

Recent Developments of Youth Ministry in China

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“Young man, I tell you, arise!” (Lk 7:14)

One priest from Hebei who is involved in youth ministry used the story of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-16) to explain the role of parochial priests. As Jesus called the young man who was dead to new life and gave him back to his mother, priests have to help young people to arise and serve their mother, the Church.

Some church youth groups may have started in China in the 1990s, but formal youth ministry really began in the first decade of this century. By youth ministry, I mean a youth pastoral program which provides not only one-shot activities or catechism, but which cares for the need of the young people on a long-term basis, with appropriate programs, accompaniment, team work, focusing on young people’s holistic growth and vocational discernment.¹ There are two main motivations: a) concern for the training of the new generations; how to care for teenagers with suitable post-catechism programs? b) given the rising number of university students going to the cities, how to prevent them from losing their faith in this new environment away from the traditional village support?

With help from overseas groups, some dioceses started programs for young people, with special focus on university students. Starting from Shijiazhuang and Xi’an, around the year 2005, Catholic student communities began to grow fast in many cities around the country, gathering young people on campus and in some Church premises, for prayers, Bible sharing, large activities and fellowship. Many rural dioceses started to gather and train

¹ The focus of this article is on young people, including teenagers (13-18 years old) and young adults (up to their early 30s).

students when they would come back during summer or winter vacations. Quickly, young people got deeply involved: apart from their own university groups, they started to run the parish or diocesan youth camps, traditionally run by priests, Sisters and seminarians. With youth caring for youth, those programs became much more adjusted to the needs of the young generations. Activities would attract hundreds of young people.

Many formation programs started, including some three months' in-depth and full-time training programs, usually called "100-day formation" (focusing on personal growth, leadership training, faith deepening, community life, spiritual growth...), to equip young Catholics to enter the adult world and to train youth leaders. Learning from these successful experiences, other groups started later in many other places in China. They would support each other, developing a network among youth leaders and youth ministers. Some diocesan youth centres or youth offices were established. The experience of joining international gatherings, like World Youth Day, Asian Youth Day, Taizé gatherings ... helped the young people in China to link with young people around the world, to open to the diversity of the universal Church and to foster their Catholic identity. Many young people born in the 1980s are now strong pillars of the local Church: they are involved in marriage and family ministry, charity work, Sunday schools. Some become community leaders, taking up the torch from the older generations. Some enter religious life or full-time pastoral work, mostly dedicating themselves to youth ministry.

But in the early 2010s, with the fast growth of technology and the affordability of smartphones, Church youth activities became less attractive; the number of youth joining the programs started to decrease, and youth ministers started to reflect on new ways of caring for the needs of young people. The XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be held in October 2018 in Rome on the theme of "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" and the new governmental restrictions on youth activities are prompting a review of youth pastoral ministry in China. The following reflections are based on interviews with young people and youth ministers, that I conducted in China in

2017, and on the responses from China to the questionnaire for the 2018 Synod.

“Jesus himself drew near and walked with them” (Lk 24: 15)

Regarding the purpose of the Synod, the first paragraph of the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL 1) reminds the whole Church that: *“Taking care of young people is not an optional task for the Church, but an integral part of her vocation and mission in history. In just a few words, this is the specific scope of the upcoming Synod: just as our Lord Jesus Christ walked alongside the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35), the Church is also urged to accompany all young people, without exception, towards the joy of love”*. Further in the document, it is also said: *“Jesus is ‘a young man among young people’, and He wants to meet them and walk beside them, as He did with the disciples of Emmaus”* (IL 75). *“Following the example of Jesus, the community of believers is also called to go out and meet young people where they are, rekindling their hearts and walking by their side”* (IL 175). Different stages in the Gospel story of the road to Emmaus are helpful to review seminal aspects of youth ministry in China: walking with, training, deep encounter with Jesus, and mission.

1. Walking with

As Jesus took time to walk with these two disciples who were going away from the community of disciples, walking with young people needs time. It is a long journey with different stages. The breaking of bread is only possible after a long walk together. As emphasized in the whole Part I of the Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris*: *“The Church listening to reality”*, the young people in China hope to be listened by local Church leaders who need to understand the environment of today’s youth. After Jesus raised the young man from the dead, he *“sat up and began to speak”* (Lk 7,15). Young people, empowered by Jesus, have something to say, so the whole community has to listen to them. In the questionnaire of the Preparatory Document for the 2018 Synod, question 5 asked: *What*

do young people really ask of the Church in your country today? The responses coming from China are very enlightening and are worth studying, especially by local Church leaders. It began this way: “Youth in Mainland China hope that the Church will listen, be tolerant, be concerned and accompany young people, trying to understand concretely their conditions of faith. They hope that they can communicate with priests face-to-face. They hope that the Church can establish communities and organize activities for the youth, according to their age, stage of life, and goals or directions”. (See also IL 66-67 “Wishing for an ‘Authentic Church’”).

