

# *Accompanying College Students*

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*Lucas*

*Translated by Wong Yik Ching*

Since around 2008, our diocese has been hosting summer camp and winter camp twice a year for university students. In 2010, when I was still a seminarian, I participated for the first time in the diocesan summer camp for university youth. Ten years have gone by in the blink of an eye, many of the then young teenagers are already parents. I happened to assist and take part in the camps for four or five years, and I miss very much the times spent with the youth. I think many of them would share the same feeling because until now, many maintain a deep friendship. Of course, this activity is different from the typical summer or winter camp: how to strengthen faith was its core concern.

In the face of the poor religious atmosphere on campus, university students unavoidably feel lonely and confused along the road of faith. Spending about ten days together with their peers for faith-sharing was a special experience, even though it was not a long period of time. Moreover, there was no demarcation between success and failure in this activity. So long as it was led with the heart, every time someone would benefit greatly from it. Although I do not feel that I have done anything, perhaps sharing some good memories and reflections on services can also be regarded as some experience of youth ministry!

The very dynamic nature of youth is an advantage for formation. In one summer camp, all the time was spent pitching a tent on a mountain. One evening there was a sudden rainstorm. Lightning flash lit up surrounding trees severely swayed by strong wind. The continuous thunder was blasting right above our tents. Not only did the tents leak, they were also put up in a low-lying area because of our inexperience. Everyone complained without end. We could only stay in the tents waving our electric torches and shouting to each other for encouragement. The next day, the priest

who led this camp wove all this into jokes as well as vivid teaching materials for understanding the majesty and greatness of God. The young people easily forgot their fright and the sleepless night. They only kept in mind how important the prayer and the presence of each other were at that time.

Another time, we planned a hike, though there were some worries that the "precious babies" of these families could not persevere. We deliberately prepared a vehicle to pick up the students who could not keep up with the group. Surprisingly, in spite of some complaints over the hardship, no one was left behind. During the lunch break, the students themselves initiated an improvised antiphonal singing contest. In a crossover of hymns and pop songs, everyone was having so much fun that the hardship suffered a moment ago seemed to be swept away in an instant. The destination of this journey was a church's cemetery. The mixed experience of feeling exhausted and witnessing the end of life was so close that anyone would be moved! In addition, as we also celebrated Mass in an open area of the cemetery, a few words of reminder by the priest could easily enter deeply into one's heart. We planned to return by car; many students, however, insisted on walking. In particular a female student whose heel was chafing probably because her shoes were not suitable, walked a long way quietly. Since we were concerned that it would attract people's attention and cause trouble with so many people walking back to the village together, the students were forced to get into the car. None of the worries we had at the beginning materialised during the hike; many students regretted that they were unable to complete the course instead. Such rigorous experience seemed to have created lasting and strong bonds between teachers and students, and among the students themselves. The so-called dynamic nature is in fact the vitality and vigour of the youth themselves. As long as positive guidance is given, all difficulties would turn into a profound experience that touches their life. Challenging some of the limits that are absent in everyday life—in a religious atmosphere—would lead to a kind of growth in personality and faith.

People generally think that it is hard for young people to maintain silence. At the beginning of an activity, collecting their mobile phones is a necessary but not easy task. On the first evening

the dormitory was basically very quiet. On the one hand, they were still unfamiliar with each other. Everyone was busy looking at their phone on the other hand. This type of silence is not real silence; on the contrary their mind could not stop chasing after the virtual world. To be silent is also a capability, and the mobile phone is sometimes an obstacle to the development of this capability. Since one has to shift frequently between the virtual and the real world, it is easy to forget that the person, the self is the real center. When we plan an outdoor activity, sometimes students would bring as many portable chargers as the number of activity days. When we have indoor activities, they also try to use different means and excuses to keep their phones. Nevertheless, collecting phones is more an attitude, telling young people that something should not be the center and necessity of life. Those who were the last to hand over their phones often went through certain internal struggles and finally chose to let go. Thus they should have a special realisation of calmness from letting go of an obsession! From this experience Jesus' parable would become more meaningful and relevant to them. "A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' He said in reply, 'I will not,' but afterwards he changed his mind and went. The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, 'Yes, sir,' but did not go." (Mt. 21:28-30). Silence is also an indispensable part in the experience of faith.

