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Catholic clergy attend a retreat organized by state-run Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in Shandong, China on March 16-20. (Courtesy of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China)

by UCA News

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The state-aligned Catholic Church organized retreats and study sessions for Catholic clergy and nuns in the coastal province of Shandong in eastern China, which, among other things, discussed President Xi Jinping's vision for religion, says a report.

The Shandong Provincial Catholic Patriotic Association and the Shandong Provincial Catholic Bishops' Conference organized retreats and study sessions for priests from March 16-20 and for nuns on March 23-26, says a March 27 report published by the

Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC).

The BCCCC is a state-sanctioned body not recognized by the Vatican.

The sessions on spirituality and education emphasized the spirit of the National Religious Work Conference (2021), where Xi stressed developing religion in the Chinese context without foreign influence.

He specifically focused on the Sinicization of religion, a political ideology to ensure loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), strengthening legal control and promoting patriotism among religious adherents.

The sessions in Shandong stressed studying regulations, observing precepts, emphasizing self-cultivation and building a positive image education campaign to be carried out effectively and thoroughly within the Catholic community of Shandong.

Bishop Fang Xingyao, head of the Provincial Catholic Patriotic Association, combined his own experience of participating in the CCP-organized National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (NPC and CPPCC).

Speaking to the clergy, Fang said the spirit of the NPC and CPPCC from multiple dimensions should be comprehensively and systematically conveyed and implemented for religious work in China in the new era.

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The meeting also included a collective study of the Work Guidelines of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference on Implementing the 'Initiative on Promoting Frugality and Avoiding Extravagance, and Upholding Right Faith and Right Conduct' in the national Catholic community, as well as relevant documents such as the Management Measures for the Appointment of Major Clergy Members in Chinese Catholic Activity Venues and the Code of Conduct for Chinese Catholic Clergy.

The retreat was led by Fr. Zhang Wenxi, who shared his insights on various aspects of the national religious community's Study the Laws, Observe the Precepts, Renew Self-Discipline, and Build a Positive Image education campaign.

These aspects included Self-Reflection and Understanding of the Current Situation, Lost, Departure, and Return to Reconstruction, The Identity and Mission of Priests, and The Spirituality of Priests.

The retreat for nuns was led by Fr. You Xijiu of the Chinese Catholic Theological Seminary.

The study sessions and retreats sought to improve the political quality, cultural literacy, moral character, spiritual life and cohesion of the religious community among the clergy and nuns in the province.

China's constitution allows religious freedom. However, the Chinese government is ranked among the worst violators of religious freedom by rights watchdogs.

The Chinese government controls religions with repressive laws and regulations implemented by several state-sanctioned bodies. The government requires all clergy and religious to be registered with the state to obtain permission to operate.

China's millions of Catholics are divided between the state-run patriotic church and the Vatican-aligned independent or underground church.