

Reflection, Action and the Double Transformation

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Abstract

An examination of the ‘Jocist’ reflection/action method as a tried and tested means of effective social transformation as well as profound personal transformation for the individual. Widely recognised for its efficacy as a tool used among young workers and students, the reflection/action method is equally valuable in animating lay women and men, of all ages, in the much neglected work of the lay apostolate and the task of being a ‘leaven’ in the world (Lumen Gentium N31).

Keywords

Cardijn; Jocist; Young Christian Workers; See, Judge, Act; Lay Apostolate; Lay Ministry; double transformation; evangelisation; mission

Introduction

The Jocist method of ‘See, Judge and Act’, (Manuel de la JOCF 1926, Cardijn 1938) encompasses three inter-related phases – to ‘See is to closely examine the reality of experience. What is happening in a situation? Who is affected? Who is able to bring about change? To ‘Judge’ is to apply the Gospel lens to the situation. Where does this reality align with the Gospel? Where is it at odds with the vision of God’s Kingdom? What would Jesus do in this situation? To ‘Act’ is to work within spheres of influence to transform the reality into the image of the Gospel. This profoundly holistic approach can be applied with equal effect from the simplest of inter-personal situations to complex social issues and has served to provide a means of formation for literally millions of Catholics, across the world, in the last century.

Despite the proven efficacy of this method of reflection and action, it has evidently fallen from favour or gone out of fashion, particularly among the Churches of the Global North. This paper, in presenting just one aspect of this method, seeks to spark an interest in rediscovering such an instrument in these ‘kairos’ moments of human history.

See, Judge, Act and the Lay Apostolate

November 21, 2024, marked the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of Lumen Gentium, a remarkable document for many reasons, not the least of which is its affirmation of the mission and vocation of lay people, in and through their lives and activities in the secular world (Pope Paul VI 1964). This affirmation, emphatically articulated in Chapter 4 of Lumen Gentium is

the basis for what has come to be known as the lay apostolate (Pope Paul VI 1965). It was also the confirmation of the work of the Jocist movements and their founder Cardinal Joseph Cardijn who, for the decades before Vatican II, had been systematically following a method of See, Judge and Act, using this to transform their realities in the secular milieu, in the light of the Gospel, while, at the same time, effectively transforming themselves in the likeness of Christ (Cardijn 1938). The influence of the Jocist method is unmistakably evident in the documents of Vatican II and, similarly, it has profoundly shaped the approach of Pope Francis through the work of CELAM the Latin American Bishops Conferences, especially in Medellin in 1968, Puebla in 1979, and Aparecida in 2007 (CELAM 2024). Yet, despite the emphasis on this lay mission and vocation at Vatican II and despite the remarkable achievements of Cardijn and the Jocist movements, the notion of the lay apostolate has all but disappeared from ecclesial consciousness .

The notion of lay apostolate has, effectively, been replaced by that of lay ministry. Where once lay people were formed to make a difference in the world these lay people are now formed to take on roles in liturgy, pastoral work and church governance (XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024). While these spheres have value, in their own right, they should not be the focus of lay vocation at the expense of the essential vocation of lay people as a leaven in the world (Pope Paul VI 1964) . This shift from lay apostolate to lay ministry has profound implications for the task of evangelisation as it changes the focus of the lay vocation from a transformative, outward looking engagement, with the world, to an insular, maintenance focused support structure, for a clerical centred Church.

Coinciding with the shift in emphasis from lay apostolate to lay ministry has been the gradual withdrawal of support for lay movements from the Diocesan, National and International Church structures. This has had a devastating effect on the Jocist movements in the Western World which are now little more than a shadow of their former selves. This could be viewed as a necessary and inevitable transition, as the world changes, so must the Church and that the withdrawal of support for the Jocist movements is but a reflection of that transition. Some have argued that we are now in a post-Cardijn Church (Cornish 2024) where new approaches such as spiritual conversation (XVI Synod General Assembly 2023) are replacing the Jocist method of See, Judge and Act.

