

The Youth in China Renew the Church

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When I discovered the theme of this year's ECCC, "Future Perspectives of the Catholic Church in China" with a special focus on the "Youth in China," I got very excited to join as it looked so similar to the subject of my thesis defended in 2023 at the Catholic Institute of Paris, entitled "Emergence of a Fraternal and Synodal Church in China – Theological Analysis of a Survey of Young Chinese Catholics."

The purpose of my research was to understand what is emerging in the Church in China. The understanding of the Church in mainland China is often partial and biased, focusing mainly on the control of civil authorities and the negative consequences for the life of the Church. But what is the daily life of the People of God like? My thirty years of contacts with local communities have made me aware of the work of the Holy Spirit, especially in the lives of young people in China. While the functioning of the ecclesial institution in China is still very clerical, the process of appropriating faith by young people renews the life of the Church, highlighting the fundamental role of fraternal communities, in which essential elements of synodality are lived out, opening onto intimacy with the Lord, Brother and Friend. My sharing will present this process of renewal of the Church in China, being aware that it is only a trend that cannot be generalized, yet with a prophetic dimension.

My methodology is based on the principle of an ecclesiology which has its starting point from the action of the Church, which is always in progress, emerging, under construction. This approach involves listening to the People of God. For this, I interviewed 50 young Chinese Catholics in 14 different locations in mainland China. Choosing to listen to the narratives of young Catholics actively engaged in the Church as a gateway to understand what is being built in the Church in China, is based on the premise that young people are somewhat a laboratory of what emerges in the Church. The corpus of these contemporary narratives was put into perspective with a biblical source, the *Acts of the Apostles*, "manifesto of the Christian identity in formation,"¹ to resonate with the hypotheses elaborated

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1 For studying the *Acts of the Apostles*, Daniel Marguerat has been a major reference for this study. For a translation in English of his extensive work on the Acts, see Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'*, SNTS 121, New York: Cambridge University Press 2002. xii + 299 pp. (translated by Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery, and Richard Bauckham).

from the narratives of the young people and to construct theological discourse.² I will not be able to present the results in detail, but will insist on four points to better understand how the youth renew the Church: 1. The process of appropriating faith by young people; 2. The fundamental role of fraternal ecclesial communities; 3. A new intimacy with the Lord, Brother and Friend; 4. A new way of being Church, more fraternal and therefore more synodal.

1. A Process of Inner Transformation: A Before and an After

The narratives present a *before* and an *after*, a characteristic that highlights a process of inner transformation. Before, faith transmitted by family and through rote memorization of the Catechism's Questions and Answers is reduced to a religion of obligations, consisting of truths to believe in, commandments to obey, sacraments to receive, and many prayers to recite. John-Baptist, a young pastoral worker, reports that when he was a child, for him Christian life was limited to prayers and prohibitions, which remained external to him. This teaching is ineffective in establishing a personal relationship with God: faith remains in a "frozen" state, at the stage of seed. This faith is perceived by children as a burden and a constraint, which they are unable to justify in the face of an educational system that promotes scientific atheism. The analysis of young people's testimonies leads to a diagnosis of a double deficit of the Word of God and of the Holy Spirit in the religious education received in their childhood.

In China, the local Church has not yet emerged from the clerical system, shaped by the mandarin political model of officials who "make the law" and disrupted by their interference in the Church's affairs, and the official positions that they give to prominent priests, like delegate to the local Political Consultative Conference (Zhengxie 政协). The strong clerics/lay bipolarity still present in China leads to a conception of the Church which belongs to the clergy: as religious education taught the children, they have no active part in the Church's mission and they have only to obey to the clergy in a pyramidal model.³ This corporate ecclesial model does not leave room for the expression of various charisms, a sign of a pneumatological deficit in ecclesial life: everything is concentrated on the hierarchical ministry, religious women, and community leaders (*huizhang* 会长).

