

Paolo Affatato
Emmanuel Parvez

Shahbaz Bhatti

The Eagle of Pakistan

Preface by
Cardinal Joseph Coutts



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Translated by Mike Dean

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Preface

I met Clement Shahbaz Bhatti when he was in his early 20s. I was struck by that young man who was so serious and thoughtful, more than any other young man of his age. He felt the discrimination against Christians and the injustices done to the poor on his skin and saw it with his own eyes. He took charge of it and became the voice of the voiceless and an advocate against injustice. Supported and moved by solid faith, he became an activist and promoter of human rights. Seeing his sincerity and dedication, others convinced him to engage in politics. So it was not surprising to see him soon become Federal Minister for Minority Affairs. A man of forward-thinking vision, he pushed and worked for the abolition of discriminatory laws, particularly the often blatantly abused blasphemy law. He then began receiving death threats from those who opposed him. But he refused to give in. “I know the meaning of the cross,” he said to me one day and added, “I have done nothing wrong. Why should I flee abroad?”

Shahbaz Bhatti lived the Christian faith consistently in all aspects of life and is an example for the witness of faith in political life. For us Christians in Pakistan, Shahbaz Bhatti was not only a minister, but an honest and noble man who tried to create good relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, to build a society characterised

by equality and harmony between faiths. In his heart and mind he had, in fact, a very clear vision: he dreamt of a Pakistan permeated with peace and harmony. His sacrifice expresses the desire of an entire nation: that the citizens of Pakistan, of every creed, ethnicity, and social class, can enjoy equal rights and dignity.

“Never repay one wrong with another; instead, repay with a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9), the Apostle Peter exhorts. These words refer to those of Jesus: “Blessed are you when they insult you, persecute you and, lying, say all manner of evil against you for my sake. This is how they persecuted the prophets before you.” (Mt 5:11-12). The meekness of Christians makes them similar to Christ. Their fidelity to God, at the risk of life, shows the truth of human existence: man is made for communion with God and his fellow human beings. Man can share in the boundless love of the Lord Jesus, an unarmed God who accepted the cross in order to cast out the prince of darkness from life.

Pope Francis said: “In the cross we read God’s answer: there, violence was not answered with violence, death was not answered with the language of death. In the silence of the cross the roar of arms is silent and speaks the language of reconciliation, forgiveness, dialogue, peace”. (Vigil of Prayer for Peace, 7th September 2013).

Shahbaz Bhatti showed us that it is possible to believe and decide one’s life from the cross. Shahbaz lived to defend Christians, minorities and all the marginalized and oppressed of our country. From Sacred Scripture he drew sensitivity and compassion for the poorest. He never ceased to believe that it was possible to live peacefully to-

gether and he promoted interreligious dialogue with courage and generosity. In his life and in his witness resound the words of the Apostle Peter: “And blessed are you if you have to suffer for justice! Do not be afraid of them, nor be troubled, but proclaim the Lord Christ in your hearts, always ready to respond to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Pet 3:14-15).

These words illuminate the meaning of his existence, which this book reconstructs with attention, accuracy and truth. For us Christians, the courage of hope is rooted in the power of the cross of Jesus. Shahbaz turned his gaze to the crucified Lord and, by His grace, lived the same faith and tenacious love of Christ. Under the cross he chose the humble and courageous way of encounter, forgiveness and peace.

The “martyr” Shahbaz Bhatti is not dead, but is and will remain alive in Christ. We will carry out his mission. His voice, the voice of truth, will never be reduced to silence. We will remember his life and his contribution to the history of Pakistan. This book is also meant to be this: a memorial and a source of inspiration for the present and the future. The work of Shahbaz Bhatti does not stop and many men and women of good will are willing to continue it in Pakistan. Every day our mission is to be witnesses of peace and love in a country wounded by violence. As Christians, our mission is love, as Shahbaz Bhatti testified, with words and deeds. And the love of Christ ensures that we do not lose hope.

Cardinal Joseph Coutts
Retired Archbishop of Karachi

Introduction

The figure of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Catholic Minister for Religious Minorities killed at the hands of terrorists in Pakistan in 2011, presents before the eyes of men and women of the third millennium a sublime example of what “life in Christ” means. His life experience, in the context of a land where Christians constitute only 2% of the 90% Muslim population, acquires even more strength and paradigmatic value. His faith was so profound and his imitation of Christ so radical, that it brought about changes in his priorities of choice, life style, and in relationships with others. Shahbaz Bhatti was a man who did not “waste” the talent of his existence but lived it fully, on a journey of authentic humanisation and constant confirmation of his special vocation and mission. The confirmation came precisely from life in Christ, lived according to the eyes and gaze of Christ; nourished by the Holy Spirit, given by Christ in the sacraments; within the Church, but always immersed in the secular and temporal structures of the world, such as work, society, relationships with others, interreligious dialogue, and politics.

Shahbaz was a young man with extraordinary dreams and a prophetic vision, who became a world-class leader in a very short time. He dreamed of a world where

the wolf and the lamb could eat together and drink from the same spring. He was a messenger of peace and harmony. He spoke bravely against discrimination and violence. He lived for what he believed in and died for his dreams. He was silenced by the hands of the wicked.

His unexpected, premature violent death has been spoken about everywhere. Men and women throughout the world, including Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, have been touched by the life of Shahbaz Bhatti, his ideas, his testament, and his deep desire to follow Jesus as a faithful disciple. Those who knew and loved him have cried out for his martyrdom, but have let themselves be carried away with joy by the memories collected in this book. In fact, this book provides a contribution to the memory of a sublime man through an analytical account of his humble life. Remembering today means bringing to life the legacy of Shahbaz Bhatti: this is good for Pakistan.

This book, the result of a shared idea of an Italian journalist passionate about Asia, and a Pakistani priest, Shahbaz's cousin, seeks to restore an important part of Bhatti's inner world, spirituality, thought and personality, and it is in this aspect that it finds its originality compared to other biographies published about him. Punctuated with a myriad of stories, declarations, and unpublished episodes which studded the minister's short life journey, the story retraces his childhood and youth (chapter I), the maturation of his socio-political commitment (chapter II), his tireless activity as federal minister (chapter III), and the crucial aspects of martyr witness (chapter IV).

