

Evangelisation among Young People in China since 2005

Bruno Lepeu, MEP

Working with China for the last 20 years, I have often been overwhelmed by the Church's difficulties (internal and external). But dealing with youth ministry in China for the past 10 years has been a very encouraging, yet challenging, experience. Through my own experience and some sharing from youth ministers inside China, I will share with you some insights on evangelisation among young people in China.¹

In the 1990s, pastoral ministry among the youth was centred on catechism classes, mostly during summer or winter camps. Young people from an early age to early twenties were gathered to listen to basic catechism training (10 commandments, questions & answers catechism), given by religious women and seminarians. One of the main purposes was to prepare young Catholics to receive the sacraments. I remember when going to seminaries, the seminarians would ask me what to do during these camps, as they were not equipped to take care of the young people. In the early years of 2000, when I was visiting local communities, one of their biggest concerns was youth activities.

As I was very involved in youth ministry in Hong Kong, they would expect miracle recipes from me to help the youth to keep in touch with the Church and to grow in faith. To answer their eagerness to learn about youth ministry, I would share some formation programs prepared for teenagers. But many times, I would be surprised to see the local so-called "youth group" formed with adults in their 30's or 40's. After decades of lay leaders coming from the elderly, the local pastors usually regarded those middle aged lay leaders as young leaders! I learnt to ask the age of the youth beforehand ... At the same time, some basic courses on proper youth ministry started to be provided for the clergy in some dioceses. In the mid-2000s, some young priests and religious sisters were sent abroad for further studies in youth ministry. At the same time, programs for university students started all around China. This has grown very rapidly over the past 10 years. Therefore, I consider that proper youth ministry started in China around the year 2005.

The challenges for youth ministry depend on age, generation, geographical and political background, etc. ... I will list a few of them.

The following text is the contribution of Rev. Bruno Lepeu, MEP (Hong Kong) to the 9th European Catholic China Colloquium "Challenges of Evangelisation – China and Europe," Konstancin/Warsaw, September 10–13, 2015.

1 The Summer 2015 issue of *Tripod*, No. 177, is focusing on this matter; the issue No. 174 on "The Encounter Between Public Education and the Faith" is also enlightening for understanding today's youth.

The gaps between generations are speeding up. After the post-80s, the post-90s, a new generation comes with new characteristics after only 5 years: post-95s, post-2000s. It is important to understand their characteristics to answer their specific needs.²

Youth in high school are very difficult to reach: they spend most of their time at school, busy with academic achievements. Parishes, even in rural areas, need to find new solutions to attract kids and teenagers to the Church. A mixture of tutorial classes and faith formation is usually successful. I know one priest who is inviting foreign youth to help with English tutorial classes and successfully attracts teenagers, even non-Catholics, to the parish summer activities. In rural areas, young people are very hard to reach after primary school. When staying in boarding schools, going to university or working in industrial areas, they lose contact with their parish and hardly find new friendship.

University students are the easiest and most important target for youth ministry in China. They are an increasing group of people (7.27 M students graduated from university in 2014, compared to less than 1M in 2002). They have more time, more holidays and less homework than secondary school students. They are full of hope and generosity. Many of them are willing to commit themselves and they dream of changing the world. They are in search of truth and the meaning of life, yet very much influenced by the atheist and scientific culture of their studies. As Catholics, they are usually struggling to keep up the family faith in a hostile environment. When they arrive at university, their faith is neither mature nor strong: it can easily wither away quickly. They face the many challenges of entering the world of the grown-ups. They are attracted by worldly concerns which challenge their spiritual quest. They do not know how to live as Catholics in this quickly changing age. For example, they are disturbed by the officials who are lobbying them to join the Communist Party. Their strong need, specific to the youth, to belong to a peer group, is deepened by the loneliness of joining a university, usually far from their hometown.

For all these reasons, the university period is the best time and the most important time for the Church to reach young people. Yet the Church is not free to evangelize on campuses, not even through young people. For the past two years, the government has been stricter in keeping religions off the campus. Open publicity for religious activities is not possible. Invitations from peers are the best way to attract the newcomers to the place outside the campus where the university students gather to nurture their faith. For example, little stickers with the following advertisement: “Looking for Mary and Joseph? Please call this number,” are one of the little tricks used by Catholic students to reach the new Catholic students.

