News



Retired Auxiliary Bishop Ignatius C. Wang of San Francisco, right, and Vincentian Father Joseph Lin of St. Agatha Parish in Brooklyn, N.Y., elevate the Eucharist during Mass at the U.S. Catholic China Bureau's 27th biennial national conference Aug. 12 at St. John's University in Jamaica, N.Y. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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Fostering vocations to the priesthood and religious life is the "biggest challenge" for the Catholic Church in China, said Passionist Fr. Robert Carbonneau, executive director of the U.S. Catholic China Bureau.

"The whole society is becoming more materialistic," said Carbonneau, adding that "many options" have opened up for young people.

Vocations and the ongoing formation of priests were among the topics presented when scholars, educators, clergy, religious and missioners with expertise on Catholicism in China gathered Aug. 11-13 for the China Bureau's 27th biennial national conference at St. John's University in the New York borough of Queens. This year's conference, which focused on the theme "Experience of the Chinese Church in the 21st Century," featured sessions on globalization, evangelization, spirituality, social outreach and eco-theology.

Secularism, consumerism and smaller family units are among the factors that have contributed to the decline in vocations in the past decade, experts said.

"Modernity is coming into China like a fast train," said Columban Fr. Tommy Murphy, a priest from County Mayo, Ireland, who has been a spiritual director at the national seminary in Beijing for four years.

"Kids are into the latest technology, social media and pop culture," he added. "Modernity has its tentacles in the Chinese culture in many ways."

Murphy said the priests, seminarians and religious sisters he has worked with are eager to strengthen their spiritual lives.

"They have a vitality and energy for the faith," he said. "They're very hungry to learn about God. They want to learn how to pray. They want to have a deep relationship with God."

Fr. James Min Guofang, a faculty member at the seminary in Hebei province from 2011 to 2015, cited an "atheistic culture" and the government's indirect efforts to discourage people from embracing religion as some of the challenges vocation directors are encountering.

"The seminary walls cannot stop the effects of the culture," he said.

"Many colleges will give tests on Christmas Eve so people won't spend time in churches and seminaries," said Min, who plans to return to China after he completes his Scripture studies at Boston College at the end of the year. Celibacy poses another challenge, he said.

Within the seminaries, there is a need for more professors, formators and spiritual directors, in addition to funds to update libraries and purchase better textbooks. Many of the best books, Father James said, are printed in English and are not used by the seminarians.

"Very few Chinese theologians are writing books," he said.

Because of the deficiencies, many dioceses are sending their seminarians and priests to other countries to enhance their education, Min said.

Despite the issues related to finding and training future priests, he said he remains hopeful that church ministry will provide meaning and purpose for people who find "boredom in materialism."

"They're looking for meaning in life," he said. "That provides an opportunity for us."

Fr. Paul Xu Yinchen, a priest in the Diocese of Shenyang, said it is difficult for church leaders to develop a program for priests on the national level because of various personal and cultural experiences. The Catholic Church has an estimated 13 million members in a country of 1.3 billion people.

"We have different backgrounds, we have different educations, we have different experiences with God," said Xu.

Bishops encourage priests to make retreats and to enroll in courses to improve their spiritual lives, he said. However, in dioceses that have one or two priests per parish, it's a challenge for priests to find time to do so or to find fellow priests to fill in for them.

Xu said church leaders in his diocese arrange five-day retreats, Monday through Friday, so priests won't be absent for weekend services in their parishes. Those retreats are also scheduled to coincide with the harvest seasons, when farming families are extremely busy in the fields, which reduces the number of calls from parishioners seeking the services of a priest.

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In an interview with Catholic News Service, Maryknoll Sr. Janet Carroll, founding executive director of the U.S. Catholic China Bureau, spoke about the status of vocations for women's religious communities in China, which are "not as numerous as they were."

In the past, when educational opportunities were limited and materialism had not taken root, pursuing a vocation in the church was an attractive option many young people, she said.

"Like any other culture and place, like the Irish and others in our country, it was an upwardly mobile move to be educated and to become a priest or a sister," Carroll said.

"(Today) young people have many more choices to do different things and have opportunities for education and to serve society in many other ways," she said.

"I recently heard of one community of sisters who had seven people leave before final vows," she said. "The superior, who had received formation training in the United States, was judicious in realizing which women were really ready and did not receive them all for final vows. Some of them left on their own accord. That left them with a much smaller number."

Concerns about their futures have prompted some women to reconsider their vocations.

"They begin to think about retirement and how they're going to support themselves," said Carroll. "Bishops in many dioceses don't have the funding (to support religious in their retirement.) And if they do, they don't think it's a priority. The thought is 'Sisters should work for bread and for God,' and not expect to be salaried or anything like that. The sisters worry about being provided for in their old

age and in illness."

Though their numbers may be down, women's religious communities "hold great hope for the church in China," Carroll said.

"They are the vanguard of the social mission of the church. That's what they mostly invest themselves in, and that's acceptable and really appreciated by the authorities in China and by the people. It's the sisters that are doing the AIDS ministry and the orphan ministry and caring for the elderly and setting up clinics," she said.