What triggers the process of "defrosting" the faith of these young people is a fraternal ecclesial experience, usually incited by a personal invitation. These ecclesial experiences, often characterized in the narratives by the joy of being together, whether participating in a youth camp, a Bible sharing group, a student community, a training session or a simple fellowship around a meal, show that the "Love one another" instilled by the catechism is

2 To understand the process of resonance between contemporary narratives and a biblical source to construct theological discourse, see Etienne Grieu, "Referring to the Bible in Practical Theology", in: François Moog (dir.), *Recherches en théologie des pratiques pastorales II: La Bible en théologie des pratiques. Groupe de Santiago, Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique, Série Actes no. 18, Paris – Louvain – Québec 2019, pp. 261-270 (online).*

3 The answer to the question 82 of the Catechism Questions and Answers stipulates that the laity has to listen to the priests, the priests to the bishops and the bishops to the pope (82问: 圣教会各级的人, 彼此有什么本分? 答: 教友该听神父的教训, 神父该听主教的教训, 主教该听教宗的教训, 这样彼此连合, 按吾主耶稣的话, 同归一栈, 共属一牧).

possible and attractive, transforming life deeply and opening onto a close relationship with a God of love. This process of transformation is experienced as a happy experience of liberation, forgiveness and self-expression, through the acceptance and recognition by brothers and sisters, which allows for a path of personal unification and appropriation of faith. It is sometimes even experienced as a process of recreation, as expressed by Magdalena, still a catechumen:

Originally, I was like a puddle of mud, I didn't know where to flow and how to move forward, and suddenly, I was molded like a whole person, and thus totally built together with who I originally was; then there was this link with God: my originally limited life is associated with the life of God, and thus ... I find that very wonderful.

This process of transformation highlights God's care, the role of the community, and the generosity of these young people's responses. It needs many steps of human and spiritual training, where the community plays a key role.

2. The Importance of a Fraternal Community

The “hierarchological” pastoral model⁴ in which the interviewed youth grew up, especially in villages, did not prepare them to live as believing subjects in today's society, marked by atheism, numerous changes (urbanization, digital revolution, consumerism ...), and a process of individualization. But a fraternal ecclesial community is crucial in helping the youth to develop a living faith and to face the challenges of modern life. Such a community is an environment where the Word takes flesh and where the believing subject who participates in it comes into being. It provides young people with a path of personalization and intimacy with God, producing a performative faith that leads to an attractive new way of life. Personalized support, for, with, and by the youth, values the subject by recognizing his/her dignity, training him/her, and actively involving him/her in the community life.

The proposals of these communities bring contact with the Word of God, which is shared, taught, and/or “simply” lived. The youth are deeply touched by this good news of a God who loves them. The fraternal community is therefore the environment where the truth of the relationship with God and with humans is realized, a family of genuine brothers and sisters who discover themselves as children of the same Father, which founds equality within the community: “You have only one Master and you are all brothers” (*Mt 23:8*).

Fraternal ecclesial experiences stand out from Chinese society, marked by a quest for power, honor, and self-interest, through networks of relationships, the famous *guanxi* 关系. The youth narratives are very negative about the society. But as Luke, a community leader, says: “Among us, it's not the same.” Through these fraternal ecclesial experiences, what touches the young people resonates with the ideal of primitive ecclesial communities

4 “The *De Ecclesia* was principally, sometimes almost exclusively, a defence and affirmation of the reality of the Church as machinery of hierarchical mediation, of the powers and primacy of the Roman see, in a word, a ‘hierarchology;’” Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church – A Study for a Theology of the Laity*, Westminster Maryland: The Newman Press 1965, p. 45 (translated by Donald Attwater).

described in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the great biblical narrative of the spread of the Word of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. The ideal of fraternal communion, *koinônia*,⁵ which is expressed as “one heart and one soul” and as a “communal sharing” where no one is left out in the community, is reflected in the descriptions that young people give of their community. They emphasize love among brothers and sisters as of the same family, in which everyone gives generously, with relationships marked by unconditional acceptance, gratuitousness, mutual care, equality, fraternity, harmony, love, forgiveness ... allowing young people to truly be themselves, to be free. This ideal, which contrasts with usual relationships in society, attracts the young people, just as it was in the times of the early Church (*Acts 2:47*), to the point of making them “falling in love with the community” (爱上这个团体), “a group where one is loved,” while being realistic about its limitations, deviations from the Gospel ideal, and the deep suffering that these deviations can cause.

They emphasize the participation of everyone, shared responsibility within the group, teamwork, the importance of valuing different charisms, the specific role of the priest, fraternal companionship ... All these elements indirectly refer to the concept of synodality and can help the universal Church to better understand how to live out synodality in a fraternal manner. Active participation within the community is one of the essential elements of the transformation of believing subjects. The involvement of young people in the community begins with a simple being-with and gradually develops into a strong commitment of the whole person. The community becomes a place to “express one’s zeal” and to implement a personal response to God’s gift. As Peter, a newly baptized student, asserts, the possibility of investing oneself in the service of the community is the condition for becoming a full member and making one with the group, to the point of proudly affirming: “I am the team and the team is me!” The fraternal community thus provides the conducive environment for young people to broadly experience the grace of their baptism and to express the gifts received from the Spirit. Young people fully participate in the life and mission of the Church: even if their participation may seem limited, yet it is essential, as in the feeding of the multitude (*Jn 6*), a boy with five loaves and two fish was needed by Jesus to perform his miracle.