Bhatti was a “son of Pakistan” who placed himself in the eyes of the universal community of the baptised as a man who went beyond confessional walls and borders, to tell everyone that life is communion with one’s neighbour and with God. The image of God, eloquent in every man and every woman, became a voice in the heart of Bhatti’s conscience, pushing him to pronounce an amen to life and then, with faith, to the supreme gift of existence: his was a desire for fullness and happiness, which was realised in conforming to Christ, and to the crucified Christ.

At the conclusion of an existence given without reservation, for Shahbaz Bhatti, we could well adapt the words of St. Paul, who said in his heart: “I no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me. This life, which I live in the flesh, I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20).

The hope is that this work of careful reconstruction of his inner life and his extraordinary spiritual charge can give an impulse to the process that, thanks to the union of a series of subjects, organisations, efforts and will, can lead to official recognition of the martyrdom of Shahbaz Bhatti.

We will not let this bright star vanish into oblivion and darkness.

Paolo Affatato
Emmanuel Parvez

Chapter I

A name, a mission

Shahbaz means “eagle.” And like an eagle, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic from Pakistan, was a person with a keen eye, a man with a far-sighted and prophetic vision. He had the ability to fly to unreachable heights: family, friends and teachers had already noticed this from childhood and adolescence. In Christian symbolism, the eagle is associated with St. John the Evangelist who, as described in the Book of Revelation, contemplated the true light of the Word, in the same way as an eagle, which according to the myth traditionally associated with it, could stare directly at the light of the sun. Shahbaz Clement Bhatti was a man who contemplated God in his daily actions, in the ordinariness of a life immersed in Pakistani society and its temporal structures, but always with his heart rooted in the word of God and with his gaze turned to heaven.

A *contempl-active* man [which means “contemplative and active”], to use a definition dear to Bishop Tonino Bello,¹ Shahbaz, the eagle, flew high with his mind, his

¹ T. BELLO, *Cirenei della gioia* (Pyrenees of Joy), San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1995.

heart, and his spirit. With his mind he imagined and worked hard to make his nation, Pakistan, a land of peace, freedom, harmony, coexistence, and respect for dignity and human rights. He kept the weakest and most vulnerable, the poor and the marginalised, and the oppressed and the disinherited in his heart. With his spirit, nourished by the grace of God, hovering high in the sky and feeding his dreams which could become reality, Shahbaz had not only matured a perspective of his own existence but also an uncommon vision of the world and history, permeated entirely by the faith that animated him. He saw his own life as a gift received from God, an evangelical talent to be made fruitful. He saw his time as a fruitful time, in which he could promote significant changes for the common good of the country. He saw the history of Pakistan as a history marked by the providence of God, from the time of the arrival of the Gospel on the Indian subcontinent, to the mid-nineteenth century, up to independence, and the development and growth of the nation.

In ancient thought, in many cultures and civilizations, a name is a mystical and powerful attribute. Association with a name is a sign of dignity and a personal mission. For the Jews, a name expressed the very essence of a person, his nature, his strength, his activity. In the Bible a name acts as if it had a force of its own: it can stand by itself as a synonym of the person themselves. A name is an essential part of every person and becomes an integral part of their identity. In the name of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti the whole story of his life is summarised. His

parents, Jacob and Marta, called him by that name and, in the course of his life, that name took on a very precise meaning, took shape, and characterised his way of feeling, thinking and acting.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God says to Israel: “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name: you are mine.” (Isa. 43:1). “In the life of Shahbaz Bhatti there was great awareness of this call and of total belonging to God,” notes Fr. Emmanuel Parvez. “By calling *by name*, God expresses the fact that for him every creature is important and precious. Before God you are unique, not one of many. God knows all His children one by one and each promises something beautiful, something great. In the name with which God calls each person lies the unmistakable and inalienable dignity of the human being. Recognizing the literal meaning of a name, one discovers the mystery of one’s nature and beauty and at the same time God’s plan for one’s own existence. This is how it was for Clement Shahbaz Bhatti.” Fr. Emmanuel Parvez, Catholic parish priest in the diocese of Faisalabad, Bhatti’s cousin, was born in the same village as him, Khushpur. He spent his childhood, youth and adult years with Shahbaz, accompanying and comforting him – while one was already an established politician, the other was a parish priest and teacher – as a friend and confidant, in a dense dialogue of a human and spiritual nature.

He was Clement Shahbaz Bhatti. Everyone called him Shahbaz, a name that in Urdu, as in Persian, indicates the eagle, the king of birds, a noble and majestic crea-

ture. That name, quite widespread in South Asia, appealed his father, Jacob, who had, in the early years of his son's life, already glimpsed and sensed its existential and spiritual parable.

But his first name was Clement. He was born on 9th September 1968 into a Catholic family. "My father, a retired teacher, and my mother, a housewife, brought me up according to Christian values and the teachings of the Bible, which influenced my childhood," he tells about himself.² He was the youngest of six children: Jaqueline, the only girl; then Paul, Peter, Gerard and Alexander, and finally Clement. In the Bhatti family great attention and importance was given to biblical names but, with Jacob Bhatti having an innate predilection for the name Shahbaz - precisely because of its meaning of moral and spiritual elevation - the child was given a double name. Clement, as his first name indicates, was a benign, kind, discreet person, full of clemency and mercy. He was a boy with an indulgent and generous character. His first name comes from the Latin *clemens*, which means merciful, mild, moderate, pitiful, and kind. There are no more appropriate adjectives to describe the personality of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, as all those who knew him, associated with him, and loved him confirm.