Lay Mission, Evangelisation and a New Epoch

There is no doubt that this is a time of transition. Pope Francis himself has said that “we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change” (Pope Francis 2015b, 2). Yet, rather than engaging with the heart of this revolutionary change, Church communities are evidently withdrawing within their own cloisters and focusing on ministerial maintenance rather than apostolic mission. If the Church today is indeed post-Cardijn then where is the new movement that will propel lay people into the world and where is the formation that will enable them to work together to transform this world with the power of the Gospel? Certainly, it will not come from the focus of lay ministry on liturgy, pastoral work and church governance.

In his encyclical letter on evangelisation Pope Paul VI posed three critical questions which have something of an ominous resonance fifty years later. He asked:

“— In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience?

— To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century?

— What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?”

(Pope Paul VI 1975 N 4)

In Australia about 20% of the population, of 27 million, identify as Catholics. Of those, about 9% (National Centre for Pastoral Research 2019, 2024) are present in their local parish community. That means less than 2% of the Australian population are hearing the Gospel within the embrace of the Church. Evidently, this this is very similar to situation in much of the Global North. So what does this say for the work of evangelisation?

It has often been observed that the Church is 99% lay people and that the vocation and mission of a lay person is lived out 99% in the world (Barron 2023). If evangelisation is to be effective then it must engage the lay person, the 99%, in and through the social milieu where they live the 99% of their lives. It is not, and cannot be, through forming lay people as lectors, cantors and acolytes, nor can it be through forming them in ecclesial governance so they can serve effectively on a board or a committee. These roles are important, of course, but they do little, if anything, to progress the task of evangelisation, and the reality of lay people’s lives ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world, remains virtually untouched.

The focus on the mission and vocation of lay people, as agents of the Gospel in the secular domain, is clearly and consistently set out in Church teaching. *Lumen Gentium* 31 refers to the role of the laity as the “sanctification of the world from within as a leaven” (Pope Paul VI 1964 N 31) while the decree on the Lay Apostolate (Pope Paul VI 1965) speaks of renewing the temporal order. Decades later, following the 1987 Synod on the mission and vocation of the laity, Pope John Paul II renewed the call to be “present and active in the world” (1988 N 15). Pope Paul VI insists that evangelisation does not stop with bringing a message of love to an individual. “For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (Pope Paul VI 1975 N 18).

The socially transformative character of true evangelisation will only be effective when it is conveyed in ways that resonate with the experience of the listener. That is, with contextual care and cultural awareness. The Apostle Paul was the master of such inculturation, heralding Jesus as the fulfilment of the Torah to the Hebrews (Acts 13:14-52), and as the mystery of the unknown god to the Greeks (Acts 17:22-23), while at all times proclaiming the liberating heart of the Gospel.

This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about

international life, peace, justice and development — a message especially energetic today about liberation. (Pope Paul VI 1975 N 29)

Pope Francis speaks of the need for ecological conversion (Pope Francis 2015a), however, when this is examined more closely it can be seen that he is, in fact, calling for an anthropological conversion, a change of heart both personal and societal that sees a radical recalibration of what it means to live fully human lives in community with one another and in harmony with all of God's creation.

The Double Transformation

In this context, it is appropriate to examine the notion of the 'double transformation' which is seen as an integral part of the formative process among the Jocist movements and stands out as a critical element of effective evangelisation. To illustrate this notion a recent example will be used, drawn from the Young Christian Workers Movement in the Diocese of Parramatta (Parramatta Young Christian Workers 2024).

In this instance some young YCW (Jocist) leaders had encountered a group of international students who were working on a construction site to support themselves while studying. Tragically, some of these young people had not been paid for their work when an employment agent vanished, leaving them destitute in an unfamiliar world. These young people, newly arrived in Australia, did not know where to go for help and were unaware of their rights, as workers, in Australia. Thus, they were vulnerable to exploitation such as the wage theft they experienced. The young Jocist leaders worked with these international students to identify the business concerned and with the help of Trade Union officials they were able to recover the stolen wages and provide some relief for these international students.

This step, in and of itself, was a pleasing outcome. A reinstatement of stolen wages, an act of solidarity with vulnerable migrants, an example of the Gospel in action in and through the secular milieu of these young lay people. However, this was only the beginning.

