

"Observe, Judge, Act, Family-Style:  
How the Christian Family Movement-USA Continues  
the Mission of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn "

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**ABSTRACT**

Christian Family Movement-USA is a national network of parish or neighborhood small groups of families that are using the Observe, Judge, Act method pioneered by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn. The mission of the Christian Family Movement-USA is to promote Christ-centered marriage and family life; to help individuals and their families to live the Christian faith in everyday life; and to improve society through actions of love, service, education and example. Using study materials produced by the CFM, members discuss what they have observed in their own family or community, judge what they have seen in the light of Jesus' teaching, and then act to change things for the better.

Drawing on publications of the Christian Family Movement-USA and writings of its members, this paper will show how the Christian Family Movement developed since its founding nearly 70 years ago in the USA and describe how the Christian Family Movement promotes Cardinal Joseph Cardijn's methodology of Observe Judge and Act in a family setting in the USA. It will employ recent research findings about US family formation, marriage, and church practice that are reflected in the current state of the Movement and identify signs of hope for the future. Finally, the paper will suggest practical ways that CFM could serve as a model for other kinds of groups to help them put into practice Observe, Judge and ACT.

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The Christian Family Movement-USA is a national network of parish or neighborhood small groups of families that use that Observe, Judge, Act method. We are members of our parishes, nourished by the sacramental life of the Church and working in collaboration with other families and associations. The mission of the Christian Family Movement is to promote Christ-centered marriage and family life; to help individuals and their families to live the Christian faith in everyday life; and to improve society through actions of love, service, education and example. For nearly 70 years, the Christian Family Movement has promoted concrete ways for the “domestic church” to improve family life by reaching out. The question is, in today's church and society, how will CFM continue to reach out in action to inspire families to live their faith actively?

### **CFM Founders Applied Observe, Judge, Act to Marriage and Family Life**

The first chaplains of CFM in Chicago, Fr. Louis Putz and Msgr. Reynold Hillenbrand, taught Pat and Patty Crowley and the other founding couples a method of

faith formation that he learned from the dynamic Belgian priest, Canon Joseph Cardijn, later Cardinal Cardijn, founder of the Young Christian Worker Movement. Cardinal Cardijn employed this method, often called the Jocist Method, for his work with workers, forming them to become lay leaders. Cardinal Cardijn said, "For me, laymen are not formed ... through books, purely theoretical teaching or spoken lectures however magnificent, or even through discussions.... Laymen are formed first of all by the discovery of facts, followed by a Christian judgment, resulting in the actions they plan, the plans they carry into effect, and the responsibilities they shoulder."

These couples, mainly educated and economically advantaged, began to meet in small groups to apply Observe, Judge, Act in the context of their vocation to marriage and parenting. Through the application of this method, their families became involved in helping others in such ministries as foster-parenting, prison ministry, refugee sponsorship, care for the earth, feeding the hungry, religious education, and couples' counseling.<sup>1</sup> They learned how their daily lives are a path to holiness and service in church and community. They observed injustice and social stresses that impacted families, and they took action to make a difference in society as well as at home.

The Movement that began with a few couples caught on rapidly and had a significant influence in Catholic life before and after the Second Vatican Council. As many as 50,000 members called themselves CFMers in the early decades.<sup>2</sup> For an excellent history of CFM from 1949-1974, see *Disturbing the Peace* by Jeffrey Burns.

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<sup>1</sup> A brief history of CFM may be found at <https://www.cfm.org/history>. For an index of the documents in the archives concerning CFM and the persons who were important in starting the movement, click on this link: Notre Dame Archives CFM Papers. <http://archives.nd.edu/findaids/ead/html/CFM.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Burns, Jeffrey M. *Disturbing the Peace: A History of the Christian Family Movement, 1949-1974*. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN. p. 246.

## Observing the Need for Like-to-Like Family Ministry

American parishes and families have changed significantly since the period before 1970, CFM's boom years, and the registered membership in the USA Christian Family Movement dropped from 2000 to about 1000 families between 1970 and today. Today, many activities and programs compete for the time and attention of families. Young people are not joining groups, either secular and religious, like they used to -- just ask the Knights of Columbus or the Rotary Club.<sup>3</sup> Religious practice and connections to the support of religion continue to weaken. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.<sup>4</sup> In 1950, 75% of Catholics went to church weekly. 1970, 48% of American Catholics attended Mass regularly. Now 23% do.<sup>5</sup>

Young Catholic families who remain connected to the Church are becoming rare today: The number of Catholic marriages has declined by half between 1970 and 2000, and so have the number of infant baptisms.<sup>6</sup> In the present situation, families endeavoring to live the Christian life need to know they are not alone. They need friends who share their values and role models for marriage and parenting.

