

A Season for Relationships: Youth in China and the Mission of the Church

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The world is rapidly changing. Evidently, there is a global shift of influence from the West to Asia. Asia is the cradle of ancient religions and cultures with the two most populous countries in the world. India is soon to overtake China as the most populous nation, and some economists forecast China will soon overtake the U.S. to become the world's largest economy. In recent decades China has witnessed the biggest internal migration and urbanisation in human history. In spite of the innumerable and rapid changes, especially among the youth, leading to a more materialistic outlook on life, the Chinese people have never been as open to Christianity as it is today, a sort of "renaissance" of Christianity since the time of Matteo Ricci. The following is an excerpt from the author's book, *Season for Relationships*, published by the Claretian Publications in 2018. It gives a first-hand account of the Catholic Church and youth in China.

A new season: Trends are indeed changing for youth in general and among the young Catholics in China. It is a season of relationships, the vertical one with God and the horizontal one with fellow citizens. It may turn out to be a season of bountiful fruits if the soil is fertile and the labourers are diligent, taking advantage of the "climate change."

Surprises from an odd couple? Pope Francis and President of China, Xi Jinping, were elected to their position almost at the same time. Now the Pope wants to know about the youth today and listen to them. That is why a Synod of Bishops will be held in Rome in 2018 precisely for this purpose. China's President, after his re-election as Secretary General of the Party, said the country's goal

now is to meet the people's ever-growing needs for a better life. He also said that people need "faith".¹ What does this mean? A greater openness to religion? Be ready for another surprise.

Another cultural revolution: China has seen the biggest migration in human history when half of her poverty-laden rural population moved to the cities in less than 40 years. Social changes have been enormous, and so are the changes in the youth. Those born in the 1980s do not understand the post-1990 or post-2000 youth. Youth culture is in transition with socialist and post-materialist culture mixes, yet the Chinese are not as liberal or individualistic as their Western counterparts. As the country is developing at a fast rate, Chinese youth are becoming more culturally confident.

One paradox too many: The controversial one-child policy has brought about social consequences and challenges, such as problems of urban "single-child" families and rural "left-behind" children², besides the aging population as a whole. There are many paradoxes in China. For instance, the population growth rate never went below zero, despite the one-child policy. Chinese families still have more children than those in many other countries. Another paradox is the reverse trend happening among the youth: their movement toward smaller cities and towns where these new development areas offer more opportunities.

¹ Full text of Xi Jinping's report at the 19th CPC National Congress delivered on 18 October, 2017. Xinhuanet. 3 November, 2017. Accessed 29 August, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm; Xi Jinping, "If the people have faith, the nation has hope, and the country has strength." Xinhuanet. 28 February, 2015. Accessed 29 August, 2018. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/28/c_1114474084.htm/.

² These are children who are left behind with their grandparents or relatives in the countryside while their parents work in the cities. It is a phenomenon due to the economic and social conditions of China especially from the 1980s to the 2000s. They are also called "home-staying children".

Under tremendous pressure: Chinese youth face different kinds of challenges. They are under pressure since childhood from studies to work and forming a future family, including looking for a life partner. The whole family or clan concentrates their efforts for the single child to pass the *gaokao* (university entrance exam), a tradition that can be traced back to the Confucian state exam during the Han Dynasty period (206 BCE—200 CE). The lifetime income of an average young worker in a metropolis will not be sufficient to purchase an apartment. Moreover, parents pool their resources to help the young in order to choose a spouse.

Technologically savvy and optimistic: Chinese youth are generally inclined to the latest technology. They are hooked on the omnipresent smartphone and newer forms of media, probably more than the youth of other countries,³ with state-of-the-art local platforms such as WeChat. And if they want, they can even jump the firewall to access overseas media such as WhatsApp and Google. Inspiring, for instance, is the one-in-a-million success story of three university students, using the bicycle-sharing system, as they made a significant transition from a pastime to a big business venture. However, the idea of a “sharing economy” has inspired many of the youths to take up initiatives to start small businesses, such as virtual online-shops, using shared platforms like *TaoBao* (Alibaba). The buoyant economy and flexible environment offer numerous opportunities to the youth, who find themselves in a general optimistic mood.

