

# *Self-Formation of Laity in the Year of Faith: An Example of Macau Diocese*

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## **Introduction**

Pope Benedict XVI declared the Year of Faith with the goal of revitalizing the Church, so that “salt would not become tasteless nor the light be kept hidden,”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he proclaimed that the Year of Faith was a gift of God’s love for the renewal of the Church. What, then, is a “renewed” life? In his Apostolic Letter “*Porta Fidei*,” the pope gave us a challenging explanation. He said that “renewal” is to shape the whole of human existence through “faith”: to shape our thoughts and affections, our mentality and conduct, so that the whole self can be purified and transformed in Christ, and we can work through love. Therefore, our “faith” becomes a new criterion that changes a person’s whole life.<sup>2</sup> “Faith” according to this understanding is not merely a matter of knowing, even though knowledge is important. However, the keystone of “renewal” is the internalization of knowledge – external knowledge motivates internal transformation, so that the transformation becomes the motivation and criterion of life. It is not only a “change” but also a kind of quality transformation. This presents us with a great challenge as well as a clear direction.

To achieve the transformation from outside in, a person’s “free” will is essential. Just as Blessed John Paul II emphasized in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Christifideles Laici*,” “People are approached in liberty by God who calls everyone to grow, develop and be fruitful. A person cannot put off a response or dismiss

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<sup>1</sup> *Porta Fidei*, no. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Porta Fidei*, no. 6.

personal responsibility in the matter.”<sup>3</sup> In the process of maturing in faith, God allows a person to grow and develop in Him. However, only when the person freely responds and gets close to God and takes responsibility for personal growth can he or she bear real fruit. This is perhaps the most difficult part of pastoral work. We often make every effort to plan various activities, but the response is muted. Moreover, many activities are only one-off events, lacking the power of continuity. Facing such a big challenge, the Diocese of Macau is trying to design a different formation program for Catholics with help from the study of social science. Here, we share our experience and hope this can introduce the subject.

### **Growth of Faith and Self-directed Approach**

The traditional way of laity formation, mainly teaching and explaining, is known as the “expert-directed approach.” According to this way, experts – mostly priests and women religious – are invited to teach and explain the subject content. Such an expert-directed approach puts greater emphasis on teaching content and the student’s receptivity. The effects are measured by the knowledge gained by the recipient. However, when we ponder the nature of formation, especially faith formation, we immediately recall what the pope emphasized in the above paragraph: we have to create a kind of intrinsic motivation, turn to God and motivate personal conversion, and this generates a shift of mentality and value orientations. In other words, it is a process of “trans-formation.” To achieve this goal, we try to use the concept and method advocated by modern adult educators, implementing the self-directed approach in some activities.

According to the teaching of Malcolm Knowles, one adult educator, the so-called self-directed approach allows a student to set his learning goal, search for learning resources, choose his own suitable way of learning, and evaluate the result of learning. This approach of paying more attention to the process than to the result is more suitable for adults. It requires the commitment of the whole person: one’s intelligence (how to collect information to solve

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<sup>3</sup> *Christifideles Laici*, no. 57.

problems), emotions (how to face criticism from others and face one's own limitations), and interpersonal relationships with others (how to get help from someone suitable and cooperate with others). At the same time, it is also a process of self-discovery. Spiritually, the person admires the gifts and abilities granted by God. During the process, he or she experiences sacrifice, failure and even death. The student not only experiences that the Lord is with him and entrusts the mission to him, but also humbly acknowledges his own shortcomings. In the Bible, God used this method to educate His people and the prophets many times.

In the Gospels, Jesus also used this approach to teach His apostles. Jesus was unlike the scribes of his time. He not only preached in synagogues, but also brought His disciples to walk through the streets, and later, "one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us" (Acts 1:21). This became the criterion to be an apostle. The approach used by Jesus was also different from that of the scribes. He did not emphasize the recitation of Scripture, but led his disciples to observe the things in daily life, including food, wind, flowers, grass, trees, wheat, loaf, bread and wine, etc., so as to understand the things of heaven. He tried to make his disciples understand the relationship between God and man from human relationships: father, steward, worker, vineyard owner, shepherd, etc. When teaching, He spoke of human experiences: finding the lost sheep, lighting a lamp, thieves, workers looking for jobs, etc. He sent his disciples to villages to preach, so that they could experience success and failure. When facing thousands of hungry people, Jesus asked them how they could feed those people, and then urged them to use all available resources to solve problems. After hearing that they failed to drive out demons, Jesus told them they had to pray and fast... This kind of faith formation emphasized not only gaining knowledge, but also developing relationships and achieving inner transformation, so that one day they could recognize Jesus while He was eating with them.

## **An Example of Macau Diocese**

In 2011, the Macau Catholic Biblical Association, together with some Catholics interested in promoting the Word of God, went to Guangxi to organize a biblical pastoral formation course for women religious. In 2012, they organized a biblical formation course for youth leaders in Taiyuan, Shanxi. Instead of offering formation to women religious and youth leaders of the Church in China, these two activities were rather opportunities for Catholics of Macau to undergo a self-directed formation program.

We used the above-mentioned self-directed approach, and would like to share that experience.

