

“Come and Follow Me”: The Journey of a Youth Minister

*Dominic
Translated by Jin Yan*

I am a priest working on youth ministry. Fifteen years flash by since I started serving the young people. Looking back, through my ministry, I have helped hundreds of young people to find their way and to be empowered. Whenever I see them grow, become mature, and their children also grow healthy and sound in the mature care of their parents—some of the little ones even nurture the dream of becoming priests or sisters—my heart is filled with unparalleled joy. I also come to a deep understanding of the sacred value and significance of this ministry. Last year, I participated in the ordination ceremony and home celebration of a young man from our youth group; two years ago, three young women from our group made their perpetual vows as Sisters; and there are several others undergoing religious formation. I have felt the meaning of this ministry, and my heart has been filled with joy because of new hope in the horizon.

However, when I look back, I realise that when I first went on this road, it was not by my own choice. In the beginning, I did not have a clear direction. It happened by chance. A priest who was older than me suddenly approached me before the Spring Festival of 2004, and asked me: “do you like to serve the young people?” I answered: “I don’t know what I like most, so it doesn’t matter.” He said: “Then go attend a workshop on youth ministry.” I said: “OK, I’ll go and see.” That is how I started, and I could no longer stop. I kept learning about the work on youth ministry, by imitating, exploring, planning, designing, initiating, accompanying, establishing, running outdoor expansion activities, innovating, etc., and to my surprise, I gradually blazed my own way in the field of youth ministry.

I have reflected a lot over this matter. I know as I kept learning and rendering services, I myself have grown a lot over the years. My character, which used to be rigid and too serious, has been tempered. I am now milder and gentler. I conducted different surveys among the young people. Now I understand their needs and their desire for priests and Sisters to voluntarily get close to them. The more I know the youth, the more I am able to approach them, and they also become more willing to come to me. The cumulation of experience has enabled me to give them better help in growing up. I also feel that, through these young people, God has revealed His love to me, and helped me to discover the talents with which He had endowed me.

Although little by little I became aware that I would devote my whole life to serving the young people, I found that my priest-companions who could work on youth ministry are becoming fewer and fewer, and we are also aging. Sometimes I also complained and sighed regarding the situation. However, when tracing back my own growth as a minister, I realised that I lacked the spirit of that elder priest, and I have failed to bring up successors. Just when Jesus began his public mission, as he walked along the Galilean sea, he saw several young people. He gazed at them and said: "Come and follow me, and I'll make you fishers of men" (Mk. 1:17). This call had brought together the first disciples of Jesus, who later became the pillars of the Church. Jesus had provided these young men with orientation and the target for their striving. With one word, one invitation, the elder priest also pointed to me the direction and goal that I have been striving for. I have discovered that, nowadays young people are in desperate need of these lofty and sacred working directions and goals worth struggling for. And this is exactly the primary task of youth ministers—to give young people orientation and purpose.

So in this reflection, I summarise some points which used to help me to discern God's will. And I hope to encourage all my co-workers with it.

First of all, we should keep the kingdom of heaven in mind and try to understand the heart of the Lord. We should be clear about His will and be determined to do it. St. Paul the apostle used to say: "for though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet

have you not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be you followers of me” (1 Cor. 4:16). Indeed, I think that we who are youth ministry workers must have this courage, insight, and aspiration. We should be brave enough to imitate Paul, to be fathers like the Apostle Paul, to inherit and pass on the spirit of Jesus, and to help the youth to achieve maturity and the perfection of Jesus.

Second, we should gaze at the youth with our heart, very caring, very attentive, very thorough, and with feelings. The expression in the eyes is a way to connect lives, exchange love, communicate mission, inject strength and reveal true sentiments. Our relationship with the youth is not a working relationship; nor is it a relation of interests, much less that of police and thieves. It is a relationship of love in Christ. Jesus used to gaze at many people with this kind of expression in his eyes. And we must also gaze attentively, caringly at the young people today.

Third, we should invite with firmness: come and follow me! I have heard many pastors who told the youth: “You can come or not; you can follow or not.” These words would add to the disorientation of the young people. What they need is affirmation and that they are wanted. I myself have also grown through this feeling of affirmation and being needed. I earnestly hope that our youth ministers can offer enough affirmation and send a powerful invitation to young people, to give them the strength to walk out of perplexity into hope.

Fourth, “I’ll make you fishers of men” means concrete direction and target, and the embodiment of far-reaching values and significance. Young people thirst for truth and meaning. We must present the most valuable and meaningful tasks to them. Do not be afraid that they might shrink back. The rich young man backed off at the invitation of Jesus, but Jesus still extended the invitation. Let us follow the example of Jesus!

Finally, I would like to make a summary of my reflections. I feel that, Jesus has put the youth of this era in front of us—a reality that we must not avoid, nor muddle through passively. Our only option is to take to heart the will of the Lord and look at the young people with affection, invite them with affirmation and sincerity to pursue the most valuable and meaningful undertaking. Let us, youth

ministers of this generation, be positive and full of initiative, walk forward hand in hand, model ourselves on the Apostle Paul, and follow Jesus to lead these young people to "look for another ocean."