³ According to a survey by a German internet company, Chinese nationals spend an average of three hours a day on their smartphones, ranking second in the world after Brazilians who spend two additional hours on their phones. See *China Daily*, “Chinese spend 3 hours a day on their smartphones, ranking 2nd in the world: survey,” People’s Daily Online, June 28, 2017.

Help from Above: Despite the aforementioned scenario, life is not always rosy and smooth sailing. Given their materialistic view of life, are the youth happy? It is in this realm that religions have a role to play.

A new long march: As for Catholic youth, accompaniment according to different age groups and stages are very important. College is a time for academic pursuits, independent thinking and seeking a meaning for life. A research on Protestant Christian student fellowships⁴ found that, while there is intense competition, a lack of mutual assistance and cooperation in the education system, some students become Christians because they find harmonious relationships and an atmosphere of greater solidarity within these groups. This is also relevant to Catholic students.

The Promised Land: There are certainly challenges for Catholics living in a non-Christian majority environment. However, there are also great opportunities and promising prospects because many young people are interested in religions in general, and Christianity in particular. There is a palpable spiritual thirst and need for values from the youth. The Catholic Church can offer moral contributions to society providing charity and volunteer work opportunities, moral and spiritual orientations, and help the youth to set their goals in life.

Some young Catholics find it difficult initially to step out of their environment at the beginning. They are reluctant to show their faith to others, because they feel it is a tradition lived within an enclosed circle that others would not understand. The Christian faith not only consists of traditional practices passed down, but also involves transmitting authentic life values that Christians live by. Inculturation is also important in the Chinese context. The Christian faith presented not as opposing to, but in affinity with Chinese culture, will have a greater impact and appeal on the Chinese youth.

⁴ Hua Hua, "A survey on college students' Christian belief—taking some Shanghai students as example," *Youth Studies*, vol. 1, 2008; Lu Zun'en, "What are Our Young People Thinking?" *The Church Magazine*, November 2014.

Two Masters? China is very concerned about education. The government has inserted a youth development program⁵ as a national goal in the overall plan of the country for the first time. The Church is not competing to attract the youth, but she could provide a unique contribution in the spiritual and religious realms, so as to greatly benefit young Chinese in the development of their lives.

With the advent of economic development, priestly vocations in China are in general decline. However, there is also discernment of vocations in a vaster sense. Youths feel the need of formation and preparation, and wish to have qualified vocations, formation of Christian families and also in the field of social commitments and responsibility. They want to be in one another's company and, at the same time, to be accompanied by experienced clergy and laity.

Comrades-in-arms: Faith is not just something personal, but it is lived together with others. There are activities offered by the dioceses for young people, such as gatherings and meetings, summer and winter camps. However, the youth need a more constant formation and accompaniment throughout the year. It is very positive that there are youth and student fellowships formed at Church premises in the city where they study. There are ecclesial communities with mature experiences in the formation of the youth, but their influence is limited. However, local dioceses can put different resources together. Ecclesial communities can extend their help and cooperate with local dioceses or parishes to provide authentic experiences of a Christian community.

Authentic and convincing: The youths want to feel a sense of belonging to the Church, and to a community. They want to have a personal encounter with God and have a personal relationship with Jesus. They expect authentic living of the Gospel and consistency with it at times of political and economic adversity. They also expect greater emphasis on reconciliation and witness of unity in

⁵ Zhang Rui, "China unveils 10-year plan for youth development," *CCTV News*, April 14, 2017.

the Church, and above all to see a community of people loving one another, so as to believe.

Agent of change: Youth is the future. They, being agents of change, will be the ones to shape it. How China will evolve and how the Chinese Catholic Church will thrive or fail is in their hands.