

# *An Analysis of the Question of Faith among University Students*

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University students play an important role in the development of the Catholic Church. A study on the current situation of Christian faith among university students would facilitate understanding the characteristics of their faith and the proper strategies to be adopted, so that university students may receive better guidance in their knowledge of the Church and in their spiritual lives. It can also help to solve various problems and foster a healthy development of their faith.

## **1. Faith and Challenges**

First of all, Sanya (on Hainan Island) is a small and sleepless city. Nightlife is the most attractive for university students as it fits perfectly with their habit of turning night into day. So they indulge themselves in the wanton debauchery that goes on under the cover of darkness. Because they know very well the emptiness and fatigue that come with quietude, they find more and more excuses to engage more people in a party. Of course I am no exception to this; but most people just follow the trend blindly. Some are silly and pathetic enough to fall in love with such permissiveness—they think that they have nothing else to do. Serious learning and study are out of question. An unenlightened university student once said casually, “A university student is not considered one if he has never skipped a class. A university student is not considered one if he has never slept in such a way that he turns night into day. A university student should not be called one if he has never fallen in love....” This sentiment has spread like a “maxim” among ignorant students of the younger generation. Everything is OK, if everyone lives according to the “maxim”. After all, their predecessors have

“proven” its truth with their own lives for many years. There are books about it, and it is generally accepted by society.

In addition, the development of the internet is so rapid that words like “speedy” and “rampant” are not enough to describe its extent. Sometimes it is as unthinkable as a billionaire turning into a beggar overnight. Their relative freedom induces a distorted mindset in some people. Or maybe it is the heat of the island that makes people sloppy and lazy, always resting on their laurels. Maybe this is why they cultivate such mediocre and strange tastes. With indulgence in online shopping, the social media, internet channels and games, the plethora of platforms and software brings with it a large amount of junk messages and advertisements, although it is true that they are very convenient. Worse still, many people become addicted to such junk contents. They imitate the content of such videos and the ideas they express. Then comes relentless forwarding which makes the rapid dissemination of internet messages even quicker. The emergence of Weixin, QQ and WeChat accelerates the small-circle tragedy of “a piece of rotten meat destroying the whole bowl of soup”. People are sickened very soon because this is taken as a very normal phenomenon. This is why nobody resists it with strong willpower except those with faith. This is how the paradox about university students like me comes into being. For many people, the word “strange” is just not enough to accurately describe people like me.

Finally, for us who have faith, the atheistic environment that we are living in wanders around like a hungry wolf. We often find ourselves in danger of being torn to pieces. On the 19th of September, 2011, on an island that is nearly ten thousand kilometers away from my hometown, I began my life in the university, and in the Chinese manner of social life that is fully immersed in atheism. Previously I enjoyed going to places that were entirely unknown to me; I enjoyed experiences that were entirely new to me; I enjoyed meeting new faces. To sum up, I enjoyed everything that was completely new to me, for I am a person full of curiosity. My new life was not entirely new to me as long as I could find a church nearby—it did not differ much from my earlier years. As I became familiar with people from all over

China, I inevitably encountered more and more differences and conflicts. Many people, even my best friends, were surprised by my spending so much time every day in prayer, especially before I had my meals. At first, they told me not to make the sign of the cross when I ate with them outside, for this would instantly cause other people to throw us discriminating glances or make them feel uncomfortable. Then they were very angry with me when, every week and on feast days, I declined all the invitations from the university and my friends to take part in various activities, so that I could go to church and attend Mass. They thought that I was always keeping myself aloof. In their minds my habit of going to church was just a colossal absurdity, and I appeared so silly to them that they took pity on me. It is undeniable that there are sometimes conflicts between my faith and my life. If I focused on nurturing my faith, I would have fewer chances to maintain friendships. For this reason, the choice between the two things causes many students in the university to lose their faith. Although they may not turn away from their faith completely, the world is big, and it is just their first step into the morass.

## **2. How I Kept My Faith Alive**

Generally speaking, university students do not believe that there is a transcendent being existing in or above this world. This is because they are sometimes (or always) arrogant and haughty. In fact, what they find unacceptable are the false things and false gods. After all, they have studied science for so many years and with such great effort. All of a sudden the things around them were “created by God”. This is just unscientific to all people with their mindset. How difficult it is, therefore, to keep up with our faith all the way through our university years! In fact, everything in a man’s life can be destroyed except his will. It is indeed a challenge to sustain such willpower for a long period of time, even though it is just a few years.

