

**AIC, Against Poverty, Acting Together**

***Change with Saint Vincent***

**March 2008**

**Reflection n°2**

**Vincent and systemic change**

***Introduction***

You have already received the first comments of the series “Change with St Vincent” in which we take the example of Chatillon-les-Dombes and analyze it. Through this example, we can clearly see the role of leader for change that St Vincent de Paul played, as he succeeded in sharing his vision with millions of men and women and get them to take it up. St Vincent made his followers independent and trained them in acquiring a far reaching vision. It is thanks to them and the creation of multiplying networks that the movement was launched on solid bases. This movement went forth through centuries and is still alive today worldwide.

AIC is a dynamic association made of and part of multiple systems which constantly interact in order to reach a common objective : serving Jesus Christ, who brought the Gospel to the poor and was committed to their liberation. Of course, we decided to cooperate in the redeeming vision of Jesus Christ, since He is the center of our lives and actions. As for St Vincent he is a model and a source of inspiration.

### ***The Underlying Spirituality of Systemic Change***

St Vincent is at the root of the rapprochement between the Vincentian family and Systemic Change. There are 3 key phrases in Vincentian tradition which encourage us today to do always more within our various branches. In this way, not only do we help the poor to meet their immediate needs by giving them roofs, food and support, but we also try to change the social system in which they live, so they can rise above their poverty.

- The first phrase states that our love must be “loving and effective”. As we all know, St Vincent repeated this many times.
- The second phrase states that our service must be “spiritual and corporal”.
- The third one says that we have to spread the Good News through “words and actions.”

Those are the key aspects of Vincentian spirituality which we must always keep in mind if we want to think and act in a systemic manner.

St Vincent was deeply convinced that words and acts must reinforce one another. First comes acting, then teaching. That is St Vincent's motto for "effective" evangelization.

In brief, St Vincent believes that words, teachings and the promotion of human beings are complementary and are an integral part of the evangelization process.

To this day, coordination of evangelization and promotion of human beings is very important for St Vincent. It is a key element of the teachings of the Church's social doctrine.

***Jesus Christ, Evangelist of the poor, is at the center of St Vincent's vision.***

- Christ gives freedom back to his people and frees it from the servitude of its corporal and spiritual wounds.
- Liberation of the poor by Christ is in accordance with St Vincent's vision, a thorough Liberation, spiritual and corporal.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he consecrated me with holy oil, in order to bring the good news to the poor; He sent me to announce deliverance to prisoners, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and proclaim a year of the*

*Lord's grace." (Luc 4: 18)*

## ***Goal of the second session***

**To explore the meaning of the Systemic Change  
as a Vincentian concept**

### ***Prayer for systemic change***

*We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the Universe.*

*You have made all things good and have given us the earth to cultivate.*

*Grant that we may always use created things gratefully,  
and share them generously with those in need.*

*Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human needs.*

*Open our minds and hearts so that we might stand at their side*

*and assist them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor.*

*Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them in their struggle for fundamental human rights.*

*We ask this through Christ our Lord. AMEN*

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 5:17-26

*One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."*

*The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

*Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."*

In this Gospel reading we see Jesus completely transforming the life of the paralytic. Notice the part that the man plays in his own transformation. Other people are enlisted to help. At the same time, Jesus gave an answer to the Pharisees and the Scribes.

It is important to reflect together to answer the following questions :

- List the different systems interacting in this story.
- Give your opinion about the impact of Jesus on the life of the paralytic.
- Do you think that the life of the paralytic changed after the miracle ?
- Who else helped the paralytic to recover ?
- Do you think the paralytic was able to reach Jesus without the help of others ?
- Why this story is an example of systemic change ?
- What impact this miracle has on the scribes and Pharisees ?

### ***Saint Vincent and Systemic Change***

Though systemic change is a contemporary idea, unknown in St. Vincent's time, we can find seeds of the idea in his life and works. We see his ability to hold the individual person in his heart at the same time as challenging the authorities of his day, following the example of his Lord, Jesus Christ.

One very good example occurred late in Vincent's life when his movement of charity had become widespread. The original charisma which had started out as an effort to help the poor was turned into a weapon against homeless people. Various social bodies started to copy the ideas of projects that Vincent had begun but did not replicate the spirit behind them. Vincent approached the issues from the angle of a poor person who needed help but those in public office had a political end in view: society had to be protected from the rabble of beggars. Basically these were two very different views of seeing the poor: the Christian view which regarded the poor as an image of the suffering Christ, and the secular view which considered them a threat to the established order. Vincent wanted to help the poor, the politicians wanted to eliminate them.

The Ladies of Charity took up a position somewhere in between and they told Vincent what they had in mind. They would try to set up a large institution which would provide the poor with board and lodgings as well as work for those who were able. They raised all the money and then presented the project to Vincent as the crowning glory of his life-long work. They were amazed when he wanted time to think about it!

