

Between Church and Youth: Characterization of Religious Experiences in Youth People Connected to Ignatian Spirituality in the Secondary-to-University Transition

Entre la Iglesia y los jóvenes:
caracterización de las experiencias religiosas en jóvenes vinculados a la
espiritualidad ignaciana en la transición secundaria-universitaria

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ABSTRACT

In Chile as well as globally, younger societal groups have demonstrated a consistent flux of cultural and religious changes. This situation challenges the way they engage with traditional pastoral proposals, and the extent to which these proposals have the capacity to address the demands of their transition from secondary to higher education—a significant period for vocational and religious exploration. This article aims to provide categories derived from a qualitative research commissioned by the Society of Jesus. The research sought to characterize how young adults, in their initial years of university education, interact with pastoral initiatives

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rooted in Ignatian spirituality in Chile. Through interviews and focus groups, several themes emerged: the significance of spiritual and service-oriented spaces, political and social reflection within this spirituality, the influence of Ignatian formation on vocational discernment and career choices, shifts in time allocation and religious involvement during this transitional phase, and the associated challenges. Notably, communal bonds, reflective practices, and acts of service emerge as salient features of religious experience. The article concludes with discussions on relevant scholarly inquiries in the field and outlines future research prospects.

Keywords: youth religiosity, Ignatian spirituality, volunteering, secondary university transition, community ties

RESUMEN

Tanto en Chile como en el mundo, los grupos societarios más jóvenes han demostrado un flujo constante de cambios culturales y religiosos. Esto desafía las formas en que ellos se relacionan con las propuestas pastorales tradicionales, y si estas pueden responder, o no, a los desafíos de su transición secundaria-universitaria, etapa significativa para sus búsquedas vocacionales y religiosas. Este artículo presenta categorías que emergieron de una investigación cualitativa promovida por la Compañía de Jesús, cuyo objetivo fue caracterizar la forma en que los jóvenes, en sus primeros años de universidad, se relacionan con las propuestas pastorales ofrecidas por la espiritualidad ignaciana en Chile. El trabajo de entrevistas y grupos focales permitió identificar algunos temas: la importancia de los espacios de espiritualidad y servicio, la reflexión político-social en la espiritualidad, el impacto de la formación ignaciana en la vocación y elección de carrera, los cambios en disposición de tiempo y participación religiosa en esta transición de etapa educativa y los desafíos que implica. En cuanto a la experiencia religiosa, se destacan los vínculos comunitarios, junto con la reflexión y el servicio. Al cierre de este texto se ofrecen algunos aspectos de discusión referidos a los estudios realizados en el área y se concluirá con prospectivas en la materia.

Palabras clave: religiosidad juvenil, espiritualidad ignaciana, voluntariado, transición secundaria-universitaria, vínculos comunitarios

Introduction: Brief Description of Ignatian Youth Ministry in Chile

The Youth and Vocations Area of the Society of Jesus in Chile, in collaboration with the Institute of Theology and Religious Studies at the Alberto Hurtado University (ITER, Instituto de Teología y Estudios Religiosos in Spanish), have joined efforts to understand the current religious pursuits of young people, in order to respond coherently to their changes and trends. Within this framework, this article presents categories that facilitate dialogue between the religious interests, pursuits, and demands of young people in transition, from the end of their secondary education to the early years of higher education, in relation to the religious proposals offered by the Society of Jesus. A summary of these themes will be presented and contrasted with the results of previous studies on youth religiosity and the high school-to-university transition.