With marriage going out of fashion and church practice declining, support for the vocation of married life has become a critical need in ministry today. In her book, *Family Ethics*, Professor Julie Hanlon Rubio recommends CFM and urges parishes offer opportunities “to bring

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<sup>3</sup> This non-joiner phenomenon was explored in *Bowling Alone* by Robert D. Putnam. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. <http://bowlingalone.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Pew Center Research: Religion and Public Life, "Nones on the Rise", October 9, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

<sup>5</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Washington, DC. "Frequently Requested Church Statistics" <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>

<sup>6</sup> In 1970, there were 23 marriages and 9 baptisms per 1000 Catholics. In 2009, there were 12.7 marriages and 2.7 baptisms per 1000 Catholics. Source: *Nineteen Sixty-four* research blog for the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), (Georgetown University, Mark M. Gray, ed.), October 2010, <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2010/08/there-will-likely-be-fewer-catholic.html>

spouses or families together to deepen their personal communion or to live out their familial vocation to be disciples of Christ in the world.”<sup>7</sup> Veteran family life minister Winnie Honeywell describes how “friends who believe in marriage” can be “marriage-savers,” particularly seasoned couples who have lived through the parenting experience: “We are convinced that no couple can live their vows of lifelong love and fidelity all by themselves – nor should they even try.”<sup>8</sup>

Responding to this critical situation, a dedicated core group of CFM leaders continues to propose Observe, Judge, Act to new families today. Although their numbers are smaller, they are energized by their faith and guided by the vision of their founders. Like the small group of couples who started CFM, they continue to volunteer their time, talent, and treasure to organize, mentor, and animate small groups in mainly suburban parishes across the county. They have judged that Observe, Judge, and Act is a means of keeping their Christian faith alive in the world and supports them on the journey of raising their family in that faith.

Personal invitation, peer relationships, and friendship are what make CFM different from other groups or programs. CFM National Presidents John and Mary Poprac from Torrance, California, told the members recently,

"One of our most vivid memories of our years in CFM is watching our 5-year-old daughter and her friend make sandwiches for the homeless here in Los Angeles. I think I treasure that memory because it exemplifies the main reason we joined CFM – to pass along to our children the importance of being grateful for the gifts God has given us and sharing those gifts with others."

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 200.

<sup>8</sup> Winnie Honeywell, “With a Little Help from Our Friends” on *For Your Marriage* website, USCCB Committee for Marriage and Family <http://foryourmarriage.org/with-a-little-help-from-our-friends> (accessed June 19, 2010).

The Presidents continue, "One of the reasons we decided to become active on the national level of CFM is our conviction that CFM is still needed by families today, more than they realize. It helps us see the similarities among peoples so we take that step to care for and love all our neighbors. It leads us to actions; teaching our children, by example, the importance of participating in our communities and working to make the world a better place, the place God wishes it to be."

Indeed, our society needs the community of small Christian Family Movement groups more than ever. Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of faith being visible in our actions to our fellow man. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he expresses a deep sensitivity to the challenges people are facing in their closest relationships: "An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself, if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice"<sup>9</sup> The CFM group, meeting in the home and neighborhood, can build these close relationships.

Although membership has decreased in suburban parishes in the US, the Christian Family Movement is thriving in places and populations where the Church is young and growing. In the US, 40% of young adult Catholics are Hispanic, and CFM is expanding in those parishes.<sup>10</sup> In the US and Canada, three Hispanic CFM movements strengthen the marriages of immigrant families by building small groups that use Observe, Judge, Act.<sup>11</sup> The largest of these Hispanic

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic exhortation (Vatican: 2013, no. 24).  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

<sup>10</sup> Lipka, Michael, "A Closer Look at Catholic America," Pew Research Center, September 14, 2015.  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/14/a-closer-look-at-catholic-america/>

<sup>11</sup> For more information about the other CFM organizations in the USA and Canada, visit the International Confederation of Christian Family Movements-North America website, <http://www.cimfc-na.org>.

CFM groups, Movimiento Familiar Cristiano Catolico (MFCC), has more than 8,000 families. These American and Canadian organizations of CFM are part of the International Confederation of Christian Family Movements, called ICCFM, with the largest concentration of members in Latin America. Worldwide, over 100,000 families on 6 continents and more than 40 countries, use the Observe, Judge, Act methodology. The ICCFM is committed to making an impact on society and is recognized by the United Nations as a Non-Governmental Organization with Special Consultative Status.<sup>12</sup> The ICCFM leadership team is building up the Movement in Africa, Vietnam, Cuba, and Sweden. All these Christian Family Movements have a common mission: Bring more families into relationships with Jesus Christ.

### **Acting to Serve Families**

Many people who are now active in ministry in the Catholic community, both lay and ordained, got their start in a CFM group. Members may be young parents, married couples, families with single parents, or grandparents. At no cost, CFM mentors provide leadership and guidance on how to invite, organize, and facilitate the small groups.

Each Action Group or Chapter is made up of 4 to 12 families, meeting once or twice a month. Because meetings are usually held in the home environment, CFM can be a comfortable setting for all kinds of families, including mixed-faith couples, to discover ways to express and act on the values they have in common. CFM prospers wherever the local pastor supports and encourages involvement. Unfortunately, groups today are much less likely than the early CFMers were to have a priest-chaplain at their meetings.