He expressed all his reservations and then advised them to proceed very slowly, building the work up gradually, being very careful about the attitudes of those involved in the work. The poor had to enter the institution voluntarily and no-one

was to force them. This was his biggest fear. One of the things that saddened him most about the project was that they planned to exclude anyone who was not from Paris – so refugees and peasants would be forced to return to their places of origin. Paris soaked up a lot of wealth so what right had anyone to prevent poor people from other areas enjoying its benefits?

He had huge reservations about hiding the poor away and shutting them in an institution. A long saga went on about all this until, in spite of all the investment, the parliament took over the project. Vincent was relieved, since at least it would not be in his name. He remained totally unconvinced that this project was the correct way to work with homeless people.

But, to Vincent's dismay, the project continued to haunt him. He discovered by accident that the priests of the Mission had been named chaplains to the project. This was proudly set out in the propaganda leaflet which praised the advantages to the poor and the public that this project would bring. The plan had been put into practice with complete disregard for his views and, what was worse, against his strong conviction that the poor should not be coerced. The decision had been made purely to stop people begging. He deliberated long and hard and consulted his community. In the end they provided some spiritual input for the sake of the poor, but they did not take up the official chaplaincy.

Interestingly, Vincent, out of respect for the authorities did not speak out against the project in public, even when the poor themselves misunderstood and challenged him for having them shut away. The authorities triumphed over removing beggars from the streets and held the project up as the greatest charitable enterprise of the century.

It had never been Vincent's intention to eliminate begging but to get to the roots of the problem and dig them out with love. (Cf. Roman P. 635 ff)

This story demonstrates Vincent extricating himself and his communities from a misappropriated charity, tackling the authorities and refusing to take part –even when pressurized by the poor themselves. Some may see his actions as a failure. What do you think?

### ***Individual Reflection, Sharing & Listening***

- Have you ever faced a similar situation to the one Vincent faced above?
- Does your service operate from a systemic change perspective? Is its mission transformative of systems and individuals?
- How does this speak to your Vincentian heart ?

## ***Reflect together on your own service***

Since Systemic Change is a process which aims at achieving radical transformation in the lives of excluded people as well as process which favors a structural change in the whole system, analyze together :

- A process that aims to achieve a radical transformation in the lives of the excluded.
- A process that favors a structural change in the whole system.

## ***Family wisdom***

*“Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is a human creation and it can be overcome and eradicated by actions of human beings.” (Nelson Mandela)*

*“Charity is not sufficient. It treats the wounds but does not stop the blows that cause them.... Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. It is justice’s role to prevent the attacks.”(Frederic Ozanam)*

*“Our vocation is to go to all parts of the world, and to do what? To set the hearts of all people on fire, to do what the Son of God did – He who came to cast fire on the earth so as to inflame it with his love.” (Vincent)*

## ***Sample Strategies***

**Detection and analysis of strategies for Systemic Changes in use, or that could be used, in your project.**

The following strategies can be applied to any Vincentian project. We esteem that, without these, no project can be considered as a Systemic Change project.

- Start with a serious analysis of the local reality, flowing from concrete data, and tailor all projects to this reality
- Have a holistic vision, addressing a series of basic human needs individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially jobs, health care, housing, education, spiritual growth --- with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development
- Make the project self-sustaining by guaranteeing that it will have the human and economic resources needed for it to last

**Are these strategies part of our ordinary way of acting?**

Carefully analyze the list of successful strategies for change, as formulated by the Commission for Promotion of Systemic Change.

1. Find those that are applied or could be applied to your project.
2. After finding them, suggest in what way(s) they could be applied.
3. What are the challenges to be met?

## ***Vincentian Family Prayer***



*Lord Jesus, you who willed to become poor, give us eyes and a heart directed toward the poor; help us to recognize you in them in their thirst, their hunger, their loneliness, and their misfortune.*

*Enkindle within our Vincentian Family unity, simplicity, humility, and the fire of love that burned in St. Vincent de Paul.*

*Strengthen us, so that, faithful to the practice of these virtues, we may contemplate you and serve you in the person of the poor, and may one day be united with you and them in your Kingdom. AMEN*

**AIC, Against poverty, Acting together**

***Change with Saint Vincent***

**March 2008**

**Reflection n°3**

**The person of the Poor and transformation**

***Goal of the third session***

**To consider the individual's role  
in his or her own transformation**

***Prayer for systemic change***

*We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the Universe.  
You have made all things good and have given us the earth to  
cultivate.*

*Grant that we may always use created things gratefully, and  
share them generously with those in need.*

*Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human  
needs.*

*Open our minds and hearts so that we might stand at their side and assist them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor.*

*Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them in their struggle for fundamental human rights. We ask this through Christ our Lord. AMEN*

***Scripture Reading:*** Luke 8:43-48

*And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. "Who touched me?" Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me." Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.*

In this Gospel the woman is intimately involved in her own recovery. She goes against the social convention of the day and touches Jesus. Here we see empowerment at its best.