But it's not only about his nature. Fr. Emmanuel remarks: "The name refers to his own patron saint and protector: he who can indicate the possibilities, the gifts, the

² S. BHATTI, *Christians in Pakistan. Where Hope is Tested*, Marcianum Press, Venice 2008.

charisms that are enclosed in the treasure chest that is inside each person. They are, in some way, those precise characteristics that express the reflected image of God, present in every person. Only by referring to the figure of the saint whose name we bear can we recognise and meet our own authentic image, that truth of ourselves which is born of the creative hand of God. The action of God on human beings is evident in the saints. They are like prisms that reflect the very life of God and are his epiphany: manifestations of how his grace transforms human beings, conforming them to God himself, in his image and likeness. Furthermore, the saint whose name we bear is a companion throughout our lives. They are like angels who protect, who indicate the way, who inspire steps towards goodness, who accompany and lead towards holiness.” And so, the life of Clement Bhatti in Pakistan is inextricably linked to that of St. Clement I, pope and martyr, who governed the church of Rome - after St. Peter, Linus and Anacletus - for nine years, under the emperors Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. Clement wrote a famous letter to the Corinthians to strengthen peace and harmony among them, for which he is celebrated as one of the apostolic fathers. Little is known of his last years. According to a fourth-century tradition, he was drowned using a neck anchor in the Crimea, his place of exile, by order of Nerva. Although there is no historical certainty, St. Clement is honoured as a martyr³

³ Documents from the fourth century tell how, during Trajan's empire (98-117), Clement was sentenced to exile in the Crimea and to forced labour in the mines. There, his missionary activity among the

and his name recurs in Roman martyrology. The story and life of St. Clement were well known to Shahbaz's parents, who frequently read biographies of the saints. Having the name of a martyr represented, then, a sign and premonition for the life of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti from the humble village of Khushpur: a man who carried out his mission *to the full*, without seeking but also without fearing martyrdom.

Even *Bhatti*, the family name, has a well-defined meaning that recounts a truth and a story. In the case of Pakistani Christians, it is the identifier of a clan that characterises its origins and also its faith. When a *Bhatti* is mentioned in Pakistan, he is immediately attributed with recognisable evidence of his origins as a member of the Christian community. Even his surname, then, shows *de facto* that he precisely belongs to the community of the Christian faithful: it itself becomes a mark that says he belongs to Christ, one that Clement felt right down to the depths of his soul.

The origin of the Bhatti family in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the regions of Punjab and Rajasthan, is etymologically linked to the Sanskrit *bha'tta*, which means "lord". Since the twelfth century, the *bhatti* tribe has been one of the largest and most widespread in the Indian Pun-

soldiers and fellow prisoners met with such success that the Romans tied him to an anchor and threw him into the Black Sea. Some time later, chronicles tell, the waters receded, revealing a tomb built by angels, who had recovered the saint's body and buried him. The martyr's tomb was taken to Rome, where the famous Basilica of Saint Clement was erected in his honour.

jab population (well before the region was irreparably divided by the border between India and Pakistan, established only with the *partition* of 1947). That name is an expression of loyalty, strength, and pride, all characteristics associated culturally and traditionally with the members of the tribe. Characteristics that are still found today, as an ancestral heritage and an indelible sign, in the temperament, mentality and deepest identity of a Bhatti.

On the other hand, in Urdu, the Pakistani national language, *bhatti* takes on another meaning and indicates a kiln or, by literal translation, a worker who works in a kiln where clay bricks are produced. This linguistic indication intersects perfectly with the life of Christians in Pakistan: especially in the Punjab region, the phenomenon of masses of poor people required to work in factories in conditions of slavery is known, where they extract clay from the subsoil, mix bricks and bake them in kilns, for the benefit of the construction industry⁴. Entire families find themselves in conditions of authentic legalised slavery, often due to the need to pay off a contracted debt, in the pay of landowners and feudal lords who manage the workforce with maximum exploitation, and force the workers - including children, women and the elderly - in subhuman conditions. Punjab Christians, of-

⁴ The brick industry is thriving in Pakistan and accounts for around 3 per cent of the national GDP. According to estimates by the International Labour Organisation, there are between eight and ten thousand kilns scattered throughout the country and there are approximately 1.5 million workers in the sector. In the province of Punjab alone, 5,000 kilns are active, known as the “kingdom of forced labour”, a system governed by an iron and inflexible law.

ten belonging to the poorest sections of the population and relegated to the lowest places of the ancient caste system, typical of the social stratification of the subcontinent, end up being the privileged victims of a mechanism that often keeps them segregated. The heavy debt to be paid, in fact, imposes on all family members exhausting shifts of work for a starvation wage, without any distinction of age, sex or health conditions. It is a condition far removed from any fundamental right, while people are considered as goods or in a purely instrumental way, without any dignity.

It is a twofold discrimination that affects religious minorities - Christian and Hindu - and the poorest sections of the Pakistani population. They are “slaves of debt.” This mechanism, that condemns them to abuse, harassment, and maltreatment, to an entire existence subject to unscrupulous masters, is inexorable. It starts with a loan or an advance from employers. In order to repay the sum due, many years are required without rights, without certainties, without pay, and being constrained to live in dilapidated homes. In many cases, the worker fails to repay the incurred debt, which is not extinguished by death but which spills over to subsequent generations, creating generations of slaves⁵.

⁵ The system is also perpetuated with the practice of *peshgi*, or an advance on the wages that the worker receives from the employer. But debt accumulates creating a system of accepted and legalised slavery. Pakistan ranks sixth in the index compiled by *Global Slavery*, which registered 2.3 million slaves in the country, 1.13 per cent of the entire Pakistani population. In Italy, a campaign of solidarity intervention has been launched by organisations such as Focsiv, Iscos and

In a paradigmatic case which reached international news channels, the *bhatti*, the kiln, tragically became a crematorium. The story of Shama and Shahzad Masih is well-known. This married couple (she Catholic, and he a Protestant) worked in a brick factory in the Punjab. The two were brutally tortured and burned alive in a kiln in Kot Radha Kishan on 4th November 2014. They had been falsely accused of committing the crime of blasphemy, and a crowd of militants carried out this terrible lynching. The story has once again shed light on the condition of thousands of disinherited, oppressed people reduced to living in inhuman conditions in the slave system of brick production. Among these, a substantial number are Christian families, who lead a life marked by poverty, exploitation and misery.