Through the questionnaire or through the direct interviews, the most important issue raised by young people is the need for accompaniment (陪伴, a word appearing very often in youth’s responses), on a personal or community level. Young people are longing for adults who will spend time to accompany them on their journey of growth, listen to them without judging, and trusting them to express their talents, even if they are not yet experienced. Many young people complain that they cannot find this kind of accompaniment: adults are not aware of this important need, they are not trained accordingly, they are busy with other priorities. But the Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris* underscores: “*The accompaniment of younger generations is not an optional element in the task of educating and evangelising young people, but an ecclesial duty and a right of every young person*” (IL 81).

Accompaniment has two sides: pastoral care (關懷) and companionship (同行 walking with). It needs a lot of manpower, as well as openness to the culture and needs of the young generations. The support given by a priest to the community has a tremendous impact. Young people can see how much their priest cares for them: if young people are his priority, it gives a strong signal to the young people and to the entire community. In many cases, a religious Sister would accompany the youth groups. With the heart of a mother, she can provide very suitable accompaniment to the young people. Being there for them is a good testimony of “Emmanuel”—God with us.

One youth leader shared with me: “*There is a Sister in charge of some sectors, of some hundreds of young people, but if I have a*

difficulty, if I am not in a good mood, I can call her personally, she will come, no problem”.

The challenge for religious Sisters is the frequent change of assignments: religious superiors easily transfer Sisters in charge of youth after one or two years. But young people need long-term accompaniment. Full-time pastoral workers can play a specific role. Pastoral workers, often coming from a youth community, attune very easily to fellow youth. But youth ministers need training and experience to care well for the youth, and perform personal accompaniment. The whole youth community also has an important role in accompanying the young people: it creates a support group where youth care for youth, where they can trust each other and share deeply about their life, their expectations and difficulties. The generous support of other young people is seen as an obvious sign of the special love in their life. New social media are also very effective for accompaniment, including spiritual accompaniment when the young person lives far away from his/her spiritual mentor.

2. Training

There is a deep generation gap between the young people and their parents. The older generations grew up in Catholic villages where faith was lived by reciting prayers and following the commandments. This is no longer attractive to younger generations. At school, young Catholics are exposed to strong atheist propaganda and to the challenges of the sciences. As they move from a rural to urban society that is becoming more and more complicated, with the explosion of information technologies, young people need more Christian formation to be able to face all those challenges and to make faith meaningful for their life. Formal teachings from priests tend to be distant from young people's quest; programs run by elder youth are on the other hand more relevant to other youth. Young people are usually good at finding the proper ways and the vocabulary to address other young people's doubts. Bible training, online programs, forum discussions, testimonies... and also service to the needy, are suitable ways of helping young people to make the faith their own. In their sharing, young people insisted on how much they grew through *service* to others.

If youth ministry for university students is bearing some encouraging fruits, how do the Church care for the other young people? In some rural large dioceses, some specific training programs, called “100-day formation” (百日培訓), are provided to young people as they prepare to enter the adult world, but they train, at the utmost, 100 young people each year per diocese. What about all the others? In some rural parishes, some young people have started to organize themselves to care for other young people at the parish level; When teenagers start to live at the school, their connections with the Catholic community in the village loosen. Unfortunately, a huge number of young Catholics “disappear” at this stage, especially if they drop out from school and work as urban migrant workers, without any religious support. The next time they will get in touch with the Church will be for their wedding or baby baptism (usually back to their village, during the Spring Festival holidays). One young man from Gansu commented on the crisis of transmission between generations: *“It is a very crucial moment. If those involved in the Church’s youth ministry relax efforts a little, then the faith of the young people in China today will collapse”*.

