



ASIA/NEPAL-The Church asks to ensure full religious freedom (and conversion) for the good of the country

Kathmandhu (Agenzia Fides) - The defense of religious freedom and secular architecture of the state is essential today in Nepal. The danger is the approval of a new Criminal Code, which prohibits "religious conversion": this is what father K.B. Silas Bogati, Executive Director of Caritas Nepal states in an interview with Fides. Fr. Silas comes from a Hindu family, he encountered Christ in his life and found the priestly vocation in the service of others. For this reason, speaking to Fides, he comments the latest draft of a new Criminal Code, which intends to prohibit "conversion from one faith to another," and emphasizes that the priority for the Church in Nepal is the commitment in education and the free service to others.

Fr. Bogati, tell us about your conversion ...

I come from a Hindu family. During my adolescence, I wondered about the meaning of life and one day I listened to the Gospel of John (Jn 3:16): 'For God loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life'. It was a liberating message for me, it touched my heart and made me discover Jesus Christ. After a journey of discernment, I chose the Catholic faith and then, thanks to the witness of many priests and nuns, I felt the call to dedicate my entire life in service to others. Today my job is to witness God's love through the commitment in Caritas Nepal.

What is your opinion on the proposal for a new Penal Code?

Article 160 of the new Penal Code which will be considered by Parliament is against freedom of conscience and religion. We demand the immediate cancellation. The article prohibits any act which may cause a person to convert from a traditional community or faith to another, with fines and imprisonment for up to 5 years. If it were approved, to preach Christ in the country could become a crime. Religious freedom is fundamental for the good of the country. As Christians we want to contribute in building a secular state. With this law, I would not be here.

What are the priorities for the Church in the country?

The Church of Nepal is traditionally very involved in education: the Jesuits introduced education in the English language in Nepal 50 years ago. Today, the Church runs 31 schools and thereby contributes to the growth of new generations. And is one of our main priorities. Then there is social and charitable service: Caritas is present in 58 of the 75 districts in the country with programs regarding food security, human, social and economic development, support to children or farmers. A special area of commitment is the fight against women and children trade, which is growing in Nepal, especially in the Middle East, due to the presence of criminal groups with international links.

Describe your daily work at Caritas?

We are 7,800 Catholics in a country of 29 million inhabitants, the majority is Hindu. Our job is to witness God's love, trying to reach out and do good to thousands. We are, as Caritas, especially for the poor and suffering: when there is a natural disaster or assisting those who have difficulty surviving or displaced persons. This is the how we say to the Nepalese: 'Christ loves you'. As Christ loved the poor and the people in need, so does the Church in Nepal. It is our way to evangelize. It is not a direct evangelization, but everyone knows that we are Christians and in whose name we do our service, and many want to know our faith.

What is the political situation like in Nepal today?

The political and social situation is marked by instability and uncertainty. It has not yet been able to approve the

new constitution under discussion for months, due to the general climate of political instability. Political leaders of all parties seem to seek only power and its own personal gain, without looking at the true interest of the citizens and the common good. As a Church, although a small minority, we hold high, with a prophetic voice, the values of justice, peace, the urgency of good governance, interfaith harmony, trying to give voice to the voiceless. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 03/06/2011)