

An Interview with Leonardo Hong: An Easter Story

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Translated from the Italian by Betty Ann Maheu, MM

Every year at the Easter Vigil about a dozen students are baptized in the chapel of the Immaculate Conception in Furen's Catholic University. Thanks to the large number of qualified religious personnel at the University, these young people are well motivated and prepared. One of the young men, Leonardo, had touched me with his enthusiasm and astute reflections. I wanted to interview him hoping to use his answers to my questions for an article on young people in Taiwan. In listening to the tapes of that interview today, seven years later, I cannot help noting how Leonardo's reflections go to the very heart of some of the thorniest problems encountered in any effort to evangelize China. Today's questions are the same posed to the first Jesuit missionaries in China in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Question: *Would you tell us something about your family background? Were your parents instrumental in your decision to come into the Church?*

I am 21 years old. I come from a family of non-believers. For them there is no God, or rather whether God exists or not is of no concern whatsoever. We live our own life and God has no place in it. Almost all the families in Taiwan have some religious beliefs: traditional practices, Buddhism and Taoism. My family is totally indifferent to any of these. On the first and fifteenth day of every month of the lunar calendar, people offer gifts—fruit, beverage, liquor and incense to the spirits of the dead and to heaven. My family doesn't even do that. As a result I received no positive religious influence from my family, and before coming to the university, I myself had no idea of God whatsoever.

Question: *How did you come in contact with Christianity?*

I became a Christian thanks to what happened to me when I entered the university. I was living in the dormitory of the university

next to a house, off campus, where a group of Protestant students, met every day and sang loudly and often even until late in the evening. This irritated me because they disturbed everybody and I found it hard to study and to sleep. I went to Sister Cecilia Hsu, the person responsible for religious activities at the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at the university. I still had no idea of the difference between Catholics and Protestants. So I went to Sister Hsu and said, "I thought that Christians were people who helped and respected others, but here all they do is disturb people. Of course, Sister was not responsible for this group and knew nothing about it. What Sister said to me on that occasion aroused my curiosity. For the first time I realized that I was studying in a Catholic university. This was a very difficult time for me: I found myself in a new ambience, I was having some trouble with my companions. I disliked the competition I saw continually all around me. I went back to see Sister who invited me to take part in an activity of the Catholic students' group. These students impressed me tremendously, and my prejudices against religion began to evaporate.

What attracted you to the Catholic doctrine?

This turnabout did not happen all at once; there were many turns in this process. I began my first catechism lesson and I had the feeling that God himself was guiding me in that way.

I spent two and a half years in the doctrine course. In the first year, I was undecided, but I wanted to know the truth. I have always liked philosophy, so the intellectual aspects of Christian thought attracted me. I gave a lot of importance to the reasonableness of Christian doctrine. But there was another dimension that attracted me: the more I got to know Sister and the community of Catholic youth, the more I found myself at ease. I sensed a certain difference in the life and relationships I had lived until now. Although that I am an intellectual type, in the end it was the witness of the Christian life that played the more important role in convincing me to become a Christian.

On one specific occasion I felt like a Pharisee, a bit hypocritical. I had spoken very critically about society. I was very harsh in my judgments towards others. Yet I understood that my position was false. In my own life, I myself was no better than those I was criticizing. I found that the priests and the Christians were more consistent with that they professed. I felt comfortable with them. I

understood that truth is not only found intellectually, it is also a matter of life, sometimes truth is manifested more clearly in very simple things.

I have always admired the great philosophers. But when I got to know Jesus, I saw that he knew how to communicate what had very deep meaning in a very simple way. Before Jesus, those great philosophers were nothing but a piece of cake.

Question: Besides studying the doctrine did you engage in any other kinds of religious activities before your baptism?

I studied catechism with Sister Cecilia whom I met on a one-to-one basis one hour every week. But there were also other occasions as well. There were priests available for dialogue and explanations. I also participated in a Bible sharing group in English. This group, consisting of both Chinese and foreigners, met in the Linguistic Center; there was even a sharing group in the dormitory. The discussion within the group of Catholic students also helped me. I could not begin to imagine that my life had taken such a turn. Nonetheless, I really felt happy with the new turn of events.

