

India Bishops on Anti-Christian Violence

Derives From Fear That Deprived Communities May be Empowered

NEW DELHI, India, SEPT. 30, 2008 (Zenit.org).- Here is the text of a statement issued Friday by the executive body of the Indian bishops' conference, regarding the ongoing wave of persecution against Christians at the hands of Hindu extremists.

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Shocked and grieved by the incidents of extreme violence unleashed against the Christian community recently in various parts of our Country, the members of the Standing Committee (Executive Body) of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India express their utter disappointment at the apathy and inaction of the Governments at the Centre and in the States.

Tragic events

Innocent people were murdered, women were molested, churches and religious places were desecrated, pulled down and burnt, houses of Christians were destroyed in Kandhamal and several other districts of Orissa. The State Government kept giving an assurance that things were normal and security arrangements were perfect. Yet when representations were made, it pleaded inability to control the mobs that vandalized church property assailed religious personnel and Christian population. It was evident that the perpetrators of these hideous deeds were trained agents of radical Hindutva activists who were acting under instructions and executing a master plan of destruction. Even as the Christian community in India was still agonizing under these most painful events, attacks and vandalism spread to Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh

It is India's ancient civilization that is being humiliated and the values such as Ahimsa, Truth, Tolerance, and Respect for Religions that She has jealously preserved for centuries that are being dragged to the dust. It is India's fair name that has been tarnished and her secular and democratic image seriously damaged before the international community. These recent horrors in various parts of our country have disgraced the high ideals and principles that our wise men and saints upheld and the vision that our Founding Fathers cherished.

We appreciate the initiative of the Government of India in sending a fact-finding team to study the situation in Karnataka. At the same time we express our disappointment because no corresponding action has been taken until now in the State of Orissa, where the violence and destruction were of much greater magnitude.

Our demands

We make the following demands:

- That stronger and stringent action be taken against all kinds of anti-social and anti-religious elements that violate human rights and terrorize innocent people;
- That culprits should be brought to book and legal action be taken against them;
- That adequate compensation be immediately given to the affected people and institutions;
- That CBI inquiry be immediately ordered to investigate the Orissa incidents and their nexus to attacks on Christian communities in other States;

- That a ban be imposed on fundamentalist groups that train "terrorists" under the banner of Hindutva or any other name;
- That the leaders who act on a communal agenda, or who inspire organized violence against persons of another community, or who use religion for political purposes be restrained.
- That in the event of people taking the law into their own hands, the police be instructed to act in accordance with the demands of law and order, with justice and without prejudice.

The teaching of the Church

We are convinced that the allegations of forced conversions by Christian communities is merely a strategy developed by vested interests in order to prevent Christian services of health, education, poverty alleviation and development on behalf of deprived communities. Conversion by force, allurement or deception goes against the teaching of the Catholic Church: "The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the Faith, or alluring or enticing people by worrisome wiles. By the same token, she also strongly insists on this right that no one should be frightened away from the Faith by unjust vexations on the part of others." (Vatican Council II) Further Church Law prescribes: "No one is ever permitted to coerce persons to embrace the Catholic faith against their conscience."

It is truly humiliating to the poor to claim that they easily yield to the temptation of converting to any religion for some material advantage. In fact, the poor who choose Christianity forfeit so many benefits guaranteed by the Constitution. Some have even sacrificed their lives for refusing to reconvert.

The Catholic Church respects other religions and holds what is true and holy in them as a precious heritage of humanity. Her teaching in this matter is clear. "The Catholic Church regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teaching which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." She exhorts all her children "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions and in witness of Christian faith and life, to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods, found among these people, as well as their values in their society and culture." (Vatican Council II)

We perceive that the Hindutva opposition to Christian activities derives from the fear that many of the deprived communities may be so empowered as to assert their own rights and resist exploitation. No matter how great the threat that may confront us, we cannot renounce the heritage of love and justice that Jesus left us. He said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." (Gospel of Luke 4:18). When Jesus went about healing the sick, associating with outcasts and assisting the poor, those works were not allurements but the concrete realization of God's plan for humankind: to build a society founded on love, justice and social harmony. The Church therefore is walking in the footsteps of her Master when she exerts herself to the utmost for the benefit of humanity, especially those who are poor and marginalized.

Our constitutional rights

Every citizen and community of our Country has an inalienable right to freedom of conscience and religious liberty. The Indian Constitution, article 25 § 1, upholds that "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion." It is this right of every citizen to embrace the religion which best satisfies his/her quest for God and for fulfillment. This constitutes an essential part of Human Rights. We belong to a civilization that attaches great importance to this right.

Christian response

Ultimately, Christian response to harassment and persecution may be expressed in one word: forgiveness, and this while we seek to have our rights safeguarded and justice done. If however, some choose to consider the sufferance of the Christian community as a weakness, they are seriously mistaken. We wish to remind everyone that we are citizens of this great country. We too have had a share in shaping this civilization and continue to contribute a great deal to the growth and development of this nation. The Catholic Church in India has always played an active role in promoting inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious harmony. It is with absolute resolve to live in harmony and in happy collaboration with everyone around us that we seek to serve God and our Nation.

We are heartened by persons of Hindu society and of other communities who have come forward to condemn the evil deeds of a fringe group of fundamentalist activists and to help the victims of violence in many ways. We are grateful that the majority of the people of our Country recognize the small Christian minority as a peace-loving community, ever eager to render service to people of all social strata and religious affiliations, especially those who are poor and needy.

We express our solidarity with the hapless suffering victims of violence, especially those in Orissa who have been rendered homeless, who are forced to flee into forests, who still languish in relief camps and who are being still cruelly threatened to give up their

Christian faith, and in their name we appeal to the Governments concerned to take appropriate and effective action without any further delay and to bring relief and justice to them.

We invite everyone to join in prayer for our great nation, for leaders of the Governments and for Civil Authorities, for all those who have suffered in the recent violence and also for those who were the cause of our sufferings. May God bless our country and lead us on the way of peace and justice.

Bangalore September 26, 2008

Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, President CBCI Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes,
Secretary General - CBCI