

YCS in the 1970s: Young Laity in Search of Vocation

Pat Walsh was national chaplain to the Australian YCS for five years, 1973-1978. Some forty years on, he looks back at the impact on the secondary school YCS of this exciting but turbulent period of historic change and reflects on the experience and its potential lessons for today's church.

The movement known as the Young Christian Students (YCS) has morphed several times during its 80 or so year history in Australia. Once highly favoured by popes, principals and parish priests, YCS's footprint today is far smaller than it used to be. Given, however, that the principles it represents both informed and were endorsed by the Second Vatican Council and remain highly relevant, this is a paradox. Whether or not clues to this change of fortune can be found in the following account, it is to be hoped that Australia's upcoming synod process will recognise what a unique vehicle the YCS can be to foster young laity and their contribution to the church and the world.

The YCS is a derivative of the Young Christian Worker (YCW) movement. Founded in the 1920s by the working class Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn, the YCW's mission was to address the alienation of youth from the church and society. Cardijn did not found the YCS but it owes its core essentials to him. These include a passionate belief in the potential of youth; that the church has a mission to the world not just to itself or the afterlife; that lay Catholics have a vocation in their own right; that this calling should be lived in the milieu of daily life, particularly the workplace; and that the Gospel and life should inform and dynamise each other in a mutually-enriching marriage.

To form young laity in this worldview, including unlearning clerical models of church, Cardijn developed a method called the review of life. In three simple steps, it teaches practitioners to see (open one's eyes to what is happening to others); to judge (assess or weigh up the pros and cons of situations against the values of the Gospels); and to act (respond actively, preferably by reaching out and engaging with those affected by the situation in question). Fundamental to the approach is to take responsibility and to learn from doing, often summarised as a cycle of action-reflection. Reflection is best done with the assistance of others in a group that includes someone mature in both the faith and Jocism*, such as a chaplain who is prepared to seek faith together with the young searcher not be the fount of all knowledge. Reflection, an important counterpoint to action which can be all consuming and one-dimensional, is also understood as a broad process. It should make room for individual thought, reading, prayer, meditation and sacramental life, not least participation in the Eucharist, the summit of inspiration, solidarity and sharing with colleagues and Christ, and the challenges he represents, including his readiness to sacrifice himself for others.

Secondary school YCS, however, differs significantly from the YCW founded by Cardijn. Its members are generally much younger than their worker counterparts, more protected and more dependent on adults, whether at home or at school and financially, a big tie. Their milieus also differ. School life in particular can seem to offer fewer options for review and action. And most schools in Australia are a far cry from the exploitative factory situations Cardijn was appalled by and from which, as Pius XI famously said in 1931, 'dead matter goes out improved whereas men are corrupted and degraded'. Cardijn imbued the YCW with a

clear and highly motivating social justice mission and, as he grew older, extended this to injustice in the Third World. What, by comparison, was the purpose and mission of relatively privileged students in YCS? And how was the YCS to form teenage students who lived in an adult controlled, dependent and often white collar career environment, in action, responsibility and related faith development? The answers to these questions have challenged and shaped YCS throughout its history.

YCS was established in Melbourne in the early 1940s under the National Secretariat for Catholic Action led by Frank Maher and B.A. (Bob) Santamaria. It owed its start not to Joseph Cardijn but to successive popes who were determined to combat the march of socialism and secularism and the erosion of Catholic values and practices in the West. The challenge was framed as a crusade in existential 'us' v 'them' terms. A mass movement of the church's lay membership, led by trained leaders under clerical direction, and active in all areas of society – rural, unions, education and schools – was initiated. Cardijn's formula was co-opted for the purpose.

With the blessing of Archbishop Mannix, chair of an Episcopal Catholic Action committee established by the bishops in 1937, YCS kicked off at two of Melbourne's top girls schools, Mandeville Hall in Toorak and Star of the Sea College in Brighton. Backed by the hierarchy and two priests, one of whom, Fr J.F. Kelly, was archdiocesan director of Catholic education, the YCS was soon adopted by other bishops, Catholic schools and religious orders. Student members were told they were a unit in a vast army led by a commander-in-chief whose mission was to save the world from what YCS literature described as '20th century paganism'. Input from YCS 'headquarters' in the form of newsletters, programs, gospel discussions, national conferences and so on, reinforced this message. The YCS was valued by school authorities. YCS leaders enjoyed status. Enquiries and action undertaken by groups included issues such as attitudes to study, school authorities and property, school spirit, manners, reading, bad language and dress, the dangers of mixed marriages and the social media of the day (comics, films and television). A prayer for the conversion of Australia was said at the conclusion of meetings. Members were encouraged to develop 'a Catholic mind' and a 'daily plan of life' that included regular Mass attendance, recitation of the rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and other Catholic practices. By 1944, a National YCS Council had been set up and Archbishop Beovich of Adelaide, himself a former director of Catholic education in Adelaide, was made chairman of the YCS. By 1953, a convention in one diocese alone, Wagga, was attended by 400 students and more than 40 religious and priests. By 1963, the YCS numbered some 25,000 students in 450 groups across Australia.

