

Discussion of Catholic Youth Pastoral in Taiwan Today

Sun Shu Kuan

Translated by Leo Leeb

Introduction

Young people are not the future of the Church, but rather her present.
(Pope Francis)

I am very pleased today to be able to come here to share with you our youth ministry, and I hope the Church will continue to accompany more young lives to an encounter with Jesus! As to the development of youth ministry, since in Taiwan we are geographically close to each other, and since there are only few faithful, we emphasize more the close cooperation between congregations and the dioceses, thus it is easier to have communion with all groups in the country.

The population of Taiwan is 23.4 million (according to a statistic from April 2024), and only 1.4% of them are Catholics, but this cannot prevent young people from gathering together and experiencing the enthusiasm for the faith. In all dioceses and congregations, and even in national youth activities, we strive to bring about some development!

Today I want to share with you five points: 1. Today's world youth; 2. the vision of Church and youth; 3. the successes and problems in youth pastoral; 4. how Taiwan faces this situation; 5. the response of the Divine Word Missionaries SVD.

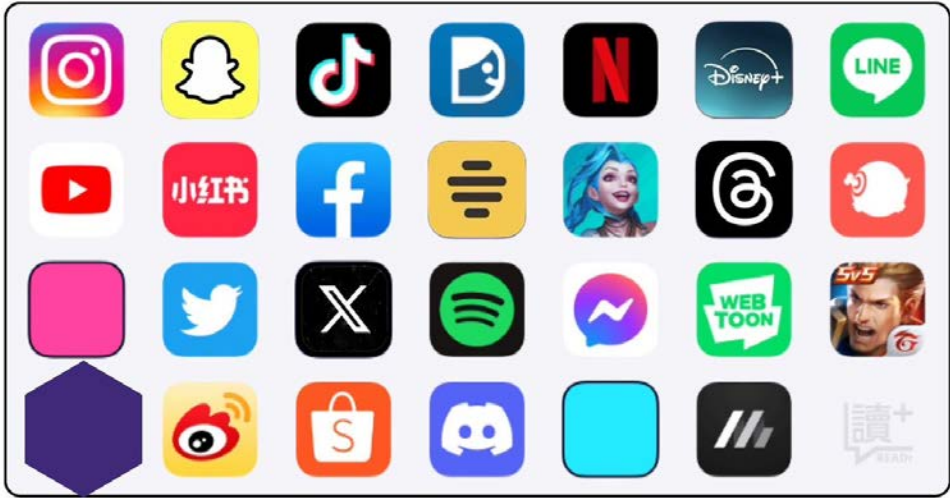
1. Today's World Youth – Youth in the Digitalized Age

a. Below you can see many social software icons, how many of them do you know?

A student of 12 years today may be born in 2012, but his or her mindset is very different from their tutors, teachers who were born earlier. How can we achieve the word of the Pope **“be close to the young”**? The tutor must be on one line with the young person. **The digitalized age is an age of fast changes.**

Sun Shu Kuan is executive secretary of the SVD Youth Ministry Office in Chiayi City, Taiwan. The following lecture was presented at the 11th European Catholic China Colloquium on the topic “Future Perspectives of the Catholic Church in China. Special focus: Youth in China” which took place from August 22–25, 2024 in Siegburg/Germany.

1 - 今日世界的青年 / 數位時代的青年



1995	2004	2007	2010	2015	2021	2023
網際網路				USA 2/3青少年有自己的iphone		
22歲	31歲	34歲	37歲	42歲	48歲	50歲
12歲	21歲	24歲	27歲	32歲	38歲	40歲
2歲	11歲	14歲	17歲	22歲	28歲	30歲
今年度高二新生 2008出生			2歲	7歲	13歲	15歲
			2011出生	4歲	10歲	12歲

Older people have experienced the fast changes, from websites to social media software. Formerly one had a computer, now all young people have mobile phones.

