

# THE PASTORAL CIRCLE: BACKGROUND AND USE

For several decades, church pastoral workers have followed the "see, judge, act" methodology introduced by the Cardijn-related movements (e.g., Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Students). This method is a popular approach that gets the pastoral workers to reflect on their experience in the light of their faith, before responding in practical ways.

It was a desire to sharpen the approach of this method by including more explicit attention to analysis that gave rise to what has been widely referred to as the "pastoral circle." The work at the Center of Concern in Washington, DC, that Joe Holland and I did in the late 1970's and early 1980's in socio-economic-cultural research, writing, workshops, etc., found a focus in the book *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Originally published in 1980, the book went into a revised and enlarged edition in 1983.<sup>1</sup>

*Social Analysis* has been an immensely popular book worldwide. The first edition sold nearly 50,000 copies; the new edition went into a twelfth printing in September 1995, with over 30,000 copies now in circulation. The book has been translated into several languages, including French, Portuguese, Japanese, and Indonesian.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE "PASTORAL CIRCLE"

At the heart of *Social Analysis* is the "Pastoral Circle." As we developed it in our original explanations, we saw it as an integral approach to emphasize the relationship between reflection and action. We knew that it was related to what authors like Paulo Freire refer to as *praxis*, or reflection based on experience, an experience shaped by reflection. Hence it could also be referred to as the "circle of praxis." Moreover, it was related to what liberation theologians like Juan Luis Segundo call the "hermeneutic circle," the interpretative method that raises new questions to older explanations because of contact with new situations.

The four moments of the Circle we originally called "experience," "social analysis," "theological reflection," and "pastoral planning." We were emphasizing that our approach to the promotion of justice linked with faith had to begin with the lived reality of the people, move deeper into an understanding of the root causes of situation, reflect on our findings in the light of our faith and then respond with effective action. But two insights gave rise to new emphases in the second edition of the book, insights that came from our friends who made use of the "pastoral circle."

First, Professor Gregory Baum, a Canadian theologian and good personal friend, who has, among many other contributions, developed significantly the dialogue between the social sciences and theology, called our attention to an extremely important fact. This is that "experience" is never simply "raw experience," unmediated

by the interpretations that we place upon it. Hence to put "experience" as a single moment in the "pastoral circle" presents an inaccurate picture and could lead to faulty explanations of reality. In the second edition of *Social Analysis*, we therefore redesigned the Pastoral Circle to show that the four moments, or elements, of our approach are all mediations of experience. We placed "experience" in the centre of our circle, and renamed the first moment "insertion," the lively contact with the experienced reality that is being analysed, reflected upon and responded to.

Second, my colleague Joe Holland emphasised another point, that the process of moving around the Circle needed to be done in an atmosphere of celebration, infused with an ethos of prayer. The more intellectual elements of analysis, reflection and planning all must be grounded and enriched through time for spiritual discernment, faith sharing, liturgical expression, music and song. Celebration and prayer make the movement of the Circle genuinely human and spirit-filled.

As I have given workshops on social analysis over the years, both in North America and other parts of the world, I have used four simpler terms for the four moments of the Pastoral Circle: *contact, analysis, reflection, response*. Each of these moments presents in turn: *data, reasons, interpretations, and actions*. I have found that the framework for discussion provided by the Pastoral Circle enables people to ask significant questions of their experience.

1. "*What is happening?*" A particular problem is experienced by myself as an individual or by my community. What are the facts that I encounter because of my contact with this experience, my insertion in the midst of the people? What is the data -- objective facts and subjective feelings -- that I can collect through basic research, interviews, questionnaires, participant observation, documentation, etc.?
2. "*Why is it happening?*" I now go deeper into the problem that I have contacted, searching for the root causes of this situation. Thus I move from an "anecdotal" approach (getting the stories about the problem) to an "analytical" approach (exploring the causes, connections and consequences of the problem). The situation is placed within a broader picture of structural as well as personal interaction.
3. "*How do we evaluate it?*" A moment of value-oriented reflection is now in order, submitting the situation contacted and analysed to the interpretation of what I consider important and meaningful. Thus a Christian will look at the situation through the eyes of faith, asking where God is to be found, what Gospel values are operative, what the social teaching of my church has to offer in interpreting the reality. This would be what we call "theological reflection." A humanist or any other committed person would engage in this moment of interpretative reflection from the standpoint of their deepest values and ethical criteria, making a "values reflection."
4. "*How do we respond?*" I move to this point of response within the Circle by taking the steps of planning, decision, action and evaluation. In a systematic way, I approach meeting the experience in ways that engage, shape, change and direct

what is occurring. Effective response will require that these steps involve community participation to the extent possible.

