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ASIA/INDIA - "Faith grows among the persecuted Christians in Orissa": Archbishop Barwa five years after the pogroms

Bhubaneswar (Agenzia Fides) - "Tertullian's observation: 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians' has become a reality in the Church of Orissa": says His Exc. Mgr. John Barwa SVD, Archbishop of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar (Orissa, eastern India), in a message issued on the occasion of five years since the anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal district (2008-2013), which is part of his diocese. "In memory of those painful events, we pray for those brave souls and we reiterate our commitment to promote peace, justice and hope", reads the message, sent to Fides Agency, adding: "This mission, in the face of violent persecutions, has become the focus of religious and priestly vocations".
The Archbishop traces the history of the mission in the district of Kandhamal, initiated by the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales of Annecy (MSFS) and then ensured by the priests of the Congregation of the Mission (CM), known as Vincentians. On June 1, 1947 the "Missio sui iuris" of Cuttack was created by Pope Pius XI and in 1974 became the Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, in a territory which today has a population of 11.5 million inhabitants. Christians are 160,000, among them 64,000 are Catholics.
"Each growth is a process that requires pruning, trials and sufferings", says Archbishop Barwa, stating that "in a span of 70 years the population of the district of Kandhamal, where the majority of Catholics of the Archdiocese live, has faced untold persecution". The highest point were the pogroms of 2008: "During the persecutions, there was an ethnic cleansing of all Christians in 400 villages, more than 6,000 houses, 340 churches and chapels, clinics and schools were burned and destroyed. Thousands of believers were injured, several women and girls, including a nun, were raped and about 60,000 men, women and children were left homeless". The Bishop recalled that 75 Christians (22 Catholics, 28 Baptists, 12 Pentecostals, 5 of independent churches) and 8 non-tribal Christians were brutally murdered.
The text continues: "Five years after the persecutions, visiting the affected communities, the faithful say to the Bishop: the persecutors burned our houses, property, and killed our loved ones, but they did not manage to destroy our faith and cannot separate us from the love of Jesus Christ .We are proud to be Christians and proud of our faith". Words and actions of this kind "are clear signs of growth in faith. They may be poor and illiterate, but rich people of faith", he comments.
The Archbishop explains that still there is no guarantee that persecution will not be repeated: "We live trusting in God and making every effort, as individuals and communities, to build peace in Kandhamal, but we surrender to God and say: Let there be your will".
In line with Tertullian’s observation, faith in Orissa is growing because of the persecution that "have made stronger and helped the young and not so young people to realize the value of faith", he says. In addition, persecutions have strengthened the unity between the Christian communities of different confessions in Kandhamal, in particular, creating "strong bonds of unity, communion and sympathy and harmony".
The Archbishop said he had received "both financial and spiritual support from all over the world for the reconstruction in Kandhamal" and wishes to thank all the benefactors who helped rebuild homes and churches destroyed. Today the local church remains committed "to helping especially the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged in their struggle for justice and peace". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/08/2013)

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