a sense of co-responsibility, with determination and creativity, in the fight against poverty, as a priority path towards transforming injustice into hope and to build a world of peace.**

In this permanent task of adapting and updating, both the Executive Board and the International Secretariat mobilize all of their resources, be they human or material, in order to promote their members' training, and they do this through all available means, whether documents, booklets, training cards, AIC-INFO, the web page, written and audio presentations etc. A corps of volunteers with a real sense of belonging **appreciates and takes advantage of these opportunities** and cooperates to their spreading and the implementation of their principles. It becomes not only an object which receives, but also a subject which cooperates with all demands it receives from the association. It takes the role of main protagonist, and thus becomes co-responsible for reaching the objectives it set itself and the success of its mission.

This process of adapting to change and to the new realities of the poor led AIC to set up new Guidelines, in order to keep going forward, ever further. It is this same process which entices it to start new projects and meet new challenges, and still be "creative and inventive forever", and still be close to the poor and attentive to their call.

Reflections and challenges :

- ✓ *in order to reach its goals, AIC International needs economic and human resources. Aware that the sense of belonging should be proven by specific facts, define various concrete ways which can demonstrate it.*
- ✓ *Do you support the AIC associations with some human and material resources? Do you take part in twinnings, or do you put your aptitudes and talents – whether in training or a specific domain – at the service of other associations?*
- ✓ *We suggest that you analyze the way in which your group meetings take place, to see whether it would be possible to add a procedure that would improve your knowledge of AIC International, of the Institutional Document, of the Guidelines, and other training and communication instruments.*
- ✓

MAIN TYPES OF AIC PROJECTS

Working through projects is one of AIC's characteristics. After sending questionnaires to all national associations, we were able to use the answers for writing the Report of Activities in 2002.

Volunteers reported 15, 317 projects :

1125 projects related to the promotion of women

527 related to education and training

427 income-generating projects

429 projects relating to food and nutrition

204 projects to improve health

2493 projects of social insertion or re-insertion

215 projects related to community development

921 centers of welcome

8976 actions of solidarity which were planned and evaluated.

These projects, which were carried out in different parts of the world where AIC is set up, are in perpetual evolution. AIC would like to generate in the volunteers who work at them a process of ongoing reflection and evaluation, in order to find out whether these projects respond in a just and efficient way to the needs of beneficiaries.

Challenges for AIC Volunteers

Each type of project brings challenges that are specific; however, we wish to point out below some that are common to all projects :



- ✓ *Reaching the poorest, those who live in utter poverty; many of them are still excluded from projects set up by AIC volunteers.*
- ✓ *Strengthen (empower) beneficiaries, develop their self-esteem, their leadership and include them in participatory dynamics which generate self-employment.*
- ✓ *Transform each home visit into a specific project, by making the person participate, so that their quality of life is improved.*
- ✓ *Accompany the various initiatives with actions in order to exert pressure and denounce injustices.*
- ✓ *Have influence either on creation or application of laws of protection of the poor who are victims of injustices and exploited.*
- ✓ *Participate in networks to fighting evil, misery and exclusion.*
- ✓ *Evaluate each project and each initiative of solidarity by following a methodology and by taking as criterion the impact on the life of beneficiaries.*
- ✓ *Encouraging and implementing preventive actions.*

4. AIC AND THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

When we work in cooperation with others, we must be thoughtful and able to distinguish between AIC and other groups which are also committed to the fight against poverties and their causes, and reach for the same objectives. These organizations can be philanthropic, political, social, lay or religious; whatever the case, our spirit makes us different. Only by being aware of these differences will we be able to cooperate with these groups, to enrich them with our contribution and our own vision of life and service. There cannot be cooperation without the ability to understand, justify and transmit what we are and our reasons for acting in a certain manner, which is unique and different. Clear ideas bring security.

AIC actively cooperates with various international and ecclesial organizations which must be known by the volunteers; this is why we are now going to analyze them. When we speak of identity and sense of belonging, we must pay attention to the relationships and interactions of AIC with the Vincentian family, which gathers all foundations and works of St Vincent de Paul. It is the first natural network of our association.

AIC lives with its sense of belonging to the Vincentian Family

We all know the various associations which make up what we call the Vincentian Family, i.e. the associations, groups and communities which are born from, inspired by or find their motivations in St Vincent de Paul. AIC forms a Christian family with all these associations; it shares with them the spirituality and mission that St Vincent left to those who followed him. We call “charisma” the union of this spirituality and this mission.

We shall try to name some characteristics of this Vincentian charisma, which AIC shares with the other branches of the Vincentian Family.



**Clear ideas
bring
Security.**

Charisma is a gift

Charisma is a gift of the Holy Spirit for building the Kingdom, to respond to the needs of the People of God or society in general. Consequently, when we live the Vincentian charisma, we commit to identify with this charisma, i.e. a certain spirituality, and to a concrete mission within Church and society.

