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ASIA/IRAQ-The German bishops: to help the Christians of Iraq "priority to work"

Erbil (Agenzia Fides) - In the difficult situation of Christians living in Iraq, while "the exodus of the faithful continues", "priorities are peace and work": is what His Excellency Archbishop Ludwig Schick, Archbishop of Bamberg says in an interview to Fides, who heads a delegation of the German Bishops' Conference that ended today, June 18, a journey in Iraq. Archbishop Schick, President of the Episcopal Commission for the universal Church, announces to Fides that the German bishops intend to help the Church in Iraq to start professional training schools and open a special office in Erbil, thanks to experts from abroad, to realize social and economic development projects for the benefit of the Christian communities.

Excellency, from what you have seen, what is the situation of Christians in Iraq?
The situation of Christians is different according to the areas. In places like Mosul and Baghdad, there are attacks and episodes of persecution that intersect with acts of crime, extortion, and discrimination. One cannot speak of "generalized persecution", but with difficulties and sufferings. In the area of Kurdistan (North of the country) instead, there is peace and security, so many Christians have fled from the South to the North. But many also suffer because they do not have the basic needs to survive and for this reason they want to leave the country: even for these reasons the exodus continues and the Iraqi bishops are concerned because the faithful are leaving the land of Abraham.

What is the government doing and what can you ask civil authorities?
We talked to several ministers who said they were open and reiterated their commitment to protect the lives of Christians. I think, to stop this exodus, the priorities are peace and work that guarantees survival and well-being. To find work you need professional training: this is why we have identified, as German Church, this particular commitment, to help the local churches.

How will you help them?
The Bishops' Conference, with Caritas and Misereor, aims to help the Church in Iraq to start professional training schools in agriculture, construction, tourism and hotel industry field. We believe that in this way we can help the local Churches to give a future to Christians and to all of Iraq. That is why it plans to open a special office in Erbil to coordinate the work and development projects of the Church. The office will employ foreign experts, to assess situations and initiate projects for the benefit of Christians. The bishops and the faithful have good intentions, but need help from abroad, and this is our task.

You have also met Muslim leaders: does inter-religious dialogue remain a challenge?
We have met with moderate Muslim leaders and open to dialogue. These, noting that not only Christians are victims of violence and of Muslim radicalism, they sustain that it is urgent to join the good forces to eliminate radicalism. But there are also radical Muslim leaders who only want an Islamic society. So dialogue is a challenge, but as Iraqis bishops say, it is the only possible solution, on which to continue with every effort.

What hope do you see for the Christians of Iraq?
The hope is there because, as Christians, we trust in the help and the grace of God. Besides even political leaders say that Christians are very important for the future of the nation, as bearers of values and humanism that can help social and religious groups to unite and build a harmonious, correct and fraternal society. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/18/2011)

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