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ASIA/INDIA - "Justice, reconciliation, religious freedom for Christians in Orissa", says Archbishop Barwa

Cuttak-Bhubaneswar (Agenzia Fides) - "Peace in Orissa can be built on the foundations of reconciliation and justice": says His Exc.Mgr. John Barwa SVD in an interview to Fides, Archbishop of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, on the eve of "Memorial Day", to be held tomorrow, August 24, to commemorate the victims of anti-Christian massacres in 2008. Cuttack-Bhubaneswar is the main diocese in the state of Orissa (northeast India), with over 62 thousand Catholics, and includes the district of Kandhamal, the theater in 2008 of anti-Christian massacres where organized groups of Hindu extremists caused more than 100 deaths and 56 thousand displaced people. Mgr. Barwa, took office only a few months ago, and is now visiting the area and has been saying to the faithful he meets two sentences taken from the Gospel: "Do not be afraid" and "Love your enemies". Here is the interview with Fides.

Your Excellency, how will you live the Day on 24 August?

It will be an anniversary lived in prayer for the peaceful future in Orissa. In many churches there will be celebrations and vigils. I will participate in a celebration of prayer to remember the victims in a small Catholic community, and in intimacy with God and in prayer. We Christians want to live in peace in our land. Despite the suffering and the tragedy of 2008, we harbor no hatred or revenge. We will remember the victims of the past, we will entrust to God the present and the future of Orissa.

What is the situation like today in the area?

Currently, the situation seems calm: there is no mass violence although there are subtle forms of oppression and discrimination against Christians. Many faithful who were victims of the attacks are slowly trying to "rebuild their lives" in different places from where they lived in the past. Of course, there remains so much fear, many Christians are still terrified and disheartened. As Bishop, during my visits in the territory – which I am gradually getting to know- I am trying to instill confidence in people, providing concrete support on behalf of the Church and proclaiming the words of Jesus: "Do not be afraid".

Do you think it is really possible to rebuild peaceful coexistence?

Peace can be built on the foundations of reconciliation and justice. Today I can see the evidence of authentic faith that my people are showing: in them there is no hatred or resentment towards those who have destroyed and killed, but the joy that comes from God This is love towards the enemy, preached in the Gospel . I preach this to families and to the displaced faithful who suffer from poverty. This is how we heal the wounds of the past and make space for reconciliation.
On the other hand justice is important: we will continue to follow - through our priest-lawyer - the court trials, so the victims are given the right compensation and the perpetrators of violence are punished. Orissa is a test to examine the credibility of the Indian judicial system: the foundations of the rule of law are at stake. We want to continue to have faith in the state and in the judiciary system, even if the sentiments prevailing among the faithful now are lack of trust and abandonment.

How would you judge the recent orders regarding the demolition of churches?

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On the issue of demolition of the churches (see Fides 22/08/2011), we intend to ask the Supreme Court to consider the orders made, so that our rights with regards to freedom of worship and religion are guaranteed, provided by the Indian Constitution. If those ordinances are unconstitutional, they must be annulled. I believe that the dispute can unblock soon.

What do you ask the Government of Orissa?

We ask the government of Orissa and the federal government for protection, an end to discrimination against the Christian citizens, the protection of the right to live peacefully in our land, professing and expressing our faith freely. On August 24 we will pray so the Lord illuminates and grants his grace to our leaders.
(PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/08/2011)

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