Having moved through the four moments of this Pastoral Circle, I now come to recognise why it is aptly described as a "circle." For I am necessarily impelled to *retrace* my steps. A response that involves action in the situation gives rise to new experiences, which necessarily in turn calls for further mediation through contact, analysis, reflection and response. For this reason, the "circle" is actually like a "spiral," going ever *deeper* and ever *wider*.

A friend of mine who is very cognizant in the theology of Bernard Lonergan told me that the four moments of the Pastoral Circle correspond roughly to the four steps of Lonerganian methodology. These could be called the "transcendental imperatives," the mandates that should be followed:

1. *experience*: "be attentive" -- get the data
2. *understanding*: "be intelligent" -- interpret, understand what the data means
3. *judgement*: "be reasonable" -- commit self to the truth by making judgements
4. *decision*: "be responsible" -- commit self to the morally good by discerning/deciding/doing on the basis of #s 1-3.

## APPLICATIONS OF THE PASTORAL CIRCLE

Before moving into a description of some of my own personal experiences in recent years of using the Pastoral Circle in social action efforts in Africa, I want to mention four books that have taken the approach of the Circle seriously and developed further its implications for and utilisation in the process of "linking faith and justice." There surely are other books that apply the Pastoral Circle, but these at least are the ones that have come to my attention.<sup>2</sup>

The first book is by a close friend and Jesuit colleague, Thomas Clarke. Having been associated with this theologian and spiritual writer in several joint ventures in the 1980s in probing social realities in the United States and elsewhere, I have found his insights particularly helpful. In a 1986 publication, *Playing in the Gospel: Spiritual and Pastoral Models*, Clarke devotes a chapter to describing the Pastoral Circle as a "promising concrete method" in the new way of doing theology that is experience-based.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Clarke sees the entire pastoral circle, not merely the phase designated as theological reflection, to be a "theological exercise of faith." A faith commitment guides the whole process.

What I want to highlight here is Clarke's distinction between the "empirical" and the "experiential." This is a point he made earlier in a contribution to James Hug's *Tracing the Spirit: Communities, Social Action and Theological Reflection*, in a chapter entitled "A New Way: Reflecting on Experience." According to Clarke, the "empirical" is highly rational, concerned primarily with factual data, with the accurate description of inner and outer phenomena. On the other hand, the "experiential" values sense, feelings, the personal and subjective. Story-telling, artistic creations, and memories are very important.<sup>4</sup>

It is necessary, therefore, in the first moment of the Pastoral Circle that we pay attention not simply to the information provided by objective data-gathering (as important as that surely may be) but also to people's hopes and fears, joys and sufferings, songs and poetry, etc. As I will mention later, this is why the "listening survey" conducted among grassroot communities is so central to finding out "what is happening?"

The effort to develop a practical theology that could engage with the struggle for justice in South Africa is found in a book reporting on a research project conducted in 1986-1988. J.R. Cochrane, J.W. de Gruchy, and R. Petersen bring together in *In Word and Deed: Towards a Practical Theology for Social Transformation* the thoughts of practitioners across a wide spectrum of churches, in both black and white contexts. The book takes the Pastoral Circle as its basic model, but makes substantial alterations and redefinitions as a result of their participatory research.<sup>5</sup>

Thus their model of doing practical theology expands the four moments of the Pastoral Circle with several additional elements, some of which were at least implied in our original presentation. Among the important additional elements are the following:

*Faith-commitment* as a pre-understanding and perspective brought to the task before the moment of insertion.

*Ecclesial analysis* as a form of social analysis, locating the church and its ministry within the dynamics of their social context

*Spiritual formation and empowerment*, including an emphasis on the Kingdom of God and a celebration of Eucharist that links liturgy and life, relating theological reflection to pastoral planning and praxis.

I find the additional elements stressed by this book to be particularly relevant to the use of the Pastoral Circle in Small Christian Communities where the Christian dimensions should and could be made more explicit.

The third book to note here also was developed amidst a group of committed Christians engaged in doing theology in a setting of crisis and social challenge. Laurie Green, a vicar in a working-class parish in Birmingham, England, wrote *Let's Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle Resource Book*, to help "ordinary Christians" find out that they can be theologians.<sup>6</sup> Green emphasises that his approach is more of a "cycle" than a "circle" in that he makes very explicit the "spin off" moment in which a group moves to face a new situation -- and reflection again on that new experience -- as a result of having been actively engaged in the struggles.<sup>7</sup>

Green calls the four moments of his Cycle: "experience," "exploration," "reflection," and "response." The moment of "exploration" is the moment of social analysis, of gathering analytical information about the situation. For the moment of

"reflection," he offers an interesting "checklist" of eight questions to put to biblical passages to help a group draw insights upon the situation being considered.