This research focuses on two cities in Chile, Santiago and Concepción, where two branches of the Ignatian Youth Network (RJI, Red Juvenil Ignaciana in Spanish) served as the study sites. In both regions, the Ignatian Educational Network (REI, Red Educacional Ignaciana in Spanish)⁵ is also present, as an initiative that links 10 Jesuit institutions and 6 “mission companion” schools, that is, institutions sponsored by other entities whose educational projects are inspired by the principles of the Society of Jesus. Children and young people have the opportunity to participate

⁵ REI is composed of 16 educational institutions located between Antofagasta and Puerto Montt, whose mission is “to form fully developed men and women who, with their talents, can transform society into a more just and supportive one, thus being faithful to the call of Christ” (Red Educacional Ignaciana, 2022).

in pastoral movements or communities, such as the Christian Life Community (CLC)⁶ and the Eucharistic Youth Movement (EYM)⁷. Additionally, students from these schools can engage in sung prayers, traditional “spiritual exercises”, camps, and solidarity activities, among other experiences.

The study involved the participation of first and second-year university students (who later progressed to second and third year, respectively) primarily comprising alumni of Ignatian schools or individuals who had engaged in initiatives such as CLC, EYM, or the Ignatian University Center (CUI, Centro Universitario Ignaciano in Spanish), affiliated with Alberto Hurtado University⁸.

Additionally, this article aims to contribute to educational and youth pastoral work in Chile, not only because young people associated with school and university educational institutions took part in the research, but also because it illustrates how religious education, present in various formative contexts, impacts the quests, values, and spirituality of college students. It is noteworthy that studies on youth religiosity in Chile have focused on specific age groups within the framework of the same

⁶ Formed by “Christian men and women, adults and young people, from different social conditions who wish to follow Jesus Christ more closely and work with Him in the construction of the Kingdom, and who have recognized in the Christian Life Community their particular vocation in the Church” (Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional de CVX, 2023).

⁷ Christian formation movement for girls, boys, and youths aged 5 to 25 years old. MEJ invites young people to live in the manner of Jesus, fostering a friendship-based relationship, heart to heart, grounded in Eucharistic spirituality for misión (Red Mundial de Oración del Papa, 2023).

⁸ CUI ensures that the Jesuit and Catholic identity of the University is embodied in all university activities, seeking to deepen and inspire the Ignatian experience of encountering Jesus and humanity through formative processes, volunteering, and accompaniment accessible to the entire university community (CUI, n.d.).

educational stage, without delving into the transition periods between these stages. Nevertheless, the importance of studying transitional moments can be observed, as they enable an assessment of the comparative perspective that young people themselves have regarding their faith experience across different educational stages.

I. Empirical Background on Youth and the Challenge of Understanding the Religious Experience of University Entrants

To comprehend the local and specific religious landscape of the interviewed youth, it is necessary to review some background in sociocultural and socioreligious studies concerning youth in Chile.

Regarding sociocultural studies, an interesting datum for our research is the low participation of youth in various initiatives. In the 14th Survey on Participation, Youth, and Media Consumption by Diego Portales University and Feedback Research (Etchegaray, 2021), conducted among individuals aged 18 to 29 years old, activities such as “expressing opinions through social media”, “environmental protection”, “promoting women’s rights”, and “promoting sexual diversity rights” stand out among voluntary activities. Among these, only the first manages to achieve over 50% participation, while the remaining activities do not reach 30%. This contrasts with the INJUV survey (2022), which indicates that the highest participation rate in volunteering was achieved at 37.1%, while 54.1% would participate in organizations or groups advocating for a social cause. Virtual communities and hobby groups are the most popular activities in which young people would actually participate

(24.8% and 11.3%, respectively), with the Church ranking third.

Regarding socioreligious studies, surveys in recent years have shown a consistent trend among young people towards religious disaffiliation. This trend is evident in both Bicentenario UC 2022 survey and the National Youth Survey conducted by INJUV. Both surveys highlight the increase in religious non-affiliation from 2018 to 2022: from 29% to 41% among individuals aged 18 to 34 years old (Bicentenario Survey, 2022), and from 57.4% to 63.6% among individuals aged 15 to 29 years old (INJUV Survey, 2022).

Although these data are illustrative, they are not entirely determinative in understanding religious trends among young people, whether in terms of their practices or their religious affiliations. This phenomenon is referred to as the problem of the “nones”, where those who claim to be “non-religious” encompass a wide spectrum of individuals with diverse worldviews or non-institutionalized religious positions, which remain invisible within this category and challenge the boundaries of what is considered “religious” (Hedges, 2021).

