

“You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14)



TRAINING REFLECTION
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Our AIC identity: Our foundations

Introduction

During the past few months, we have continued to reflect on the identity of AIC, attempting to identify the fundamental characteristics of our movement. This process has given rise to numerous very enriching exchanges and discussions throughout our AIC network.

The purpose of this training reflection is to present four characteristics that summarize the essence of our identity:

1. An international Catholic-inspired non-governmental organization
2. Fidelity to St. Vincent’s charism and spirituality
3. A predominantly women’s movement that supports mostly women
4. Charitable action organized at all levels, from local to international

It is the combination of these characteristics that distinguishes AIC from other associations and charitable movements.

These characteristics come from St. Vincent’s initial project. They have been preserved, and continuously updated and enriched for more than 400 years, thanks to the commitment of thousands of volunteers who have preceded us.

It is important to know them and preserve them so that we in turn can pass them on to the volunteers who follow us in the future, and also so that AIC can continue to carry out the wonderful mission entrusted to us by St. Vincent.

1. An international Catholic-inspired non-governmental organization

a) An international network to transform society

AIC volunteers, present in 56 countries on 4 continents, form an extensive network of about 100,000 members. Their common goal is to act together to tackle all forms of poverty and exclusion, and address their causes.

AIC volunteers work at local level with people living in poverty and in situations of social exclusion. They undertake transformative actions aimed at providing people with decent living





conditions and supporting them in the implementation of their projects so that they are empowered with regards to their own development and that of their communities.

The volunteers are also responsible for raising awareness and alerting society and the Church to the living conditions of the most disadvantaged people in order to tackle the root causes of poverty and eradicate them. To this end, AIC promotes co-responsibility and networking at all levels (local, national and international) in order to create fairer social structures.

AIC, an international association under Belgian civil law, is an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) with representatives in several important international bodies: in UN agencies (ECOSOC - Economic and Social Council of the UN in New York; UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris) and at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France. There, they denounce injustice and poverty, give a voice to the most disadvantaged people, and engage in collective reflection and lobbying activities.

The international dimension of the network¹ is an essential element of our identity, as well as one of our greatest strengths: we are enriched by our cultural diversity and share our talents, skills and experiences to carry out our mission. This enables us to have a greater impact.

b) A lay movement within the Church

Through their charitable work with disadvantaged people, AIC volunteers strive to give life to the Gospel. They participate in the mission of the universal Church in the name of their faith in Jesus Christ, who invites them to bring to the world the Good News of the God who loves us and wants us to be happy. Their actions are part of authentic humanism, which recognizes in each person the image of God and wants to help them to lead their lives with dignity.

The volunteers make each person aware of their own dignity, helping them to discover their own strengths so that they can work together to build a better and fairer world.

At local and national level, the AIC groups collaborate with other parishes, dioceses and church organizations.

At international level, AIC is recognized by the Holy See as an association of lay faithful, with legal personality under Canon Law. Its action, which must be in conformity with the apostolic aims and social doctrine of the Church, thus bears witness to the Charity of Christ in the tradition of St. Vincent de Paul (*Art. 1 and 3 of the Canonical Statutes*). AIC is a member of the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life; the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; the Rome Forum of Catholic-inspired NGOs and the Catholic Centers for International Organizations (CCIC in Paris; CINGO in Strasbourg; United Nations Catholic NGO Forum in New York).

AIC is part of the Vincentian Family, a living and growing community of more than two million people who seek to follow Christ, evangelizer of the poor, according to the model offered by the life of Vincent de Paul and his collaborator Louise de Marillac.

¹ This dates back to 1634, when the first Confraternities of Charity were created in Italy.



Questions to discuss in your groups

- What are the advantages for your group of belonging to an international charitable network such as AIC?
- How could your group benefit even more?

2. Fidelity to St. Vincent's charism and spirituality

AIC's work is based on the charism and spirituality of St. Vincent, which give meaning and value to our actions.

a) Jesus Christ, model of charity

"Lord, if You were in my place, how would you act on this occasion?" (SV, XI, p. 314)

St. Vincent invites us to serve our disadvantaged brothers and sisters with love, taking Jesus Christ as our model of charity. We are called to love them as Christ did, with tenderness, compassion and sharing their pain, something that cannot be achieved without prayer.

"Give me a man of prayer, and he'll be able to do anything." (SV XI, p. 76)

Our commitment as AIC volunteers has as its main objective the lives of the most disadvantaged people. In our action, it is fundamental and essential to get involved and work directly with them, with deep respect, trusting in their values and accompanying them along life's path without wanting to impose our own direction.

For St. Vincent, true charity is directed toward the whole person, both spiritually and materially, which implies supporting the most vulnerable people in a holistic way.

b) Three virtues proposed by St. Vincent

St. Vincent's deep devotion to the Virgin Mary led him to entrust to her the first Confraternity of Charity. For him, Mary is the model of charitable service in the Gospel passage of the Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, as she lets God be the center of her life. Service to the most disadvantaged people is also about making ourselves available to God's action in us, in order to bring God to others. To this end, St. Vincent invites us to imitate Mary by practicing three virtues: humility, simplicity and charity.

Humility consists in recognizing the truth of who we are, our aptitudes, qualities and capacities, and using them for the common good. It is also about recognizing our limitations and the smallness of our being before the greatness of God, in order to be always ready to serve, letting Him act in us.

Humility goes hand in hand with **simplicity**, which consists of transparency, spontaneity and sincerity in word and deed.

