

Reflections of Two Youth Ministers

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Ren: Challenges and Tomorrow

Do we notice the needs of the young people around us? Do we have time to sit down and listen to them? Do we feel the unique energy of young people? Do we cry and laugh with them? Do we really know the young people? As a youth minister, these questions often ring in my ears. Here I would like to share with you the experience I have with the youth. Let us talk about the challenges Chinese Catholic youth are facing.

Adolescents and young people need the guidance of elders to help them discern as they make decisions in life, and to step out of their own cocoon. Here I wish to share about the relationship between young people and their family today. Many Chinese Catholic youth are not willing to live with their parents. Most Chinese parents are very traditional and young people do not want to repeat their parents' old ways of living. Many prefer to adopt other ways. Some of the young people around me desire to emigrate. They try to become “non-Chinese” or “non-Asian.” Success is often defined as finding a spouse or a job overseas. On the other hand, there are also many young people who are willing to maintain their parents' original lifestyle. These different choices make us ponder again the relationship between young people's culture and the morality of the family. Despite these questions of generations and identity, many Chinese Catholic youth are eager to get married. At the same time, family life is also a challenge and pressure for them.

When it comes to education, the first thing that comes to our mind is schooling. Schools should not be a place where young people spend most of their lives just to learn some knowledge. China's education system should focus more on shaping the personality, guiding and accompanying the growth of young people. Unfortunately, the current education system only provides information, but not life education. Schools should not pursue

short-term gain at the expense of the normal growth of the youth. Do Chinese Catholic youth who live under a cut-throat education system have no options but to "accept their fate"? Every educator needs to ponder this question. In the mindset of Chinese people, success is to have the children study hard and find a good job after they finished. The children become an expression of their parents' vanity. In the field of work, young people in China also suffer. Many young people do not have a job, or they "persevere" in their job, only to earn their "daily bread" to support the family. This is not to say that young people cannot work hard. Rather, the point is, in order to meet the demands of social pressure today, young people sometimes have to sacrifice their dreams. In the midst of these challenges, what can we do for today's teenagers and youth? Young people around the world long to be listened to. They need to be listened to without judgment or lots of advice. The youth do not need too much advice. More importantly, they need personal space and companionship.

Companionship looks like a simple task, but it is actually very complicated. Many priests on the mainland are studying spiritual companionship. Why do surveys show that what the youth need most is accompaniment? What is the relationship between the youth and the Church today? Are the youth willing to open their hearts and share their lives with bishops, priests, religious and Sisters? This is a big question mark. Young people really hope the Mother Church will relate to them. The following are some voices from the hearts of our youth: *Please accept us as the children of the mother Church. Do not judge us. The words that come to mind when we talk about the "Church" are "awe-inspiring," "boring Mass and liturgies"; we can never touch the bishop's throne; we feel far away from the bishops and priests. It is not so easy for young people to participate in the Church. Because we are too young in the eyes of the elders, young people are not eligible to take part in pivotal work in the parish or dioceses. What we want from the elders is trust and support.*

At the same time, I also asked a few young people who participated in World Youth Day. The influence of World Youth Day on the youth is huge. Many young people were on fire for the Lord after participating in the World Youth Day and wanted to do

something for their respective motherland. But when the fire slowly dies out, it is not so easy for them to continue to live with passion in their daily lives. The point I want to make is that these international, diocesan big events can continue to bring hope and dreams to young people. They are not just one special event. In order not to let the fire or passion die out, the Church should work together like a big family. How to awaken the youth of the Church? This question that is at the root would lead us toward the youth of the Church in China, to pass over today and step into tomorrow.

