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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Catholic woman in jail for blasphemy in Punjab: Bishops' concerns and appeal

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – The Catholic Church in Punjab and throughout Pakistan is in shock by this latest case of injustice. Agnes Nuggo, a Catholic woman from Faisalabad, in Punjab has been unjustly accused of blasphemy (see Fides 22/2/2011). According to Fides sources in the local Church, who are closely following the case, Agnes is 50 years old, Catholic, married to Bashir (52 years old) and mother of five children: three boys, Shahzad (29), Imran (27), Amir (13), and two girls, Kiran (25) and Amber (23). She is accused of blasphemy by Muslim neighbours, who are claiming ownership of land. Agnes professes her innocence and says the accusations against her are fabricated.

Fides has gathered more details on the affair. Agnes is the victim of a vendetta, but she too has made mistakes: in fact in recent weeks, because of a private quarrel, she had falsely accused three Christians, telling the local imam that they had insulted the Prophet Muhammad. Verifying their innocence, Agnes made a public apology, admitting her mistake and apologising. However, now she is the victim being falsely accused of blasphemy and the same local imam has testified against her.

The Bishop and priests of Faisalabad have come together in the last few days for a week of spiritual retreat that will also give them the opportunity to examine the case and decide which strategy to follow. The assembly of diocesan clergy is engaged in fervent prayer for Agnes and her family, which is being assisted by the local Church through some priests and sisters, to protect the innocent victims of the blasphemy law, for peace and harmony in the country.

Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore and President of the Episcopal Conference, expresses the concern of the Bishops of Pakistan to Fides after this new case: “It is deplorable that it has happened again. Accusations of blasphemy against Christians, members of other religious minorities and even against Muslims continue to occur. The law is open to abuse and this is what is continually happening: this causes us great concern. We must not stop our efforts and our mobilisation to change this law. We hope that Agnes' story can be clarified and resolved quickly. We continue to hope that the wise part of the country agrees on the urgency of eliminating or at least reviewing the law.”

In Pakistan there was a recent Government reshuffle, in which the Minister for Religious Minorities was reconfirmed: “From the new Government,” says the Archbishop, “we demand a policy of equality and respect for the fundamental rights of all, and the realisation of a more democratic system in the country, according to the principles of transparency and justice. This is the only way to develop peace and harmony. We Christians and other religious minorities are part of the country. We want to live in peace in a nation that respects all citizens without discrimination.” (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/2/2011)

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