During the Covid time the way of teaching was changed: presence teaching became online teaching.

b. The Younger Generation

- ◆ Young people live in a world different from the world of their teachers and parents.
- ◆ The impact of “globalization” effects that youth all over the world are more and more similar, although they live in their own places, and this impacts on their socialization and identity
- ◆ The challenges of “multiculturalism”
- ◆ Sense of belonging and participation

Young people today do not see themselves as a vulnerable group in need of protection or as passive receivers, but most of them hope to be active participants or leaders in society. Obviously some youth also prepare to make commitments and to devote themselves to a cause, but when they feel they lack participation or encouragement, they will directly express that this is unbearable, they will be depressed and mentally exhausted. Therefore, whether a youth is depressed or vigorous depends on whether the society offers tangible opportunities, on the situation of the family where he or she grew up, and on the views and experiences of the young person concerning meaning, relationships and values.

c. The Confusions and Challenges Faced by Young People

- ◆ Identity and peer relationships
- ◆ A pluralist society, culture and religion
- ◆ Family
- ◆ Economy

What is the thinking of young people? I will use the example of my observations as a teacher in Fu Jen Middle School in Taiwan:

Presently I am offering courses on life education at the Fu Jen Middle School in Jiayi (Chiayi) in Taiwan, thus I have some short-distance experiences with youth, which I am presenting now to you. These courses are not a discipline helping to obtain better grades in the grading system, thus most schools neglect them, and only schools which emphasize human development support the opening of these courses.

In the schools I have observed that after classes the students do not run to the gymnasium area but they just turn off the lights in the classroom and begin to stare at their mobile phones. When I am a teacher, I am naturally interested in the activities of the pupils, and I would like to have more interaction with them, but I always received a cold response. Later I realized that when students play on their mobile phones we cannot disturb them at will, we first have to ask them: “Can I talk to you now?” Once we obtain permission to enter their horizon, we can begin a conversation, and I think this is what the young people call a “feeling for borderlines” (*bianjie gan* 邊界感).

Due to the technological developments, the young people can obtain information in which they are interested by way of their mobile phone. This is an advantage, but it easily limits their experiences. For example, it will not arouse their interest if you invite them to some activities, because if it is more comfortable to play computer games at home, there is no need to interact with new students. With regard to the identity of students, they would rather become service people, because they do not want to follow group rules of a summer camp. From childhood on they have grown up in the world of science, and they have a new set of values concerning interpersonal relationships. I think if one can enter the access point to the world of the young, if one can establish a relationship and obtain their trust, it will be helpful for conversation. Last year during the summer vacation of the first grade of junior high school, I invited students to join a summer camp, but from one class only two participated, but after one year of teaching them, this year half of the class

wanted to join the summer camp, and I believe that the establishment of relationship and obtaining their trust was very important.

2. The Vision of Church and Youth

- a. Vision: The continuation of Church life needs young people, **but the youth of the Church are gradually disappearing.** In the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops the Church wanted to understand how to accompany the youth in their discernment and choice, and also wanted to listen to the problems and needs of the youth.
- b. Numbers of believers and age comparisons: data from Fr. Luo Zhiwei following the reflections of the Third Evangelization Conference:

Age Group	Parishioners	Sunday Mass Attendants	Parish Cadres
Minors (under 14)	7,480	3,621	50
Youth (15-24)	7,963	3,140	205
Young adults (25-44)	16,812	6,778	843
Middle aged (45-64)	22,839	10,929	2,373
Older (over 65)	17,306	8,885	937
Total	72,400	33,353	4,408

(When comparing the number of youth and the parish cadres, it is clear that only few youth return to serve in parishes, and in most cases the middle aged people must accompany the youth.)

- c. The crisis of the Church:
 - ◆ Young people realize that “life does not need the gospel, does not need God or the Church.” They rely on other types, not institutionalized religions and spiritualities, such as TAROT and spiritual growth theories, or they have a strong sense of belonging to their groups, or they seek consolation in other religious experiences. The presence of the Church is ever weaker and it is ever more difficult to encounter people.
 - ◆ The mainstream culture, such as relativism, and the emphasis on individual characteristics, is different from the gospel values and can hardly be reconciled with them.
 - ◆ What specifies the young people is their links to “modern science and technology and to the world of fiction.” They use science and technology to establish the relationships suggested by the media; how to establish human “views on the world, time limitations and interpersonal relationships.” The Church needs to develop a corresponding culture for pastoral ministry.
- d. Solution means: to exhort “the Christ of Life.” Pope Francis said: **Young people are not the future of the Church, but rather her present.** I hope to gather some points which can produce positive results of youth gatherings from the past years, so as **to raise the willingness of youth to serve in the local Church.** Therefore, this pastoral compass can help the pastors of the local Church and youth pastoral ministers to fully experience the joy of “youth party gatherings” (*qingnian shengyan* 青年盛宴).