All of this exists in the name Bhatti: a burden of immense suffering, human dignity of millions of people trampled on, the trial and the laborious redemption of generations of the oppressed. For Clement Shahbaz, the family name always constituted a powerful warning that determined and guided his vocation and mission: never again a single person without dignity, never again rights trampled on with impunity, no more injustice, marginalisation or discrimination. In those poor slaves, Clement Shahbaz recognised the condition of humiliation, segregation and harassment of the tortured and crucified Christ. In each of their faces, scarred by pain and

the Catholic newspaper *Avvenire*, as can be read in Italian at the link: <https://www.avvenire.it/mondo/Pagine/documenti-e-scuola-mille-famiglie-ripartono-in-pakistan>

streaked with tears, he reread the prophet Isaiah and his fourth song of the Servant of Yahweh, dedicated to the man of sorrows, to the suffering servant, to the man deprived of beauty, splendour, and dignity. And then he put his whole self, his commitment and his possibilities, even his personal economic resources to contribute to their salvation and liberation.

Mindful of the gift and commitment of Shahbaz, that same mission today continues to be carried out by Fr. Emmanuel Parvez who, in the Faisalabad area, redeems the Christian peasant families from slavery by paying off their debts, finding land for them to cultivate, building a house, bringing their children back to school, and giving them back the dignity of free citizens, of children loved by God.⁶

Khushpur, “Pakistan’s Vatican”

Fields of rice, sugar cane, cotton, and tobacco stretch as far as the eye can see. Carts pulled by mules or horses travel on dirt roads and country paths, carrying seeds and agricultural products to the markets of urban centres. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in the immense plains of the Pakistani Punjab, the “land of the five rivers” where there is no lack of water so crops are abundant and lush⁷.

⁶ See the article *Un uomo fatto Vangelo* (A Man Made Gospel), published in Italian in “L’Osservatore Romano” of 13th July 2019

⁷ Pakistan’s Punjab province covers 205,345 km² and is home to more than 110 million inhabitants, more than half of the total popu-

Since 1870, at the time of the British colonial government, the civil authorities of the Punjab (which included the province later split between the modern states of Pakistan and India), decided to increase the cultivated land by building dams, dykes and canals, so as to satisfy the demand for agricultural products in European markets. An extensive irrigation system of channels was built in areas that today include the districts of Faisalabad and Toba Tek Singh. In 1880, a new city was founded in this area, which took the name of Lyallpur. Its urban layout was based on the Union Jack, the British flag, with eight roads radiating from a large clock tower situated at the city centre. From 1904, Lyallpur became a district of eastern Punjab, which included the local administrations of Lyallpur, Samundri and Toba Tek Singh, where both Muslim and Sikh populations migrated. The settlement of population in the district, which maintained an essentially agricultural social and economic character, grew rapidly, and as early as 1916 the Lyallpur wheat market established itself as one of the most important in the region. The textile and food processing

lation of Pakistan (205 million, according to 2018 estimates). It is administratively divided into the four districts of Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Lahore and Multan, which have cities of the same name as capitals. Essentially, it is an agricultural region, thanks to the irrigation guaranteed by the waters of its five rivers (the Indus and its tributaries Jhelum, Beas, Chenab, Ravi and Sutlej). *Punjab* derives from the Persian *pang* (five) and *ab* (river). The territory produces wheat, sugar cane, cotton, tobacco, and fruit trees are grown. Industry has developed mainly in branches related to agriculture (fertilisers, agricultural machines, textile plants, sugar factories). In Punjab there is also the federal enclave constituted by the capital of Pakistan, Islamabad.

industries developed from the 1930s onwards. In 1977, the name of the city and district was changed to Faisalabad⁸ (“city of Faisal”), in honour of the late King Faysal of Saudi Arabia, a highly regarded person in Pakistan.⁹

In this expanse of fields that stretch as far as the eye can see, 40 kilometres from the capital Faisalabad, stands the village of Khushpur, the birthplace of Shahbaz Bhatti. Its name means “village of happiness” (in Urdu *khush*, happiness; *pur*, land), and there could be no more appropriate appellation to describe the serene, hard-working and peaceful life of the locals¹⁰. The village has a unique and special connotation: its population is almost entirely made up of Catholics. It is a real rarity in a nation like

⁸ Faisalabad, with its 3.2 million inhabitants, is today, according to the 2017 census, the third most populous city in Pakistan (after Karachi and Lahore). It is a thriving economic and commercial centre and contributes 5 per cent to Pakistan’s annual GDP.

⁹ Faysal ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl Sa‘ūd, (Riyad, 14th April 1906 - Riyad, 25th March 1975), was King of Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975. As a sovereign, he sought to implement a policy of modernisation and reform. Among the main foreign policy themes were pan-Islamism, anti-communism and Palestinian nationalism. During his years in government, he helped to strengthen the political and strategic alliance between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, including by funding research to equip Pakistan with nuclear weapons. He is still a respected and beloved personality in Pakistan. The impressive Faysal Mosque in Islamabad is dedicated to King Faysal, who supported and financed the project. It is the largest mosque in Pakistan and South Asia, and one of the largest in the world.

¹⁰ Khushpur is a village located in the Samundri subdistrict, within the wider Faisalabad district. The British administration identified it as “Chak 51”. Chak is a term in the Punjabi language that indicates a settlement of population settled in a contiguous territory. The chak system was essentially used to collect the taxes of the British Raj era.

Pakistan, where the Muslim population constitutes about 96% of the 210 million inhabitants and Christians are, more or less, around 4 million, almost 2% of the population. The Christian religion is, then, the trademark of this small agricultural settlement of about 5,000 inhabitants, made mostly of simple single-storey brick houses connected by dirt roads.

