

China's one-child policy takes toll on vocations

BEIJING (CNS) — China's one-child policy, begun nearly 30 years ago, still provides pastoral challenges and is taking a toll on vocations, said some Chinese church leaders.

Auxiliary Bishop Paul Pei Junmin of Liaoning said that, in the past, the diocese used to have 20 young men and women enter the seminary and convent each year, but that has changed because of the one-child policy and "the influence of materialism."

"Here the church in China is very traditional, conservative," said Bishop Pei. "It's very difficult to reconcile with the government regulations and church teachings," especially when people can lose their jobs for having a second child.

Jean-Paul Wiest, a sociologist and professor at a Beijing university, said the situation becomes difficult when clergy counsel young couples.

"Priests might say, 'It's the law,' but they might also say, 'It's your conscience, you have to decide what to do,'" he said.

"If we have another baby, we will lose our jobs," said one university professor whose husband also teaches at a university. However, she noted, in Beijing, the one-child policy only applies to people like university professors and government employees. People who work for foreign companies would not lose jobs because of a second child, but would have to pay a hefty fine, she said.

China's one-child policy was adopted in the late 1970s to control the population. In 1978, China had a population of 959 million and a growth rate for the 1970s of 1.5 percent, down from 2.3 percent in the 1960s. By 2006, the population was 1.3 billion, and its growth rate was about 0.6 percent over 10 years.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects China will have a zero percent growth rate for the decade 2030-2040.

Through the years, the government has allowed some exceptions to the policy, for example, if a couple lives in a rural area and their first child is a girl.

The one-child policy is now enforced at the provincial level, and enforcement varies; some provinces have relaxed the restrictions. For instance, some provinces say that if each spouse is a single child, the couple may have two children. Henan province, with a population of about 100 million, does not allow this exception.

How much the policy is followed also depends on local officials, Wiest said. For instance, in some strong Christian areas, the village's chief official might be Catholic, so the policy might not be enforced.

One church worker said that sometimes the second or third child is penalized and cannot be registered, so he or she cannot go to school. He noted that the law is constantly evolving.

Bishop Pius Jin Peixian of Liaoning said he sees the biggest challenge to his diocese as vocations. The number has been "going down in recent years." He said large parishes used to have 500 to 600 baptisms a year, but now have about 100.

Father Joseph Xia Qingtian, dean of studies at Liaoning's regional seminary in Shenyang, attributed the decline in vocations to the one-child policy. To fight the trend, he said the diocese sends priests into parishes to talk about vocations. In addition, last summer about 30 young people came to the seminary for a type of summer camp for vocations.

Of the more than 40 parishes in the diocese, "many, so many" do not have priests, he said.