

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED FORMATION FOR JPIC

Introduction

JPIC is **not just one area or even one dimension** of the Church's mission to the world. It is, I would argue, **at the very heart of what all mission or ministry** in the name of Christ and his Gospel is all about. If concern for, and the active promotion of, a more just, peaceful and environmentally healthy world, is not central to what we are doing in our varied apostolates, then we cannot in truth say we are witnesses and proclaimers of the integral Gospel of Christ. This means that formation for JPIC has to be much more than a specialized training programme for a few members of Religious Congregations or Missionary Institutes who undertake JPIC work as their specific and full time apostolates. It has to be an integral and coherent formation for all who are called to be witness of Christ and of God's reign in today's world.

Three Dimensions of Formation for JPIC

As I see it there are **three essential and interrelated dimensions** in formation for JPIC work

- a) Experiencing the world(s) of the excluded and marginalized
- b) Reflecting on, and understanding the world from the perspective of that experience
- c) Working in solidarity with the poor and marginalized in action programmes directed to the transformation of the world

While these three dimensions for JPIC formation cannot be separated, they are distinct, each dimension having its own proper methods and goals. The first dimension (with the emphasis on experience) employs the method of **exposure** to the world(s) of the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, etc, and is directed to the goal of **empathy with the victims of injustice** and the ability **to see the world** from their perspective. The second dimension is more intellectual and analytical. It uses the

methods of **intellectual enquiry, orderly research, and sustained reflection**. It aims at understanding the world from the perspective of the victims of injustice (and seeks out the root causes of injustice). The third dimension (solidarity) develops **appropriate action programmes** and is directed towards the transformation of the world or moving it in the direction in which God wants it to move.

A. Experience and Exposure

Experiencing the world of the poor and the marginalized must be the starting point and constant point of reference for all JPIC formation. This is very much in line with the “preferential option for the poor” adopted as the principal criterion of apostolic commitment by many religious and missionary Congregations twenty years ago. One does not hear much about this option today, but in my judgement it is just as relevant as ever. It is **an option that flows from, and gives expression to, God’s chosen path of loving involvement with his children**. It is a concrete living out of the beatitudes of Christ and an imitation of his missionary methods. It is from the standpoint of the poor and the excluded that we begin to perceive God’s ways and to align ourselves with God’s project for humanity. But there is no way we can experience the world(s) of the poor and excluded without being exposed to those worlds.

In the past most religious and missionary formation took place within secure, comfortable and tranquil centres of formation, far removed from the turmoil and scramble of most people’s lives, especially the lives of the poor. I am not sure that we have moved away from this kind of formation setting to any significant degree, and it certainly not easy to do so. Even formation centres established in more recent times in Africa and Asia, have not chosen to break away from the traditional kind of formation setting. If anything today’s formation centres are more comfortable than they were in the past.

The principle of exposure to the world of the poor and marginalized entails **entering into the places they inhabit, identifying with their fears and hopes, their**

frustrations and struggles, their sorrows and joys (just as Christ did). From such exposure we may learn to feel with (empathise with) those who live on the margins of society politically and economically, and to see the world from their perspective. In the early stages of formation, I believe the emphasis should be on this kind of exposure leading to empathy and solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

B. Reflecting and Understanding

All experience requires interpretation. Experience of the world(s) of the poor and marginalized is no exception. While important, it is **not enough to feel empathy with the poor and marginalized**. It is vitally important **to learn how to read and understand the world from their perspective**. This reading is to be carried out, first of all, in the light of the Gospel and the Christian tradition and **also**, I submit, in the light of the specific charism and tradition of each particular Congregation or Institute. I emphasise **also**, because it is **the Gospel of Christ that is the primary hermeneutic key**, not the particular charism of the Institute.

Intellectual formation, especially in initial formation programmes, should aim at providing candidates not just with data nor with ready-made answers to the problems experienced, but with the tools, the methods that will enable them to interpret and understand the reality of the world they have experienced at first hand (i.e. the world, viewed from the perspective of the marginalized and excluded). At the same time, it is crucial that certain basic information is communicated, especially in regard to the critical imbalances that afflict our world in the areas of economics, politics, social relationships, gender relationships and our relationship with the natural environment. This is still not done in many centres of formation. Specific courses on these issues may be required to complement and concretise the usual programmes of theological, spiritual and pastoral studies. Furthermore candidates in initial formation must be encouraged and facilitated to carry out their own research on specific issues (e.g. evaluation of a particular aid programme, treatment of refugees in a particular area, examples of conflict resolution, etc).