We believe this is the case for many young people who do not feel part of a religion or do not adhere to a formal belief, but who undergo different explorations and affiliations that can be considered spiritual or religious in a broad sense (such as karma, personal energies, etc.); or, even experience more than one traditional religious belief. Thus, a more qualitative approach to the specific experiences of each young person can reveal the uniqueness of new “religious orientations”. As Cerda-Planas points out (2022a), integrating elements such as the noetic, sensory, ritual, consequential, and communal

dimensions, applied in focus groups, helps to understand the complexity of youth religiosity.

From an empirical-theological approach, the same author has studied youth religiosity, specifically among students aged 15 to 16 from different social classes and religious confessions. The results of her work reveal elements of continuity with studies conducted up to that point, but also interesting and relevant findings for this research, such as the importance of topics like life after death and the ambivalent impact of religious education on youth religiosity (Cerda, 2022b).

In this regard, there is an evident decline in traditional religious practices, but also a scarcity about specific descriptions of current religious experiences among young people. From this perspective, a direct precedent for this research is the study conducted by Bahamondes et al. (2020) on the social representations of the Church and faith among young people attending Jesuit educational institutions in Chile. In that research, young people associate faith with social spaces or contact with individuals in adverse situations. In continuity with this orientation, our study will observe that the interviewed young people identify their experiences of God, the spiritual, or the transcendent with very practical dimensions, such as service or volunteering.

In light of this panorama, the need for strengthening qualitative studies of youth religiosity is once again evident, but also from the standpoint of “lived religion” that can illustrate changes in their experiences, quests, and interests, considering their own languages and experiences. This approach helps us distinguish who considers something as religious, why they characterize it as special, and

for what reasons; this perspective surpasses what is considered religious and significant from a canonical and conventional point of view (Taves, 2011).

On the other hand, local research based on empirical evidence has studied youth religiosity in specific stages of development, such as adolescence or university youth, but has not addressed the transition between these stages, during which significant religious changes could be observed. The transition from secondary to higher education constitutes a significant transformative process in the lives of young people. During this stage, known as emerging adulthood (the period of life between 18 and 29 years old), most individuals begin to forge their identity, explore new possibilities, and face the uncertainty that accompanies the search for a meaningful life project (Papalia et al., 2012). This process involves a change in role and environment for those experiencing it, and it brings with it a degree of uncertainty as they encounter a space of greater diversity.

Sacristán (2009) highlights that every educational transition implies the possibility of experiencing critical moments of doubt, perplexity, restlessness, and even discomfort, but also the need to confront demands for personal adaptation, which can foster future transformations. Higher education not only entails a higher level of academic learning but also a space where individuals explore their identity, values, and their relationship with the surrounding world, including their spiritual or religious experiences.

Furthermore, it seems that young people are not always adequately prepared for this transition, either due to differences between the type of

education provided in school and at university, or due to educational differences among different social groups. In this context, authors have demonstrated the importance of non-curricular variables in motivating the university path (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

With these precedents in mind, we will consider how the transition from secondary to higher education impacts the religious experiences of young people, particularly those linked to Ignatian spirituality. Is it possible that in the transition to new forms of socialization and education at university, they reassess their religious positions? What role do the religious instances offered by the Society of Jesus play in the religious exploration of young people as they move into higher education? To answer these questions, we will need to consider “lived religion” as a study perspective, in order to discover new categories in the narrative they themselves construct about their religious experience and Ignatian spirituality.

II. Methodology

The objective of this research was to characterize how university students relate to pastoral proposals offered by Ignatian spirituality, considering their own interests and religious experiences. Ultimately, the aim was to generate categories that facilitate dialogue between the religious interests, quests, and demands of young people in formative transition—from the end of their secondary education to the early years of higher education—and the religious proposals that the Society of Jesus offers them in Chile.