First of all, daily prayer is indispensable for me. I formed my own way of prayer in 2005, when I began my life in the high school dormitory. I prayed thrice a day—in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening. Each time I recited the rosary. In my morning

and evening prayers, I added the prayers that I learned from primary school. In the afternoon I might add a brief but affectionate chat with God. I didn't really enjoy praying the rosary, but I was deeply impressed by the pious prayers of my great aunt. The strict discipline of prayer in my childhood years continues up to the present time. Even though I am often unwilling to do so, I would still pray three times a day. It seems that parents who are very strict with their discipline are indispensable for growth. In my opinion, our prayers will not be futile, but of course we have to pray seriously. Everyone of us is given twenty-four hours a day. Praying thrice in a day takes at most one-eighth of our time. We have plenty of remaining time to busy ourselves with other matters. Besides regular lessons, there is plenty of time for us in the university. Yet I am not inflexible with my prayer because I am not a saint. Very often I am lazy and weak with regard to prayer. However, I know that the forces of the devil will immediately come and roar at me, if I stop praying. Therefore, I insist upon prayer even though it is sometimes burdensome. It is just like the three meals we take each day—we should not miss one of them. Prayer is, of course, not restricted to the recitation of prayers. Even simple prayers like the Jesus Prayer, short meditations and conversations with Him like a friend are all helpful.

In addition, it does not help much if we add to the number of our prayers, but only say them mindlessly, especially when our hearts are confused and troubled. It is important to take part in activities like retreats and courses. In the past, I was a bit disdainful towards these activities, as I thought that our hearts would not be purified and our spirit would not grow simply by not speaking for several days, or through listening to sermons and lectures. That was just ridiculous! In fact, I seldom had time to participate because I was at school. Nevertheless, I did join some of the learning activities, or otherwise I would never have heard of the Jesus Prayer. What changed my perspective about these activities completely was a one-week retreat I made in August 2014 in Beijing. There was an exquisite chapel inside a private residence attached to a social welfare house. My deepest impression was the first time I participated in the 24-hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I chose my favourite time to pray in the chapel alone. I could remain

in silence, pray or chat with Jesus in the tabernacle. For most of the time, I had conversations with Jesus and, except for the prayers which I recited with others every day, I seldom said vocal prayers. The benefits of the retreat were far beyond my expectations. I discovered many problems that I had not noticed before. I felt the presence of Jesus in very concrete ways. All of a sudden everything became lovely and harmonious. The copious negative energy that I had before attending the retreat disappeared completely. It was a wonderful experience—it was just inexplicable!

Finally, the presence of teachers and companions who are also seeking a life of faith is important for upholding one's own faith and for one's own spiritual growth. There are only a few people on Hainan Island who are practising Catholics. Catholic university students from other provinces, who come to Hainan to study can be counted on one's fingers. Therefore it is indeed a blessing to be able to find a few companions at the university. The presence of the *Hai Jiezi* (海芥子) Youth Group makes the church a welcoming place and I feel at home in it. We are more like noisy children at a family gathering. Some people come to Mass primarily to visit with a certain friend. Obviously this adds to the attraction of the church. A person may be lazy in his daily prayers, but inevitably everyone will be more serious in prayer when we pray together. We can even find support for each other in times of temptation, so that we may gain many benefits, and not fall so deeply into sin. I had been very troubled by the lack of accompanying teachers. Hainan Island is not really a faraway district, but there are only two priests, two resident Sisters and one Sister who comes to serve periodically for such a big island. Therefore it is not hard to envisage the difficulties of maintaining a life of faith on Hainan Island. I have often heard that, in other countries, every individual can find a personal spiritual director. I was envious because, if this were the case, I would not have to worry about changing to a new director and then beginning all over again our understanding of one another. I had many opportunities to have conversations with them, but it was an activity that had a time limit. I did not want to begin to tell a long story, and then overrun the scheduled time. So I passed on meeting them.

### **3. The Needs of University Students in Their Faith**

“What is faith?” Many people have asked me this in the past. I was embarrassed because I did not know how to explain my faith briefly and precisely, so that the atheists of my age would understand. After all, faith is a kind of luxury for most university students, especially the Chinese ones. But from my present situation, faith is much more like a personalized kitchen, a first-aid kit, or a bottle of energizing Red Bull that people crave for, and that never exhausts itself, or runs dry. This is something that I and the atheistic university students around me are both eagerly looking for.

University life is at times colourful and at other times monotonous, but there must be some leisure time to think things over, right? Faith plays a more and more critical role in a society that is seriously sick. The desire for faith among many university students surpasses even their own imagination. Moreover, the prevalence of heretical cults makes it difficult to properly inspire and guide university students along the path of faith. Those who sow the seeds of faith should not give up on the seeds they have already sown. For this reason, we who have faith should, on one hand, be cautious and set a good example for those to follow. On the other hand, we should put our faith into practice so as to guarantee that we are not sowing the wrong seeds.

University education is the time when we gain the most knowledge. We can quickly discern what is good and what we need. Therefore, the various learning activities that the Church organises are all very important, whether they provide help in dire need or serve as an honorific offering. For me, a real understanding of the Church, as well as my own experience and interpretation of the Christian faith, began in my university years. It was also the time when I was the most proactive in my learning. Besides, there were more holidays during our university years. We did not need to worry about our assignments like primary or secondary school students. The absolutely free time of holidays caused us to dislike them instead. The Church is always attentive to the formation and learning of lay Catholics. This is exactly our advantage when we, as university students, compare ourselves with other groups of people.