*Light:* What things in the passage illuminate or inspire you?

*Question:* What things don't you understand?

*Surprise:* What things in the passage surprise you?

*Approval:* What things do you agree with, and approve of?

*Reject:* What are you turned off by, reject or question?

*Parallel:* Can you name something like it from elsewhere in the Bible?

*Input:* Can you name something like it from your own life and experience?

*Action:* What are you now prompted to do as a result of this passage?<sup>8</sup>

A unique way of structuring essays about doing the works of "faith and justice" is found in a fourth book, by Fred Kammer, S.J., *Salted with Fire: Spirituality for the Faithjustice Journey*. Kammer uses the Pastoral Circle in two ways in his presentation of a spirituality of social ministry. First, he organises the material of each of his four chapters according to the four moments of the Circle, the four "mediations of experience." He begins with the contact that many people in social ministry have with feelings of "burnout" or depression; he moves to looking at a "how to" approach to analysing our situations by asking questions about *who, what, when, where, how, why*; then he reflects on the "darkness" that marks so much of the contemporary culture of injustice; finally he encourages us to "walk in the light" by taking steps along the paths of justice, love and reverence. Second, Kammer develops the focus of each chapter by using the moments of the Circle not as totally distinct but more "as waves rolling upon a beach. Each wave does build upon the preceding ones, but with different peaks and troughs emphasizing different aspects...."<sup>9</sup>

## PASTORAL CIRCLE IN AFRICA

In discussing the use of the Pastoral Circle in an African setting today, let me describe my own recent experience in three different programmes: (1) the DEP approach to community improvement; (2) efforts to promote justice and peace at national and local levels; and (3) input into pastoral theology courses in seminaries.

### Development Education Programme

Central to the participatory development approach used in several English-speaking African countries is a three-volume manual called *Training for Transformation*, by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel.<sup>10</sup> Put together in 1984 on the basis of extensive experience in Kenya, the manual presents a series of lessons on community involvement in development, using the basic methodology of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. Many of the lessons relate directly to the moments in the Pastoral Circle.

When I arrived in Zambia at the start of 1989, I spent a year as a field worker in the "Development Education Programme" (DEP) of the Monze Diocese in the southern part of the country. This village development programme utilised the

*Training for Transformation* approach to prepare a local team to work with the people in their efforts to improve community conditions. I was thus able to experience first-hand how the Pastoral Circle could be the framework for involving villagers, the majority of whom were illiterate, in the various steps of identifying development problems, designing responses, organising resources, planning and implementation of programmes, and evaluation of results. Let me mention a few examples here from my experience as a field worker on a DEP training team.

1. *Contact*: DEP uses something called a "listening survey" to help village team members discover the "burning issues" affecting a local community. This involves not simply the collecting of objective statistical data (e.g., the number of people in a village, education and health conditions) but the identifying of strongly felt needs, desires, hopes, fears, expectations, etc. The team "contacts" these feelings by listening to what people talk about in local gatherings at markets, beer halls, funerals, churches, transport facilities, etc. What is frequently repeated, is spoken of with emotion, is voiced by influential persons: this can vividly tell us what is happening in people's lives.
2. *Analysis*: Many different forms of social analysis are used by DEP. Because English is the second language for many of the people participating in the programmes, we had to make use of very simple terms to describe the complex processes. Rather than speak of the influence of "economic structures" we would ask who had money and how did they use it by themselves or with others; rather than probing the role of "values," we would talk about what people considered very important in their lives and worth making sacrifices for. One of the most engaging ways of doing analysis is the use of what Paulo Freire calls "codes": sketches (skits), posters, songs, etc. These would describe some burning issue in a graphic fashion that would then be analysed by asking questions of the group like: "What did you see happening? Why were people doing that? Does that ever happen in real life? Why does it occur?"
3. *Reflection*: Most of the people participating in DEP would identify themselves as Christians and many of these are Catholics. For all, the Bible is an important source of reflection, inspiration and guidance. So relating the experience contacted and analysed to explicit faith dimensions is not a difficult task in working with the people. While a tendency to "fundamentalist" reading of Scripture has to be challenged, a true appreciation of the relevance of the Word of God to real life situations is also strongly present. Moreover, culture and its values is an important resource for the reflective questions. Since "inculturation" is such an important emphasis today, I found a very rich reflective moment would come in getting people to probe the cultural elements that were important. For example, they would evaluate what was happening in terms of positive and negative points in their culture today in relation to the situation they were engaged with.
4. *Response*: Since it is a development project oriented to getting people involved in improving their own lives and overcoming dependency on outside sources of ideas, funds and personnel, DEP stresses a variety of decision-making approaches. Besides outlining simple "steps" to follow (objectives, proposals,

assignments, etc.), there is also a Commitment Cycle that I found particularly helpful.<sup>11</sup> It shows how each step of the planning and implementation is inter-related and that if commitment breaks down at any point (e.g., failure to take up assigned responsibilities, ignoring of recommendations, etc.), then the entire process breaks down.