### ***(1) Gather Participants***

Just as the Lord called His disciples, we introduced the program to the Macau Catholic Biblical Association and to Catholics and their friends who joined the association's activities. First, we introduced the objectives of the program and described our dream. We said we hoped that the youths could read all the books in the Bible and the women religious could share the Word of God in various other ways. We explained that the Word of God is essential in the life of faith, that studying the Bible is not so hard and that everybody could hear the Word of God only if we master the methods and were willing to do so (if I can, so can you). The program's objectives were to encourage participation, manifest the importance of the Word of God, and gather a group of lay people to establish a community that shared common aspirations.

### ***(2) In-depth Learning***

The participants chose one book of the Bible, such as one of the historical books, and read it. Each small group set its own schedule and methods, discussing the most interesting and most frequently-read passages that could be read with the audience later. Then they selected methods for sharing and meditating on these passages. At this point, the pastoral workers encouraged and expressed concern for the members of the small groups and their progress, as well as the difficulties they encountered, such as the boring content of historical books and the abstruseness of the Book

of Revelation. The pastoral workers had to provide information as necessary. The main task of the pastoral workers at this stage was “to keep them company.”

It was also the time for each group to establish a community. At the beginning, they might not know each other, but then they set the schedule together, selected the method of Bible study and divided the work, found ways to deeply understand the books, studied the Bible together, meditated, and shared their resources, including reference books. They also invited other people (even Protestant colleagues) to attend talks on special topics, etc. During this process, the small groups, especially through the sharing of the Word of God, led the members to experience the work of the Holy Spirit, thus establishing a community around the Word of God. For example, a four-member group that studied the Book of Revelation finally grasped the meaning of the Seven Letters in daily life after a long discussion till midnight. Later, they not only shared the Word of God with other people, but also made visible the community formed by the Word of God (this community still continues sharing and connecting). The small groups had to report on their progress in the large group every two months, answering questions raised by the other group members and accepting suggestions. Then each group made their own adjustments. In this way, the Christian communities were formed by the Word of God and the Eucharist.

However, the process of these small and large groups sharing and learning was painstaking and varied. Someone read the Book of Revelation a dozen times and suddenly gained the insight during the group’s sharing session. Another person decided to join the liturgy of the hours after reading the Psalms. Someone else designed a popular seizure game for youths. The work of the Holy Spirit was just as dazzling as at the beginning of creation the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. During this process, the pastoral workers still had to give more encouragement, study different books of the Bible, have the courage to offer some constructive suggestions, encourage the small groups to communicate with the large group, pray with the participants, hear the Word of God, pray for enlightenment, entrust everything to God, and get strength from the Word of God. All sorts of joy and sorrow beyond words came after eight months of formation. The

participants got the same reward, as one of them said, “I have never read the Bible so hard in my life, and now I discover that the Word of God is so wonderful.”

### ***(3) Both Teachers and Students Are Witnesses***

Regarding this community of lay Catholics, all members had to travel to China at their own expense and bring along their hand-made materials. They shared the Word of God with other Catholics whom they had never met before. That in itself was the best witness. Though not fluent in Putonghua, they shared the Word of God with the women religious. It was something really new to many people. After studying all the historical books with perseverance, they could tell another group of Catholics that Bible study was possible. It was more convincing than anything else. One young boy told a youth group that St. Paul followed Christ in such an absolute way, and you would see a glow in their eyes. The self-directed formation of these Catholics and their changes became the best teaching materials witnessing to the Word of God. On one hand, we tried to provide formation to the laity of Macau diocese; on the other hand, we helped them become formators so that they could share with their friends. Then the audience would have the ability and motivation to share with others.

### **The Challenge of Formators**

This can be a very challenging method for the pastoral workers because this kind of formation does not have specific textbooks and common procedures. It is difficult even to monitor their progress and is more time-consuming than giving lectures. During the process, the biggest challenge for the pastoral workers was the problem of “confidence” – in the formators, in God, and in God’s work. Sometimes they got stuck, even after spending a lot of time preparing. At times when I noticed them having problems of cooperation and being unable to get the key point, I was tempted to do it myself. It was like when Jesus was on the cross and He faced another temptation: being asked to come down from the cross. Similarly, a formator needs more courage and patience, and has to pray humbly to God. When using this method, he or she also needs

a high sense of sensibility and flexibility. He or she must establish a good and trustful relationship with the one who receives formation, and set a clear goal. The formator also needs a spirit of adventure, to let the Holy Spirit work on them. Using this method requires more time because a formator does not just teach a few lessons, but becomes a companion. He or she should be a motivator rather than a teacher, an animator rather than a judge, and provide more materials or resources than just prepare one's own lesson. Finally, it is important that the formator has to pray for the entire project and all the participants, entrusting them to the Lord, because God alone is the ultimate formator.

## **Conclusion**

To assess this formation approach, we should not measure its results and effects because the audience can get more knowledge from a lecture by a Biblical scholar than the sharing sessions of these twenty Catholics. However, from the perspective of the internalization of faith, I believe the participants underwent changes this year. I have no data for reference but there are some cases that I can share. One participant paid for and attended a course on the "Book of Revelation" every week in Hong Kong. One candidate for baptism said, "I see the power of the Bible, and now I read the Bible every day. Please pray hard for me!" She decided to be baptized next Easter and invited one of her group members to be her godmother. One participant downloaded the liturgy of hours to her mobile phone. Another said that she would pray for the Church in China more fervently on May 24 because, until then, the faces of the youths in China were still on her mind and the Chinese Church was so real and loving. Some participants would compile the materials they prepared to share with Catholics in Macau in the Year of Faith. I can say that this is not a kind of data assessment. But there are changes in Macau diocese, not only change of quantity, but also change of quality — namely, transformation.