The research had a qualitative approach, as it sought to uncover meanings and interpretations

from the subjectivity of the participants. Thus, its epistemological-theoretical framework is grounded in social phenomenology, a comprehensive and interpretative theory of social action that focuses on exploring the subjective experience of individuals in the context of everyday life and what constitutes their common sense (Mieles-Barrera et al., 2012). Based on this foundation, it is argued that common sense, the meaning that each person has about their subjective experience, possesses particular structures that can be made explicit when the process through which such meaning is constructed and the associations that sustain it are understood.

The research unfolded in three phases: the first involved personal engagement with the participants through semi-structured interviews; in the second, data collection and analysis were carried out; finally, in the third phase, the participants were once again engaged in group settings, aiming to generate new categories collaboratively and horizontally.

To conduct the research, we selected young people in their first or second year of university who had some connection to Ignatian spirituality, either in school or university. Participants were contacted through open calls, resulting in the gathering of seven individuals from Santiago and five from Concepción. A total of 12 interviewees aged between 19 and 23 participated.

During the interviews, spaces of trust were created to allow young people to freely express their beliefs. To this end, guidelines were constructed based on key areas such as spirituality, religious practices and experiences, vocational concerns, and personal quests, among others. Although there was an effort to delve into these issues, a flexible conversation

was always prioritized, allowing participants to share their interests and experiences confidently in their own terms. With the consent of the young people, the interviews were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The information resulting from the interviews was approached through thematic analysis (Mieles-Barrera et al., 2012). This process involved open coding, then focused coding, and finally, the synthesis of relevant themes. Firstly, excerpts from the transcriptions were coded using concepts, words, or ideas that succinctly captured the contents expressed by the interviewees. Subsequently, efforts were made to group the resulting codes into different, more general categories that captured the meanings of the initial coding. This helped elucidate common experiences and perceptions, leading to the development of the eight final themes presented as the outcome of the first stage of this research.

This process was fundamentally inductive, aiming to maintain consistency and coherence among the meanings expressed by the participants, the formulated codes, and the themes developed. We believe that the presented themes adequately reflect the religious interests and experiences of the interviewed young people, as well as the different ways in which they have engaged with the religious instances offered by the Society of Jesus in Chile.

Finally, two focus groups were formed, involving some of the interviewees in Santiago and Concepción. Four of the themes that emerged from the analysis process served as the basis for discussion. The objective of the focus groups was to contrast the religious experiences and concerns that young people raised in the first stage with the

approach that Ignatian spirituality has had towards their areas of interest; subsequently, collective formulation of new approaches that Ignatian spiritual instances can develop considering the research results was sought.

III. Themes Associated with the Narratives of the Young People

Below are the eight themes that emerged from the interviews with the young people. Each theme was grouped as follows:

1. *Youth Connection with Ignatian Spirituality:*

- a. Ignatian formation fosters spaces of spirituality and service.
- b. Appreciation of political-social reflection within spirituality.
- c. Impact of Ignatian formation on vocation and career choice.

2. *Transition from Secondary to Higher Education:*

- a. Changes in time availability and modes of participation in religious activities.
- b. Transition entails personal, social, and academic challenges.

3. *Characterization of Youth Religious Experience:*

- a. Valuation and importance of community bonds in religious experience.
- b. Religious experience as service and importance of reflection spaces.
- c. Institutional affiliation is not fundamental for religious experience.

1. Youth Connection with Ignatian Spirituality

The young people interviewed acquainted with Ignatian spirituality at various times and places. Central points of their connection with the Ignatian instances in which they participated include: (1) the spirituality and service activities offered to the youth; (2) the opportunity to share in community; (3) and the possibility of engaging in apostolates. For graduates of schools belonging to the Ignatian Educational Network (REI), Ignatian-formative and pastoral activities were always present in the school environment: “In school, it was always constant, like EYM, the camp, in CLC” (Interview 8); “Yes. I was in EYM. I was also in CLC. And also, in pastoral activities at school, as a delegate... and participating in school activities” (Interview 9).

