

Responses of Youngsters in China to the Synod on Youth

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Some young Catholics in China have expressed their views as a response to the preparations for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, convoked by Pope Francis to be held in the Vatican on October 3-28, 2018, with the theme “Young people, the faith and vocational discernment”.

A report from the Mainland Chinese youth that comprised answers of 28 dioceses, from both open and underground communities in China, was submitted to the Holy See in late 2017.¹ It was a response to Questionnaire of the Preparatory Document for the Synod, devoted to youth.² Some Catholics in China were invited to participate in a Pre-synod to express their views.³ These formed the materials for the working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) of the Synod in 2018.⁴

The 15 questions in the survey collected views regarding youth, Church and society, as well as matters relating to youth vocations, youth ministers and pastoral workers.

The report could be summarized as four main points:

(1) Due to political restrictions, access to youth formation and vocation discernment was limited to internal Church activities. As it

¹ *Answers from the Church in China* to the Questionnaire of the Preparatory Document of the XV General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, November 1, 2017.

² *Preparatory document of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, January 13, 2017.

³ “*Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*” *Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting*, March 19-24, 2018, Rome.

⁴ *Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod 2018. Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment, XV Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops*, October 3-28, 2018, Vatican.

is feared that local authorities might intervene, religious activities for youth were seldom publicized, limiting participants to parishioners or members of the Church. Young Catholics faced challenges from atheism and materialism, and were perplexed about their Catholic identity.

(2) Young people are eager for fellowship, spiritual life, faith formation and personal guidance. Pastoral ministers would make home visits, accompany them and listen to their needs. Conditions of political restrictions, however, allowed the young Catholics and their ministers to maintain closer ties. In China, there are a few minor seminaries, pastoral centres and groups helping young men to discern their religious vocations. Major seminaries also provide training or formation activities that direct toward vocations. After all, in traditional Catholic families (Catholic faith passed down by ancestors), parents and families are supportive of their children's vocations.

(3) The preferred activities for the young people were voluntary social services, prayer gatherings, group activities and pilgrimages. Young people found their school work and employment stressful, but still they feel a need to nourish their spiritual life.

(4) The survey shows an urgent need of full-time pastoral workers for youth, as a concern raised by many young Catholics. The pastoral workers could accompany and provide guidance for their vocational discernment, training and spiritual formation.

This survey, while contributing to Synod preparations, has indeed provided an opportunity for the Church in China to reflect on the youth and their needs. A clear message from the report was a call for "quality" pastoral work for the youth in the current Church in China. It is not so much the number of prayer sessions or summer camps, but a way to guide the young people to encounter Jesus Christ, to know their Christian identity and to bring the Gospel to others.

To have "quality" pastoral work requires a pastoral plan for youth ministry, which is always missing in dioceses or parishes. The formulation of a pastoral plan for youth means a well-coordinated plan with human resources (experienced ministers and pastoral workers), activities or programs, support and finances to guide the young people along. Otherwise, the youth may be

disappearing. Experiences learnt from dioceses or parishes with well-planned youth activities showed that young people would keep coming back and enjoy their lives in the Church. Even when they moved to other cities or regions, they would still serve the Church actively. As suggested in the China report, the creation of positions of full-time pastoral workers, with reasonable remunerations, is an effective option for dioceses and parishes. The sustainability of youth pastoral work is essential, especially in today's fast pace of life.

Youth ministry is somehow related to that of marriage and family. This Synod of Bishops, devoted to youth, continues the spirit and discussions of marriage and family in the previous Synods (2014 and 2015) and the subsequent promulgation of the apostolic exhortation *Joy of Love* (2016). The pre-nuptial preparation for young people is essential to how they live out the values of their marriage and family life. In fact, parish priests repeatedly encounter cases where couples who were not clear about the value of marriage and family life would finally pursue an annulment in marriage or a divorce. This goes back to the need for formation of young people in how they see faith and family value.

The report also indicated the young people's expectations of their clergy and pastoral ministers. Young people preferred their priests and guides to provide them with an outlook on life, Church values, ethics and perspectives on marriage and vocations. They also hope their ministers and priests would accompany them and pay heed to their formation and spirituality. They also hoped to see better pastoral plans, at least to have formation programs dedicated to the needs of their age and maturity. Are the pastoral workers equipped? This challenge is important for Chinese believers who try to discern the path of Christ in a materialist environment.

Living in such an environment, a religious Sister from northern China, who participated in the Pre-synod, asked Pope Francis a question about religious vocations in China. She told the Holy Father the situation in China, where young people are living a materialistic life amid rapid economic development, and there is a lack of formation for Sisters. She asked, "What can we do to strike a balance between the mainstream culture and spiritual life so as to accomplish our mission?"

Pope Francis replied that in a culture that does not give God space, one has to protect the Sisters, by accompanying, teaching, helping them, and, above all, loving them. (“Salt and Light”, 19 March, 2018)

Other members from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong who also attended the same occasion, told Vatican Radio (Chinese) on 26 March, 2018: “We are young, but we are not frivolous!” The greatest gift for them is to realise that “the Church is one body.” They said that young people at the Pre-synod expressed the hope that the Church would take off the “old-fashioned” cloak, and become “transparent and close to people, and support them in their dreams, lest they leave with discouragement.” Actually, the young people are very concerned about the Mother Church.

In his Letter to the Church in China in 2007, emeritus Pope Benedict said that “the family in fact ‘is the normal place where the young grow to personal and social maturity.’” (Letter, n.15) He encourages young people to actively cooperate with the Church and to share the word of God.

Finally, a young Chinese priest involved in youth ministry comes to my mind. He often says that youth is “a special gift that God has bestowed upon our Church.” He cited Pope John Paul II’s words: “Rome became ‘young with the young.’” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 9) “Our Church in China is also full of vigor and vitality because of the presence of the youth who are active in the Church,” the young priest said.