



## **ASIA/IRAQ- Nearing Christmas "between fear and sturdy faith"**

Baghdad (Agenzia Fides) - The Christian communities in Iraq will live a "Christmas under siege". "The traditions will be respected in the privacy of homes and churches. The Holy Mass is celebrated during the day, for safety reasons. It will be a Christmas, between fear and sturdy faith", says in a note sent to Fides "Aid to the Church in Need" (ACN), which announces a campaign of solidarity and support to the Christians in Iraq.

The testimonies collected by ACN in Iraq underline the condition of the faithful in various regions of the country. According to Msgr. Jean Benjamin Sleiman, Archbishop of Baghdad of the Latins, in recent years, some Christians have experienced persecution and today they continue to inhabit the most dangerous areas such as Baghdad and Mosul. They are considered "dimmi" (infidels), therefore legally and socially inferior, and even forced to pay the "jizya", the tax due from the non-Muslim minorities in order to practice their faith. In Kurdistan - says the Bishop - the life of Christians is more quiet, "but the enormous socio-cultural and economic difficulties push the faithful to emigrate". Apart from these "islands of coexistence", the Christian community is subjected to the Muslim majority, "helplessly witnessing crime, mafia or militia".

The uncertainty of the future is shared by the faithful Iraqis, who look forward to the Christmas mass. "The holidays - explains the Archbishop of Baghdad of the Latins - are fundamental opportunities to practice their faith. I hope we can celebrate them with equanimity, but it all depends on the security". Looking to the new Iraq, Mgr. Sleiman calls on the international community to support the government, "so that Iraq once again becomes a rule of law."

Fr. Amir Jaje, Superior of the Dominicans in Baghdad, talks about the tense atmosphere that has been reigning in Baghdad for a few weeks now, due to sectarian conflict and the imminent withdrawal of the U.S. troops: "The extremists are taking advantage of tensions to make their voices heard - says father Amir - and the faithful are increasingly distressed". But "there is still hope in Iraq, and our Christmas is to believe in this hope", he concludes. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/12/2011)