

PRESS STATEMENT

ARCHBISHOP OF DELHI ASKS PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI TO ORDER JUDICIAL ENQUIRY INTO BURNING OF CATHOLIC CHURCH IN EAST DELHI, PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN CENTRAL INDIAN STATES

St. Sebastian's Church in Dilshad Garden gutted in arson; Community plans demonstration at Police Commissioner's Office on Tuesday morning

NEW DELHI, 1 December 2014

Delhi Archbishop Most Rev. Anil Couto, has in a memorandum to Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Mr. Rajnath Singh, called on them to urgently order a judicial enquiry into the burning of the St. Sebastian's Church in Dilshad Garden in the national Capital, New Delhi early this morning. The entire interior, including the Altar, the Holy Bible and Cross were reduced to ashes. On the complaint of Church priest Fr. Anthony Francis, the police have registered an FIR against unknown outsiders for causing the fire with malicious intent. Senior officers of Delhi police, the Special Branch and the Forensic Crime unit came to the spot after many hours, and once the agitated members of the Catholic community blocked the roads in the area. Samples were retrieved from the inside of the church, which was still smelling of fuel oil.

Till late in the evening, police could not say they had made any progress in their investigations.

Addressing the media, Archbishop Couto said apart from the judicial enquiry, the government must repair the building before Christmas, ensure that policemen guilty of dereliction of duty are punished, and special police investigation teams are set up to trace the guilty.

The Christian community cutting across denominations, and civil society have decided to protest at the offices of the Police Commissioner of Delhi on Tuesday morning to focus attention on the attempts to polarise the people in Delhi state which goes to the polls soon, and the continued persecution of Christians in Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh and other tribal and rural areas.

On Sunday, 30th November 2014, two house churches in Anuppur district of Madhya Pradesh were attacked. Earlier in November, catholic priests in the Bastar region in Chhatisgarh were told all their schools were to install statues of Goddess Saraswati and they would not be allowed to be called "Father", the usual honorific, by the students, but would be called "Acharya". In other districts of Chhatisgarh, village panchayats under political influence have passed regulations banning non-Hindu religious persons from organising prayers or opening places of worship in their territory.

Archbishop Couto said the arson in St. Sebastian's church was condemnable not just because it was an act of sacrilege and hate against the community and its faith, but that it could happen in the national Capital which is just recovering from a series of communal incidents. Also distressing is the sense of police impunity. Long hours were lost, and possible evidence destroyed, before the police finally came. St. Sebastian's church was constructed in 2001 and is among the biggest churches in East Delhi. The church was active till Sunday night because of religious ceremonies for catholic children receiving their first Holy Communion.

The night watchman had handed over charge to the day watchman at 5 am. The Parish Priest, Fr. Francis, was informed by the day watchman of the fire. The fire was still raging when Fr. Francis informed the Fire brigade and the police.

The community soon collected at the police station to impress on the officers to call in forensic experts. When the police failed to come, roads were blocked for some time. Those who visited the church included archbishops Anil Couto, Kuriakose Bharanikulangara, Bishop Jacob Mar Barnabas, several Members of Parliament, Mr. Arvind Kejriwal and former MLAs of the area.