All around China, without a major difference between official and unofficial communities, many beautiful experiences of youth ministry have developed since 2005. In some cities, the local Church provides very extensive programs for university students, including fellowship, large activities, pilgrimages, with formation, service, prayer ... Many non-

2 See the interesting study published by Churchchina.org in the November 2014 issue: “Women de nianqing ren zai xiang shenme? – Qiantan ruhe xiang 80 hou, 90 hou, 95 hou zhuan fuyin 我们的年轻人在想什么? —浅谈如何向80后、90后、95后传福音 (What Are Our Young People Thinking: How to Witness to Youth of the Post 1980s, 1990s and 1995s),” written by Lu Zun'en 陆尊恩, www.churchchina.org/no141106 – English translation by ChinaSource – Chinese Church Voices, www.chinasource.org/resource-library/series-index/what-are-chinese-young-people-thinking.

Catholic students do follow their Catholic friends in joining such youth groups and become very devout. I remember a university student, who was baptized in a youth group run by some seminarians. After a few years of commitment in the group, he finally joined the seminary and is now preparing to be ordained. He is one of the many examples of young people, coming from non-Catholic urban families, mostly only children, who entered consecrated life, and are progressively changing the face of the clergy (who currently come mostly from a rural, traditionally Catholic and less educated background).

Some small settings allow young people to experiment with community and prayer life, which is very helpful to nurture their vocation. Many young people are also ready to dedicate some years of their life to serve the Church and other young people,³ even if it is hard to make one's living serving the Church as a lay person. Some will be challenged by their families who expected them to take up a successful career after graduating from university, especially when they get married. This does not help them to reflect on their life, on their relationship with God and what they can do for God and for others. Personal spiritual guidance is very much needed to help those young people on their path to sanctity. Many young Catholics are very brave and ready to suffer for their faith.⁴

Support groups through Weixin & WeChat (the Chinese Twitter & Facebook) or QQ are very useful means of support to young people. Some rural dioceses, which provide winter and summer youth programs, will keep in touch all through the year with those young people studying all over China. It is mostly youth leaders who nurture those connections. But some priests or religious sisters will be very involved, sometimes even going around visiting the young people in the cities where they are studying. Some youth groups are also offering a follow-up for graduated students, including connections with their new working place, pre/post-marriage counselling, etc. ... Some more mature groups are providing support to other youth groups around China. Youth ministry networking is growing, but youth workers need materials, support and training.

After experiencing international youth gatherings (like the World Youth Day, Taizé gathering, Asian Youth Day, etc. ...), some places are now organizing locally large youth gatherings. Some dioceses now have a proper Youth Commission and/or a youth centre. A few dioceses are also offering intensive programs for the youth, like 100 days of full-time training (including personal growth, leadership training, faith deepening, etc. ...) to equip young Catholics to enter the adult world. Some groups are focusing more on prayer life.

One specific group is targeting the young professionals arriving in its city, providing them with extended support including housing, work application, couple matching, etc. ... A special concern for youth ministry is family life: how to equip young Catholics to live a happy and stable family life in the fast changing society? As many young people, including a lot of non-Christian couples, turn to the Church for their weddings, marriage counselling and celebration of weddings are important occasions for evangelisation.

In many places, the local Church is not well equipped to face these specific challenges. Young migrants working in the cities are also a specific target for evangelisation, yet mostly

3 See the examples mentioned in *Tripod*, No. 177, especially the one of Jin Yan, pp. 84-87.

4 In summer 2014, 60 young Catholics from China did not hesitate to brave the government's ban and join the Asian Youth Day in Korea, ready to face any kind of retaliation after their return.

forgotten by the local Church. Young students studying abroad in a free environment are very open to new ideas, including religion. But most of the time, only evangelical groups are caring for the needs of those young Chinese students abroad.

In conclusion, holistic Youth Ministry is a crucial pastoral focus for the Church in China, to answer the needs of the youth and to renew the life of the Church. Vocations to consecrated life, to married life, to the service of the Church ... will be nurtured through this beautiful and challenging ministry.