The word "tomorrow" brings us hope and dreams. If the Catholic youth of China maintain a vigilant heart from now on, and become aware of the illusions that today's society offers them, and refuse to blindly follow the cult of Mammon, will there still be so much inequality in China? If Chinese Catholic youth realise from this moment on that there is an all-powerful authority who can heal and turn around our lives, will there still be so many suicides in China? If Chinese Catholic youth radiate the face of God in everything they do, will China still be indifferent? If Chinese Catholic youth seek the meaning of life themselves and are not infected by impetuous social tumours, will China be the country with one of the highest divorce rates? If Chinese Catholic youth had established a deep relationship with the Lord and carried on a mission, the Chinese Church would not be sleeping anymore. Rise up, youth! Even if we are in a special environment, in search of the kingdom of heaven, that special relationship is a treasure that will help us trust in God. Rise up, youth! Let us emerge from our comfort zone *to make a better place for you and me.*

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Gardener: My Mission on Youth Ministry

I was born into a family that has been Catholic for several generations. After a childhood and early youth that was happy and free of worries, I encountered a major setback in my life: failure in the college entrance examination (*gaokao*). This changed my life and I became a perplexed young adult. On one occasion, I happened to see a young man of my age leading a prayer service with guitar, and in my heart an inexplicable desire arose: could I be like him, leading a prayer with guitar? From then on, I began a journey in constant search of myself. At the start, I was just a recipient. Seeing the persistent pursuit in faith of the elder brothers and sisters in the Church was a big inspiration for me. I kept going, looking for the answer to these questions: Who am I? What on earth is my relationship with Jesus? What is the purpose of my existence in this world? Why am I a Christian?

Now, as a lay person working on youth ministry, I would like to share a few things I have come to know, as well as some challenges with all of you.

A. The aim and methods of youth ministry—a summary from my experience

The aim of youth ministry: to enter the world of the youth with Christ's love, to accompany them in discovering God's love in their living experience, so that they could have the opportunity to hear, among the various choices, the voice of Christ, and be able to respond vigorously to His call. This aim also invites me to establish a profound and intimate personal relationship with Christ. It is like having a good friend who loves me very much, and he is Jesus my elder brother. Naturally I want to introduce him to other friends of mine. The more I know him, the more joy I have in introducing him to other friends. Thus, the youth ministry in my experience is also a process in which one life exerts influence upon other lives.

Of course, in youth ministry, there is not only the aim, but also some external ways and methods to learn, for example, experiential pedagogy, heuristic methods of teaching, basic psychology, adventure-based outdoor training, etc., so as to help me achieve the

aim of youth ministry. Secondly, we should also pay attention to issues in entertainment, sports, science and technology, the hot topics in society, which the youth tend to follow. This could provide us with more resources to be with them; and I have found out that the more I pay attention to their points of interests, the more attentive they would become to what I am interested in, and the more chances I would have to bring them the love of Christ.

B. Relations with co-workers and with the youth in ministry

The experience of the past years also told me that I needed co-workers. Whenever I felt helpless, frustrated and disoriented, it was my co-workers who offered me great support. At the same time, I also need a cooperative and open spirit, to respond, together with my co-workers, to the needs of the youth. Surely, besides the bond in work, I have been closely linked with my co-workers in life also. Their loving care for me has helped me go through difficulties, and empowered me in my life. The love of Christ circled among our group of companions through the bonds in our work as well as in our lives. And certainly this bond also gives me a deep sense of belonging to a loving Church.

Besides the cooperation with my co-workers, I also need to cooperate with the young people. I got to know this from the process of my growing up. Because the seniors who used to accompany me in this mission, had set me good examples and gave me the strength to grow from a youth into a youth minister. Therefore, I made the experience of being accompanied in the past as the principle of my engagement in this mission. When the young people work with me, it is also a process in which Christ shows Himself to the young people via me.

C. Challenges encountered in youth ministry

Challenges from the need of family and that of work: the busiest time of my work is usually holiday time for others. Therefore, I tend to miss some opportunities to enjoy public holidays with my wife and children. I often need to find a balance

between the two needs, trying to adapt my time and energy for the needs of both my family and my work.

Challenges in work: sometimes I pay too much attention to the current questions faced by the young people, asking persistently how to solve these problems such as the addiction to internet games, the disorientation and aimlessness of the youth, pornographic information, no clear interpersonal boundaries, the tensions in parenthood, etc. I forget to resort to the source of life—Christ. Thus, I have to constantly remind myself that there is no end to questions that are in need of solutions. What I need to do is to create, under the light of Christ, different ways to show that Christ is the truth, the life, and the way, and to encourage the youth to think, to provide them with more opportunities to make choices. Therefore, the questions faced by the youth are both challenges and opportunities for me as a youth minister, prodding me to think: how to enable young people to choose Christian values through their own reflections, when they face complex problems?