Over time, this increased availability of experiences has allowed them to develop notions about Ignatian spirituality, although there is some difficulty in defining it with articulate and technical language.

CLC secondary allows young people to get to know each other and form communities of life and service where they can share personal and spiritual topics. In turn, those participating in the CUI highlight the space for its openness and the service opportunities it offers:

I think participating in these instances... it's like... I don't know if it makes me feel important, but I do feel that I contribute my grain of sand to society and with that I feel at peace, really. And I feel that has been important for me... They make you find yourself a bit, like... find your path a bit. (Interview 5)

Thus, spaces of spirituality and service become important in a personal and spiritual sense. This

importance is also evident in their vocational searches or new spaces for participation once they are in university.

Another highlighted aspect in the testimonies is how young people link religion and spirituality with the broader context in which they are embedded. This stems from the notion that spirituality involves pausing and reflecting, whether as inner listening or paying attention to the world around them:

I think spirituality is a bit like ‘how do I feel about what I am experiencing’. And thinking in silence, I think, like meditating, in the end like... Because, I don't know, you can argue with anyone, at any time of the day, but I don't know if you really stop to reflect on that situation... (Interview 12)

This capacity for insight is considered a fundamental part of spirituality, and for some, it is an Ignatian hallmark. Spaces for service and reflection make young people aware of their social situation while adopting a broader perspective on the realities of inequality in the country:

It helps me to see the world differently, not always from judgment... to understand that not everyone has the same opportunities... I also feel that spirituality also has a lot to do with politics, and you question a lot... (Interview 5).

The connection between spirituality and politics was explicitly mentioned several times by the respondents, who believe that spirituality and religion should have a clear relationship with social issues and national contingency:

Jesus has been a figure that allowed me to question the churches. In fact, with the image of Jesus, this question began: why do I have to wear suits to go to church on Sunday if Jesus wore sandals? (Interview 11)

Finally, one of the points highlighted in the interviews was the impact that value formation has on their vocation and career choice. The value of service translates into giving a practical orientation to how they live and express their faith. This is evident in the fact that, despite the variety of the interviewees' fields of study, most agree on giving a social focus to their choice, highlighting the possibility of service and connection with others:

But I was missing that part of serving, which I like a lot. That's also why I want to study Nursing, which has a lot to do with contact with the person in need. So, the two experiences I had marked me a lot. (Interview 2)

In this case, once again, service experiences have been key in shaping the interviewee's vocation, whose significance has transcended the school stage. Thus, the professional practice is seen as a way to continue practicing the values learned in the previous educational stage and to stay in touch with the needs of others.

2. Transition from Secondary to Higher Education

When entering university, spiritual or religious experiences acquire a new perspective. In the previous stage, time allocated to religious, pastoral, or spiritual activities usually occurred during school hours or in extracurricular dynamics. However, university life brings a new routine that influences the availability and distribution of time for participating in religious or spiritual instances.

It was such a chaotic year that I didn't even have time to... to give myself some time. Everything I did was like university, university, university. [...] I even had classes on Saturdays. So, from Monday to Saturday, from eight to eight in

the evening, it was like university, university, university. And I never stopped to... to do the things I did before. (Interview 6)

This testimony reflects the new challenges that young people face once they enter college. The vast majority of interviewees agree that the first year becomes an overwhelming and difficult process to manage; however, there are exceptions where participants mention that the formation they acquired in their previous school allowed them to adapt to the first year of higher education: "No, I thought everything was going to be more complicated, the adaptation, the new group... but the truth is that everything turned out super easy, like the first people I met, I got along with them super well, [...] the course group too, like we helped each other..." (Interview 10).