This pre-Vatican II model was highly successful from an organisational point of view. It generated in students a sense of being part of a great, historic cause and cultivated leaders from elite settings who went on to occupy important positions in the church, society and commerce. But though it benefitted from Cardijn's brand and his methods, it did not pretend to replicate the YCW in a student setting, to address alienation or disadvantage or to develop critical inquiry. It was integrated into the Catholic education system, served as a practical adjunct to religious education, excluded the church from critical inquiry and instilled in students a fear of the world. Unlike the YCW which refused to be co-opted into Santamaria's influential orbit, the YCS was institutionalised and, though nominally a student

organisation, was adult directed from the beginning. As late as 1964, the six students at a YCS national executive meeting were outnumbered by sixteen priests and religious.

The point of this analysis is not to run down the pre-Vatican II YCS or those involved in it. In its own terms, this model was clearly successful. My purpose is rather to highlight how different it was to the YCS that succeeded it in the 1970s and which, in a sense, it generated in line with Newton's third law of motion.

In contrast to the clerical, top down character of its predecessor, the 1970s YCS highlighted the lay and student character of the movement. It also sought to return to its Cardijn roots by emphasising action for justice and change. This model resonated strongly with me. I encountered Jocism first through a YCW summer school. Fired up, I introduced a YCS model to the college and community where I worked that took its cue from the YCW and favoured disenchanted students and troubled youth.

This new trajectory cannot be precisely dated but its agents felt they were on the right side of history. Australia at the time was experiencing an unprecedented surge of 'people power', rejection of the status quo and experimentation with alternatives. The horrific Vietnam war (1955-1975), its lethal body count leading most nightly TV bulletins, epitomised everything felt to be wrong with Western society. Students were heavily involved in advocating change and challenging structures. In France, the French YCS supported the 1968 student revolution in Paris. In Australia, 'student power' challenged universities and pushed for representation in schools. Influential books by the Catholic thinkers Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Ivan Illich *Deschooling Society* (1971) were closely studied and discussed. YCS national staff lived in community, dressed down, related to Jesus as a prophet and radical who'd taken on the establishment, challenged the lifestyle of the hierarchy and celebrated the Eucharist around their kitchen table.

While these winds gave impetus to change in the YCS, it was Vatican II that gave its new direction the seal of approval. In its own way, the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) embraced the idea of 'people power' by re-imagining the church as 'the people of God'. The Council's chapter on the laity in *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and its *Decree on the Laity* (1965) were the first time in 2000 years that a Council had addressed the role of the laity. Both had Cardijn's fingerprints on them. They represented a paradigm shift. The laity were no longer a stranded asset confined to paying, praying and obeying, to be defined in a subordinate relationship to priests but, because of baptism, to Christ. Equals in the church, they were uniquely called to live out their faith in the world. Schools were asked to foster the lay apostolate amongst students; the Jocist method of see, judge, act was endorsed.

In addition to receiving Vatican II's blessing, Australian YCS internationalised in the 1970s. International YCS (IYCS) made this happen. Staff in Paris and an extension worker in Singapore visited several times in the early 1970s. Australian YCS reciprocated by participating in four major IYCS conferences. These were two World Conferences (Netherlands, 1974 and Spain, 1978) and two regional gatherings (Thailand, 1976 and Brussels, 1976). Australia's Kevin McDonald was elected IYCS secretary-general in 1978.

Though peripheral, international involvement was not entirely new to Australian YCS. Throughout the 1960s, national YCS worked to conscientise groups about the big justice issues of the day. Students were challenged to watch serious TV, use their geography, history and religion subjects to inquire into the causes of questions such as apartheid, racism, political imprisonment, poverty and conflict and to act in keeping with the Gospel mandate to 'love one another as I have loved you'.

In the 1970s, however, internationalisation not only elevated this engagement to a whole new level but made it the core business of the YCS, at least for the national leadership. Led by impressive and energetic Latin Americans close to Fr Gustavo Gutierrez, author of the highly influential *A Theology of Liberation* (1973) and a YCS chaplain himself, IYCS assemblies adopted liberation theology and a program of radical change directed at the education system itself. Analyses made of education concluded that it served a universal, profit-driven and invasive capitalist system that worked principally for interests other than those of students, the environment and the majority poor. YCS in the 'centre', such as Australia, was challenged to engage in solidarity with YCS in the 'periphery' and to collaborate with the YCW and like-minded organisations to be a force for liberation and salvation history.

The Australian YCS of the 70s, therefore, had three clear objectives: strengthening the lay character of the organisation; re-focussing its pedagogy on the student experience; and pivoting towards engagement with the disadvantaged. These objectives were closely related in practice. The overall purpose was to form thoughtful lay and student leaders committed to faith-based action for justice in schools, in cooperation with other students. By definition, these leaders would be confident enough in their sense of vocation and direction to have outgrown over-dependence on an adult chaplain or religious assistant. They would also use review of life to deepen understanding of faith, church and society, to identify where change was needed for the benefit of the disadvantaged, and to form other students in these principles. This approach did not break with the church or dispense with chaplains or assistants. Rather it asked clergy and religious, conditioned to see themselves as the church and sometimes as youth gurus and kings of the kids, to re-imagine the laity as the church in the world and to re-cast their role as supporting animators who also engaged in action and reflection in their own lives.