3. Deep encounter with Jesus

Many young people recalled having received a very formal religious upbringing when they were children, centered on learning prayers that they could not understand. At that time, their Christian faith would be considered a burden, and God was a distant God to fear. One student even mentioned that, when he was young, he knew nothing about Jesus. There were only prayers to recite. In their journey of faith, spiritual experiences are crucial to discovering God’s love and to start to build a more personal relation with Him. Faith starts to become personal, no longer an external belief forced on them. The relation to God is no longer a give-give relationship with a God who is to be feared. A young lady in Hebei shared that through a 3-month training program, she experienced God’s love for her: it became *her Jesus, her faith*, not only the faith of her parents, or of others.

Praise and Worship charismatic prayers, Taizé prayer meetings, pilgrimages, international gatherings, vocational camps, retreats ... are different means that help young people to experience a deep encounter with Jesus. Again, accompaniment is crucial to help young people to discern God's presence in their lives. Many young people insisted that retreats were more important than activities to deepen their relations with God. But it is hard to find retreat centers which are willing to open their doors to young people (for financial reasons, but also out of fear that young people will not be able to respect silence), or to find retreat masters willing to preach retreats for young people (most of the trained retreat masters are available only for priests, Sisters and seminarians).

4. Mission

Empowered by youth ministry and the encounter with Jesus, young people are full of dynamism and creativity to serve the Lord and others. They need to be trusted, to have the space to develop their own talents. One priest serving young people urged fellow priests to avoid the traditional way of teaching: *stop telling the young people "this is not possible, that is not allowed"*. He concluded by asking: *"to whom does the Church belong? Not to the priests but to the young people; the Church is made known through the talents of these people"*.

Many young people are willing to serve the community. Most of the services that take place on a regular basis are parish-oriented: altar servers, lectors, choir singers, ushers, Sunday school teachers. Major activities like Christmas celebration are usually taken over by young people. They bring their dynamism and enthusiasm which renew the whole community and attract even more young people to join. Children do enjoy the lively services, and admire these elder brothers and sisters, with a strong desire to become like them when they grow up.

Charity work has a deep impact on young people, but it usually takes place on an *ad hoc* basis. Service to orphans or the elderly are the most common charity work for young people. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a saint cherished by young people who admire her selfless love. Some youth groups have chosen her as

their patron saint. Some young people even went to Calcutta to serve the poor with the Missionary Sisters of Charity for a couple of months.

Enthusiastic young people are important role-models for other youth who can easily identify themselves with them. They share the same culture and speak the same language. It is usually easier for a young person to open to an elder brother or sister, than to a priest.

Some young adults are willing to serve as full-time youth ministry workers. It is very fruitful, especially when networking among themselves: they share ideas, talents and resources. This opens the door for lay ministries in the Church in China, but their identity as lay pastoral workers is not well understood or recognised by the whole community. In particular, they lack support and professional training, especially in youth accompaniment. Financially speaking, these pastoral workers, usually university graduates, get a very low salary from the Church, with no benefits. It is hard for them to make a living, not to mention the possibility to start a family. After a few years, they may leave the pastoral field with bad feelings about the Church, whose leaders are ready to build cathedrals and diocesan centers, but cannot afford to pay a just salary to their staff.

Examples of young people born in the 1980s serving the Church as full-time lay ministers open up new choices for the younger generation. Consecrated life and priesthood are not the only way to answer God's call. In the Synod's *Instrumentum Laboris*, vocations in the Church are described as "*the many multifaceted expressions through which the Church fulfils her call to be a real sign of the Gospel, received in a fraternal community. The various forms in which we can follow Christ express, each in its own way, the mission to bear witness to the Jesus event, in which every man and woman finds salvation*" (IL 97).

In China, vocations to the priesthood and even more to religious life for women, have been declining tremendously. In just 20 years, the number of seminarians has decreased by four-fifth. Traditional ways of nurturing vocations seem to be drying up. Does it mean that God is not calling anymore or that young people are not generous in answering God's call? In the interviews, I heard

many young people share about vocation. They feel the call to follow Jesus, to live with him, and to serve others.

Among the hurdles to answering this call, young people emphasize the lack of personal accompaniment, the opposition of the family, the pressure to find a well-paid job and to start a family, the bad examples of some clergy, the lack of enthusiasm of the Sisters, the situation of the Church in China (including pressures from the government and internal divisions). Positive factors are leadership and service experiences, vocation camps with personal follow-up during the year, testimonies of joyful and dedicated priests and consecrated persons, personal faith with strong spiritual experiences (including retreats, international gatherings), etc.