The mentioned changes can also vary depending on geographical location, the academic institution, and each individual's personal circumstances. Entering higher education might involve other transitions, such as changing the city of residence and habitual home, further complicating the process (Gallardo et al., 2013), which can be an emotionally challenging experience for young people who may begin to question or confirm their identity and personal values: "It was obviously impossible to make friends unless you were very extroverted... [laughs] and that wasn't my case. So, I spent like a whole semester without many friends..." (Interview 9).

As they question and reevaluate their beliefs, young people may show a departure from the religious practices of their childhood and a difficulty in maintaining the same religious activities they participated in at their schools or

family environments, due to the lack of structure. This creates a break, as entering university involves more pluralism and generates other priorities.

Because the university is a much broader place than school. So, while at school there is something everyone has in common, which is the same school, but here everyone comes from different schools, from different cities, from different regions, arriving at a reality that is not shared... but at university it is so broad that it is... that it is very difficult to access that as well. (Interview 1)

Despite this, the interviewees do not show a disengagement from religion itself and maintain a constant interest in participating in religious or spiritual activities. They begin to prioritize their activities according to the available time within the university world, where academic demand is higher. This creates a drastic shift from the religious offerings provided heteronomously by the school to a diversity of life projects that they must explore autonomously. The autonomy they gain upon entering university allows them to make more independent decisions about their voluntary participation. To adjust to the new environment and their role, individuals need to make sense of what happens to them, a process that is never isolated but lived together with those around them.

3. Characterization of the Religious Experience

A first point to highlight is that none of the interviewees referred to individual religious experiences. Instead, almost all mentioned the importance of community when discussing these experiences. This observation underscores the importance of analyzing the impact of social

connections on the religious experience of youth. It appears that these young people do not have an individualistic experience of spirituality; rather, it is understood and experienced with a certain community or relational support.

Among the types of connections, the role of the responsible person stands out prominently. While some young people mentioned significant familial relationships in their religious experiences (mainly mothers or grandmothers), it was the adult in charge of the experience who was attributed a significant role in its valuation. If the relationship with that person is poor, it creates a break in both the religious experience and the relationship with God. In fact, when asked about negative experiences, all respondents mentioned relationships with people or situations where they felt discriminated against, undervalued, or unrecognized. In all cases, this break led them to distance themselves from their faith or stop participating in religious or spiritual activities, especially when the negative experience was related to sexual orientation or gender issues:

The same issue of homosexuality, more controversial issues, abortion..., because I have tried to discern in certain discussions and separate them. I mean, yes, being called the Antichrist [...] did affect me, it did bother me, [...] it's like a discussion in my mind, where I say: 'No, don't let it affect you.' (Interview 4)

On the contrary, many interviewees referred to welcoming as a relevant factor in opening up to experiences they characterized as religious. Following this, an important result of this research was to discover the relevance of how the responsible persons invite, receive, and carry out these experiences. The most valued attitudes were disinterested listening, joy, and genuine interest

in knowing and accompanying them in their processes:

Yes, I believe that love comes together here at the CUI, with the people and the connections [...] I feel they are always concerned about you, like it's not just an assistentialist thing, but yes, if you are sad, you can trust someone here, you know? [...] And I feel that it's a strong support... because in the end, you don't feel so alone. (Interview 5)

My homeroom teacher [...] was a very understanding person with everyone, he was kind, always cheerful [...] He always greeted you with a smile, so I appreciate that a lot, [...] that they help you both educationally and spiritually. (Interview 7)

In this sense, young people expressed that they valued the relationships established with pastoral guides or leaders, emphasizing that trust and care relationships were fundamental in what they considered a significant religious experience. Thus, more than the type of activities they were invited to, the interest and significance of their relationships proved decisive, including both the personal characteristics of the person in charge and the way of establishing connections with participants.