### Justice and Peace Committees

Following the strong encouragement in recent years of the Vatican Justice and Peace Commission, national justice and peace efforts have been promoted throughout the continent of Africa. Zambia has had these programmes since the mid-1980's and is well organised both at the national level (in the Catholic Secretariat of the Zambia Episcopal Conference in Lusaka) and at the local level (in parishes throughout the country). The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace takes up national issues such as the impact of the economic reforms of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) on the poor, or the adoption of a new constitution. The parish Justice and Peace Committees pursue local topics such as treatment of street children, wages paid by church employers, witchcraft practices, prices of essential goods, etc.

What particularly distinguishes the justice and peace programmes in Zambia is the high level of *training* provided for those who participate. A series of five training seminars is offered (of a week's duration) to cover the topics of:

1. spirituality of justice
2. research methods
3. social analysis
4. moving from theory to action
5. evaluation

As can be surmised from the topics of the training sessions, the Pastoral Circle plays a key role in the approach utilised. I have been involved in the various sessions and have seen that the dynamic of the Circle is very relevant to the people's experience of grappling with justice and peace issues. The step-by-step approach of "contact, analysis, reflection and response" is not followed directly, but enters into the training process at various points.

For example, because the grounding of justice and peace work on a firm basis of Christian faith is so important, the "spirituality of justice" training session comes first. Participants in the programme must appreciate that they are called to justice and peace not for political motivations but because of their baptismal call to follow Jesus Christ and share his Good News with others. "Integral evangelisation" requires commitment to the promotion of justice and peace, as rooted both in scripture and in the social teachings of the church. For this reason, the Pastoral Circle moment of "theological reflection" is in some ways anticipated as participants are taught in the first session to raise questions and evaluate situations in the light of their faith commitments.

In the “research methods” and “social analysis” training sessions, the Pastoral Circle’s emphasis on getting in touch with problems and finding out their root causes is explained in ways that enable participants to understand more deeply what is happening and why it is happening. Obviously, this has important consequences for the type of action taken by a justice and peace group. I remember, for example, one parish group that did research and analysis on a serious problem of youth misbehaviour in a village. It changed its initial response from a punitive action (shut down any drinking places) to a constructive action (open up recreational facilities) once it had completed a good social analysis and discovered the root causes of problems.

Finally, the “moving into action” and “evaluation” sessions focus on the response moment of the Pastoral Circle. For many justice and peace groups in Zambia, the response is in the line of publicity about a particular problem (e.g., police treatment of street children) as well as advocacy toward government officials (e.g., pressure for more fair wages for house servants).

A noteworthy example of the application of the methodology of the Pastoral Circle in the work of justice and peace is the 1990 pastoral letter of the Zambian Bishops, *Economics, Politics and Justice*. This letter came out during the last year of the one-party regime of President Kenneth Kaunda. The President blamed criminal elements and South Africa for inciting the troubles, but many felt that something much more significant was taking place. The Bishops’ letter reported on the suffering of the people that they had heard (“contact”); identified the root cause of the suffering as lack of political accountability (“analysis”); spoke of the Christian virtues of justice and dedication to the people (“reflection”) and urged peaceful participation in the referendum regarding establishment of a multi-party democracy (“response”). I believe it is fair to say that the impact of the letter came not simply from its timeliness but also from its clarity.

### Pastoral Fieldwork Guidelines

As a final example of the use of the Pastoral Circle, let me cite my experience of working with seminarians in efforts to better integrate into their academic programme the placements in pastoral fieldwork. It is probably true that most seminaries that are preparing future priests require some practical exposure to church work prior to ordination. This may include working in a parish, assisting in a school or hospital, or involvement in some social project. But it is probably fair to say that a good many of the activities that the seminarians engage in, either during their school year proper or during holidays or break periods, are not too closely related to their regular academic programme. Fieldwork can sometimes just be seen as a change of pace or a break from what is really important, that is, engagement in academic work like scripture study or church history. Both teachers and students may see it this way.