Welcoming and training according to these new profiles of vocations is very challenging. How is the traditional way of training priests adjusting to the needs of well-educated and more mature young men, with strong faith and rich community life experiences? Young women usually do not feel attracted to local diocesan congregations that they consider very rigid. Rather they prefer international communities. Some new ecclesial movements are attractive to some young women, who want to follow Jesus and serve the Church, but do not want to be living in a convent.

Conclusion: a call for an “institutional conversion”

Part III of the Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris* describes many paths for pastoral and missionary conversion of the local Church, calling for an “institutional conversion” (IL 198). During the presentation of the document, on June 19, 2018, the Secretary General of the Synod, Cardinal Baldisseri, gave some reasons for this call: “*Often the young are blamed and held responsible for moving away from the Church en masse. But they very often experience situations that lead them to affirm that it is the Church that has moved away from them*” (see also IL 174).

A. Towards a youth-friendly Church

On the diocesan level, bishops, priests and religious superiors may find that youth ministry is very important for the Church, but practically when it comes to financial support, manpower and

premises, many other items seem more important than youth ministry. Parish priests may be happy to have young people coming to church; some would make the premises available to young people, but would seldom provide them with suitable accompaniment. As youth is a stage in life with specific challenges and needs, youth ministers need to be more specialised, with proper training and long term plans. It is common to see a priest or a religious Sister transferred to another field after 2 or 3 years of working with young people. It is particularly obvious with seminarians who are sent to help with youth programs, as part of their own training. After their ordination, most of the time, they are assigned to a “more important” mission. One young lady bitterly commented on this situation, saying: *“The bishop is using us as guinea pigs to train his seminarians. We are not worthy to have well-trained young priests to care for us.”*

B. Towards a Church of communion—fraternity

“Many young people believe a renewed ecclesial approach is decisive, especially from the relational standpoint: young people want a ‘less institutional and more relational’ Church, that is able to ‘welcome people without judging them first’, a ‘friendly and proximate’ Church, an ecclesial community that is like ‘a family where you feel welcomed, listened to, cherished and integrated’”. (IL 68, see also IL 178: “A Family Experience of the Church”)

Community life is playing a tremendous role in helping young people in China to live their faith and to take an active part in the life of the Church. It is related to the importance of peers for youth, to the need of family bonds far away from home, but it is also a way of living the specificity of Christian life, especially in a society in which all relations are cultivated for a purpose (有利益). Young people treasure these relations of selfless love, where everyone is equal, like brothers and sisters, without any hidden agenda. This kind of Christian relationship brings young people deep joy. Fraternity in the community is based on the understanding of Jesus as “elder brother Su” (穌哥哥), a name many young people love to call the Lord. Some priests rebuke young people for using a

seemingly casual term. But some priests like to be called by the young people in a similar way, for example “elder brother Song” (宋哥), a familiar yet respectful way. Emphasising the Church as fraternity (*adelphotés* in Greek) was very common in early Christianity, and can be very useful to understand what kind of Church is emerging in China.

C. Towards a participatory and collaborative Church

When young people discover the joy of being disciples of Christ, they get very involved in the life of the Church. They start to care for each other; young people minister to young people; young people evangelise young people. When we ask the young people what they can bring to the Church as a community, their first answer is always: dynamism (活力)! One young man emphasized: *“Young people are particularly great, together they are particularly dynamic, they have many ideas”*; another added: *“When young people rise, they become the backbone. What they do, other groups cannot do. The elderly want to do things but they do not have the energy; the kids do not have the capacity to do it, many things rely on young people, including evangelisation.”* A young seminarian commented this way: *“when you have young people in the church, people will not think that the faith is for old people who think about life after death, it is really about life!”*

Young people’s participation in the Church start with liturgical services, organising activities, but also suggest new ways to care for families, or to evangelise. They care for the needy, and some do get involved full-time in social services. In some rural dioceses, many new community leaders are former youth leaders. One of them insisted on the influence of the youth group, which brought them three important fruits: an experience, a sense of belonging, a training for their future service in the Church and in the society. With this young generation of Catholics, the Church in China is also moving toward the model of a *Servant Church*.

Youth ministry in China still has a lot of room to grow and is facing many challenges, including the implementation of the government’s new religious regulations. But it is already bearing a lot of fruits, deeply changing the persons, raising young people to

new life in Christ. If these changes do not yet affect the structures of the local Church, they reveal, however, a possible new figure of the Church emerging in China, one that brings comfort and hope in a gloomy atmosphere surrounding the Church in China today. When Jesus raises young people from the dead (as in Luke's Gospel), they start to speak and to bring new life to the Church.