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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOG - The head of the Indian Catholic Youth Movement, Bishop Hendry D'Souza of Bellary, has raised his voice about the necessity of religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue in India.

“Social amity should not be the responsibility of the government alone, rather all citizens of the country have a bounden duty to consciously stand for such fundamental rights and ensure all communities enjoy them without discrimination, especially the minorities and weaker sections,” said Bishop D'Souza on Saturday.

He was reflecting on US president Barack Obama's address to the people of India, delivered two days earlier in Delhi.

On his visit Obama said the US and India can be “best partners” and encouraged the dreams of youth. He also professed the importance of freedom of religion in both nations, and unity across religious divides.

Bishop D'Souza praised the address and noted its warm reception by Indian youths. The Indian Catholic Youth Movement, which he chairs, has a membership of more than 50,000.

“Religious leaders have an added duty to form to their fellow believers to treat all religions with due respect and shun all forms of intolerance,” Bishop D'Souza said. “Without considering each other as enemies, religious followers must fight common enemies such as poverty, disease, the dehumanizing caste system, sex-selective abortion, violence against women, and the degradation of the environment.”

Tolerance of religions is important in the Hindu-majority India because of a recent rise in attacks

by Hindu radicals against members of minority religions.

An estimated 80 percent of the population is Hindu, while 13 percent are Muslim. There are also notable minorities of Christians (two percent), Sikhs (two percent), and Buddhists (one percent).

Since the May election of Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist, as prime minister, the already common threat of religious violence has increased. Around 600 cases of physical and structural violence against Muslims and Christians have been reported since the election, as well as forced conversions to Hinduism.

“Promotion of interreligious interactions and interreligious dialogue are the need of the hour,” Bishop D'Souza reflected. “They need to be promoted at various levels, both informally and formally. With a nationwide large network of educational institutions and youth associations, the Catholic Church is in a position to sensitize children and youth to the demands of such a task. Interreligious outlook and values are being inculcated through formal and informal education.”

This education, he said, “should start in the families and continue through formal education in schools and colleges,” saying that “no one disputes the need of social harmony for the progress of a country. It is of paramount importance.”

He said many of India's youth are “open, democratic and inclusive. However, there is a fringe element which is vocal and vociferous, vulnerable to extremist tendencies. They are victims of religious and social prejudices, gender biases and superstitious beliefs.”

Bishop D'Souz lamented that the “explicit political will to contain all forms of violence emanating from religious fanaticism is yet to be seen.”

“The Church in India is serving the people of India irrespective of their religious affiliation, in the fields of education, social development, and health care. Its services are substantial and widely lauded, especially for the physically challenged and the aged.”

“Through education, the Church has contributed immensely to break the barriers of prejudices and stereotypes through formal and informal education and women empowerment programs,” the bishop said.

He added, however, that “more needs to be done in the area of caste discrimination and indignity of women.”

The Indian Catholic Youth Movement and other groups, such as Young Christian Students and Young Students’ Movement, Bishop D’Souza said “are helping the youth to be interreligious in their outlook, to respect all humans in all stages and forms, to be pro-life and to protect the environment. All these activities are profoundly inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, promoting universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all people.”

He said that “though Christians are accused of 'proselytizing and converting', the Catholic Church sincerely avoids all forms of unethical and unlawful evangelism. While the Church is contributing its bit, nay it’s very best, to build a more humane and a harmonious society, a fanatical, even sinister section of society is bent upon causing disruption and discord. That’s where the law-enforcing state should intervene firmly and impartially, nipping such tendencies in the bud, before it becomes a communal inferno, disrupting the nation's progress.”