



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - Ministry for Religious Minorities confirmed. Bhatti to Fides: "Commitment and faith in Christ"**

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) – The Federal Ministry for Religious Minorities was confirmed in the new Government of Pakistan, presented by Prime Minister Raza Gilani, after a reshuffle and a drastic reduction in Government departments (from over 50 down to 22). According to local sources, the Ministry was at the point of being abolished, absorbed into the area of the Ministry for Religious Affairs (which deals with issues of the Muslim community). A campaign of international pressure has contributed in the end to the confirmation of its presence.

Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic, leader of the Ministry, also in the new Executive, can not hide his satisfaction and said to Fides: "With thanks to the grace of God and the prayers of the faithful I have been confirmed. I am happy in this sense: the religious parties and extremist movements exerted strong pressure on the Government to abolish the Ministry for Minorities, but the President of Pakistan and Prime Minister resisted and, for the common good of the nation, have chosen to maintain the Ministry."

According to Bhatti, "this is therefore, a clear signal of Government's attention towards religious minorities. It would have been very easy, in fact, during the culling of the ministries, to cut this Ministry. Many key ministries have not been confirmed, for several reasons, including those related to issues of corruption. My confirmation in the role also rewards the moral integrity and transparency that has always characterised our work."

"My new appointment," continues the Minister, "will create some protests and resentment by many Islamic extremists. But my struggle will continue, despite the difficulties and threats that I have received. My only aim is to defend fundamental rights, religious freedom and the life of Christians and other religious minorities. I am prepared for any sacrifice for this mission, which I carry out with the spirit of a servant of God. I thank all those who have prayed for me and supported me. I am receiving many messages of support from Pakistan and around the world. Pakistani Christians are happy to still have a representative in the institutions."

Bhatti concludes: "Now there is still much work to do. We need to face very serious challenges such as the blasphemy law. I will try to witness to my faith in Jesus Christ, through my commitment."

In fact, "the pressures exerted by the press and the international community have borne fruit. We are pleased that the Ministry has been confirmed," Fides was told by Fr Mario Rodrigues, Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Pakistan. "Of course," notes Fr Rodrigues, "if we look at recent decades, we can not say that there have been serious improvements in the lives of religious minorities, but to abolish the ministry would have been even worse. The Minister is an important spokesperson for us. His commitment against the blasphemy law is clear and public, and has resulted in threats to take his life."

"But now," concludes Fr Rodrigues, "we ask the new Government to take a new path, and to make concrete steps forward to protect our rights, to eliminate discrimination, and to promote social development for religious minorities. The Government today is afraid of reactions by Muslim extremists, so it will be difficult. We call for an act of courage." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 12/2/2011)