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Maryknoll Centennial Symposium: Surprising lessons from Communist countries

Heidi Schlumpf | Oct. 9, 2011 NCR Today

Communist or socialist countries that restrict missionary activity and religious expression pose particular challenges to the practice of mission today, but countries such as China and Vietnam also have surprising lessons for the Catholic Church, Father Peter C. Phan told the Maryknoll Centennial Symposium this weekend.

China?where Maryknoll?s first missionaries had arrived in 1918?expelled all foreign missionaries in 1949. ?But lo and behold, when Christians came back in the 1980s, we found a more vibrant Christianity in China than it was before,? said Phan, professor of theology at Georgetown University. ?What we thought would be the end of mission turned out to be the flourishing of mission.?

?What we learned in those 30 to 40 years is that bishops and priests were dispensable,? Phan said with a laugh. ?This is also the lesson we learned here during Vatican II. While the bishops were in Rome, the local churches prospered.?

Phan suggested that the distinction between the official and underground churches in China may be a Western lens that is ?too limiting, too confining to understanding what is really happening on the ground.?

Likewise in Phan?s native Vietnam, the ?irony of history? was that Communist rule after 1975 has led to a ?purification? of the church, rather than the end of Catholicism in that country. ?Bishops, priests and sisters were forced to live a humble, poor life like the rest of the others,? Phan said. ?And the one thing we learned is the absolutely indispensible work of the sisters. It was they who taught the faith.?

Despite the unexpected vibrancy of the church in China and Vietnam, a number of concerns remain, Phan said, including questions about religious freedom, interreligious dialogue and especially about materialism and consumerism.

?The greatest challenge for Christianity is no longer the oppressive policies of the Communist Party. We know how to get around that,? Phan said. ?Rather it is the complete indifference to Christianity as well as to any religious way of life as the result of the relentless pursuit of wealth and all the pleasure it promises.?

Christians must still press Communist governments to recognize religious freedom as an inalienable human right, not a special favor from the government. ?And religious freedom must be carried out on behalf of all believers, not just Christians,? Phan said.

He reminded the audience that missionaries are ?guests in the house? of other cultures. ?We depend on the host, which are these other religions,? he said. ?You cannot go to a host?s house and say, ?Well, I really don?t like how you arrange your furniture.??

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