A second interesting element concerns the place given to peer relationships. Many reported that a major motivation and reason for participating in such instances was to meet people: "Camps are a good experience because you meet people" (Interview 7); "Thanks to the formation camp, I met other people and my best friend [...] CLC helped me meet other people and expand my circle" (Interview 3). Or having made significant friendships in these activities:

I became very close to her and also met many friends my age thanks to that [...] And I still talk to most of them now; so, they are friends with whom I can go to these activities and then continue sharing life with them. (Interview 9)

Peer relationships are a common factor in the interviews, showing how these experiences have fostered and allowed them to establish deep and lasting connections. However, the bond with responsible persons seems to have more significant value. This raises the question of whether the importance given to peer relationships is due to their developmental stage or if it has a direct impact on the spiritual aspect.

When asked about their religious experiences and what characterizes them, all respondents referred to dynamics of service and/or giving to others. Activities such as volunteering and CLC camps were mentioned repeatedly: "In that camp, I really felt like I connected" (Interview 8). In many cases, it seems there is an identification of religious experience with service or, at least, it is not understood separately from it:

Well, the truth is that I don't see spirituality as an exercise of a religion. So, it feels more alien to me to think about how I can connect with spirituality in my free time. That's why I mentioned acts of service. I think for me, at least, acts of service have become a quite interesting exercise in spirituality. (Focus group Santiago)

Thus, service becomes the preferred means by which young people relate to God or transcendence. It is not an intimist way of living the religious experience, but rather from the contact and relationship with others. In other words, the

participants in this research understand that spirituality must have a correlate in concrete life, in our decisions and daily actions: “[...] I continue to maintain my connection by helping or [...] with people and all that. It goes more that way. So, the religious moment is like when each person reaches that connection.” (Interview 10).

It is worth noting that the emphasis on doing is challenged by the need for spaces of reflection on their experiences. These spaces are not understood as individual or personal instances; young people value community spaces for dialogue and conversation where they can share their volunteer experiences.

Moreover, it is important to note that not just any space would be conducive to such reflection, as it is not easy for them to talk about these topics with “just anyone”. To “open up” and “talk about deeper topics”, they pointed out the importance of having safe and trusted spaces:

But that’s why I feel it’s very difficult to have a conversation about this or a safe space, so to speak, to talk about these topics if it’s not somewhat established [...] it’s very difficult to talk about these topics out of nowhere [...] So, if it’s not a space or a time set aside to talk about these topics, I think it’s very difficult to build that trust. But also, surrounding yourself with open-minded people whom you know you can count on for anything; I think one should also be able to express oneself and feel free to talk about these topics without being judged or not being listened to. (Focus group Santiago)

Finally, a third element that characterizes youth religiosity in the interviews conducted is the scant presence of traditional experiences linked to the institution. This observation could indicate

that this is not the usual way young people relate to God. Even among those interviewed from Catholic schools where institutional participation is encouraged, this type of experience fades in their transition to university.

However, this absence of institutional ties does not indicate a disinterest in the religious. In fact, young people show persistence in seeking opportunities that provide moments of inner connection and allow them to live their spirituality. Nevertheless, the type of religious instances and beliefs are diverse: “Understanding that we can perfectly be laypeople or people with a spirituality outside a religion, converging on common factors of social action or diverse spirituality.” (Focus group Santiago).

While the persistence in seeking religious experiences and faith seems to be a common trait, it appears this dimension of their lives ceases to be among their priorities. Given the multiple university demands, this does not seem significant enough to prioritize over other things. In fact, one of the most mentioned factors for stopping participation or abandoning their forms of religiosity was the lack of time. The search does not disappear, but it seems it is not prioritized.

IV. Final Discussion

In the context of previous research, there are evident continuities regarding young people’s participation and prioritization of volunteer activities, alongside the representation of their religious experience through social and community volunteer spaces.

A central aspect emerging from the interviews is the necessity for spaces of reflection or confrontation where young people can discuss their experiences in the mentioned practical-social environments.

In this sense, their religious experience, far from being an intimate or individual encounter, is social, reflective, and communal. This is especially true for those who participate in this form of spirituality. In the context of a new educational stage, religious socialization spaces could translate into significant instances for sharing challenges and experiences.