CFM does have the support of the institutional Church in this mission all over the world. CFM-USA is a member of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers. The U.S.

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<sup>12</sup> International Confederation of Christian Family Movements, <http://www.iccfm.org>.

Catholic Bishops recommend the Christian Family Movement in their documents *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995)<sup>13</sup> and *Follow the Way of Love* (1994)<sup>14</sup>. The National Chaplain is Fr. Louis Golamari and Bishop George Rassas of Chicago has served as episcopal liaison since 2013. CFM leaders were invited to participate in preparations for the Synod on the Family at the Vatican in 2015. Latino-American CFM members are playing a key role in the *V Encuentro* process, which is using Observe, Judge, Act method to energize the growing number of Hispanic Catholics in the USA.<sup>15</sup>

### **CFM Publications Teach Observe, Judge, Act**

Each CFM meeting has program guide for prayer and study. Since its inception, CFM has produced an annual Program Book, focusing on issues families encounter. Program books are written by veteran CFM members, under the direction of their national chaplains, professional Catholic family life ministers, and educators. These materials are a benefit of a family's annual membership in CFM.<sup>16</sup>

To start out, a CFM group uses a the most recent edition of *For Happier Families* (2014) -- actually the 10th version since 1950 -- which introduces them to the Observe-Judge-Act method. This is actually the tenth revision of the introductory program. They reflect on the vocation and dignity of their families as baptized disciples. Then they observe and judge about how they use their time, make memories, and care for their relationships. They learn how they are in the world but not of it, and judge how to serve as Jesus did. This foundational CFM

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<sup>13</sup> USCCB, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, 1995, <http://www.usccb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth/laity/called-and-gifted-for-the-third-millennium.cfm>

<sup>14</sup> USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love*, 1994, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/follow-the-way-of-love.cfm>.

<sup>15</sup> See more about the V Encuentro at <https://vencuentro.org/>

<sup>16</sup> For a catalog of program titles and topics, visit [https://www.cfm.org/program\\_catalog](https://www.cfm.org/program_catalog)

experience teaches families to be part of a movement of Christian companions in action, coworkers in the vineyard. They can move on to CFM's Discipleship Formation series: *Meeting Jesus Changes Everything*, *Loving the Family God Gives Us*, and *Embracing the Mission*. A group of seniors may choose program materials that focus on the second half of life. Other available programs address racism, technology, stewardship, parenting, faithful citizenship, immigration, and marriage enrichment.<sup>17</sup>

### **Examples of CFM in Action**

It can be a challenge to find actions that the whole family can do together, especially if they have young children. With some creative planning, CFM groups in Michigan and Illinois took on family-friendly actions like partnering with a community group to do yard work for the elderly, fixing up homes for disabled neighbors, collecting underwear and socks for the homeless, and raising funds for the needy with walks and bike-a-thons.

The Observe-Judge-Act (OJA) method starts with peoples' lived experience and trains them to demonstrate their faith in action. In a meeting about passing on Christian values, the members in Maryland "judged" that they can teach by example. They decided to sponsor a speaker on social justice in their parish, to discuss the daily news as a family, and to volunteer to teach the Confirmation classes.

In meetings about the Corporal Works of Mercy, some members in Omaha observed hunger and housing situations in their community. They decided to were invited to identify agencies in their community with whom they could partner to make sandwiches to distribute to the working poor and volunteered at a local soup kitchen. A group in Pittsburgh prepared shoe boxes full of toiletries, snacks, and personal items to donate to a local charity that assists recovering addicts.

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<sup>17</sup> A full listing of CFM study materials may be found at [http://www.cfm.org/materials\\_resources](http://www.cfm.org/materials_resources).

When CFM members work together to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, defend the Gospel of life, or serve the local church, they are teaching their children in the most effective way possible, by a good example, and not only by words. From this understanding the CFM-USA has taken as its motto from the letter of St. James, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.” (James 1:22)

## **Summary**

For nearly 70 years, the Christian Family Movement has used Observe, Judge, and Act to teach families to be active agents of the Gospel and missionary disciples who evangelize their friends, relatives, and coworkers. When people judge facts in light of the Gospel, it provides an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to convert their souls to Christ. This method gives them the vocabulary of evangelization. The discussion helps men and women to find the words to express their faith. CFM members become part of a network of families all over the world who are living their faith in action. CFM teaches members to see themselves as a vital part of the Body of Christ, engaging them in the mission of Jesus.

We have seen how Church participation and family life has changed dramatically over those years, and the Christian Family Movement is ready and willing to change, too. CFM's leaders will need to employ the best in social media, online publishing and communications, video technology, and survey methods to reach out and engage more families. It remains for today's CFMers, heirs to the spirit of Cardinal Cardijn and the mission begun by their founders, to imagine new ways to pass along this gift to a new generation.

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