The young people are also well aware that this ideal functioning of the community requires a process in which everyone learns and is formed, that there is a risk of easily leaving people aside, especially newcomers, and that some leaders may be tempted to decide alone. They note the importance of the accompaniment and support of Church workers (especially a priest, but also a nun or a lay worker, who play the role of an elder brother or sister 哥哥姐姐). Their search to correspond to the will of God leads to an openness to the Holy Spirit, with whom nothing is impossible, as Francis expresses while reflecting of his willingness to serve other young people:

When I had this desire, I didn’t see the direction to take, but I felt that God would certainly enable me to accomplish it. In fact, at that time, at each step, I thought like this. I told myself: when my aspiration corresponds to that of God, God will

5 This ideal is particularly expressed in *Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35*.

certainly enable me to accomplish it. If God wants this ... I want it and God wants it, why wouldn't it be fulfilled?

3. A New Intimacy with the Lord, Brother and Friend

A Loving God

The essential element of the process of “defrosting” the faith of young people is the transformation of their relationship with God. They gradually (or sometimes suddenly) discover that the distant and frightening God of their childhood is in fact a close God, a friend, a brother who loves us infinitely, with whom we can speak in the second person and confide in. Catherine describes her relationship with God in terms of a union with God: “I truly believe that God is in me and that I am in God,” while fixing her gaze on Jesus, “the most perfect person,” with whom she shares an “intimate relationship.” The same Louise, who as a child was ashamed of her faith which she felt as a constraint, discovers great intimacy with Jesus, “like in a pot of honey,” which she joyfully testifies to those around her; Jesus is no more the God of her parents but hers. Francis-Xavier, an only child, likes to see God as an “elder brother ... someone who takes care of me.” The young people easily call the Lord “Elder Brother Jesus,” “suge” (稣哥), as confirmed by Cecilia, a youth pastoral worker:

Very often, I don't say God, Jesus and all that ... we say to him: “Elder Brother Jesus” ... He is like my elder brother, you know that he will never abandon you, that he will be by your side.

A Theology of Christ the Brother: Antique and Chinese!

The fraternity experienced within the community that strongly attracts young people, as well as the intimacy with the Lord as an “elder brother,” refer back to the origins of the Church. As Michel Dujarier has shown in his numerous works on the subject,⁶ in the early centuries, the common appellation for the Church is the Fraternity *adelphotès* (ἡ ἀδελφότης), a neologism of the New Testament (*1P* 2:17; 5:9) built on the word “brother” *adelphos*. This vision of the Church as Fraternity goes with a theology of Christ the Brother, widespread among the Fathers of the Church, based on the writings of St. Paul which present Christ as the “Firstborn among many brothers” (*Rm* 8:29), “co-heirs with Him” (*Rm* 8:17) and whom He “is not ashamed to call His brothers” (*Heb* 2:11; *Jn* 20:17). This theological approach shows that on the one hand, Christ became our brother in humanity through his incarnation and on the other hand, through his death and resurrection, he opens us to divine life, adopting us into divine Fraternity, making us, through baptism in the Spirit, his “little brothers” and “little sisters.” With him, our Elder Brother, we become

⁶ Michel Dujarier, *Église-Fraternité. L'ecclésiologie du Christ-Frère aux huit premiers siècles* [Church-Fraternity. The Ecclesiology of Christ the Brother in the First Eight Centuries], Paris: Cerf 2013 (vol. 1) & 2016 (vol. 2). For a short introduction, see his last article: Michel Dujarier, “Redécouvrons la théologie du Christ-frère,” in: Marie-Jo Thiel – Marc Feix (eds.), *Le défi de la fraternité – The Challenge of Fraternity*, Zürich: LIT Verlag 2018, pp. 281-292. See also a book written by the young Ratzinger (1960): Joseph Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* [translated from German by W.A. Glen-Doepel], San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1993², 93 pp.

children of God the Father. When the young people in China today call the Lord “Elder Brother Jesus,” they are going back to the roots of our relationship with Christ in baptism, following, probably without knowing, the Fathers of the Church.