The “colonies”, meaning these entirely Christian villages, were started by Belgian Capuchin missionaries who, at the end of the 1800s, brought the Gospel to this area of the Indian subcontinent. The first to be baptised needed to develop a sense of mutual solidarity and strengthen their Christian identity, remaining united in a community with an overwhelming Muslim majority. So, the missionaries began to buy land and transfer evangelised families to it, with the aim of protecting and strengthening their faith, allowing them to have a fruitful experience of community life and apostolic solidarity¹¹. Even today in Pakistan, more than a hundred years later, the so-called “colonies” are mono-religious ghettos that gather together the majority of the Christian faithful. Although now other reasons have been added to the original ones,

¹¹ There are 34 villages in Pakistan that have this origin: settlements cared for and built by the missionaries, for the “untouchables” who had converted to the Christian faith. For a valid overview of the origin of Christianity in Pakistan, see the article *Le origini del Pakistan e il ruolo che hanno avuto i cristiani e le altre minoranze* (*The Origins of Pakistan and the Role Played by Christians and Other Minorities*), published by Bishop Anthony Lobo in the magazine “Oasis” in 2005, available in Italian at the link: <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/origine-cristiani-pakistan>

linked to discrimination and the fear of suffering violence and persecution. Central to this is the need for security and protection that Christian families feel in Pakistan: they prefer to have fellow believers alongside them, especially if they have teenage daughters who can become easy prey for Muslim men. Kidnappings for the purpose of marriage and forced conversion to Islam are, in fact, a tragically widespread reality. In the prevailing mindset, which has strengthened over the years, especially among the less educated, members of religious minorities remain “inferior beings.” It is a legacy of the old caste system: the Christian and Hindu communities that remained in Pakistan after the partition from India in 1947 belonged to the lower social groups. That stigma is still felt today, and non-Muslims are often considered second-class citizens. This is also because various changes to the constitution, approved in the 70 years following independence, have in some cases institutionalised discrimination.

But Khushpur really seems like a happy island. Located on the Punjab plain, between Lahore and Multan, the village was founded in 1901 by Belgian Capuchin missionaries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, they bought a vast forest territory in order to gather together the Christian families which were then dispersed in the surrounding area. The founder, Fr. Felix Fink Henricus, was a Belgian Franciscan missionary who had come to Lahore from Antwerp in 1889. A friar with an active, industrious and far-sighted personality, he was the meritorious founder of several other villages such as Mariamabad (the “village of Mary” in the district of Sheikhpura), and Fran-

cisabad (the “village of Francis” in the district of Jhang). *Felix* is the Latin word meaning happy. The village was given the name of Khushpur in honour of Father Felix.

The priest was one of 147 missionaries of the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor of Belgian nationality who travelled and worked tirelessly in the Indian subcontinent, between 1888 and 2011, leaving indelible traces of the spread of the Gospel and of the establishment of Christian communities. Pakistan today owes much to their evangelising passion and their gratuitous commitment to human development. The story of that extraordinary missionary adventure that brought the religious followers of the saint of Assisi from the old continent to South Asia is linked to that evangelising impulse that went through the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century. After the establishment of the diocese of Lahore, then in India, decided by Pope Leo XIII on 1st September 1886, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (today Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples), acknowledged that the Capuchin fathers were already working in that region and noted that “because of the long distances and various difficult situations, this diocese needs more apostolic men for ministry,” entrusted the care of the diocese of Lahore to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin of the Belgian province, with the hope that “it can always be fulfilled for the benefit of the salvation of souls and the propagation of the faith.”¹²

¹² Decree *Datum Romae ex ex aedibus S. Congr. de Propag. Fide* XV Novembris An. 1888. LS Johannes Cardinal Simeoni, Praefectus.

In 2018, after more than 132 years of service to the local church, studded with the foundation of countless churches, schools, missions, and villages, especially in Punjab, Leopold Hugo Evens, the last Belgian monk and missionary remaining in the “land of the pure,” took his leave and left Pakistan, where the legacy of the Franciscans is more alive than ever. Evens carried out his pastoral service for 48 years (1970-2018), with “zeal and passion for the proclamation of the Gospel,” said Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw, leading the archdiocese of Lahore in the farewell. The Capuchin friars in Lahore, today have custody of Mariam Siddeeqa, a well-established local religious province connected to Belgium, but now autonomous, governed by Pakistani friars and thriving with new vocations to consecrated life and the priesthood. “We are grateful for the service rendered by the Belgian Capuchin friars, who have worked hard in this land to keep the Punjab church alive since 1886,” remarked Lawrence John Saldanha, emeritus archbishop of Lahore, calling them “the builders of the local church,” and gratefully remembering their contribution also for the training of seminarians and nuns.

Fr. Emmanuel Parvez is a native of the same village founded by Father Felix, a place where the imprint of the missionaries can still be recognised and whose spirit and evangelical witness can still be breathed. Today, the parish priest appreciates and praises the living faith of the inhabitants: “In Khushpur the seed of the Gospel planted a hundred years ago is bearing abundant fruit.

People's faith is solid. The village is full of vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and marriage. It has produced two bishops, John Joseph and Rufin Anthony, over 50 priests and over 100 nuns, alongside committed Christian lay people such as Shahbaz Bhatti and the theologian Paul Earnest. The village also boasts hundreds of catechists. This is why it is affectionately called the Vatican of Pakistan," Fr. Emmanuel notes, recalling that numerous Catholic institutes, schools and colleges are located in the village: the national centre for the formation of catechists; the women's high school run by the Dominican nuns, with an attached centre for the professional training of girls; the men's hostel and the adult education centre under the aegis of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; the female community of the Third Order of Saint Dominic; and, today, there is also the "Saint Anthony of Padova" training centre, built in the complex dedicated to Shahbaz Bhatti.

A favourable and rather homogeneous social environment from a religious point of view, has also allowed, over the years, the foundation of cooperative bodies for the excavation of wells, the canalisation of water, the purchase of tractors and other agricultural machinery, and the marketing of agricultural products. There are elementary and middle schools in the village, which are lacking in nearby villages. "This confirms the traditional commitment of Pakistani Christians to the education sector," Fr. Emmanuel notes. Talking of the flourishing pastoral life in the parish church of St. Fi-

delis, the only one in the village, he says: “There is a lively, attentive and joyful participation of men, women, the elderly, children, and whole families at worship, liturgies, pastoral and social activities.”

