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Religious head urges greater empowerment for nuns

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NEW DELHI -- Lack of empowerment among Catholic nuns remains a major concern for the Church in India, the head of Religious in the country says.

Although there has been much work generating awareness in the Church about women's rights, "we have a long way to go in realizing" systemic changes, Montfort Brother K.M. Joseph, president of the Conference of Religious India (CRI), said.

Old beliefs and a perception that convent life is meant only for spiritual pursuits were partially to blame.

Many nuns do not receive the necessary skills or academic training to cope with the demands of missionary work, he said on Jan. 12. As a consequence, many languish as domestic workers in their congregations and male Religious institutions.

"Dynamics of change in this sector are slow and difficult," he added.

The brother was airing his concerns in an address to the general assembly of the Catholic Council of India, the Church's top representative body in the country.

Some 250 people representing bishops, priests, Religious and laity from India's 160 dioceses attended the Jan. 9-12 meeting in Nagpur, Maharashtra state.

Brother Joseph said CRI has been working for a "gender empowered Church" and has organized a series of training programs.

"We were happy that this became a national agenda" and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India took up the issue of empowerment of women in its last plenary meeting, he noted.

He urged Church leaders to act to break the current mindset.

Areas that need focus include respecting the dignity of women, appreciating their consecration as Religious, acknowledging their missionary service, and giving them decent remuneration.

There are around 100,000 nuns in India, "more than 80 percent" of the Religious in the country, said Brother Joseph.

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