- e. How to make youth return to the accompaniment of the Church, so that they come back to serve in the Church? We should give the youth confidence, because today and tomorrow the young are the witnesses of the gospel, the treasure of the Church. This is a pastoral priority of historical importance. It is also the unique opportunity of the youth, not only allowing them to experience the faith and community, but also helping them to discover and live their own special vocation.
- f. From a pastoral “for the youth” one should shift to a celebration of **“being with youth”** and **“walking with the young.”** We must ensure that the young generation realizes that society pays attention to them, that they are the focus of pastoral care. In fact, young people desire to participate and to be appreciated, they want to feel that they are the common promoters of Church life and the mission of evangelization. We all must examine what responsibility we have toward the young, and we should eagerly accept the challenge and face the problems, hopes and hardships of the young. Therefore, we should find out how to kindle the flame of the Church, be aware to accompany the youth, accept them and patiently listen to them, these are urgent tasks, and at the same time we should fervently and vividly preach to them God’s Word. Sometimes the Church tends to give them some well-prepared answers and ready-made solutions, and does not allow to fully manifest or represent the problems of the young people, or is not willing to tackle the challenges arising from these problems. With empathy a listener should allow a mutual exchange, so that the youth can make a contribution to the community, allow them to support the group to raise new and sensitive questions and face new problems. At the same time, listening in order to preach can really touch a human heart, and it is a preparation for a keen and fruitful evangelization.
- g. In these actions the Church hopes to hear the voices, feelings and beliefs of the youth, even to accept doubts and critique. It hopes that their voice is heard in the community, and that it reaches the ears of the pastors, just as it is written in the *Rule of St. Benedict* “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best” (*Rule of St. Benedict*, III, 3).

3. Problems and Achievements of Youth Pastoral

We have invited several coworkers in the field of youth ministry to share with us their spiritual road and their spiritual fruits.

1. First Example: The Shared Thoughts of Jiangjing, Former Secretary of the Bishops’ Conference:

Looking back at the past years of working at the Bishops’ conference, I was for a long time only doing one thing: establishing relationships. In the field of pastoral work, this is everything. Because of the relationships with our partners, because of our common songs and games with the youth, we can better pray with them, can grow with them in the service at the summer camps, and can also better bear the failures and hurts after an activity. Only

after we have established a partner relationship with the youth, we have an opportunity to open up new life experiences with them. For example, we have made a training for holding the World Youth Day, together with other youth groups from all over the country, and there we asked the different choir leaders to sing the main song of the World Youth Day, and we recorded a program of questions concerning the faith of the youth, etc. Because of the trust and partnership established in the past, all wanted to come from their different groups, wanted to cooperate, and to witness this unity was truly a good achievement of pastoral work. As for me, the praxis of pastoral work is a kind of deepening the personal faith life and a relationship of trust in God. It is also the joy of seeing how different groups are united in the faith. This is spiritual nourishment which cannot be measured, it is the greatest gift in my work for the Church.

2. The Second Example Comes from Campus Ministry – Wenhui’s Sharing:

For the youth of Taiwan, most of the life and faith during the school time comes from the influence of the family. The entry into university marks the beginning of a period of full autonomy, which means to approach a crucial crossroad. They will explore whether they want to follow and live out this faith, if there are not demands from the parents and no pressure to study hard. If in this moment they actively begin to make choices and explore, this faith has a possibility to become a part of their firm identity. My work was to encounter these university students who stood at the crossroad, and to accompany them to explore and deepen their faith. Our main method was to have a meeting once a week throughout the semester, and the themes were life and all the different concerns of the faith. Even if some of them have been baptised as children, this does not mean that they had really experienced the faith. I remember I often asked the students these two questions: **“Why did Jesus become man?”** and **“What does his sacrifice mean to us?”**

Most students were unable to answer these questions, and thus one can see clearly that the Church youth today are like a tabula rasa, an empty sheet of white paper in terms of faith. But the weekly meetings we had and the summer and winter camps during vacation, and the prayer meetings for the youth, the pilgrim activities etc., all these things helped them to add colour to their faith.