One of the qualifying moments during the year, which well expresses and manifests the spirit of the local Catholic community, is the feast of Christ the King, the Sunday on which the Catholic Church concludes the liturgical year. “In Khushpur,” says Fr. Emmanuel, “it is considered the most important celebration after Easter and Christmas. On that day the whole town is decorated and festively adorned. Preparations begin several days in advance. Verses of the Bible are displayed on the walls alongside posters and drawings illustrating biblical episodes. In honour of Christ the King, a solemn procession takes place along the 24 streets of the town, with the participation of students from five schools. Everywhere you see frescoes that depict the miracles of Jesus. People place altars in front of the houses, expressing their devotion, faith and love for the Saviour. The bishop and the priests walk in the streets carrying the Blessed Sacrament, while hymns are sung in honour of Christ Jesus.”

Shahbaz Bhatti had been no stranger to this spirit since he was a boy, and in particular to this celebration. Indeed, he was particularly attached to it. “He always involved young people in the preparation of this wonderful spiritual event,” recalls his cousin, “inviting them to celebrate the occasion together.” It is not surprising that the street where his family lived was de-

clared the best decorated for 15 years in a row. In this way Shahbaz showed his great devotion and his zeal for the Lord.”

The Catholic community of Khushpur continues to be the cradle of a Catholicism characterised, in full Franciscan spirit, by simplicity, meekness, purity of heart, and humility. It is no coincidence that it continues to generate vocations to consecrated life or lay Catholics seriously engaged in social work. There is a deep faith, deep-rooted and sincere, among the people of Khushpur. There is active participation in worship, the sacraments, community prayer, sharing the word of God, educational, charitable, and social activities. In a society mostly composed of simple people, sometimes uneducated, spiritual life is intense, rich and penetrating: always drawing from the source, which is Christ himself, it always nourishes and generates new children.

One of these was Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, who lived his childhood, his formative years, and his growth here. This privileged environment, a sort of oasis of the spirit and of Christian charity, was the crib in which a free, fruitful spirit was born and developed, always anchored in the Gospel of Christ. A spirit which was nourished by the word of God and, filled with the Holy Spirit, was animated by the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Clothed in humility, gentleness, mercy and minority, Clement Shahbaz Bhatti was a worthy descendant and disciple of those Franciscans who came to plant the seed of the Gospel over a century before.

The childhood of an angel

“His family was deeply Catholic and educated him in faith,” Fr. Emmanuel Parvez, who spent his childhood and youth with Shahbaz, tells us, “As a child he attended the village church every day, attended catechism and received the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation with joy. He was a promising student and participated in all the debates organised by the school. Already at that time everyone felt that he was destined to become a leader.” The sense of belonging to a family was very strong in such a small and isolated village. Furthermore, the Catholic faith constituted an essential element of it, which helped to create and maintain human and spiritual unity, in the family as well as in the whole community.

Fr. Emmanuel, who also grew up in that environment, still remembers: “Our grandfather had six sons and four daughters who continued to live in the same house with their families, even after getting married¹³. All of us grandchildren had fun together and lived happily, sharing simple everyday life. That large family was a training ground for human relationships. I remember that we used to get together and play under a big tree, which was our meeting point. On long, hot summer af-

¹³ Reconstructing a branch of the family tree, Francis P. Bhatti and Taban Mariam Bhatti were Shahbaz’s paternal grandparents. The two had six sons and four daughters: the males were Caesar, Issar, Rahmet (Fr. Emmanuel Parvez’s father), Charles, Peter, and Jacob Bhatti (Clement Shahbaz’s father); the females were Kesero, Sardara, Sadiq Bibi, and Magdalene Bhatti.

ternoons we were all there, sitting and chatting. Sometimes we performed the miracles and parables of Jesus and each of us played a different role. Shahbaz was the youngest of all and did not express himself well because of his age, but he always nurtured and expressed a strong desire to participate in these dramatisations of the Gospel. We cousins and relatives were impressed by his zeal and faith, and we often chose him to play an angel.”

It is the figure of the angel which will remain sewn on Shahbaz for his whole life: “Once, during Lent,” continues his priest cousin, “we decided to perform the passion and death of Jesus. We chose the episode in the Gospel of Luke in which the story of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane is told and who, in his agony, sweats drops of blood. In that passage it is said that an angel of the Lord appears in the garden of olives, come down from heaven to comfort him. As usual, the role of the latter had been entrusted to Shahbaz, who embodied him so well that we were all moved. Improvising, he suddenly had such compassionate and loving words that even the boy who was playing Jesus felt filled by happiness and peace. We decided to repeat the performance for our parents, friends and neighbours. Everyone appreciated it very much and was impressed, in particular, by the character of the angel.”

A few days later, when asked what he had felt in playing that part, Shahbaz said: “I was thinking of all the people who are sick and in difficulty. Jesus suffered for those people and I want to love him for his goodness. I

felt like I had really been in Jerusalem, in Gethsemane. I thought I wanted to help Christ, as he loved and suffered for all of us.”¹⁴

Fr. Emmanuel remarks: “This was the role he played throughout his life: an angel who consoled everyone who had faced violence, oppression, persecution and death. He always gave strength to those who suffered. He bravely faced the danger of death. People were comforted by his presence. For the minorities of Pakistan he was an angel of peace, hope, courage and steadfastness. Many people in our country still remember him as a guardian angel. His jovial character, the struggle he led, the difficult path he followed and his resistance – always lived in the name of the Gospel – have conquered everyone’s hearts. Women, children, workers, workers in brick factories and all the oppressed considered him an angel sent by God to encourage and defend those who were in difficulty or risked their lives.”