In every activity we would usually arrange a special Eucharistic adoration. Students themselves decorated the small altar that enshrined the Blessed Sacrament. We would sit either facing, or around the altar, mostly up to the students. The altar was surrounded by small candles for both decoration and illumination. In the peaceful candlelight, it was easier to immerse oneself in the sacred atmosphere. We stayed silent for most of the hour. The priest who led the liturgy would also wear vestments and take part in the adoration together. He would share a few words before completing the adoration with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. During the adoration, spontaneous prayers were neither encouraged nor stopped. To experience freely the communication with Jesus was more important. We concluded with prayer in small groups on the spot, or by offering a prayer intention written in advance. Every

time after leading such rituals, I always felt that the atmosphere of the whole event became more profound. Students would even find time to go to the chapel alone, or in company, or as an entire group, to quietly adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for a while. Even if the whole activity makes only this one impact, it is worth it. Because Jesus himself taught his disciples, "when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret" (Mt. 6:6). To go towards God from one's heart spontaneously and in silence, isn't this the spirit of prayer that Jesus taught us?

The lectures in youth activities may be more in need of some new elements. Some faith knowledge can also be taught by combining teaching and fun. Once I arranged a Bible quiz. It was played in teams and the prizes were simply fruits. Everyone was fully engaged, not only laughing throughout the game, but they also asked for more when the game ended. Some issues or concerns the young people raise may seem strange. But to set aside time to address these questions in fact conveys key teachings: "What is faith?" and "What is the Church?" For instance, the youth frequently ask, "Why does the Church prohibit believers from marrying non-believers?" They are actually asking, is the Church a strict authoritarian organisation? Does the Church ignore individual thoughts because of its own principles? If we can explain that the Church is not prohibiting, but does not encourage such union; if we can clarify that the Church sees marriage as beautiful and sacred, thus she prefers a profound foundation of ecumenism in marriage. This not only settles questions, but the image of the Church and the knowledge of faith are also naturally implied. Regarding the lack of faith knowledge, it is unnecessary to demand instant success. Even if we put in more effort, there is no way to teach the complicated faith system of the Church in such a limited time. The focus should be on accompanying young people in life. With the help of priests, Sisters, seminarians, lay leaders, and even behind-the-scenes support of laypeople, the Church has been alive and present in these activities indeed.

Dynamism, silence and learning, these three aspects experienced in youth ministry are in fact, an attempt to honour the characteristics of young people themselves, and to bring faith into their lives in an appropriate way. How to let the youth themselves

encounter Jesus is the center of all events. As Jesus carried out his ministry, he always met people through people. Therefore, how to make the youth activities of the Church always carry the sign of encountering Jesus is the very direction we should work toward. Invite people with different roles and identities in the Church to take part in these activities can help make Christ's face clearer.

Thanks to the help of Hong Kong, I was fortunate enough to accompany three young people to participate in the "Asian Youth Day" held in South Korea in August 2014. Although we were only a small group, it was such a valuable and rare experience to gather with young people from all over Asia and to be in communion with the newly elected Pope Francis. Through the sharing of this experience, our youth activities are more aware of being part of the universal Church.

Lastly, it is also worth sharing some difficulties of youth ministry, in order to find better ways to face them. How do we bring the faith experiences in these activities to school or social life? For the most part underprivileged and marginalized in society, what should a young Christian do in this current situation? In an era that is increasingly digitised, traditional activities are losing their attraction. How can we improve the work of youth ministry? How should we regard faith, in the difficult and uncertain process of integrating into society? Some of these ought not to be issues, but they are actually happening in the lives of every youth. Perhaps it is very hard to have a perfect answer, but relying on faith, with companions in life, and facing together all kinds of restrictions and limitations, God will finally provide answers to these difficult challenges. This is because young people are the youth of Christ; youth ministry should always be placed under the eyes of Jesus. "Jesus looked at them and said, 'For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.'" (Mk. 10:27)