This fraternity⁷ in Christ that the young Chinese people treasure is also very much rooted in Chinese culture.⁸ From Confucian’s emphasis on friendship among brothers *youti* 友悌 and on brotherhood on the path to virtue *shixiong* 师兄 / *renxiong* 仁兄, to the status of sworn brothers *jiebai xiongdi* 结拜兄弟, especially developed in the martial arts novels *wuxia xiaoshuo* 武侠小说, like *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan* 水浒传) where all men are considered as brothers (*si hai zhi nei jie xiongdi* 四海之内皆兄弟), the Chinese culture reserves a special place for brotherhood within all the relationships, with emphasis on friendship and companionship, and feelings as strong as the connections between hand and foot (*shou-zu zhi qing* 手足之情).

The theology of Christ the Brother reminds us of the fundamental equality among brothers and sisters within the Fraternity, not on a moral level (we must love others) but on a theological level: since God the Son adopts us into divine Fraternity, the only identity that matters is that of brothers and sisters in the Brother. This approach revolutionizes relationships within the Church-Fraternity and theologically grounds synodality, this “walking with” among brothers and sisters.

4. A Revolution in Church Relationships

By focusing on the figure of Christ the Brother, the young people help the whole Church moving away from the clergy/laity dualism to freshly hear the Master’s warning: “You have only one master, and you are all brothers” (*Mt* 23:8). However, it seems easier to name Jesus as Christ and Lord than to call him Elder Brother and Friend. The former appellation can justify a certain “hierarchology,” with a distant and all-powerful God, a paternalistic clergy, and passive faithful. The latter explodes human patterns and establishes a radical equality among all: since the Master, God himself, chose to manifest himself as a Brother among his brothers and sisters, the disciple of the Master can only be a brother/sister like the Brother, loving as he loved us (*Jn* 13:34). Moreover, referring to Christ as a friend (*Jn* 15:15) also invites the development of a spiritual friendship both with Christ, as did “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and with the brothers and sisters of the ecclesial community.

When asking the young people what they are bringing to the Church, the first answer is “dynamism” (*huoli* 活力), to renew the local Church. The narratives of the youth show that the generous commitment of young people in the life and mission of the community opens up new perspectives for other age groups’ Catholics to become more participatory themselves. The active participation of young people in the life of the ecclesial community, sometimes even in full-time mission, renews the entire community. Older lay people

7 Although the word “fraternity” does not exist as such in Chinese, the concept of brotherhood is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. For a Chinese translation of the “Christian fraternity,” I would suggest the expression *xiongdi qingyi* 兄弟情谊, which literally means love and friendship among brothers.

8 For more development on this topic, see Bruno Lepeu, “Synodality with Chinese Characteristics,” in: *Tripod* 204 (Spring 2024), pp. 57-87.

discover that mission is not only for priests and nuns, but that they also have a place for active participation in the life of the community. Other possibilities open up for them. With young people, they also experience new ways of praying, they seek to deepen their faith, and to give more space to the Bible. The faith experiences of the young people can also renew the Christian life of the families, both their original family and the new ones that they start.

The priests themselves are transformed in the school of the young. Having mostly been accustomed to deciding and ultimately doing everything alone, they discover with the young people the richness and beauty of teamwork, the importance of involving lay people in the life of the community, including in the decision-making process: the role of the lay people is not of helping the priests but to participate in the mission of the Church. This paradigm shift greatly enriches the life of the Church and renews priests in their own vocation, as testified by a young priest serving young people, providing them with formation programs:

Before, I always did everything by myself ... and I was very tired. Now I am able to share tasks with others and then myself to rely on God. In this process, it is first of all not about what they received, but that I have received a lot: since I entered the seminary, I have evolved a lot, the Lord has given me many lessons ... And in terms of accompaniment, it is not me who accompanies the young people, it is them who accompany me. Sometimes, when I supervise them, their changes also invite me to change. This kind of change comes from within, and not from an external or other change ... For my vocation path, it is very good ... Every training batch is for me a place of renewal.

