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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Bishops to the government: no to religious discrimination in textbooks

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) - The education and formation of the mentality of young people are one of the key points on which to intervene to change Pakistan, to reduce religious intolerance and to promote harmony and peace in society. Based on this assumption, the Commission "Justice and Peace" of the Episcopal Conference submits to the new Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif - engaged in the formation of a new government - the topic of religious discrimination in textbooks and taught at school. In a note sent to Fides, the Commission also noted that non-Muslim students, enrolled in public school, are in fact forced to follow Islamic studies and this is a violation of their inalienable rights.
According to a study published by the Commission "Justice for Peace", and sent to Fides Agency, 55 chapters in 22 textbooks used in Sindh and Punjab contain false, offensive and discriminatory statements against religious minorities.
In the note sent to Fides by Peter Jacob, executive director of the Commission, stated that, paradoxically, the dilemma is between "education or spreading hatred", given that the texts report distorted historical facts and create prejudice in boys and girls and feed intolerance towards religious minorities. According to Jacob, "this approach is visibly discriminatory against non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan and in violation of Articles 18, 20, 22 and 25 of the Constitution." The Commission notes that discriminatory comments have increased over the years: in 2009, there were 45 cases reported in textbooks, while the number rose to 122 in 2013.
Political parties and institutions, notes Jacob, are called to intervene, given that the issue touches the human rights sphere, religious freedom and the education system. The Commission suggests that the new government should review the education policy and calls for action to remove "discriminatory lessons against minorities." To do this an independent Commission of scholars and historians should be established. Non-Muslim students should be allowed not to follow Islamic study classes but can study their respective religions or alternative studies. (PA)
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