A merely intellectual understanding of the world, however, is insufficient. As Christians, we ought to have an understanding that unites heart and head, spirit and intellect. Hence, personal, spiritual and pastoral formation of candidates must accompany their intellectual formation and be integrated with it.

C. Action for Change in Solidarity with the Poor

As servants of the Gospel of Christ, our mission is not just to understand the world but also to change it, to transform it in the light of, and in line with, the demands of God's advancing reign. Our faith in the Resurrected one leads us to a **prophetic discontent with the *status quo* for the sake of the world's promised future**. Hence formation for JPIC must include initiation into the skills and practical know-how required to become effective agents of social change. In the past a great deal of attention was given in formation programmes to the knowledge and skills needed for spiritual and pastoral ministries. Too often, however, the manner in which candidates were trained for priestly service prepared them poorly for even these ministries, and so they tended to exercise it in a paternalistic and autocratic manner. Nowadays, it is I think fair to say that most, if not all, formation programmes include listening and relationship skills and prepare candidates for shared leadership. There is also need for training in the skills required to become effective agents of change in the socio-economic arena. I am speaking here of agents who are **able to motivate people, to let their voices be heard, and to work alongside them in action programmes they themselves choose**. While only a small number with the necessary aptitude may be trained in the techniques of advocacy a basic understanding of economic and political systems should be a requirement for all.

Ongoing Formation

Formation is a life-long process of conversion and growth, of attuning ourselves ever more perfectly to the mind and heart of Christ in our apostolic commitments. While

most religious Congregations and Institutes have made considerable progress in providing their members with opportunities for pastoral updating and personal renewal, ongoing formation of JPIC commitment is I believe dismally inadequate. This explains why the promotion of JPIC is viewed as a specialised ministry and left to a few individuals. Many religious and missionaries have little or no awareness of what JPIC work entails and feel ill-equipped to become involved. I suggest that the following programmes can be easily arranged and offered to all members at local level.

1. The Social teaching of the Church.

It is often said that this is the Church's best kept secret, a secret hidden not only from lay people but from many sisters, brothers and priests. This could be presented by combining lectures and seminars. The basic aim of this course would be to enable participants to see that commitment to JPIC is an ecclesial imperative that lies at the very core of Gospel witness and proclamation.

2. Social Analysis Sessions

These sessions aim at enabling participants to reflect in a systematic way on their experiences of injustice and, using the findings of the social sciences, to identify the causes of injustice and expose the structures of oppression in society, and finally, but most importantly, to indicate, how Gospel values can be translated into practical goals for the creation of a more just world. There are several guidelines for conducting such sessions. I mention here a small booklet in English, written by Sean J. Healy and Bridget Reynolds, entitled *Social Analysis in the Light of Gospel*, 1989.

3. Training for Transformation

This is an adult education which seeks to promote social change by empowering the participants to identify radical and structural solutions to the problems of poverty, injustice and environmental exploitation. It employs the psycho-social method made famous by Paulo Friere – a method which starts from the feelings of the participants (the 'psycho' part) and motivates them to become involved in

action for change (the social part). The basic principle of the method is that the agents of human liberation are the people themselves.

4. JPIC Retreats

Normally religious involved in active apostolates are encouraged to do retreats in some quiet remote location, and spend time with the Lord (away from people). But there are other ways of doing a retreat which may be just as effective in deepening our conversion to Christ and his Gospel. One such way is to live for a week among the poor or marginalized, inviting them to speak their own word to us. This could be done in small groups. The group then reflects in prayer in late in discussion on their experience during this exposure.

Conclusion

Formation for Justice, Peace and Care for Creation is not a political agenda nor an organising tool for such an agenda. Its central concern is with cultivating a fundamental attitude grounded in Christian love. It is about inculcating an authentic and integrated Gospel perspective on what mission means in the complex and interdependent world which we inhabit today. It is a formation that not only stimulates but empowers candidates to proclaim effectively and embody concretely the full Gospel of Christ in the one diverse human family and the one global reality of our time and history.

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