The presence of Jesus enables her to seek help actively, and her life is transformed. There are several occasions in Vincent's letters which indicate that his care for people was firstly about attending to their needs as individuals and secondly that the service was not only about relief but essentially about sustainable transformation in their lives and equipping them for the future. Writing to Mark Coglée, superior in Sedan in 1656, Vincent encourages the missionaries to invest in the future of the school children. He urges that, not only should books be bought so that the children who would otherwise not be educated might study, but that means be found for helping them in the long-term. He asks that they be trained in a trade so that their futures are taken care of and they can be independent and self-sufficient. He relies on the Ladies of Charity to provide funding for this and commends their achievements so far.

### ***Individual reflection, Sharing & Listening***

- Can you think of an example of transformation in your own life?
- Did this transformation come from outside or did you have an active role in it?
- Are you aware of the importance of your participation in the service to the poor?
- How does this speak to your Vincentian heart? How does this speak to your Vincentian heart?

## ***Reflect together on your own service***

- Remember that Systemic Change includes involving the individual person in her/his transformation and respond promptly to human needs, while respecting the person's right to determine his/her own future.
- Is your service respectful of the wishes and aspirations of the poor? Does it take his/her opinions into account?
- Describe the process of participation of the poor in the project. Is it full participation or do you just involve them in small services to the group, such as preparing the room, cleaning it, etc?
- Identify, in the list of strategies, those that refer to the participation of the poor and analyze whether they are applied in your project.

As you may realize, these strategies are essential. If possible, to help your remembering them,, make a large poster listing the strategies and place it for everyone to see in the meeting room. This is a useful reminder, for the group as well as for the beneficiaries.

## ***Family wisdom***

*“Above all, be very courteous and gentle with your poor; you know they are our masters and we must love them tenderly and have great respect for them. It is not enough for us to bear these maxims in mind: we must give proof of them by our charitable and gentle attention. By our state of life and profession we are dedicated to this.” (Louise de Marillac)*

*“We have not done enough for God and our neighbor when we have given just food and remedies to the sick. How did Jesus serve the poor? He went from place to place, curing the sick, giving them any money he could afford, and instructing them with a view to their salvation.” (Vincent)*

*“The order of society is based on two virtues: justice and charity. However, justice presupposes a lot of love already, for one needs to love a person a great deal in order to respect their rights.” (Frederic Ozanam)*

*“M. Florent is pressuring us to provide money to buy books for the use of those poor children who are coming to school. Please give one or two écus a month, for three or four months, for that purpose, out of the money that the Ladies send you for the poor.*

*I hope they will approve of this modest outlay, since these children are really poor and could not study otherwise.*

*As for us, we are too poor to furnish these alms. I also think, Monsieur, that it is inadvisable to keep it up; ordinarily, it is*

*not much use for young people to begin the study of Latin when they have no way of making some progress in it, as happens when the parents cannot give them what is necessary. This does not hold, perhaps, for an intelligent boy, who shows he is such by his progress, and who might give some charitable person reason to help him advance.*

*Apart from that, most of them will stop halfway. It is better for them to learn a trade early on; that is the benefit you should procure for those poor children of Sedan. Encourage their parents to apprentice them to a trade, or ask God to inspire the Catholic ladies of the town to do as the ladies in Reims have done. They have banded together to do a number of good works, and they meet weekly to foresee the good they can do and to take measures to do it. Now, they have undertaken the care of poor children with so much success that in less than eight months they have placed nearly 120 of the boys in trade not to mention the girls, several of whom they have also placed in service.*

*If you see any opportunity to persuade your ladies to do the same, a similar success should be hoped for from the goodness of God.” (Vincent)*

The above are mottos of self-promotion and empowerment, which St Vincent put in practice years ago. Are we, women and men of the 21st century, doing the same ?

## ***Strategies Samples***

It is important to promote training sessions during which members of the group, especially the poor themselves, speak with one another of their successes and failures, and exchange their opinions and talents. This will help train efficient volunteers and visionary leaders in the local community, leaders who are inspired by St Vincent de Paul.

Using your list of strategies, identify together those which apply to the participation and empowerment of the poor.

**Are these strategies part of our ordinary way of acting?**

**Share any new insight or action you feel challenged to undertake.**

## ***Vincentian Family Prayer***

*Lord Jesus, you who willed to become poor, give us eyes and a heart directed toward the poor; help us to recognize you in them in their thirst, their hunger, their loneliness, and their misfortune.*

*Enkindle within our Vincentian Family unity, simplicity, humility,*

*and the fire of love that burned in St. Vincent de Paul.*

*Strengthen us, so that, faithful to the practice of these virtues, we may contemplate you and serve you in the person of the poor,*

*and may one day be united with you and them in your Kingdom.*

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Editor: Agnès Dandois

Tel.: 32 (0) 10 45 63 53

mail: [info@aic-international.org](mailto:info@aic-international.org)

[www.aic-international.org](http://www.aic-international.org)

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## **Collaborators for this issue**

### **Redaction :**

*Patricia de Nava*

### **Translation**

*Hélène Bushen*

### **Design**

*Béatrice Dupriez*

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