YCS national meetings highlighted case studies of review of life that pointed up injustice and alienation. Punitive responses by an SRC and school authorities to graffiti in a school toilet block were analysed to show that the system was weighted against the disadvantaged, even racist and in conflict with the Gospel; the graffitiists turned out to be Aboriginal kids who were not coping. Action to improve tuck shop services failed to rally other students; their apathy challenged YCS to ask why and to question whether and how the school was unwittingly fostering alienation, not Gospel inspired involvement.

This approach generated its own challenges. Putting new wine into old wine skin put the old container under considerable strain. The focus on students involved in 'authentic student action' left many in the YCS unhappy. National staff were criticised for having an agenda and being selective. They were also frustrated in their turn when directed to work in more traditional dioceses. YCS assistants who were also teachers rejected suggestions that their schools were oppressive or that students should become militants. Visits by national YCS

staff were discouraged in some dioceses. Chaplains who ran the YCS as parish youth groups favoured leaders who could run a meeting and organise social activities. Other chaplains who favoured a 'preferential option for the poor' saw little scope for this in privileged schools. They encouraged leaders to work with the unemployed or institutionalised youth outside schools and challenged the credentials of YCS national staff not involved in action in their own lives.

In 1976, a chaplain summed up the situation this way: 'There are now at least five very different YCS movements in Australia', he wrote. 'They are mainly secondary, mainly lacking in review orientation, struggling for an identity and a purpose, continually faced with a high turnover and the problem of developing new kids all the time'.

The situation forced the YCS to make some important decisions. It had to ask was it an elite movement and force for institutional change in its own right or was it a seedbed for the nurture of future leaders? Was it a student union for which, at best, the Gospel was a social justice manual or was its role to explore the student vocation and to facilitate a search for lay Christian discipleship, spirituality and practice during formative school years? In a word, was its principal role to form a sense of lay vocation that would give added purpose and meaning to adult life?

By the end of the decade, YCS leaders had opted for the 'seedbed' model. YCS's core business was to utilise Cardijn's pedagogy to form secondary students in the fundamentals of the lay apostolate vocation as articulated by Vatican II. This process should allow for fun and friendship and for individuals to grow to different levels at different paces. It would ultimately bear fruit in post-school adulthood, it was hoped, when these young laity came to occupy positions of influence in society, the church and the world.

Conclusion

With an eye to the future, four points can be made.

1. The Jocist review of life is not just a training tool or a practice confined to the YCS and YCW. It is grounded in, and an extension of, a common, almost unconscious, human habit that we use a thousand times a day. What Cardijn did was to formalise and baptise this see-judge-act reflex. Its practice is an enriching life skill. Many former YCS colleagues testify that it has served them well in adult professional life, enhancing their sense of responsibility for others and the world and engagement in many local and international contexts.

2. The fate of the YCS is no different to that of many other church entities across the Christian spectrum, particularly in Australia and the West. In that sense, understanding its current situation in Australia requires a broader study than the above sketch. On the other hand, in other settings the YCS remains a global Catholic youth movement. It continues to function in over 100 countries, particularly the South, and takes its lead on issues like climate change, refugees, conflict resolution, inequality, human rights, inter-religious dialogue and criticism of capitalism and consumerism from Pope Francis, himself from the global South.

3. Australian Catholic schools are a notable exception to the general pattern of collapse of Christian institutions. Might more of these schools have a fresh look at the YCS, check out the YCS where it continues to function in several dioceses, and ask if its formation methodology can value add to education in Christian fundamentals and help students see their opportunities as a vocation, not just as a pathway to career and success? Lay teachers can play the animating role that chaplains and religious assistants once did. Teacher trainees can be educated in Jocism and the lay vocation and exposed to lay exemplars such as Fernand Tonnet, Pat Keegan, Simone Weil, Frederic Ozanam, Evelyn Underhill, Dorothy Day, Dag Hammarskjold, Mary Robinson, Seamus Heaney and Chris Weeramantry, to name some.

4. Much that the YCS advocated for in the 1970s is arguably mainstream now in sections of the church. This includes, most notably, an active voice for the majority laity, a concomitant rejection of clericalism and increasing recognition that being lay is also a vocation and that faith is a journey, a notion once foreign to a cut and dried, absolutist church. What Jocism specifically adds, however, is that the lay vocation and its spirituality are practised in the various contexts of daily life, notably the workplace, not just in the service of the institutional church and its practices.

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** The term Jocism derives from Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (JOC), French for the YCW. It is used to denote the spirit, principles, orientation and methods developed by Joseph Cardijn, founder of the YCW.*