



## **ASIA/MALAYSIA - "Allah" issue: more than 100 complaints to the Director of the Catholic weekly Herald**

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - Fr. Lawrence Andrew, Malaysian priest and director of the Catholic newspaper "Herald", a diocesan weekly in Kuala Lumpur, is being investigated by the Malaysian justice and is likely to be indicted and prosecuted for "sedition". As reported to Fides by the local Church, 109 complaints have been filed against him, for having said in an article on December 27 that the Catholic faithful have a right to continue to use the word "Allah" to refer to God. In the article, examined by Fides, Fr. Andrew cited a hundred-year-old Christian prayer in the Malay language, in which he used the name "Allah".

"The situation is quite serious. There is great concern in the Catholic Church, because the story has taken a turn for the worse", explains to Fides Agency Friar Augustine Julian, a missionary of the Brothers of Christian Schools in Kuala Lumpur, former secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia. "The investigation of the judiciary in course is a subtle form of pressure towards all Christians. There is strong concern in the community and tension with radical Islamic groups", adds Julian. Even the Bishops of Malaysia, who these days are in Johor, for a meeting of the Bishops' Conference, "will examine the delicate issue", notes Julian, although it is likely that there will be no official intervention. What is feared is an escalation that could lead to violence.

The opening of an investigation on Fr. Andrew comes after another critical episode: the recent seizure of over 300 Bibles by the police in the state of Selangor (see Fides 03/01/2014). The Department for Religious Affairs in the state has justified the act - which has aroused strong controversy - because the Bibles, written in the local language "Bahasa", use the word "Allah". The "Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM)", the owner of the seized bibles, has asked the Selangor government to formally endorse the "10 point Declaration", issued by the Federal Government of Malaysia in 2011. The Declaration allows the Christian community to "print, import and distribute the Bible in indigenous Malay languages in the country", placing certain conditions on the distribution in the Malaysia peninsular. The BSM claims to have complied with these conditions and that the bibles were reserved to the churches of Sabah and Sarawak (in Malaysian Borneo) and to some indigenous Malay-speaking Christians living in the peninsula. The prime minister of the state of Selangor, Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, yesterday ordered the police to return the Bibles, in accordance with the Declaration.

The dispute over the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims broke out in early 2009. The Catholic Church launched a legal action claiming violation of its constitutional rights. That same year, a court upheld the claim of the Church. The subsequent judgment of the Court of Appeal in October 2013, reinstated the ban. Muslims constitute more than 60% percent of the 28 million Malaysians, while Christians represent around 9%. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/01/2014)