



ASIA/BHUTAN - "Democracy, freedom of worship and mission in the future of Bhutan": interview with the Archbishop of Guwahati

Guwahati (Agenzia Fides) - " Bhutan is making enormous progress in democracy and is showing signs of openness to religious freedom. I am convinced that, if religious freedom is guaranteed, there may be religious congregations that want to offer their service for the mission in Bhutan. We want others to know that as Christians, we love Bhutan and the Bhutanese people. It would be a pleasure and an honour for us Catholics to place ourselves at the service of the country's future "is what Archbishop Thomas Menampampil, Archbishop of Guwahati in Assam (Northeast India) says in an interview to Fides, one month after his trip to the Buddhist kingdom in mid-March. "What should be remembered- said the Archbishop –is that in 1600 two Portuguese Jesuits, fr. Cabral and fr. Cacella, went to Bhutan and spoke of Christ to the people. We hope that those ancient bonds of faith with Bhutan can be rebuilt. " Here is the text of the interview granted to Fides:

Your Excellency, what was the purpose of your visit to Bhutan?

Bhutan is a country touching my Diocese of Guwahati in Assam. I had not been there for 18 years, and I wanted to see how things were after the arrival of democracy. I found many changes, and the population has grown. Even the capital, Thimphu, today is 10 times larger since then. Democracy was an initiative of the same monarch (and this is rare) and shows how far-sighted he is. His decision has prevented the country from future tensions and his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, is following his steps. A whole nation is gradually learning how democracy, responsibilities, roles, structures work. It is in this context that we see the possibility of widening religious freedom, that the leaders seem to be offering in the kingdom. With my trip I wanted to have a feel of the atmosphere through direct contact in the country. I visited Thimphu, Geddu, Wangdi and other cities, meeting over 300 people in 15 different parts of the kingdom: this gave me a fairly good idea of the situation.

How many Christians are there and how do they live?

The Christians of different denominations have grown in recent years and, according to some observers, there are about 100 thousand. They read and pray with the Bible, trying to share and witness their faith in Christ. Sometimes they invite non-Christians to the Mass, who after a while decide to opt for the Faith. There is a strong Christian awakening among the people of Nepalese ethnicity, especially as the evangelical churches have made progress in Nepal, and in the near Bhutan you feel the influence. Of course, the dominant religion is Buddhism. In a nation of approximately 800 thousand people, 60% are ethnic Bhutanese, and 40% Nepalese. Christians are very devout in their worship, but they suffer the limitation of not being able to practice in public, and are forced to do so in private. Conversions are prohibited. I would say that they are just like the first Christians who gathered in the catacombs. I met and encouraged them to preserve their faith.

Are there any Catholics in Bhutan?

There are and they live in peace. There is also a Catholic in Parliament. I started my own journey with a Mass for the small Catholic community in Thimphu. Some of them even remembered my visit 18 years ago. At that time there was still a Jesuit missionary in the country, fr. Mackey. After his death, there has been no Catholic missionary in the Kingdom but, periodically, from the diocese of Darjeeling (West Bengal, India), priests go there to celebrate Mass. Recently, another Jesuit, fr Joseph Kinley Tshering, who is related to the royal family, regularly comes to meet the Catholic community, which is respected by the authorities. The faithful are optimistic for the future.

What can you say about the faithful of other Christian communities?

The rest of the Christian communities belong to rather independent Churches, with a Pentecostal background. I have to say that wherever I went, I was welcomed enthusiastically and saw my arrival as a great sign of encouragement. I saw that the faithful themselves are eager to know more about the Christian faith, the pastors themselves admit that they need training and look forward to someone who can help them. The faithful, however, have a deep faith: I believe they are living like the early Christians, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. There is a strong presence of the Holy Spirit among them.

Is there any sort of harassment of Christian believers?

There seem to have been cases of direct harassment in certain cases of active preaching. What is known, however, is that public authorities discourage new forms of religion. For example, the Christian citizens do not get a job or a promotion or admission to higher education, only for their faith. Sometimes to penalize the community, electricity may be cut off, or water-supply may be stopped and houses demolished. However, I did not find any of the Christians discouraged or over-worried about these episodes: they have lived harder times. In fact, the faithful seem to feel a sense of greater freedom and, with the coming of democracy, they are full of hope. Even the authorities are introducing more liberal measures step by step. Christians hope to be allowed to build places of worship in due time, but they will need to be cautious and not alarm the lobby of the Buddhist monks, who are very powerful on the government.

What good things do you see for the future?

I see great things for the future. The progress that the country has made is encouraging. Now there are roads, buildings, an educated leadership, plans, projects and development activities, educational and health services, while tourists come in significant numbers. The country is part of the international community and it is promoting democracy. I am sure that the time is not far when the usual freedoms guaranteed in any democratic nation will also be offered in Bhutan. As Christians, we love Bhutan and the Bhutanese people. It would be a pleasure and an honour to place ourselves at the service of Bhutan's future. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 04/16/2011)