Sandstorms occur quite often in the Indian subcontinent, especially in May and June. Usually the storms have a limited duration, even of only two hours, but when they arrive everything is covered with dust and the sky darkens. For a while everything stops, espe-

¹⁴ The words, declarations, dialogues and speeches attributed to Shahbaz Bhatti and reported in this book have been collected, in a careful reconstruction work carried out by the authors, thanks to talks with relatives, friends, acquaintances, and Bhatti’s work companions, who all shared their memories; some passages have been found in Pakistan in unpublished notes and documents; to a small extent they are taken from articles or television reports published by the Pakistani mass media in Urdu.

cially human activities that take place outdoors. Pakistani children are quite troubled by these phenomena. In Fr. Emmanuel's memoirs, he recalls an episode linked to those storms: "Once we cousins – there were 14 of us – were lounging in the fields in Khushpur, eating fruit from wild plants and trees, when a storm suddenly darkened the sky. We were children, only a few of us were over ten, and Shahbaz was the youngest. Frightened, we found shelter under a very large and robust tree. We held hands and sat down. Close to each other, nervously waiting for the calm to return. It was evening, and we knew the sun would soon set. Some of us were very worried and started to cry. George and Sylvester worked hard to console the most scared ones. We formed a small circle and tried to do our best to protect the others, especially the little ones. Suddenly, Shahbaz shouted, 'Let's pray and ask the Virgin Mary to help us and intercede for us.' Happy with that proposal, we began to recite the rosary and invoke Our Lady. Shortly after, the sandstorm ceased, we all felt great relief. A little light soon returned and we hurried to reach our houses in the village. On our way back, we were all very happy and thanked Shahbaz for his idea of turning to Mary. He simply replied that it was what his mother did when she had a problem or difficulty."

Like every child, Shahbaz had embraced the testimony of faith and the example of his parents. Fr. Emmanuel observes: "Shahbaz always appreciated very much what his mother and father had done for him. His parents taught him to trust in the Lord and to ask

for Mary's intercession." The family was the holy place where his human personality flourished and developed, where his faith was nourished and his spiritual path took its first steps. There, in the warmth of the family home, Shahbaz developed his profound awareness of being a "beloved disciple" and of belonging to God, of being a son of God, a precious creature, for whom the Redeemer gave his life.

This awareness grew over the years, thanks to prayer, the education he received, and his regular attendance at the parish church of St. Fidelis in Khushpur. Here, little Shahbaz was baptised, as is the custom among the local families, on 10th September 1968, the day after his birth, 9th September, celebrated by his parents, siblings, relatives, and friends who welcomed him with joy into the Christian community, the newest member of Jacob and Marta Bhatti's family.

Little Shahbaz soon showed, even from elementary school, interest in the catechism taught by the parish, which prepared him to receive the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation – a practice also widely followed by the local church. They were not and were not considered "lessons" to be learnt through the study of school textbooks, quite the opposite: they were an occasion to encounter Christ, which took place through the reading of the Gospel. Thanks to that community reading in the company of other children, always guided by a catechist or a priest, little Shahbaz got in touch with God and tuned his heart in harmony with the Trinity.

That 9th March 1975¹⁵ was a moment of immense joy and great celebration for the whole Bhatti family. Shahbaz, together with other children from the village, received the most precious gift: Christ himself had entered his heart through the Eucharist. Christ himself had become flesh of his flesh, sanctifying his whole person. A gift of which Shahbaz would always have a profound awareness: the Eucharist became the centre of his life, the pivotal point to hold on to firmly in the most difficult moments. That's not all: during the same Eucharistic celebration, Shahbaz – a child not yet eight years old – also received the sacrament of Confirmation, which makes people “perfect Christians,” confirming their faith and placing the seal of the Holy Spirit upon them.

From the beginning it was clear to him what Confirmation really was: not so much the confirmation that the children give to the “yes” already said by their parents at their baptism. On that occasion Shahbaz was confirmed by God the Father who, after giving his life and generating him in baptism, still said his “yes” giving his strength, so that his creature could “succeed” in life. The Father, anointing him and consecrating him like King David, said to him: “Go, Shahbaz, I will be with you on the roads of the world.” With the gift of the Holy Spirit, with the gift of Confirmation and his strength, God assured

¹⁵ The date of baptism, First Communion and Confirmation of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti can be found in the records of the parish church of St. Fideles in Khushpur, consulted by the authors of this book and attested by the parish priest Fr. Anjum Nazir, in a certificate issued on 8th May 2019.

Clement Shahbaz of his presence and grace, to help him carry out his mission to the fullest in this world.

Fr. Emmanuel notes: “Confirmation, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, was a very important moment for Shahbaz. Experiencing the gift of the Spirit is extraordinary and indelible: it means being permeated by the Spirit who allows you to believe, hope, and love. Shahbaz experienced the outpouring of the Spirit and did it many other times in his life: faced by the ever changing and unpredictable moments of his life, he would respond by living Christian strength, hope, and joy.”

Young Shahbaz lived in Khushpur until he was 15 years old. His charisma and personality soon became known to everyone. He shone like a bright star, recalls Fr. Emmanuel, which illuminated others with its own light: “Even at a young age, we often saw him in the village chatting with other boys and girls. He stopped to talk about Jesus and the Gospel with them and invited them to attend Sunday Mass: there we would meet face to face with God, in the company of Jesus, he told us. That was his privileged company.”

Shahbaz grew in wisdom and grace. And, in his journey of growth, he became aware of the gift of faith, which guided his vocation and mission; it nourished the virtue of hope, acknowledging in God the giver of all that is good. Doing his will was the way to happiness. The proclamation of the love of God, given in Christ Jesus, had so deeply affected him that it marked his history forever. From this spiritual inspiration and from his authentic encounter with Christ, Shahbaz discovered that

God is hidden in the faces of the poor. He discovered fraternity with everyone, starting from the weakest, he discovered free love, the preferential love for those who are in distress or suffering. “Loving,” he often repeated, “means not starting from our point of view, but from that of those in need.” A love that does not discover the face of the weak, the poor, and the oppressed would not be love at all: it is not only a question of “giving” but of valuing the presence of the other, his life, itself the image and gift of God.

