



ASIA/MYANMAR - Appeal of the Church and civil society: "In ethnic and religious diversity, the path is dialogue"

Yangon (Agenzia Fides) - Authentic peace in Myanmar passes through "respect for ethnic and religious diversity". "A real peace process with ethnic minorities" is necessary which involves "national political dialogue," and one has to give priority to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion", to avoid all forms of hatred and violence: this is what is said, in a joint message sent to Fides Agency, by two senior representatives of the Church and civil society, His Exc. Mgr. Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, and Benedict Rogers, a Catholic activist of the NGO "Christian Solidarity Worldwide," who has been working in Myanmar. The two leaders are side by side in order to build a country where the values of peace, justice, brotherhood, human rights live. The message sent to Fides recalls that for two years "a new era for Myanmar has begun, which has brought more freedom for civil society, as well as a truce

in ethnic conflicts and more openness of the country in the world.

"There is much to be thankful for. For the first time in decades, there is talk of democracy and peace, "even though" there is still a long way to go", says the text, pointing to the urgent need to stop the war in the Kachin State and promote meaningful dialogue with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO).

Another challenge is that of religious harmony: "The past year saw the shocking violence against Muslims in Myanmar, starting from the state of Rakhine in June 2012. Violence and anti-Muslim propaganda - continues the text sent to Fides - showed a deeply rooted problem in the Myanmar society: how to live with our deepest differences. No society can be truly democratic, free and at peace if one does not respect political, racial and religious diversity, as well as protecting the basic human rights of every individual, regardless of race, religion or sex".

The message recalls the 130,000 displaced Muslims in the state of Rakine, who live in terrible conditions, asking to be treated humanely. The two leaders have launched an urgent appeal to the government to "allow aid workers free access to refugee camps and guarantee their safety", calling on the international community to provide aid. The document recalls that "hatred and violence are contrary to the teachings of the great religions of the world", including Buddhism, prevalent in the country, and urges the authorities "to take action to prevent the further spread of hatred and intolerance", pursuing "anyone who incites violence". "We call on all leaders - in politics, in religion, media, education and civil society - to speak clearly against religious hatred and intolerance".

Recalling the centrality of the freedom of conscience and religion, it is stated that "these principles apply to all believers, whether they are Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, animists or other beliefs".

The text explains that "many Buddhists are afraid of a possible Islamization of the country" and see the progress of an "Islamist agenda" in the world (citing cases such as Egypt, Pakistan and Syria); but acknowledges that "many Muslims are victims of this approach" and these stereotypes.

"It is therefore in the interest of our brothers and sisters and of all the people of Myanmar to engage in an open, peaceful and respectful exchange of opinions", in a process of inter-religious dialogue" necessary in Myanmar now more than ever, at every level". "Violence, discrimination and hatred are not solutions. Treating Muslims in the way they were treated in Myanmar last year is no different from the way in which radical Islamists treat minorities in places like Pakistan or Egypt". "Dialogue - concludes the message - is essential: knowing each other, and discovering what we have in common, allows us to build a nation based on shared dreams, on mutual respect and unity in diversity". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/08/2013)