Charisma brings a certain identity

Charisma is what makes us Vincentians, not the works in themselves. Charisma is always a mystery which cannot be fully understood. That is why we don't try to give a definition but only try to describe it so as to get closer to the riches it offers us. We proclaim it with force, because this Vincentian charisma inspires the life and mission of Vincentians.

The focus of charisma is to follow Jesus, servant of the poor

Very often we stay on the periphery of identity or charisma, which we are led to confuse with Vincentian virtues or with other elements which, however important, are not the center of charisma. What Vincent de Paul discovered as center of charisma and Vincentian vocation, is the fact of following Jesus Christ, the gospel preacher and the servant of the poor. In the Vincentian vocation, the idea is not simply to do what Jesus did, that is to serve and evangelize the poor, but to turn the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives into reality. Very often the works are identified and confused with the charisma, while they are the reflection of the charisma instead. In the Vincentian family, we share the center of charisma, which is not theory but on the contrary, is lived within a historic moment and a given culture. The heart and the center of Vincentian charisma is in the service to the poor and our experience of faith in service.

Within the Vincentian family we share the same spirituality

Spirituality has its foundation in the Gospel and emphasizes various aspects of the life of Christ. Our Vincentian spirituality is focused on Jesus Christ, and we imitate through him the missionary sent by the Father, the gospel revealer and the servant of the poor. It is centered on Jesus Christ, who lives charity towards the poor, by sympathizing with them and helping them to save themselves, materially as well as spiritually. All the branches of the Vincentian family were born for the corporeal and spiritual service of the poor, of those who don't even have the necessary minimum income. Among the poor, they even seek out the poorest.

The missionary sense

The members of the Vincentian family live the missionary sense deeply. They try to live the simplicity, humility and charity such as Jesus Christ lived them and such as St Vincent practiced them. Those are dynamic virtues which lead us to be like Jesus

Christ, so that we can do what he did on earth. They are ready to go beyond themselves in order to always be on the path towards the poor. They live in availability so that they can answer God's calls through the poor. They allow the poor to evangelize them. In their lives, they are attentive so they hear the voice of God in the people called the poor.

They live their mission with a practical and concrete charity. For them, charity means work. They love God with the sweat on their heads and the effort of their arms. They use their physical life for the material and spiritual salvation of the poor. Vincentians take the path of perfection and holiness by living within the world. For Vincentians, sainthood is in the streets, in hospitals, in poor neighborhood, amongst the sick in their houses, in marginalized zones, with native people, in the prisons... Their spirituality feeds on sacraments. It also feeds on prayer, and their prayers drink from the very words of God and life itself.

Common Projects

St Vincent created the first three foundations, AIC, the Mission Congregation and the Daughters of Charity, to work in cooperation in order to give better service to the poor. His prophetic intuition led him to conceive, from the start, the greater Vincentian Family, which in our days is present everywhere through the world.

There are differences and characteristics for each branch of the Family, which represents additional riches. When we put those differences in the service of other branches, they create a sum of knowledge, experiences, aptitudes and networks that none of the branches would achieve on its own. Each branch lives the charisma and spirituality differently, but in order to really bring something to the whole, each must have a strong identity, its own individuality and characteristics. It is only through being perfectly free and aware of its own identity that AIC will be able to bring all its riches to other branches. This is why it is important that those who accompany groups offer them **liberating advice** that stimulates growth and maturity for groups and individuals, while avoiding attitudes of submission and dependence.

AIC's specificities are, in one way or another, shared with a branch of the Vincentian Family or another. However certain points characterize our association even better :

AIC is the first branch founded by St Vincent himself. He clearly set up the center of AIC's charisma : *to honor our Lord and his holy mother as models, and assist the poor who are sick in body or in mind.*

AIC is attentive to new realities and signs of the times, in order to meet the needs of the poor in the most efficient way, and with a clear conscience of the evolution of charity.

AIC as an association is thoroughly feminine in nature, but non sectarian; it is made up mostly of lay women; therefore most of its projects seek to promote women.

The character of St Louise de Marillac is remarkable as inspirer of AIC's actions and model of spirituality; it is for that reason that March 25th was chosen as "AIC's Inter-

national Day of Prayer". It is a special moment for prayer, reflection and reaffirmation of charisma for all AIC members in the world.

AIC members work through concrete projects. By doing that they respond to the wish of their founder, who said that charity was necessary, but that it should be implemented in organized ways.

Involved in the defense of human rights and in promotion of justice, its members participate in actions in very diverse domains, related to marginalization and human development; they also cooperate with social organizations and platforms.

They reach out and create networks with other non-governmental organizations and Church organizations.

