

Born into a New Life

Jin Yan

I was born in the 1980s into a Christian family. The family was “Christian” because my mother comes from a Catholic family of several generations, and she brought the religion to my father’s family. So I was raised in a quite religious atmosphere. We went to Mass every Sunday, and on Saturday nights we had Bible study in the family. But due to the former years of persecution and to the atheistic propaganda, at that time religious faith, especially Christianity, was still discriminated against by most people in society. When I was a little girl and went to Church with my mother, our neighbors were perplexed, or they would ask sarcastically: “Still going to Church, heh? Is there a salary in it for you?”

Thus, my parents passed on to me their Catholic faith and the habit of going to Church, but I had to grow up alone in a society full of anti-religious influences. At that time, there were only two or three Christian families in the whole town, which was the centre of the county. I had no Christian friends of my age with whom I could talk about faith, and no teacher to guide me in this area. Everyone around me had a negative attitude toward religious faith, regarding it as superstition. In middle school the course named “Ideology and Politics” appeared in the curriculum, and my mind began to be invaded by communism and atheism. I was divided between two worlds: the world of my family with its Christian faith, and the world of school with its propaganda and exams. Deep in my heart I believed that my parents had a reason for their faith. But from time to time, doubts arose in my mind. Without the courage to challenge either side, I had to continue my inner struggle, alone. When I was in trouble I called to the God of my parents. The rest of the time I buried myself in my lessons and textbooks, including the books on political propaganda. In this way, I could pass the college-entrance examination and change my fate by entering a good university. The

Catholic faith was like a seed buried deep in my heart by my parents, and it was waiting for the right day to sprout out.

Later I was lucky enough to succeed in the exam, and I enrolled in a university for language studies. With much more free time on campus, and also with the support of my parents, I began to search for better ways of living out my faith. However, I was still divided between two worlds: faith and life. Faith was still what my parents had given me, but the place to practise it had moved to a city Church. My parents were not with me. I was still alone in life, but more completely this time: I had to be independent. At this moment, I had the strong feeling that I needed friends of my age, who were also Christians so that we could share our faith together. God really took care of my needs. In the city of my university, I found a prayer group in which I met several good friends. We gathered every weekend, went to Mass together, prayed together, and always ended with a simple but joyful meal. Moreover, in my hometown, the diocese organized a summer camp and a winter camp for college students every year, where I could meet many Christian students of my diocese. We worshipped God together, shared our experiences together, and learned a lot about our faith and the Church. Although during this period, God was still “the God of my mother”, just like for Jacob in Gn. 28, who knew God as “the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac.” Only when He “keeps me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on”, and makes everything in my life go smoothly, shall He be “My God”. Otherwise I’d easily get angry with Him and be full of complaints against Him. However, those prayer activities and the community life both in the prayer group and in the student camps kept me in close contact with the Lord. I was led, even unconsciously, to know more about Him and to get closer to Him. Eventually He became “my God.”

In 2008 I graduated from university with a Masters degree in English Language and Literature. As my university was well-known, I could easily have found a job in that big city, become its resident and settle down as most of my classmates did. But just before graduation, I suddenly got tired of city life, for it seemed that I could see right through the future—job, residence (“hukou”), family, apartment, and car. But I did not want to spend the rest of my life

struggling for those things. I wanted to look for greater meaning in life, and try to live this out. Therefore, after a short period of consideration, I came back to my home diocese, and under the gaze of many puzzled eyes, I went to the pastoral center to start my ministry with the Church—working for the formation of the lay-faithful of the diocese, as a lay person.

At that time the pastoral center was newly started. There were very few workers and very few resources. My first task was to organize the office, so as to ensure the smooth implementation of the formation programs. The second task was to accompany the youth groups. Due to the lack of co-workers, I felt quite frustrated in the beginning, but the good Lord never abandoned me. His powerful hand was always with me. A good tutor in the area at that time gave me a lot of help, especially in terms of spirituality. Together with the benefit of the formation lessons, I finally got a true understanding of my faith and of the God that I believe in. I eventually felt His great and unconditional love for me all through my life. One day, I saw in the elder son of Luke 15 the image of myself. Although I never left the Father's house, I had never understood His merciful heart. For under a pious appearance, I had a cold and selfish heart, which was far away from Him. I knew that it was due to the lack of a religious education in my childhood. But it was also due to my experience of "struggling alone" in my early years. When I got to know this, I finally became the younger son--- who could kneel down to experience the merciful love of the Lord.

My experience of growing up as a whole person prepared me for my second task—to accompany the youth. When I looked at them I saw my early self—lost and struggling to keep up the family faith in a hostile environment! I wanted very much to help them, so that they would no longer need to struggle alone! In fact it is not an easy job. This era has undergone rapid development. New technologies are changing the world every day—and with it, the mind of the people, especially the youth. They are more active than us who were born in the 1980s; their life is easier, but they live with less care about history, and society and its future. Therefore I need to know their thoughts, their lives, and listen to them. In this way I can explore together with them, under the spirit of the Gospel, how to live as Christians in this age. For example, "whether to join the

communist party” has puzzled a lot of Christian students. It is in fact a contest between faith and worldly expectations. It is one of the greatest challenges in our pastoral work. We need to accompany the youth, and guide them patiently, in order to help them walk through this dilemma. Another example was during the period when almost the whole nation was stirred up to “boycott everything Japanese.” How should we Christians discern this matter, and act? This problem also demanded that we help the youth to find a proper answer. Of course, “as you sow, so shall you reap.” Each year there are students who graduate and leave the students’ association, and settle down in different cities. Most of them, even when they get married and establish their families, are still active Christians, involved both in the Church and in society. When I see this, my heart is filled with joy, although I understand that it is God who “gives the increase.” This makes me feel that I have found the “greater meaning” in life that I looked for in the beginning. Not only have I myself been born into a new life, but I have also found a “career” that deserves my lifelong commitment. Thanks be to God!