3. Third Example: It Comes from an Educator of Jesuit Youth, Linwei:

I have served as youth educator in the Jesuit “Magis” youth center for ten years now, and I was a youth social worker before for around five years. Since the time of my studies I was drawn to youth work, and I progressed along this road. After having served in a social service institution for some time, I was invited by the Jesuits to work in a youth center led by lay believers, and so began a very special journey.

The youth work in our center emphasizes “spirituality” and “training.” Therefore it uses the methods of group and individual conversation, listening, activities, training courses, retreats and common studies or services to approach the youth. In our work we can hardly separate work and life, and very often we ourselves are the ones who are healed during our work. Thus when we ourselves grow, the youth and the coworkers will also make progress

together with us. It is like an Ignatian spiritual youth formation, in which every month is dedicated to a new theme, and even if we all know the content, we learn together with the youth, and so we ourselves also become more familiar with it and discover the work of God in it, and this present service is a mystic experience between us, the youth and God.

Every youth pastoral unit has a different core value or congregational mission, and I think to understand the core values and mission of one's group can help our services to become more pluriform and still keep the core. Besides that one needs to know oneself, which means the pastoral worker must know in which kind of service program he or she can best live out his or her talents, thus the emphasis is on knowing oneself, knowing one's community and knowing God. In related workshops and within the institution there should be many formations which help to deepen this "knowledge." The frontline youth work in Taiwan has many forms and features, and also the services are manifold and rich. The past experiences have told us that whatever the features are, it is most important to know that one's work with the youth is a calling and a mission. Different youth workers can serve the different needs of young people, and in the process of responding to this calling, we walk toward the image in which God created us, we follow the Lord, and since we are all members of one body, we will improve, and we improve together.

Through the sharing of Jiangjing, Wenhui and Linwei we can understand that the youth in different groups and different age sectors will need different tools offered to help them. But I think, just as Linwei has shared, that every youth worker and group must first understand himself or herself, must find the center and final orientation of their service, and so develop the strengths of each group and accompany the youth to walk toward the faith together.

4. How Does Taiwan Face the Situation?

Because of the geographical features of Taiwan and because the number of believers is small there, we emphasize more the close cooperation between dioceses and congregations, so as to more easily achieve an integration of all communities in the country.

In the national activities we assemble every year there is the youth from all over the country to celebrate the Taiwan Youth Day, which is held in the seven dioceses by taking turns. It is a localized celebration of the Church, with pilgrimages, getting together, prayer experiences. In the journey of the Taiwan Youth Day around 200 young people will learn to know the saints together and will live with priests and sisters. In the common praises and songs they are touched by the community of the faith! Besides this, under the leadership of professional college students, also our university students can obtain a profound faith formation. Every year in the winter and summer holidays there is a formation camp lasting for one week, especially designed for university students. It caters to the needs of the youth in their special growth period, and it helps them to realize the value and mission of their existence; this also gives them an opportunity to repeat a catechism course.

On the level of dioceses, in these years there have been diocesan youth days, youth camps or children's camps held in different places, and also youth workers and counselors are formed by each diocese. Also because the different congregations have developed pas-

toral work in Taiwan, the close cooperation between congregation groups and diocesan agents is a feature of our formation work.

Besides the youth themselves, the youth workers of the dioceses and congregations of Taiwan also are now holding national meetings for youth workers, so as to train our youth apostolate ministers, and to share the achievements and challenges of youth work, also to read ecclesial documents together and discern the direction and targets of future youth ministry.

In the development of Taiwanese youth groups, there are special parishes to enkindle the faith of young people, there are diocesan youth associations and special groups for students in professional schools (*da zhuan*) as well as groups with special missions, such as: Tabor Youth Group, Talitha Kum, Magis, SVD Youth Group, etc., which use their different talents and characteristics to spread the gospel, so as to enrich the faith life of the youth in Taiwan.

