

December 28, 2011 - Nigeria - In pursuit of reconciliation, justice, and peace



(ANS – Abuja) – The terrorist attacks against Christian churches on Christmas Day have shaken and disturbed the whole Christian community in Nigeria. The Salesians in the country, while being aware of the present dangers, continue with their usual efforts: on behalf of the young and promoting their all-round development, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

The fundamentalist Islamic group Boko Haram has claimed as their work the bomb placed in front of St. Theresa Church in Madalla, as well as the other explosions between December 24 and 25 in Christian places of worship. The name *Boko Haram* means “western education is a sin.” The main aims of this group are the creation of a Muslim state in Nigeria, the extension of Sharia law throughout Nigeria, and the elimination of Western education, which is often identified as being Christian – aims which the group pursues while targeting the Christian communities in the country.

“A religious confrontation between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria today could push this country of 160 million people into a deadly civil and religious war that could de-stabilize the whole sub-region and region,” a local source reports. “Thank God, there has not been retaliation from Catholics and Christians during these immediate days after the bombings. On the contrary, the answer has been ‘prayers’ for the victims and the victimizers. On the other hand, religious and civil authorities have condemned the bombings in no uncertain terms.”

As a religious community dedicated to the education of the young, the Salesians in the country are now on the alert; yet relationships of dialog and respect built up with all the religious groups mean that it is possible to look to the future with confidence: “The relationship between Muslims and Salesians has always been cordial and respectful,” the local source continues. “They do appreciate the educational efforts of the Salesians, especially in the field of technical education, and the preparation of young people for the world of work.”

The educational and pastoral strategy of the Salesians in all the countries of the vice province of English-speaking West Africa (AFW) – some of them with a Muslim majority such as Sierra Leone, and others with large Muslim communities such as Ghana, Liberia, and indeed Nigeria – has always been based on dialog, tolerance, collaboration, and respect for the other religions.

"In all the Salesian schools Muslim students and even Muslim teachers who are in love with Don Bosco's Preventive System are welcomed. In the schools and oratories-youth centers, Christian and Muslim prayers are recited as a sign of respect and tolerance. Many Muslim boys and girls enjoy Don Bosco's loving kindness," our correspondent concludes.

In his apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus*, Benedict XVI invites all the members of the Church to persist in the esteem for Muslims: "If all of us who believe in God desire to promote reconciliation, justice, and peace, we must work together to banish every form of discrimination, intolerance, and religious fundamentalism. In her social apostolate, the Church does not make religious distinctions. She comes to the help of those in need, be they Christian, Muslim, or animist. In this way she bears witness to the love of God, creator of all, and she invites the followers of other religions to demonstrate respect and practice reciprocity in a spirit of esteem. I ask the whole Church, through patient dialog with Muslims, to seek juridical and practical recognition of religious freedom, so that every citizen in Africa may enjoy not only the right to choose his religion freely and engage in worship, but also the right to freedom of conscience. Religious freedom is the road to peace." [no. 94]