

# Ongoing history

MENLO PARK, Calif. - Even though the average age of religious-order priests, sisters and brothers serving in the United States is increasing and their numbers are declining, don't conclude religious communities are dying out, a well-known scholar said during a recent national meeting in Menlo Park.

Instead, think of consecrated life as an "ongoing history" being written by the Holy Spirit, advised Oblate Father Frank Morrissey, adding that the divine author's last chapter is "yet to come."

A professor of canon law at St. Paul University in Ottawa, the priest presented an overview of the history of religious life - with a view to the future - in a series of talks during the 40th annual assembly March 14-18 of the National Conference of Vicars for Religious.

Vicars for religious serve as the liaison between their bishops and those in consecrated life in their dioceses.

More than 50 vicars came from across the country to the meeting, with the theme "Seasons of Hope: Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present, Claiming the Future." Auxiliary Bishop Ignatius Wang of San Francisco was homilist and celebrant at the conference's opening liturgy.

In his talks Father Morrissey reminded the vicars that declining numbers in religious life mirror a breakdown of secular society, which, he said, "is at a crucial breaking point." He cited a widening gulf between the "haves and the have-nots" as a primary example.

At the same time, he said, there are varying schools of theology operating within the church in various parts of the world. This is not dissent, or a lack of submission to authority, the speaker said, but "different ways of looking at the same reality."

"Church authorities who are often operating out of a different model are having recourse too often to 'the will of God' to justify decisions that are most certainly politically inspired," Father Morrissey said. We are fighting anew the battles of the

early 20th century with so-called 'modernists.'

"Matters which are often opinions are being presented as the only possible Catholic teaching," he said. "But we should keep in mind that in the late 19th century, the church condemned vaccination for the same reasons it is condemning certain medical practices today. It would be good to have a sense of doubt."

Progressive and traditional Catholics are becoming more polarized, he said, and too frequently questioning of authority "is immediately branded as dissident or immoral."

"Not surprisingly, then, this has repercussions on vocations to consecrated life as we have known it," Father Morrissey told the vicars for religious. "We often hear it asked: Who would want to spend his or her life in structures which are no longer considered to be life-giving, at least by those who reflect on them? Religious institutes are rapidly diminishing in numbers and are not attracting new vocations in significant numbers."

At the same time, he said, "we also see many signs of new life."

He paid tribute to "thousands and thousands of church members who are seeking for deeper spirituality." Among them, he said, are the 50 to 100 "martyrs" who lose their lives each year not only in mission countries but also at home.

"If people are willing to give their lives for something, there must be something worthwhile there," he said. "It is up to us to try and discover what it is."

Father Morrissey noted the roughly 150,000 people in the U.S. who take part in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and similar programs each year. He also lauded the number of laypeople who are involved in full-time ministry and the presence of the church in health care.

Father Morrissey advised his listeners to be proactive about the future.

"Proclaim the good news to the world, as it exists today, not as religious institutes imagined it to be some 50 or so years ago," he said.

Religious institutes of tomorrow must be based on the person of Jesus, not on

structures, he said. “We must ask ourselves the question: What do we have to offer to the world that it is sadly missing at this time? And how can we make this potential offering a reality?”