



Teaching students

TO SEE, JUDGE, ACT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Words Fadi Elbarbar

The role of Coordinator of Social Justice was first formally introduced at St Monica's College in 2012 and I have been in that role since then. My role is to give the students an opportunity to learn about and more importantly *think* about global issues that cause grave disparity in our community, our nation and our world. We do this by using the See, Judge, Act model. Students are introduced to the issue over several lunchtimes and then given an opportunity to reflect on it theologically and talk about why we should care about the issue using Catholic Social Teaching principles. They then plan actions that are required to include fundraising, awareness raising and advocacy.

Each year level is given a different social justice focus, which includes homelessness, sanitation, ethical consumerism, indigenous awareness and reconciliation, asylum seekers and refugees, and poverty. We invite speakers to visit the school from different organisations to speak to the students on these issues. As much as possible, we aim to invite speakers from Catholic organisations and raise funds for them. We explain to the students that the Catholic Social Teaching principles are what link us and that by choosing a Catholic organisation, we know that they will respect the principles that we hold dear to our hearts.

In 2016, we had over 200 students involved in social justice programs across the school. All of these students come to the table with a passion to make a difference and, as their time within the social justice program continues, we need to help them understand what that means, the effort required to *truly* make a difference and why understanding the importance of Catholic Social Teaching is paramount to really doing something good for humanity. A great example of this is sharing a part of the Passion narrative in the Gospel according to John:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:26–27)

I use this tiny story with my social justice students and challenge them to think of themselves as that unknown disciple—if Mary is now their mother, that means they are a sibling of Christ! Everyone, therefore, is a sibling of Christ! This is a powerful way to give them an understanding of why their passion to change the world is so important.

Students enjoy learning about the issue and gaining a better understanding of it. They enjoy reflecting on the importance of the issue and learning that the Church more often than not has a stance on it. Above all, students love to take action. As their experience in social justice forms them, they find that the more they know about the issue the greater the impact their actions have—they come to understand that the whole process of See, Judge, Act is important in making a lasting difference. We ensure that what we do educates our students on the issue and challenges their thinking—and at times the thinking of our staff, their parents and the wider community.

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A highlight of 2016 was our Slow Fashion Exhibition, organised by our Year 9 students. After learning about Fairtrade and ethical consumerism, each of the forty students researched a different ethical and sustainable clothing brand in Australia and asked them to let us borrow an item of clothing to be shown in the exhibition. Students organised a launch for the exhibition and then over 300 Year 9 students came through the exhibition over the space of a week to learn about the cost of the fast fashion industry on people and on the environment and to see what alternatives were out there. The students linked this to many of the messages from *Laudato si'* and the Catholic Social Teaching principal of stewardship, or integral ecology. Finally, students were given ideas on how to be more ethical in their daily lives, starting with looking after the things you have now.

One thing that I learned early on is that students are often passionate about social justice within the confines of Catholic school, but once they leave it becomes less and less of a priority. That is why St Monica's College formed the Social Justice Alumni Program. There are now over 100 students from the classes of 2012–2016 who stay connected to what we do at school; they visit regularly to offer a helping hand and are encouraged to continue to be social agents for change within their new communities. This group is something that we take immense pride in and I have seen it make a big difference in the lives of these students.

Further to the social justice program, my role as Social Justice Coordinator involves incorporating social justice into the curriculum. I am tasked with finding ways to link what students are learning to social justice issues. We have done this across the school in a variety of ways. In Year 10 Geography, where students learn about the state of the world and how dire it truly is, I am invited to speak about the good that is being done. In Year 12 Health and Human Development, I am invited to speak about the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In the past we have connected the Year 11 English Area of Study on Isolation with the issue of offshore detention and the detrimental psychological impact that has. We created a whole unit in Year 10 Maths that linked their unit on measurement with a Caritas sponsored water saving project in Tanzania. These are some of many examples.

While we have a large number of students in the social justice program, incorporating it into the curriculum is where we can reach the greatest number of students in a way that really relates to what they are learning. I see two major benefits to this. Firstly, it taps into a student's sense of social justice when they may not have realised that they had one! Secondly, I have met some of my best students while delivering content in the classroom—students who have not joined the program for whatever reason but then join and lead once they have experienced social justice in some capacity.

Finally, I am a member of the Justice Education in Catholic Schools (JECS) committee run by the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne's Office for Justice and Peace. My role here is to assist in the decisions made in support of Justice Education in the archdiocese and to assist in the creation and running of Social Justice Teacher Network Days and the JECS Student Day. In 2017 we are looking to create a Social Justice Teacher Network Resource Community to give one another the opportunity to share ideas that have worked with our students.



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