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ASIA/INDIA-The Archbishop of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, in Orissa: " Persecution exists, but the faith of Christians is growing"

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - " Persecution on Christians in Orissa exists, but faith grows and strengthens, and even the number of the faithful is increasing. We are not afraid: we will always be ready to tell the truth, to defend the person`s dignity and freedom of religion. Although today in Orissa, as Christians, we feel abandoned by the institutions ": is what Archbishop John Barwa, Archbishop of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, the leading diocese of the state of Orissa (India north-east), with over 62mila Catholics said in an interview with Fides. The archdiocese includes the district of Kandhamal, the scene in 2008 of anti-Christian massacres that claimed more than 100 deaths and 56 thousand IDPs. The Archbishop, at the Vatican for the ad Limina Apostolorum visit, explains to Fides the reasons and roots of anti-Christian violence.

Excellency, what is the situation of Christians in Orissa today?
Persecution exists, we face many challenges, not without concerns. But we believe that persecution is part of our Christian vocation and Christian life. We are not afraid, but we live it as a blessing from God. We know that where there is persecution, faith is strengthened, and today I am proud to say that faith in my people is strengthening. The blood shed for the faith in Christ is always the seed for new Christians: in Orissa the number of Christians is increasing.

Can you describe the episodes of violence that happen today?
It must be said that massacres like those of 2008 do not occur today. But Christians are terrified and cannot return to their homes. There is a subtle form of oppression and intimidation carried out quite openly by the Hindu extremist groups. It often happens in rural villages, where continuing threats and violence that are often released by the national news as the case of the Christian girl raped and murdered (see Fides 16/5/2011). At the base there is hatred and hostility against Christians that result in discrimination on behalf of some sectors of society and also by the institutions.

Do you have confidence in justice, police and civil authorities?
Orissa is a test for the respect and administration of justice in India. We can see painful examples in which Christians are treated as second class citizens and struggle to get justice. For example, the case of Sister Meena Barwa, the Catholic religious raped in 2008, the responsible were released on bail. The reaction and the results of ongoing trials, after the massacres of 2008, will be strong evidence in the nation to see if people can really have faith in justice and if everyone is equal before the law. And how can one trust the police, who witnessed the rape of sister Meena and other massacres without stopping the attackers? The police did and do not protect us. As Christians, at the moment, we feel are abandoned by the institutions.

This is very serious in democracy ...
It is, but these are the facts. Today we do not feel sufficiently secure and protected. Furthermore, at least so far, we have not received justice for the violence suffered.

How many Hindu extremist groups are there and why are they so strong in Orissa?
I am unable to give figures, but the Hindu radical movements in the area are well known, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and others, blinded by fundamentalism. There are few compared to the majority of Hindus who are peaceful and moderate. But those few continue to incite violence and hatred against Christians and manipulate people.

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Why are Christians the favorite target?
For a variety of social, political and religious reasons. The Christian community in Orissa is largely composed of tribal and Dalits. For the evangelization of the tribes there are no problems. The Dalits, however, are considered part of the Hindu society: they are the lower castes who are to serve the higher ones. Christians work to promote human, economic and social development of Dalits, they defend the dignity and they often ask to embrace the Christian faith. This triggers the reaction of the radical Hindus. Sometimes Dalits, freed from the yoke of caste and ideology, set up economic and commercial activities, and this creates competition in economy: another reason for dissatisfaction. This is the land on which extremism and violence flourishes. There are, then, political reasons: Christians do not support the Hindu nationalist parties in power (such as the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), and therefore political leaders do not want the community to expand or to be more.

What is your pastoral approach, in such a difficult context?
It is to weave relations of dialogue at all levels: with the common people, with other Christian communities, with the Hindu religious leaders, with civil authorities, with police chiefs, to unite all people of good will. The motto I have chosen for the episcopal ministry is "Thy kingdom come" I believe that this pastoral style may serve to build God's Kingdom in this part of India.

What did the meeting with the Pope mean for you?
The Pope encouraged us Bishops and thanked us for the support we give to our people. He reminded us of our responsibility as Pastors, inviting us to strengthen the faith and defend the dignity of every person. After this meeting, my heart is full with gratitude for God. It was a blessing to come here in the Vatican to meet the Holy Father, to receive words of encouragement and consolation and a blessing from Him.

The Pope underlined the freedom of religion and protection of human rights ...
I felt that passage of the Pope's speech was addressed directly to me and to the situation we live in Orissa. I feel called to proclaim, without fear, the truth about human dignity, freedom of faith, respect for human rights which are often violated in Orissa. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 19/05/2011)

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