In an effort to integrate the two experiences of fieldwork and classroom, an academic course entitled “Practical Theology” is required of all first year students at Hekima College, the Jesuit theologate in Nairobi, Kenya. (I have taught in this course on occasion as a visiting lecturer.) Besides the ordinary study of church pastoral



practice and models of theology, students are obliged to spend a few months in a field experience of pastoral work. This period is prepared for by a thorough explanation of the Pastoral Circle, and the experience must be written up in an academic paper following the elements of the Pastoral Circle. In effect, the Circle provides the guidelines for the three phases of the fieldwork: entering into, reflecting in the midst of, and writing up afterward.

The set of guidelines includes five steps:

1. *Step One: Insertion and gathering of data.* This involves describing the insertion in physical terms, and then providing empirical data about the place of insertion and the pastoral institution where the student is placed, and experiential data about the feelings of the people being related to.
2. *Step Two: Analysis of the situation.* A thorough social analysis of the situation is expected, that includes an identification of the most important needs or problems in the area, examination of the historical, structural and value influences, conclusions on the root causes of the problems, and evaluations of the attempts made to improve the situation.
3. *Step Three: Theological reflection.* Here the student is expected to bring to bear materials and resources gained from other seminary courses, by addressing questions such as relevance of scriptural themes, church social teachings, and theological categories such as grace, sin, salvation, solidarity, etc., and the operation of various models of church, inculturation, sacraments, dialogue, etc.
4. *Step Four: Response.* Depending of course on the actual situation of the placement, the student makes recommendations regarding the future of the pastoral work, describing the models of change that might be appropriate and the various strategies that could be followed.
5. *Step Five: Evaluation.* This element is made a separate part of the pastoral focus in order to assist the student to reflect on "what was happening to me and to the situation" during the placement. The Guidelines suggest that the student set down some reflections about hopes and fears before beginning the fieldwork, keep a journal of some sort during the experience, and then at the end review the original expression of hopes and fears. Special attention should be paid to what implications the student sees for the study of theology and for the model of future priesthood looked forward to.

I will say that I found the papers that the seminarians prepared as part of this course to be of fairly high quality. The Guidelines based on the Pastoral Circle provided a framework for asking the right sort of questions and drawing conclusions that related to their overall study of theology and their priestly preparation. Some of the topics presented in the Hekima College course included: working in a refugee camp; ministry among the handicapped; single mothers earning money by beer brewing in a urban slum; inculturation efforts with initiation rites among tribal peoples;

Christian ministry in a Moslem environment; and youth groups in Small Christian Community settings.

## CONCLUSION

As other essays in this collection show, the Pastoral Circle is really part of a much wider movement in ecclesiology and theological methodology. The movement is characterised by being participative, contextualised and action-oriented. It is a movement that particularly finds itself at home in the struggles of people for an integral evangelisation that identifies with the aspirations of the poor. It is noteworthy that many of the recent pastoral letters coming from the churches of the South reflect the approach of the Pastoral Circle. At their best, the Small Christian Communities in Zambia and elsewhere in Africa (similar to the "*comunidades de base*" of Latin America) utilise the Pastoral Circle in their meeting formats.

"See, judge and act" is basic pastoral approach. By adding particular attention to the structural elements that are to be seen (through social analysis) and the faith dimensions that are to be used in judging (through theological reflection), the Pastoral Circle widens and deepens the "see, judge and act" approach. The test of its effectiveness and the value of its utilisation is, of course, not in its methodological clarity but in its practical strengthening of the project of integral evangelisation, the work of the Kingdom of God. I would like to think, from my experience of sharing in the design and refinement of the Pastoral Circle, and from my experience of its use today in Africa, that this approach is indeed Kingdom-oriented.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, revised and enlarged edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, and Washington, DC: Center of Concern, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>Working in Zambia for the past seven years has limited my access to recent publications. I would appreciate receiving references to any other books, articles, or projects that make explicit use of the Pastoral Circle.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., *Playing in the Gospel: Spiritual and Pastoral Models* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1986), p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., "A New Way: Reflecting on Experience," in James E. Hug, S.J., *Tracing the Spirit: Communities, Social Action, and Theological Reflection*, Woodstock Studies 7 (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 16-18.

<sup>5</sup> J.R. Cochrane, J.W. de Gruchy, and R. Petersen, *In Word and Deed: Towards a Practical Theology for Social Transformation* (Hilton, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle Resource Book* (London: Mowbray, 1990), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Kammer, S.J., *Salted with Fire: Spirituality for the Faithjustice Journey* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-108.

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