Before my baptism, that I received on the Easter vigil of 1993, I made a retreat. I promised to follow Jesus, to struggle against my faults, especially against pride and my prejudices. I invited Jesus to come in me and I sense that my body was the temple of Jesus. During the baptism, perhaps because of the words used for the ceremony, perhaps from emotion or perhaps because I thought that there is something magical in it, I experienced a very strong emotion. I sensed being made new, something refreshing. But I cannot appropriately describe this experience in words.

I shared my emotion with a number of my friends, but I could not do it with all of them. Some would not understand. Some of my childhood and later friends think that I have sought help in religion to cope with my frustrations. And if I try to explain, they don't listen for very long. With them, for the present, words and explanations serve for nothing. My parents did not show much interest in my baptism. They did not oppose it. They saw it as a juvenile stage that I would soon outgrow. Perhaps God will speak to my friends and my family in other ways. I think that God has various ways of making himself known.

Question: Do you think that the Church and Catholic Schools and Catholic universities are sufficiently missionary minded and aggressive enough in letting students know about the Catholic faith?

The church could be more missionary. For example, the university could do more to show that it is a Catholic school. Now that I am a Christian, I think that the school is too timid in putting forward Christian initiatives. They fear the rejection of the students. But often students reject what they do not understand, what they do not know. The school could do more not through religion classes, but through life experiences that show love in action. In this way, students could feel the power of love. Very few students have chosen this school because it is Catholic. The majority either doesn't even know it, or is indifferent to it. Students care only for the quality of the studies. That was what was important for me before I became a Christian.

I feel the need to share and to meet with Christian students of Taiwan, and also with those here at the university. Catholics are few and it is difficult to be Christian in a society that is not Christian. We must support each other all the more. Many people and groups here are too traditional, closed and conservative. We need more missionary activity.

I myself must do my part. After my baptism, my friends elected me leader of the Catholic Students' Association. To tell you the truth, I did not want to accept, because I knew that there were so many activities, meetings, that consumed so much time and I wanted to study full time.

While I was trying to decide what to do, during one of the voluntary activities, I met some unfortunate persons, who have a very difficult life. I realized that if I did not get involved now, I would never be able to do so. Learning serves to help people, but it cannot be used as an excuse not to get involved immediately, ignoring the specific needs of the people. And so I decided to accept the responsibility in the student group and to get involved in their numerous volunteer activities even if this were to lengthen my studies for another year.

Question: Are there certain elements of the faith that young Chinese find particularly difficult to accept or understand?

Education in Taiwan offers nothing in terms of religion. Most students have no idea of God. They are not familiar with the

idea of a supreme and superior principle. My greatest difficulty has been to accept the idea of a superior, better, greater and more powerful being. It is my experience that young people in Taiwan, including my friends, think they are the sole agents of their destiny. And if there is a Heaven other than the heavens, that Heaven has nothing to do with them. They respect Heaven, but they do not obey its message, rather they think that Heaven has no message for them. Here we have a key difference between Christians and most Taiwanese, or if you will, the Chinese. The Chinese do not adore Heaven. They only respect it, holding themselves at a certain distance. It is only when they find themselves in great need that they turn to Heaven for help. But in daily life, Heaven has no place. For them, one only reaps what one sows. Students in Taiwan are very much influenced by the idea of scientific revolution, Darwinism, and the survival of the fittest and consequently of competition in society. This competitive mentality is prevalent in Taiwanese society. People compete with one another. Those who win consider themselves the victors and experience great satisfaction. That mentality does not please me at all. I was not born to compete with others. Moreover, this kind of thinking is very different from the Christian way.

My ideas of religion have changed considerably. I have gone from the typical Chinese way of understanding Heaven to the Christian way of thinking of God, which means to obey his message.

Question: What are some obstacles preventing Chinese people from accepting the Christian faith? Does education have any role in religion?

I know that many people do not believe in Christianity because they think that the life of Christians does not correspond to the Gospel. As for myself, I can say that the words of Jesus have changed my life. However, from many points of view, I still have faults. Jesus has said that the sick are in need of a doctor, not the healthy. Only by accepting our humanity can we come near to Jesus. I am aware that religious men, Sisters, missionaries and priests are all persons journeying towards Jesus. Priests do not walk on clouds, but on the earth. Of course, there are things that are not beautiful in the life of the Church, but this does not make me doubt the truth of the doctrine.