Challenges from the external political environment: I could never forget that time, when I was still a young student, how our youth activity was stopped by government officials even before it started. It was the first major blow I ever experienced: such a good thing, but it was halted! Even now I could not understand it. The Church never taught us any wrong values; why did the government not allow the youth to gather? That is why up to now, our work of youth ministry has been surviving in crevices; we must keep a low-profile in everything! Maybe we still have to live like this for quite some time. However, I am willing to accept this challenge; in such crevices, and by the grace of the Lord, my life, and those of the young people will glitter with more resplendence.

The challenges of livelihood and security: my salary is 60% of the average salary in the city where I live. With daily expenses, this salary is merely enough for survival, without any bank savings. Sometimes, facing economic pressure, I have thought of giving up, and getting a job with good pay. However, I could not deceive myself, because I am really fond of this mission and willing to devote myself to it. That is why I am still struggling to go on amidst these tensions. Several of my former co-workers who were very serious and excellent in this Church ministry had left due to

economic burdens. I felt so sorry for them! I really want to appeal to the pastors of the Church to think about this question: with the decline of vocations, what kind of life security could the Church provide to lay persons who are qualified and willing to engage in pastoral work, in accordance with the social justice promoted by the Church? Of course, I hope this security covers not only the current salary, but also social insurance. I know very well that one undertakes Church mission in faith, but Christ also needs His Church to endow His graces to people, right? Therefore, I hope the Church pastors could respond to this question in time, so that lay persons with aspirations for pastoral work could enjoy better working conditions.

The challenge in self-identification: as a lay person working in youth ministry, sometimes I could meet embarrassing situations on self-identification. As the priests and sisters all have their own dioceses or congregations, I often feel I am in-between clergy, Sisters and other lay faithful. I am neither a parish leader nor a youth group leader, but I work in youth ministry. Sometimes people would ask out of curiosity: how could you receive salary from the Church? You are neither a priest nor a Sister, couldn't you make money by working? There are also non-Christian classmates and friends who used to say: I really don't know what you are doing. You don't work like us. What on earth do you do for a living? Sometimes, confronted with these questions, I have doubt about myself: am I really a crank?

And so, I hope the Church clergy could say something for us in terms of our identity, to make known the importance of our existence. I hope they could often accompany us and show solicitude for us, so that whenever we fall into an identity-crisis, we could find someone to listen to us.

D. On transmitting faith to our children

When talking about the transmission of faith, the first thing I think of is the religious life of me and my wife. During the first three years of our marriage, we moved three times to three strange cities. During that period, we longed for life in a Christian community. In 2015, we moved to the city where we are living now,

and began to participate in a small Christian group that gets together every two weeks. Such gatherings not only help us to establish our relations with God and with others, but also deepen our relationship as husband and wife. Of course we also take our children to such gatherings, and now they know what their parents are doing there. They also long for such activities, because they could play with the children from other families of the group. They have made friends with these children—Christian friends. We also take our children to Sunday Mass, and every night we say a small prayer before going to bed. We transmit our faith to the children by our examples. For the time being I don't have any special ways for that, but I would like to accompany my children, with my time and energy, and with the love of Christ, to grow up in His love. The most precious gift my wife and I could offer to our children is our faith. Therefore we attach great importance to the relationship between us, reminding ourselves constantly that God is the Lord of our family, that we should try our best to create a family ambiance of mutual love.

To love one another, to forgive, to embrace—these are the beliefs that I need to remember all my life; I have to repent constantly, and try to live up to the image God has created in me.

Postscript

After finishing this sharing, I feel so grateful for the call and care God has granted me. I appreciate every encounter I have had in my life, especially that with my wife. I thank her so much, for I could truly experience my weakness and limitations before her. I ask for the love of God to teach me how to love everybody in my life, especially my wife.

This article is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.