As part of their See, Judge and Act process, the Jocist leaders recognised that this situation of wage theft was not an isolated instance and that international students were vulnerable to many forms of exploitation, especially if they sought work in unregulated sectors to help meet their living costs.

While it was satisfying for the young Jocist leaders to have helped these particular international students recover their lost wages, their reflection led them to understand that further action was needed to protect other vulnerable young people from being exploited in their workplace. This reflection resulted in further action where seminars were held to educate young workers about their rights in the work place and to identify where they could get support if these rights were being violated (Parramatta Young Christian Workers 2023a). This action was also supported through a social media campaign named 'Worker Wednesday' where the young Jocist leaders provided regular updates with crucial information safeguarding worker's rights (Parramatta Young Christian Workers 2023b).

These actions were transformative for scores of young workers and had the potential to flow out to many more. Additionally, the actions also had a profoundly transformative effect on the young Jocist leaders who worked for this change through their See, Judge and Act approach.

The double transformation recognises that, as an activist engages with their social reality, seeking the transform it through the lens of the Gospel, they are, likewise themselves undergoing a transformation, as they learn about themselves, realise their capacity to bring about change, and experience growth in discipleship that can only come from active engagement. This type of transformation cannot be achieved through a course of study or a program of reflection. It arises uniquely when a disciple of Christ, reflects on the reality of their experience, applies the Gospel lens to the situation and acts to bring about change.

Having engaged in this cycle of reflection and action, the agent of change finds themselves changed. They are newly empowered, newly aware, newly motivated and newly transformed. Through the experience of this double transformation they have been formed into a more effective and more motivated agent of evangelisation and through their work for social change they have transformed the reality of others, bringing the light of the Gospel to situations of injustice and exploitation.

There is one further piece of critical information to note about the young Jocist leaders and their workers' rights action. All of this happened beyond the realm of the lay ministry. It happened in the world of the 99% where true evangelisation must be focused. For the international students who suffered the wage theft and for the scores of young people who learned about their rights at work, there is no other connection to the Church or to the Gospel. They are not attending Mass on a Sunday, they are not in a Parish Youth Group and they will not be found among the crowds at a World Youth Day event. Some might be Catholic, in name only, though many are not.

This is truly an image of evangelisation in today's world and it is one that ought to be repeated in every city and town supported by every Parish and Diocese, however, it is becoming increasingly rare as institutional support is progressively withdrawn from the Jocist movements.

So where is the new movement that will propel lay people into the world and where is the formation that will enable them to work together to transform this world with the power of the Gospel? Where is the initiative that will enable such examples of grass roots evangelisation to flourish? Significant amounts of money are given over to support lay ministry initiatives which do little more than satisfy the needs of some of those already present in the Church pews (Mason 2010). At the same time, lay movements, such as those of the Jocist tradition, continue to do heroic work, in the real world, with little or no support from Parishes, Dioceses or Ecclesial Conferences.

It is hard to find other examples, in the Australian context, where lay women and men are systematically engaged in intentional processes of formation leading them to reflect on their own temporal reality. Then, through the lens of the Gospel, to collaborate with others in transformative actions that help God's kingdom to be realised in our world. There are, no doubt,

other inspiring examples, however, they exist in the absence of a planned, systematic and resourced program of formation for engagement with the temporal order (Flannery 1996).

Conclusion

If the work of evangelisation is to flourish then it must move beyond the realms of liturgy, ministry and Church governance and it must embrace the secular world as its primary and fundamental focus. This is the place of the lay person and this is the essence of the lay mission and vocation. Cardinal Cardijn demonstrated, well and truly, how this could be done and for the decades that followed, the young people of the Jocist movements lived this mission with energy and passion. In recent years this has been waning with a lack of institutional support. The Church today and the people of our world, whom she serves, are so much the poorer for this occurrence. There is a critical need to discover anew the transformative power of See, Judge and Act as a means of propelling lay people into the world where they may, once again, become effective instruments of evangelisation as humankind embrace this new epoch of humanity with challenges and opportunities not yet imagined.

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