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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Bishop of Faisalabad: "Obscure forces foment interreligious tension and hatred"

Faisalabad (Agenzia Fides) – Bishop Joseph Coutts is anxious and exhausted after being up all night, in constant contact with the civil authorities and the police which succeeded in restoring law and order in the suburb, and with his priest – on the spot trying to calm the people amidst anti-Christian riots in Waris Pura. This morning the Bishop presided the funeral of the two brothers murdered yesterday in front of the law courts which had found them not guilty of blasphemy. Bishop Coutts, who says it is important to let people know about "the dramatic situation of Christians in Pakistan", agreed to be interviewed by Fides. Here is what he had to say:

Bishop Coutts, what is the situation of Christians in Faisalabad today?

The situation is tragic. The murder of the two men yesterday, the wave of violence represent a drama for Catholics and for all Pakistani Christians. I would remind you of a similar episode in 1994 when Mansur Masih, Christian charged with blasphemy was acquitted and then shot dead as he left the Law Courts in Lahore, while two other people were wounded. Furthermore Judge Arif Iqbal Batti, one of the judges who had acquitted the man, was later also murdered. I would remind you also of the mass attack last year on the Christian community in Gojra. The dynamics are the same: this means no real progress has been made. The Christian community is shocked and disheartened.

Were other people killed or injured in the attack in Waris pura?

The angry mob attack caused panic, shops and other buildings were damaged, but no one was killed or seriously hurt, only a few had slight injuries. I must say that the authorities and the police were most efficient, they arrived immediately and the militants soon dispersed. Of course the defenceless, hunted Christian families are still under shock.

What was the cause of all this violence?

In recent weeks a hand written leaflet containing offensive writings about Islam and about the Prophet Mohammed was circulated in the area. The leaflet brought angry reaction among Muslims. Many are convinced that Christians want to challenge Islam and offend its Prophet. This was the reason for the tension in the past few days: the two brothers were accused of writing the leaflet. But the Court ruled differently and acquitted them from the charge.

Who wrote the leaflet, in your opinion?

Christians would never write or diffuse such a thing. It was cleverly produced to provoke trouble: obscure forces spread hatred and conflict between the different communities. Think of the recent attacks on the Ahmadi Temple in Lahore and the Shiite Mosque in Sargodha, now the violence in Faisalabad: I believe this is all part of a plan to spread interreligious tension and hatred throughout Pakistan. It is not easy to fight such evil forces but with the help of God, we will do our best.

How will you go about it?

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Through continual contact with civil authorities and religious leaders we will make it clear that Christians feel no hatred Muslims what they desire is to live in peace. Certainly we face a difficult task because there is now a deep divide between a very large Christian community in Faisalabad, and large sectors of the Muslim community. We are trying to mediate, thanks to the goodwill of some Islamic leaders, but it is very difficult. The first step is to restore mutual trust.

What did you say to the faithful during the funeral of the two brothers?

Amidst general feelings of grief, pain and emotional tension, I told our people that we would offer the blood of these innocent men together with the Blood of Christ. It will further our salvation and we hope, heal our city of Faisalabad of the sickness of hatred and violence. The two brothers were of Catholic parents, they were both baptised here in our church. Recently one of them, Rashid, after taking a short course on the Internet, received a mandate from a Protestant denomination to preach the Bible. We will carry the memory of these two innocent Christians in our heart.

Do you think the blasphemy law is a cause of violence?

The law against blasphemy is at the root of this tragic situation. The Church in Pakistan is in front line, with the Bishops' Commission for Justice and Peace, calling for the law to be withdrawn. We intend to continue this campaign to promote justice, freedom and the rule of law. However the blasphemy law is a product of a way of thinking, a cultural attitude: only with hard work at interreligious dialogue can we perhaps gradually change this mentality. Many Muslim leaders are angered by the international situation, and radical anti-west ideas and anti Zionism circulate freely. Our work of mediation and peace building is not easy, but we trust in the help of God and all Christians in the world.

What would you ask of the universal?

I ask the universal Church first of all to realise the situation of suffering in which Pakistani Christians live, and then to offer us the support of prayer and any other help necessary for our mission.

(PA) (Agenzia Fides 20/7/2010)

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