

Towards a Spirituality of JPIC Animation.

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Introduction

The Church has proclaimed the importance of Christian commitment to the transformation of the world to the likeness of the Lord (Cf. Centesimus Annus, 5). The JPIC animator helps create awareness of suffering and injustices in the world, by being himself sensitive and aware of the effects of intolerance and greed on the most vulnerable, as well as encouraging gospel initiatives to alleviate pain and tackle the underlying causes of exclusion. He/She cannot achieve this alone.

As well as fraternal and institutional support, he/she needs a strong and developing spirituality. I would like to highlight eight aspects towards such a spirituality.

1. Animator

The principal responsibility of a JPIC coordinator (commission) is to encourage religious to become involved with Justice and Peace issues and not just do the work themselves. The activist does what needs to be done. The animator must convince religious; by word, deed and ideas that JPIC is an integral part of their vocation and not an optional extra. Every religious is responsible for the personal and fraternal living out of the JPIC values. It is not the exclusive responsibility of those who happen to be named.

There is a danger of placing labels on people: she is in youth ministry; she is in social ministry or family ministry etc. We need to distribute responsibilities, but at the same time, be aware of the dangers of confining the work to those named. It is regularly stated: “every religious is responsible for vocations!” We believe the theory, but in practice everything is left to the religious appointed. When he/she is successful everyone is responsible, but when he/she fails, he/she is alone.

If the JPIC commission ignores its animation role, JPIC in the life and ministries of the Religious Institute will not develop well.

A JPIC animator must ask at least three questions:

- What am I doing/proposing to encourage the inclusion of JPIC values, projects etc., into the daily life of the religious community and their pastoral work?
- How can I support religious with a particular JPIC ministry?
- What other issues does the commission need to address, which the Province/local religious community is unwilling or unable to assume just yet?

The leadership often agree that JPIC is an integral and constitutive part of the charism. JPIC animation requires that we first open ourselves and our communities to the excluded of the world, listen attentively to the cry of the poor and be moved by the face of the crucified, poor and humble Jesus in today’s leper. If JPIC animation is understood as first solving inequalities and injustices within religious communities and then looking outward, it is a grossly mistaken notion. How can we compare injustices experienced by the vast majority of humanity to those, however alarming, within our religious communities? If we succeed in being touched by the suffering of the excluded, many of our structures, ministries and those to whom we minister will be called into question.

2. Love of Jesus

What sustains a JPIC animator in his/her commitment? Personally the focus narrows down to love of Jesus and love of the poor; symbolized in a photo in the OFM-JPIC Rome office of a little barefoot refugee boy walking with a sack on his back, containing all his earthly possessions, with a caption: “He got in the way of somebody’s war”. The JPIC animator is called to serve Jesus in the most vulnerable and excluded of our world by animating the brothers and sisters to live JPIC values and include them in their ministries.

The JPIC animator must cultivate a strong relationship with Jesus Christ. Unless he/she possesses a solid, balanced and consistent prayer life, h/she will eventually burn out, become disillusioned, resentful and/or lose a balanced perspective. JPIC animators are not social workers. When a JPIC animator leaves the Institute it has institutional consequences, delaying the process for JPIC to be assumed as a constitutive part of the religious vocation.

Young brothers and sisters, enthusiastic about the social dimension of the gospel, passionate about the struggle for a better world, are a delight and at the same time a source of worry for me. Delight, because it is a positive sign for the future of their institute and a worry because it implies commitment involving risk and misunderstanding, which lead many to opt for other ways of serving the poor and the disadvantaged of our world outside the Institute.

3. Love of the Brothers

The best JPIC animator is not necessarily the most capable or technically prepared, but one who loves the brothers and sisters, despite their resistance and lack of response to JPIC values. Weakness can lead a brother or sister to ask for support and show real appreciation on receiving it. This is the basis of collaborative ministry. The animator who loves the brothers and sisters will be looking for ways to encourage, coax and urge them towards a deeper involvement with the excluded. Brothers or sisters will not be bullied, forced or shamed into action. Every brother and sister in every apostolate and at every stage of his/her life is doing something related to JPIC, even though it may not have such a label. A respectful animator recognizes these aspects and builds on them. Animation is a labour of love.

4. Love of the poor and excluded

Helder Camera, underlines a vital quality for a JPIC animator. He said: “When I give bread to the hungry they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor have no bread they call me a subversive.” Love of the poor is central to JPIC animation work. It is not an exclusive love, but one that channels most energies, resources, efforts and projects for and with the poor in their struggles for life and dignity. As well as supporting emergency humanitarian needs, the animator must encourage reflection, whereby questions relating to unjust structures are addressed.