Charity is the principal virtue, the one we should privilege, because where we find it, we find God. By allowing ourselves to be inhabited by God, we can serve disadvantaged people with love. For St. Vincent, charity must impel us to action. That is why he strove to help the most



vulnerable people in a dynamic way, respecting their dignity and fostering their development and autonomy through training. To follow his example, we are constantly invited to be creative in the fight against poverty in all its forms.

“Love is inventive to infinity.” (SV XI, p. 131)

St. Vincent also teaches us that there is no true charity without justice. It is justice that impels us to commit ourselves to the most vulnerable people, defending their rights and fighting against the causes of their poverty so that we all may enjoy decent living conditions.

Questions to discuss in your groups

- What feature(s) of Vincentian spirituality most strike(s) you?
- Which one(s) would you most like to practice in your service as a volunteer and within your AIC group?

3. A predominantly women’s movement that supports mostly women

a) This is a constant element that has characterized us since our origins

When St. Vincent launched his appeal to help a destitute family during his homily one Sunday in August 1617 in Châtillon les Dombes (France), it was women who came to the family’s aide in large numbers. Understanding that it was necessary to organize this abundant generosity in order to make it effective and lasting, St. Vincent founded the first “Confraternity of Charity”, whose members were the “servants of the Poor”.

“[People living in poverty] have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons.” (SV XIII b, p. 8)

In entrusting this service of charity to women, St. Vincent was being very innovative for his time. For more than 400 years, the groups have multiplied and, although in several countries there are fruitful collaborations with men, AIC’s groups remain predominantly female. Consequently, over the centuries, AIC has developed a feminine way of being and acting.

Being attentive to the most disadvantaged people, AIC has naturally focused on supporting women and their children. Even today, more than 60% of the people living in extreme poverty are women (*Oxfam France, March 3, 2023*).

b) A specific contribution to the empowerment of the most disadvantaged women and to the promotion of gender equality

Developing equality as well as promoting and spreading women’s rights remains an important and topical need for social, political, evangelizing and Vincentian action. Mobilizing for the cause of women and their active participation in society is essential if we want to build a world of solidarity, free from the injustice of poverty.

AIC has first-hand knowledge of the difficulties faced by the most disadvantaged women and helps them to know what their fundamental rights are and how they can access them,



whatever their culture. AIC also makes their voices heard in international organizations to ensure that equality between men and women is recognized and respected everywhere.

Putting the ideal of charity into practice in this way, with a particular and priority emphasis on the empowerment of women and equal relationships between men and women, is an important and original contribution that AIC makes to the Vincentian Family, the Church and society.

Questions to discuss in your groups

- What forms of poverty do women in your area face most frequently?
- What actions do you or could you take in your group to help these women achieve greater autonomy and greater equality?

4. Charitable action organized at all levels, from local to international

a) Volunteers organized in groups

St. Vincent realized immediately that, to be effective, charity must be organized. That is why, on August 23, 1617, he drew up the first regulations for the newly established “Confraternity of Charity”. The work has always been done by members who work together as a team, which multiplies their impact: each one contributes her time, her energy and her talents, and guarantees the continuity of the action over time. Our differences make us complementary and enrich the group, which is a community of faith, work, exchange and friendship. Trust and respect among its members, as well as good coordination, guarantee its cohesion and smooth functioning.

“They will cherish one another as persons whom Our Lord has united and bound together by His love.” (SV XIII b, p. 7)

Tasks, responsibilities and positions are not permanent. There should be a periodic rotation of them, which creates development opportunities for both individuals and the group.

AIC is structured around local groups that respond to situations of suffering detected in their environment. These groups are brought together into 56 national associations, which combined form the AIC network.

b) Committed, responsible and competent AIC volunteers

AIC volunteer work is demanding and requires **commitment**. The volunteers’ commitment is made freely and takes into account their motivations, their abilities and their availability in terms of health and time, in order to guarantee the continuity and effectiveness of actions.

Once committed, volunteers are **accountable for** doing what they have committed to. Acting responsibly directly creates trust among the other members of the group, the people being supported and any partner organizations.

By committing themselves to serve, volunteers assume the responsibility of continuous training. Following the example of St. Vincent, AIC considers that the **ongoing training** of each



volunteer is an essential condition for being able to support the most disadvantaged people, especially when actions are carried out with people who are vulnerable. For this reason, the volunteers receive ongoing technical, interpersonal and spiritual training, adapted to the different needs identified locally. This training focuses in particular on the multiple dimensions of the causes and effects of poverty, as well as on the participation and empowerment of the people affected.

At international level, AIC's leaders provide training in several languages to the network's volunteers and encourage the exchange of experiences and best practices. The aim is to improve working methods in order to have a greater impact at local level. The training is made available either online (bi-monthly training reflections, AIC Diploma) or in person (international assemblies, continental seminars), and is passed on to the groups by the national leaders.

"It is not enough to do good, you have to do it well."

Questions to discuss in your groups

- Over time and as a result of the training you have received and your experiences at local level and in your group, what changes have you noticed in the way you fulfil your commitment as an AIC volunteer?
- In a very concrete way, how does the training you receive help you to generate changes in the lives of the people you support (especially with regards to their empowerment)?

Sources consulted

- AIC Charter
- AIC Diploma
- "The Spirit of AIC" (Patricia de Nava, 1995)
- "The Visibility of AIC", training booklets n°14 and 15, October 2009
- "AIC, Our Association", training booklet n°22, October 2013
- "AIC, a Female or Mixed Association?" (Fr. Eli Chaves dos Santos, CM, 2013)
- "The Seven Fundamentals of Vincentian Groups" (Chantal Crépey, 2024)

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