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OCEANIA/PAPUA NEW GUINEA-The Bishops: "No to priests who want to enter politics"

Port Moresby (Agenzia Fides) - Priests have to be close to the people, help them in the process of human, spiritual, cultural, social growth, and help them grow in holiness, but no to priests who want to enter politics: this is what the Bishops of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands underline, in a letter, which Fides, received, to all priests.

The letter, signed by the President of the Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, His Excellency John Ribat, MSC, Archbishop of Port Moresby, is a heartfelt appeal to all priests, called "the closest and most trusted co-workers with whom we share the ordained ministry","seeking holiness in the performance of our sacred ministry in service to others."

"It is our duty - notes the text - to preach the Good News to our people, to help them grow in holiness and to shepherd the flock entrusted to us by the Good Shepherd."

"Unfortunately, once again, some of our brother priests are planning to run for political office in the 2012 Papua New Guinea National Election. This is a great disappointment for us bishops and for the majority of our Catholic people. We believe that most priests, religious and lay people share our disappointment: the choice by a priest to enter politics is a betrayal of the people ...like in the Gospel story (Jn 10, 12-13) in which a shepherd abandons the flock entrusted to him."

The Bishops recognize the importance of political commitment: "It is entirely appropriate that qualified Catholic lay people represent the Church through direct political involvement and thereby find creative ways to apply the Church's social teaching in shaping specific policies that promote the common good." However, they continue, "running for public office, as well as to actively campaigning for a political party or candidate, is contrary to the vocation to the priesthood." Priests, in fact, "must proclaim relevant moral principles and explain and Catholic social teaching to all people, especially to politicians and political parties, without suggesting that the Church endorses only one or the other among many morally good ways of organizing government or of seeking to address particular social issues. The priest must offer a clear and ethical stance about right and wrong, based on the Good News of Jesus."

For these reasons, the Bishops recall, priests are forbidden by Church law to run for political office (Canon 285).

"It is good and noble when a priest hears the cries of the poor, desires to right injustice and wants to ensure that those suffering have access to basic social services such as healthcare and education. But an honest, hardworking, caring and dedicated priest, a Good Shepherd, already knows that through his call to the ordained ministry, he possesses a moral authority which allows him to unify people and bring about a positive change in communities," the text continues.

The letter points out that no Bishop in Papua or the Solomon Islands has never given or will evergive permission to one of his priests to enter politics: a priest who enters politics will be suspended from exercising his priestly ministry, a suspension that "extends at least two years beyond the time when the priest finally withdraws from politics ", as decided by the Episcopal Conference, calling on the people of God not to encourage priests to take this step, but to find lay representatives worthy of that commitment. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 26/4/2012)

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