5. The Response of the SVD

a. Origins:

In the year 2003 the SVD established the “Taiwan Youth Mission Office,” aiming at the whole Catholic Church of Taiwan. The administrative areas of the SVD for the Catholic Church in Taiwan are these: Taipei District (Fu Jen University), Jiayi District (Fu Jen Middle School), Alishan Pastoral district for the aboriginals, which play an important role in the task of helping youth to enroll at schools and to grow.

b. Service receivers: **young people** between 16 and 29 years, and also tutors of youth

c. Core aims: serve the youth through communities and accompaniment, so that in a next step the youth can continue to serve the next generation of young people in the diocese.

For the young people:

- ◆ Targets: junior high school, senior high school, professional college students and employed youth
- ◆ Vision: enliven parishes through the participation of youth
- ◆ Objectives:
 - ✓ Bring the youth back to the families and parishes
 - ✓ Help the youth to participate in ecclesial services
 - ✓ Help the youth to live their faith, make the faith practical
 - ✓ Accompany the young people to overcome failures and pressure in their growth

For the tutors of youth:

- ◆ Target group: parents of students, teachers, youth counselors, tutors of youth, youth pastoral ministers, adult Christians
- ◆ Aims:
 - ✓ contact and train adult Catholics who want to become tutors (*peibanzhe* 陪伴者) of Church youth

- ✓ arrange study sessions and presentations, help the tutors of the youth to progress in their faith life, Church awareness, and professional skills, so as to be able to accompany the youth more effectively
 - ✓ help the tutors to establish youth groups in parishes
- d. Services offered:
- ◆ Common camps of SVD youth
 - ◆ Taizé prayers
 - ◆ Emmaus mountain climbing activity
 - ◆ Life education
 - ◆ Taiwan and international volunteer work
 - ◆ Youth Bible Contest and Competition
 - ◆ Participation in the World Youth Day
 - ◆ Offer study sessions and presentations for the tutors of youth
 - ◆ Publish an annual and maintain the website, for example a book on a volunteer in Vietnam “Journey of Love,” youtube, facebook

6. Conclusion: The Move to Offer an Office for Youth Ministry

In the service at school and in the parish I could experience what it is to develop “youth work” in a new way. The core of youth ministry is “to accept.” One needs to understand and tolerate the different views and opinions of the youth, must not oppose or criticize them too fast. One must not hurry to tell them “you should do it like this.” This insight seems to me very helpful after all my practical experiences. In the pluralist post-modernist environment, we can try to communicate with people from different backgrounds in a modest and open attitude. This does not mean to negate the truth of the Christian faith, but it is to look at it from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. In this way learning and listening, accepting and changing one’s viewpoint will lead to the development of an open dialogue.

In the Office for Youth Ministry we truly saw the disappearance of the young generation, and in this concern we have always reflected and asked whether the emphasis on assemblies and meetings in our work would not neglect some of the true needs of the youth? Therefore we tried to make the following changes and we work toward that direction.

- ◆ To approach the life of the youth, help them to face challenges. We want to be close to them, so as to see the direction of their lives, their relationships and identities with all their challenges, and we want to face these complicated problems together with them. The mental growth of the young generation can no longer be judged according to age. Many psychological needs of the young people prematurely exceed their age, and youth ministry workers can see the ignorance and confusion created by those needs.
- ◆ To establish a practical platform to reflect the faith in our services: We can bring together the professional and life experience of the community and invite them to help us in our youth ministry, by way of study sessions, presentations, camps, service activities etc., to establish a multiform practical platform, where we look at the needs of this world together, and where we reflect on the meaning of the faith in our service,

so that we reunite faith and life. For the kingdom of God, we try to change our views and try new methods, we accompany each other, learn together and create together! In the future, our youth ministry will also tend toward more communion and cooperation. We know that the young people face all kinds of minor and major problems, there is the generation gap, materialism, individualism and other conflicts, but a mature faith can really guide our young people so that they can bridge the conflicts and be peaceful reformers, promoters of life, practitioners of our mission. Let us pray together and work together! Thank you!