

Poverty and ignorance favour religious intolerance



“If we don't succeed in eradicating poverty and ignorance in our Country, then we will not be able to combat the the phenomenon of religious intolerance”. This was a comment made to L'Osservatore Romano by Paul Bhatti, Adviser to the Prime Minister for National Harmony in Pakistan. The Adviser – a federal minister and the Catholic brother of the Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, assassinated on 2 March 2011 – recently met with a group of inmates, and spoke about the situation of Christians serving prison sentences –Mrs. Asia Bibi- Photo on charges of blasphemy. Among them is Asia Bibi, the woman accused of offending the prophet Mohammed and the Koran and condemned to death; her physical conditions are particularly disturbing. But many religious and secular organizations in Pakistan, including the Masihi Foundation, have been working for the liberation of women.

Speaking of his meeting with inmates the Adviser observed: “It was something my brother Shahbaz always did and I intend to continue the tradition. My thoughts also go to Asia Bibi, who is suffering unjustly in prison”. There are around a dozen people currently in prison for blasphemy and some of them Christian. According to Bhatti's indications there are at least five Christians being held in Pakistani prisons on account of their faith. Their situation seems to be a dramatic one, above all from the psychological perspective. “Unfortunately, Asia Bibi,” explained Bhatti, “is not the only person of the Christian faith serving a long sentence in Pakistan for having offended Islam. These are the consequences of distorting the law against blasphemy but more than anything they are consequences of a widespread ignorance which plagues the weaker members of society: it is sufficient to recall the fact that all the people accused of blasphemy are extremely poor and therefore targets of those with the intention to promote hate and division between religious communities”.

According to this Government representative, therefore, it is necessary to pursue the eradication of ignorance and poverty in order to combat the wounds of intolerance. “The law on blasphemy could be abolished. If we aren't able to change the mentality of the Country and combat cultural and material influences, there will still be room for fundamentalism and discrimination against minorities”.

The Adviser inherited from his brother the direction of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) and attentively follows this work of developing relations with various religious communities. “As a Government representative and President of APMA, I have excellent relations with moderate Muslims”, he underlined, “and on various occasions we have had the opportunity to meet and agree on the need to limit religious extremism, favouring progress and the good of society”. The Minister for National Harmony enjoys complete support at the institutional level, explaining: “It is not a government with a facade”. On a whole, the Adviser underlined that “Pakistan is a poor country and does not have strong enough resources to confront all the social questions. We are working to channel those resources into certain areas of priority, such as the fight against poverty, by promoting a series of micro-enterprise projects, including health education in schools”. On the theme of education, he concluded: “We are collaborating with local religious leaders for schools to assume an ever more privileged role in spreading a culture of peace”.

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