Martha, a young person in charge of a parish Bible youth group, while praising their chaplain, provides many elements on the figure of the priest suitable for the community: a person “with a strong capacity for adaptation,” “particularly gifted for relationships with people,” “a confidant ... a good friend ... a father ... an elder brother ...,” “particularly good with each member of the community,” in whom she places tremendous trust. This figure resembles those of Barnabas and Paul in their relationships with the early Christian communities they founded and accompanied. They visit them, rejoice in the work of the Spirit among them, encourage them, exhort them, invite them to perseverance, institute elders, give thanks with them. They set out new actors and work together in the Church (*Acts* 11:25-26) with many companions, men and women. The loneliness of young leaders and the lack of appropriate accompaniment, mentioned in the narratives, point to the need for a ministry of comfort and encouragement, in the vein of the *paraklesis* (παράκλησις) in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 9:31), the Paraclete. In this view, the figure of Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement” (*Acts* 4:36), a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and faith, reminds us of the mission of comfort and consolation that also characterizes the apostles.⁹

Since Jesus warned his disciples not to be called master or father (*Mt* 23:8-9), it is necessary to draw practical consequences and not to be like the scribes who say but do not

9 See the occurrences of παρακαλέω in the *Acts of the Apostles* 2:40; 11:23; 14:22; 15:32; 16:40; 20:1; 20:12; 27:33.34.

do (*Mt 23:3*). Concerning priests, brothers among their brothers and sisters, as Vatican II says (*Presbyterorum Ordinis 9,1*), they are called to exercise pastoral service configured to Christ the Brother and to love their brothers and sisters as Christ loves them. Confusion often occurs when the priest says “brothers and sisters” to the faithful and they respond to him, “Father.” However, for the priest, acting in persona Christi, refers to the figure of the elder brother and not to that of the father. A true reform of the Church requires accepting to be deprogrammed; for this, a change of vocabulary is necessary to no longer call priests “father.” The same young people who call Christ “Elder Brother Jesus” also call their priest “elder brother So-and-so.” In Chinese, the appellation *shenfu* 神父 coined by Catholics to designate priests, literally “sacred-father,” could advantageously be replaced by a new expression *muxiong* 牧兄,¹⁰ literally “brother-shepherd,” which both values the common identity of brothers in the Brother and the specific function of shepherd in the name of the Good Shepherd, for the service of the community. Such an evolution also encourages moving from the concept of accompaniment (guide) to that of companionship following the example of Jesus walking with his two disciples on the road to Emmaus (*Lk 24:13-35*). Rather than emphasizing the figure of the guide, which can refer to the teacher/student dialectic, the concept of “companions on the road” (*tongluren* 同路人, σύννοδοι) emphasizes “walking with,” on the same level, being ready to be mutually moved by this companionship, which is the spirit of synodality.¹¹

Conclusion: Towards a More Fraternal and Synodal Church

The process of appropriating faith by young people, the love they return to the community of brothers and sisters, their assumption of responsibilities in the community and in the world, are helping the Church to build and renew itself, while questioning its highly hierarchical and pyramidal functioning, the weakness of its accompaniment of believing subjects, and its lack of openness to the world.

Since the Master and Lord became Servant, Brother, and Friend, the companions on the road within the community become beloved brothers and sisters “in the flesh and in the Lord” (*Phlm 16*), in humanity and in divine life. No other title suits better the disciples of Christ the Brother. Within the community, depending on the charisms of the Holy Spirit, some ensure a pastoral ministry of unity, supported and advised by a few, to allow everyone to exercise the common priesthood of the baptized and to build up the Church-Fraternity. By excluding any form of clerical paternalism, according to a dynamic circularity between the different polarities of the People of God, all brothers and sisters are called to walk together, to listen to each other, to listen together to the Spirit, and to persevere in

10 The first step could be to use more often the word “sacerdotes” (*siduo* 司铎), instead of *shenfu* 神父; another solution could be to use the Vietnamese vocabulary for priest: *lingmu* 灵牧, literally “pastor of the souls.”

11 It is interesting to note that Ireaneus talks of the Church in a dynamic way as a “Caravan of brothers” or “Convoy of the brethren” *tōn adelphōn sunodia* τῶν ἀδελφῶν συνοδικῆ (*AH III,4,3*); see Michel Dujarier, “L’Église ‘caravane’ de frères et de sœurs,” in: Guillaume Bady – Marie Chaieb (eds.), *Irénee de Lyon – Théologien de l’unité*, *Théologie historique* 132, Paris: Beauchesne/Cerf 2022, pp. 86-95.

the harmonious exercise of the four tasks of the Church: testimony, worship, and service, all rooted in fraternal communion.¹²

Such is the fraternal and synodal figure of the Church that young people in China are helping to gradually emerge and which refers to the theology of Christ the Brother of the early centuries of the Church.

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12 See the tasks of the first community: *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*, rooted in *koinônia* (Acts 2-6, especially 2:42).