



ASIA/MALAYSIA - "Christians are praying and not responding to the provocations," Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur tells Fides, following attacks on churches

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - The Church hopes to be in Malaysia "a presence of dialogue and peace" and the legal case over the use of the word "Allah" is part of the "normal right that all citizens have to clarify a controversy before the court." This is what Archbishop Murphy Pakiam of Kuala Lumpur explains in an interview with Fides, in his first public statement after the attacks on Christian churches which occurred in the night between January 7 and 8.

After the High Court's decision favoring the Catholic Church in reference to the use of the word "Allah" for God in Christian publications, particularly on the Catholic weekly The Herald, some extremists threw petrol bombs against three Protestant churches and one Catholic church in Kuala Lumpur, causing minor damage. The extremists shouted "Allah is only for us", referring to the dispute on the name. They were intimidating gestures, which have generated general outrage and condemnation by government authorities and leaders of various religions.

Questioned by the Fides, Archbishop Murphy Pakiam said: "Last night, there were minor attacks and minor damage to four Christian churches in Kuala Lumpur, including the Catholic Church of the Assumption in Petaling Jala. Gestures of this kind are a rarity in Malaysia. We condemn all violence and all those who seek to create unrest in society and conflicts between religious communities. Several leading Muslim groups have joined us in condemning the violence, expressing their solidarity." Among these groups is the the PAS (Party Islam Se-Malaysia), an influential Islamic party in Malaysia that has discouraged any form of protest, stressing that the word "Allah" belongs to the theological tradition of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity.

Archbishop note: "Currently the situation is under control, the government and the police have acted swiftly to quell any form of violent protest, which was very well contained. Assaults, with crude explosives, are isolated acts done by small groups, probably by individuals filled with 'fervor' from the Friday prayer of the Muslims. Today everything is calm. We are confident that order and security will be guaranteed tomorrow, when our churches will be full for Sunday mass. There is a bit of fear among the people, but we hope that everything goes well."

Christians in this matter, emphasizes Archbishop Pakiam, "are praying and keeping the peace, without retaliating. And we will not do so in the future. We want to be a community that lives in dialogue and spreads peace throughout the nation. Certainly these episodes and the controversy surrounding the term 'Allah' can have a negative impact on Christian-Muslim dialogue. It will take time and patience to overcome this impasse."

Moving to the heart of the question, the Archbishop explained that "the Church, in taking the case to the High Court, has sought to defend its case by appealing to the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which allows freedom of worship and religion. In the Malay language, there is only the word "Allah" to refer to God, and it is therefore unconstitutional to apply restrictions on language or religion to Christians Malaysians who speak in Malay language." The Church has confidence in the justice of the state and has filed the appeal in accordance with the law: "In fact, given the government's announcement to appeal to the Supreme Court, while the matter is still sub judice we will not use the word Allah. We want to clarify the issue peacefully and civilly."

In Malaysia, Islam is the state religion, but the constitution guarantees freedom of worship and religion to other religious communities. The Islamic religion is professed by 50% of the 28 million Malaysian citizens, almost all of whom are of the Malay ethnic group. Ethnic minorities (Indians and Chinese) include minority religious communities: Christians (8%, among which 900,000 Catholics), Buddhists (7%), Hindu (7%), followers of traditional religions (25%), other religions (5 %). (PA) (Agenzia Fides 9/1/2009)