



## **ASIA/LAOS - First Buddhist University in Laos - When will there be Catholic schools?**

Vientiane (Agenzia Fides) – Laos will have its first Buddhist university. The first stone of the new institution was officially placed on Sunday, January 24, in a solemn public ceremony in Vientiane.

The institute, under the auspices of Theravada Buddhism, aims to provide education to Buddhist monks and novices but also to all those young people, especially ethnic minorities in Laos, who, living in rural areas do not have the economic opportunity or possibility of receiving an education. "Therefore, it will play an important social work," said the Venerable Bouakham Saribouth, Vice-President of the "Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization" and Chairman of the National Education Commission. "Contributing to the education of disadvantaged or marginalized citizens is part of the educational policy of the government," he said. "The new university will educate young people ready to serve the country."

The construction of the University will cost \$45 million and will be funded by public and private donations. The project includes several buildings, including dormitories and a meeting area for about 3,000 students. There will also be libraries, teachers' offices, dining halls, like modern colleges, in an area about 60 km from the center of Vientiane.

Missionary sources consulted by Fides note that "serving the country," "being a good citizen," and "contributing to the overall development of the person," are also the principles compatible with the educational system of Catholic schools: many Catholic institutions in many Asian countries are indeed attended by non-Christian pupils. "So, the question is: when will there be Catholic schools in Laos?" Fides' source notes.

The Catholic Church in the country has 35,000 faithful, less than 1% of the approximately 6 million inhabitants, but she works to establish dialogue and good relations with the government in order to improve her social, charitable, and educational activities. It should be noted that "the government of Laos recently seems to have understood the fundamental mission of the Catholic Church, which places man and the integral growth of each person at the heart of her pastoral work." There are two encouraging example: after 34 years in Luang Prabang - the ancient royal capital in northern Laos - a women's religious community that cares for a group of deaf people has returned. And the government has authorized the opening of the Seminary of Santa Teresa to Thakhek in southern Laos, which houses about 20 young men on their way to the priesthood. "The Catholic Church would be very happy to give a contribution to the nation in education," said sources of Fides.

The national education system is controlled according to a curriculum established by the Communist Party, who rose to power in the country in 1975, penalizing all religious activities and confiscating Christian property institutions. The pastoral work of the Christian communities continues to be controlled by the authorities.

In 1985, the country established universal access to primary education, but illiteracy still affects about 50% of the population. In 1996, the first and only public university, the National University of Laos in Vientiane, was established. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 26/01/2010)