They are represented in major international institutions and act within society in order to guarantee the presence of evangelical values and Christian love in the world.

Questions for Reflection

- ✓ *are you aware of AIC's own characteristics that might enrich other members of the Family? According to your own experience, how could your group cooperate more efficiently with other branches of the Family?*
- ✓ *Analyze your relations with the leaders of your Vincentian group. Is there a real respect of its own charisma? Is the importance of your role as managers and leaders of the group's spirituality recognized? Does the interaction between you and your leader make an obstacle, or on the contrary, does it reinforce the group's maturity?*
- ✓ *In what way have you contributed in an efficient manner, be it individually or in groups, to projects that are common to the whole Vincentian family?*

5. AIC-VIETNAM, A NEW ASSOCIATION WITH A STRONG SENSE OF BELONGING

The sense of belonging takes on bright colors...

During our Vietnam visit, we drove over the roads from Ho Chi MinVille to Dalat through the various regions where AIC volunteers and Daughters of Charity work : Northern area (2 groups), area of the High Plateaus (8 groups) , Coastal area (3 groups), Eastern area (7 groups) and Western area (22 groups).

This very young association created in 1996 has 750 members today. Volunteer participation to the two training days organized for our visit was higher than anyone hoped : 350 attended, in spite of distances and family difficulties.

We were able to see the great development of AIC- Vietnam. The sense of belonging and the enthusiasm to serve the poor is obvious, the training documents are studied with trust and motivation during the bi-monthly meeting. “We are mothers, farmers, teachers, seamstresses... and we are very proud to be AIC volunteers... an INTERNATIONAL association!”

Like in all AIC associations throughout the world, volunteers work in their own neighborhoods, they know the beneficiaries well, their families, their problems. It is a service of efficient proximity and very human. To finance their activities, volunteers are inventive : planting cashew trees, weeding, helping at wedding meals, making collections...

After this visit, the concept of “sense of belonging”, which was black and white in the documents, has taken on bright colors... I understood that concrete actions of service and self-giving are OUR common values and the source of our deep joy.

Beatrice Dupriez

AIC International Secretariat



The Sense of Belonging, in Concrete Terms... Testimony of a visit to AIC-Vietnam

On March 20, 2004, I find myself in Dalat, in central Vietnam, in a large somewhat shabby room, in front of 200 AIC volunteers.

Earlier I had left Germany and traveled for hours. But I heard that, for most of these women, the trip was far longer and far less comfortable : 3 hours walk and a 12 hour long night trip in an old bus over narrow winding mountain roads.



They came for a day of training. But what can I tell them, as they come from different cultures and histories?

Our discussions show that the Guidelines which they apply in their work and lives, sometimes without being aware of them, are the bonds that unite us. Step by step, they recognize elements of the Guidelines in their actions, and a sudden surge of enthusiasm fills them. Proud of what they do, happy to share, to be listened to, they now know that they are not alone, that there are women all over the world who do the same work and share and live the same values.

More and more I feel that not only do volunteers know Christian values and the spirituality of St Vincent, St Louise, Sr Rosalie Rendu, they also have the strong training of the Daughters of Charity. The most touching thing is to see how these values are lived. They are deeply practiced in a difficult environment where the Catholic church is tolerated but not recognized. Coming from a population which has been through the sufferings of war for many generations, they live the Gospel by sharing what they have with the poor. When they speak of what they do to build houses for elderly homeless people, find food for street children, work for the handicapped, I understand why they came from so far:



They want to give testimony for the sufferings of their people and share their experiences, they seek confirmation of their values, they want to learn new methods to better respond to sufferings with efficient and well managed actions.

Vietnam volunteers are strong women, and in spite of difficult lives, they are filled with the joy that comes from the deep conviction of living in agreement with their values.

In the Dalat room, I felt the meaning of belonging, knowing one's identity and values, sharing them with others to adjust them to field actions and moving along the same path. Vietnam volunteers knew this when they started on their way to Dalat. The same goes for all volunteers from other countries, when they walk for miles with a bag on their heads, when they travel all day by train with a baby on their backs, when they hit the road so that they can share their spirituality and experiences, learn, be trained to AIC's common vision, thus bearing witness of their sense of belonging. When I listened to Vietnamese volunteers in Dalat, I understood that the "sense of belonging" means the permanent creation of concordance between daily personal life, personal values and spirituality and the objectives and values of AIC. The sense of belonging is not a fixed concept. We must walk on many paths, sometimes physically, but more often mentally and spiritually.

Anne Sturm

AIC International President





A mainly women's association organized
at world level, including
more than 150,000 volunteers
in 6,000 local teams in 50 countries.

Founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617
to fight any forms of poverty and
injustice and to give women an active
social and recognized role,
in a spirit of solidarity

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