In addition, it is possible to perceive a low prioritization of voluntary religious spaces given the high academic demands of university life or other vital priorities and obligations, such as work or family. This aligns with the low participation rates of youth in voluntary activities as shown by surveys conducted by INJUV and UDP, as mentioned earlier. However, the interviewees still value the social dimension of their religious practice, to the point that it impacts their vocational choices and their characterization of religiosity.

From the perspective of pastoral offerings, it seems pertinent to consider a gradual transition of religious proposals between secondary and university education, integrating flexible spaces in terms of time and organization. This is because young people experience an abrupt shift from mandatory, homogeneous, and/or guided pastoral spaces in school to voluntary, plural, and autonomous spaces in university. Hence, there is a need to consider the possibility of establishing greater gradualness in the transition, allowing the final years of school to reinforce education in autonomy, dialogue, and pluralism.

Moreover, traditional spirituality spaces, such as personal prayer or Spiritual Exercises, were scarcely mentioned. This can be interpreted as a constant trend over the past decade, as indicated by other surveys (Cerdeira, 2021). The Spiritual Exercises

specifically pose a vocational question; however, it seems that social volunteer activities have a greater impact on their vocational choices.

Furthermore, the importance of responsible individuals and welcoming religious spaces is recognized. Just as family continues to show its relevance in the initial stage of faith socialization, for the interviewees, the perception of values like tolerance and acceptance by the responsible individuals in each instance is key to determining the closeness or distance with which they engage in religious spaces.

These findings suggest that the “lived religiosity” approach is not only useful for analyzing popular expressions of religiosity but also specifically for understanding the religious experience of young people in educational transition, as even though they may declare themselves believers, their experience can differ from disciplinary definitions, even challenging theological reflection.

As mentioned earlier, the transition from school to university is marked by the opening to new possibilities, interests, and life projects. It is a moment of exploration of one’s identity, values, and place in the world. In the religious sphere, the transition from school to university marked among the interviewed young people a separation from the structured spaces for developing their religious and spiritual life, which were reinforced during the school stage by the Ignatian educational project. However, this did not signify a total abandonment of religious values and beliefs.

Moreover, from this perspective, we can better observe how religiosity does not end or limit itself to participation in religious institutions but extends to everyday life. In this sense, as Morello

(2021) points out, if daily life changes, individuals will give creative responses to the new challenges they face. In this case, it is interesting to appreciate how the institutional religious context of secondary education is a space where young people learn and socialize their religious experience, and how this formation provides a foundation that is later confronted with new ideas and spaces fostered by the transition to university (Orellana, 2023). Faced with change, young people reinvent and reappropriate their religious practices and beliefs, adapting them to new vocational questions and the diversity of university life.

Conclusions

The study conducted on young people transitioning from high school to university has illuminated several areas of interest for further exploring youth religiosity. However, it has also raised additional questions and challenges to be explored. We would like to offer some prospects for future studies on youth religiosity in Chile and highlight some pending areas of study.

The first area of interest relates to the need to study other stages of youth transition, such as the transition from university to the labor market. Given that youth religious experience is already complex at a local level, and priorities are re-

evaluated during the transition to higher education, it is crucial to study how the hierarchy of values, projects, and time distribution are redefined in this new transition, also affecting the place of religiosity in the lives of young people.

In this context, two additional challenges become relevant for further study. The first challenge is understanding the order or scales of priorities for today's youth. If religious and voluntary group activities are not priorities for many young people today, what then, occupies the top positions in their hierarchy of values? What do they express concerning their projects and hopes? In this regard, the second challenge emerges: although our study included a diversity of young people in socioeconomic terms, this dimension was not intentionally and comparatively addressed, leaving an interesting space for investigation. Even concerning priorities, these could have been influenced by factors such as work and distance, among others.

The qualitative approach has allowed us to generate categories from the narratives of the young people themselves, delving into their religious experiences, notions about Ignatian principles, and challenges during the transition phase. It is worth noting that the diversity and pace of the youth world is a constant challenge, demanding ongoing monitoring of its changes and plurality.

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