Furthermore, many people I know have a utilitarian idea of religion. They think it's something you grab on to in difficulty,

something that comes in handy when you need it. Now, I've changed my mind. Faith is something that changes your life completely. I too thought that religion was useful only for those in difficulty who needed to get rid of their problems by themselves. Many Taiwanese will say to a Christian, "If this does you good, good for you! I don't feel the need. I don't want to lose the direct control over my life." This concept of being able to control one's life does not come from traditional Chinese thought. Chinese tradition does not emphasize the individual, the person, but rather the group, the family, the clan, the nation. Today, in Taiwan, young people and young adults have a different mentality. They want to be modern; they reject the traditional mentality. They are influenced by Western individualism and existentialism.

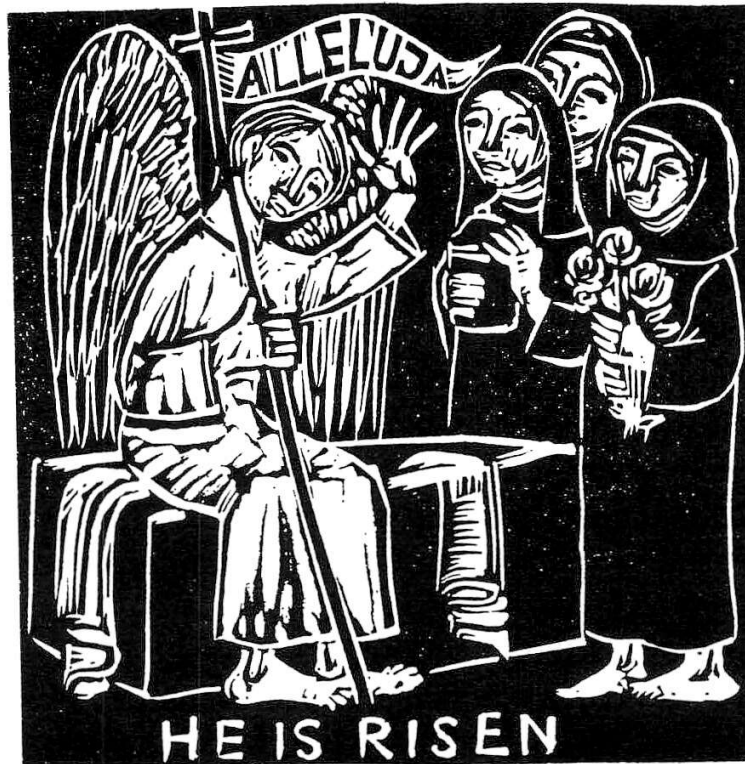
If schools today spoke more about religion, perhaps there would be more stability among young people. Instead what predominates is individualism. Schools only teach what can be scientifically proved, what can be proved with material evidence. The result is that young people think that unless something is material and scientific, it has no value or does not exist at all. For this reason, I think that an education that values the spiritual and religious aspects of persons would help young people to be more stable and provide them with many more possible choices.

Question: *How can we best speak to the people of Taiwan about Jesus?*

I am afraid that the first thing that comes to the mind of the Taiwanese when they hear the name of Jesus is that Jesus is not Chinese. Among my people there is a very strong ethnic sense. Some even think that Christianity in Taiwan represents a kind of cultural intrusion. The Chinese, they say, already have their own religious ideas, and Jesus is Western and we don't need him. This is a real problem. The large majority of the people are very polite towards the missionaries, but deep down they think that they do not belong to our society. Some think that Christianity got here by using force. This is a very big problem. The solution is the experience of love. We must show the people how much we love one another and that we are able to love everyone. God is love. If we concentrate on doctrinal aspects instead, I fear we will not get very far. People must be touched by love. Love will bring them to the Gospel. I want to make this aspect of love, a key point in my future involvement. To be frank, I still feel

weak. I do not yet feel the strength to be a “missionary” among the young people and in society in Taiwan.

Some argue about whether the Christian and Chinese identity can go together without contradictions or betrayals. I do not feel that I have a divided identity. I see that I am above all and simply a human being, unique and undivided. Human beings no matter where they come from have the same dignity because we come from God and bear his image. Naturally, we are born in various families and nations. I don't think that the fact of being Chinese is very important. The fact that I am Chinese is just a part of God's plan. Now I am Christian and I do not think that I have betrayed anyone. If I had been born in Europe, it might be more natural for me to be Christian. I mean that it would be easier for me to be a Christian. But perhaps God wanted me to be Chinese in order to witness the faith among the Chinese. I think that Christianity is a worthy and universal religion, one that unites people. Christianity is nobody's exclusive property.



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