5. Collaborative Spirit

A true collaborative spirit needs to be worked on. There seems to be a dichotomy between the language and reality of collaboration at many levels in religious institutes. How can we recognize a religious with a collaborative spirit?

A brother/sister who has a collaborative spirit: *Constantly consults others; Plans with others; Recognizes the importance of working with others; Delegates responsibility; Evaluates the work regularly; Understands leadership in terms of service and not from the perspective of power and prestige; Empowers others to*

assume responsibility; is happy when someone succeeds at a task and is even happier when the job is done more satisfactorily by others;cConstantly encourages others in their work and acknowledges their efforts; supports others in times of failure;flexible in implementing agreed upon processes; values involvement more than success in the work; believes in the dignity, capacity and equality of others; is patient in the face of obstacles.

6. Lifestyle

A JPIC animator who struggles to personally live the JPIC dimension of his/her vocation will have a greater chance of acceptance by brothers and sisters and have his/her discourse taken more seriously. Love of the poor, closeness to them, support of their organizations and their causes, as well as a genuine effort to live simply, is essential for a JPIC animator. Everyone entrusted with JPIC animation must evaluate his or her own lifestyle. It is helpful to do the evaluation in a

constructively critical and fraternal atmosphere. Blatant contradictions need to be rectified, or at least worked on. A sincere effort cannot be faulted. Nobody expects perfection, but few brothers and sisters will easily forgive unattended contradictions. Where we live, what we possess, who we associate with, on what we spend our money, who our friends are, point to a deeper reality within. How we react to provocation and contradiction is a pointer to our inner peace and non-violent approach. Do we participate fully in community life? Do we assume our share of responsibilities? Is our zeal for the far away poor, sick and excluded matched by our compassion for the sick, elderly brothers/sisters, as well as “difficult” brothers/sisters. What do we do to show we really reverence creation?

7. Networking

Many brothers/sisters do excellent pastoral work. Their hard work often leads to exhaustion and stress. The importance of networking is not always widely appreciated. Many JPIC coordinators miss valuable opportunities, both nationally and internationally, to connect with other people and groups working on similar issues. They fail to appreciate the importance of international solidarity and networking for the benefit of the excluded.

A regular complaint about religious members of bigger congregations is their self-sufficient attitude and inability to network. They fail to support inter-religious groups, NGOs and other people involved in similar struggles. A lot of repetitive work is done; where a better and more intelligent use of resources would be more effective.

Decisions affecting people are mostly taken at other levels outside of their control. National and International decisions will eventually affect the poor we serve. We must try to influence these decisions in the light of the gospel and the social teaching of the Church. This is the underlying reason for our presence of many religious NGOs. The JP commission of the Episcopal conference in South Africa has four full time professionals working on policy documents related to economic and social policies. Their contributions are so valuable that the national government invites their contribution to legislative policy papers. This work is truly an integral part of evangelization. It is imperative we try to constructively influence Government policy before it negatively affects the poor we serve.

8. Ongoing Formation

Most JPIC coordinators have no formal training. Many are passionate about issues affecting the poor, have practical experiences, but lack knowledge and technique. Our theological and philosophical training often does not equip us to deal with or understand some complex mechanisms affecting people and the environment. A good missionary learns from experience. JPIC animators are in a similar situation: limited experience, some knowledge and enormous challenges. The JPIC Resource-book and other resources were developed to help animators, but they are no panacea. The JPIC animator needs to keep abreast of current affairs, listen to critical analysis of events and apply gospel principles to them. Courses should be undertaken in economics, the social doctrine of the church, Law, Ecology and Human Rights, etc. Most JPIC animators have many other responsibilities. Long-term courses are often not realistic.

Conclusion

Much progress is being made in the animation of JPIC values in the religious Institutes, with countless excellent initiatives taking place. It has been stated, and it is an unfortunate reality, that the Church’s Social Teaching is her best-kept secret. The JPIC animator should not expect this work to be readily appreciated or understood, even if there are endless gospel justifications, as well as arguments from our sources pointing to the importance of JPIC values. The JPIC animator needs to be personally convinced that the work of the incorporation of JPIC values into the life and ministries of the brothers/sisters is indispensable for building up God’s Kingdom and without which

the Good News would have little or no relevance. The animator helps sow the seeds of the Kingdom and the Lord brings results in His own good time. Defeatist attitudes have no part in the profile of a good JPIC animator. When some animation strategy is unsuccessful or meets with resistance a good evaluation is needed, with a desire to return to formulate new proposals. The animator searches for solutions and is not crushed or disappointed by the enormity of the challenges. When we recognize ourselves as God's instruments and that we only partially contribute to the solution we become freer to act.