News



Bishop Paul Junmin Pei of Liaoning, China, distributes Communion during a Mass at St. Vincent DePaul Church — concelebrated with Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich and about 20 priests from China and the U.S. — during a conference hosted by the US-China Catholic Church Association at Chicago's DePaul University Aug. 3, 2024. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)

Simone Orendain

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Chicago — August 8, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

An Aug. 2-4 conference in Chicago on the life of the Catholic Church in China covered both the difficulties and strengths of being a church under a heavily regulatory communist government. The event included presentations from four clergy members registered with the Chinese government's Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, marking the first time this many officially registered Chinese clergy led talks at a conference hosted by the Berkeley, California-based US-China Catholic Association.

In his talk, Bishop Paul Junmin Pei of Liaoning, China, emphasized the need to address a trend, similar to that of the Western world, of waning priestly vocations, and also a need for the laity to take up the task of evangelization.

Citing both Pope Francis and the late Pope Benedict XVI, Pei said clergy and religious had to embark on a journey of ongoing formation and "constantly be inspired to return to their own Galilee to rekindle the first love."

The U.S.-trained prelate said secularization was one of the main reasons for diminishing vocations in China, a trend that he said started in the early 2000s.

"(For clergy and religious) the impact and destructive power of secularization on the Chinese Catholic Church is actually greater than any external forms of violence," he said.

The bishop, who is vice president of the state-sanctioned Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, said he believes for clergy and religious there is a lack of awareness of the effects of secularization, while doubts about the spiritual world have stifled growth in spiritual life. They are beset with unidentifiable busyness and have difficulty calming their minds to pray, said Pei. Also, the rise of individualism

has brought a "lack of emphasis on the church's traditional and spiritual exercises."

Additionally, Pei, 55, said the laity have a significant role in "pastoral and evangelization work."

"Families and parishes are the school of faith and the cradle of vocations," he said. "They should find ways to ensure that the young people learn about the church's teaching, understand about the spirit of Gospel, and develop the various qualities and religious sentiments needed for vocation."

But, in a country that has barred youth under 18 from worshiping, the task has not been easy.
Pei said young people do go to church in large cities such as Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. He said although catechism, including teaching and training, may be lacking for children in villages, the environment of Catholicism is very friendly, so children and families do participate in church life together.

The communist country has long sought to keep outside influences at bay and in 2020 China expanded its rules and regulations for organized religion. The government implemented stricter controls to have those registered who are currently unregistered, more commonly known as being underground; and to govern finances and significant moves of religious organizations. It also seeks to "sinicize" religion, meaning to make religious beliefs conform to China's state ideology.

Under Francis, the Vatican has focused on forging diplomatic relations which China broke off in 1951 shortly after the communist victory in China's civil war. In May, the Vatican expressed hope for establishing a diplomatic presence in China.

A 2018 agreement that has been renewed twice — and is up for renewal again this year — is meant to address the Vatican's concern of having bishops in communion with Rome who are also recognized by China's government.

Advertisement

But since the second renewal, at least two bishop appointments happened reportedly without the Vatican's approval. The Vatican reiterated that all such appointments be made by consensus. Last July, Francis belatedly approved the transfer of Bishop Joseph Shen Bin from Haimen to Shanghai, which has a

controversial counterrevolutionary history and whose bishops have been detained. In November 2022, the other bishop, Bishop John Peng Weizhao of the Diocese of Yuijang was made an auxiliary bishop of Jiangxi, a diocese not recognized by the Holy See.

Anthony Clark, a history professor at Whitworth University specializes in Catholicism and faith in China. He opened the conference with a talk on the history of the church in China trying to keep its Catholic identity while also remaining culturally Chinese, with lessons from a foreign missionary, Jesuit Father Mateo Ricci, who worked in the late 1500s within the culture while serving in China.

Clark, a Catholic, told OSV News that in his experience of nearly 30 years of traveling to China to teach, the bishops he has met are "100% loyal to the Holy See, both the sanctioned and underground, with almost no exceptions."

He continued, "And in that faithfulness to the Holy See what we call 'in pectore' — in the heart they are faithful to the Holy See — how do they function? They function all at some level, in a place of resistance. I would say all of the bishops, at some level, are resisting."

He gave an example in which the government ordered a paragraph about communism be stricken from the church's catechism. It was — but what was left was a blank space, Clark said, indicating that something is missing.

"They are finding a middle ground to both obey the state, but try and be more obedient to the faith, and that middle ground is a very difficult place to be in," he explained. "So the big question is: if there are no bishops, then there are no ordinations; if there are no priests, there are no sacraments; and the state could at any given moment eliminate even the underground church by and large. So what that means is, that in order to preserve the church, you have to exist in that liminal middle space."

For one unregistered Catholic priest, that middle space is his life. He described to OSV News his ministry going "with the grace of God" from diocese to diocese in China training religious, teaching Scripture to believers whom he said are eager to learn, and forming youth leaders who "have a deep longing for our faith."

He said there is a strong demand for this ministry and that in his work he has seen the number of believers growing. There are an estimated 10-12 million Catholics

in China. But at the same time, like the bishop, this priest also noted that influences of the secular world have had an impact on people leaving the faith.

"We don't really feel everyday we are in fear," he said. "Sometimes maybe a bit more, sometimes a bit less ... but we know it's the situation. We can live in it and we enjoy our work there."