And so, from childhood, Shahbaz was not afraid of and did not avoid beggars and vagrants who sometimes roamed Pakistani cities. One of his charisms and innate abilities was to be able to relate to everyone, from the most important people to the poorest or most marginalised. And as a child he already showed attention to others and that impulse of generosity and mercy which is ‘having a heart for the poor.’ “Many years ago,” Fr. Emmanuel recalls, “a boy from Khushpur became a beggar. He stopped working and put on a long red tunic. Around his neck he had garlands of shells, bells, and coloured stones and he let his hair grow, which he wore very long. He looked quite frightening and very unusual. During the day he went from house to house to beg, and was considered crazy and good-for-nothing. People feared that he had a bad influence on young people. To everyone’s surprise, Shahbaz was also seen in his company. His father and relatives were very worried. Jacob called his son to his room and asked him for explanations, urging him not to hang out with this unsavoury person.”

Shahbaz surprised everyone by saying these words: “He is not a bad person. I would like to try to bring him to his senses and that is not possible by force or by arguing with him. It’s necessary to stand by him with wisdom, prudence and friendship. You’ll see that soon he will take off his long dress, cut his hair and throw away his strange necklaces.” Not long after that, the so-called “beggar” turned into a distinguished person. He began to work and openly told everyone how grateful he was to Shahbaz Bhatti who, thanks to his beneficial influence, had convinced him to change his life.

In that oasis of Khushpur, lost among the boundless plains of Punjab, during a carefree and happy childhood, Clement Shahbaz Bhatti laid the foundations for the development of his personality as an adult and a mature Christian. He lived a righteous faith, grounded in listening to the word of God, in diligent reading of the Gospel, in receiving the sacraments. He was animated by a “certain hope,” founded not on human effort or merit but on the fidelity of a God who makes himself present, accompanies, guides and saves his people. He practiced charity, becoming “close” to all men, with the spirit of the good Samaritan, who stopped, saw, and touched suffering, and consoled suffering humanity.

CHAPTER II

Adolescence and youth: his socio-political commitment is born

The boys who lived in Khushpur were quite lucky because there was a Catholic school in the village, attended by children from at least eight villages in the surrounding area. Shahbaz attended elementary school at St. Thomas High School in Khushpur, run at that time by Lasallian brothers, which, like all Catholic schools in Pakistan, welcomed students of all social classes and backgrounds, whatever their religion or culture. In 1970s Pakistan, religious discrimination or an emphasis on the beliefs professed by individual families – which in the following decades would become a factor of polarisation – was not noticeable in society. Often students of various places organised sports competitions, which saw children and teenagers from neighbouring villages, families and different communities meet to have fun together. Those of Khushpur (Chak 51) often played with those of the neighbours in Chak 52, Naradada, and Chak 23 but, at times, sports competition could degenerate into conflict and quarrels.”He was only a boy, but when

Shahbaz learned of one of these episodes,” recalls Fr. Emmanuel, “he immediately tried to mediate and restore peace. He intervened before the dispute could turn into a religious problem. He invited the Muslim and Christian boys to the sports field behind the school and started talking about the need to establish good relationships with each other.” Bhatti turned to them saying: “Sport forms our character, it brings us closer to each other, it should make us friends, not enemies. It doesn’t matter if we win or lose, we have to stick together. Sport teaches us to respect and accept others.” That message reached everyone. “Even today his classmates and other students remember him as a friend and peacemaker,” notes Fr. Emmanuel.

From his early years of school, Bhatti showed his undoubted leadership qualities and his charisma. At the age of eleven he joined a group that he had helped to create with a group of peers in Khushpur, called “The voice of justice” – that was his first step towards a social commitment that would lead him, in the long run, to active political life. His desire, from then on, was to benefit the poor, oppressed, weak, and marginalised, and to help build a society, a country, a nation, a world of justice and peace. Shahbaz was very clear that he wanted to and could give his contribution: he felt co-responsible for the common good. “The group,” recalls his brother Paul Bhatti, who in some ways continues his social and political commitment, “was aimed at combating the inequalities and injustices present in society, starting from the

territory of the village¹⁶. The boys gathered in the classrooms of the school, left free at the end of the lessons, and discussed solidarity, poverty, equality and charity until the evening. From there aid initiatives to the poor of the village began. Shahbaz showed, *in nuce*, the qualities of a creator and organiser of events, activities, and public demonstrations, as the result of the commitment of a collective movement.

“Shahbaz was very fond of participating in debates. He started doing it in the village and at school. Often the teachers organised meetings on a variety of social issues and Shahbaz participated enthusiastically. He also planned them in the village and passionately defended the rights of farmers and workers,” recalls Fr. Emmanuel, adding, “Once, the debate had the title ‘Work is more important than education’. Shahbaz, then 15, opposed this statement with wit and intelligence, defending the right to education as if children all over the world were his. Everyone appreciated his arguments and proposals. The public began to applaud him and he received much praise also from those who had to support the opposing argument.”

This mobilisation, at the beginning, was not so welcome in the family. His father, Jacob, considered it a distraction for his son and, in a rather intense confrontation, urged Shahbaz to put aside social and political activism to devote himself instead to studies and become an established professional in his field, following the example

¹⁶ P. BHATTI, *Shahbaz. La voce della giustizia*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI), 2017.

of his older brothers. According to family stories, for a certain period Jacob took away Shahbaz's "weekly pocket money" to try to dissuade him, in some way, encouraging him to give up his "great ideas" and rather think about his education and career. But Shahbaz was not convinced. He already had in his mind and heart the far wider horizon of his mission in the world. And the village of Khushpur, then, was starting to feel rather small.

It was at that stage, around the mid-1980s that Shahbaz left his native village and moved to Faisalabad to continue his studies. He was 15 years old. He was admitted to state secondary school and later to university. In the city school, whose breadth, structure and amplitude far exceeded that of the village, Shahbaz came up against a harsh reality. As he had already heard from stories of people close to him, prejudices and social and religious discrimination were widespread, so much so that some students were discouraged from continuing their studies. In particular, Christian pupils suffered greatly: they were marginalised because of their religion and their social class. Shahbaz did not take long to make himself known in the school environment: "He organised meetings and debates during the summer holidays," continues Fr. Emmanuel, "Involving children and young people to discuss various social, religious and cultural problems. He also invited villagers to these meetings. And he explained that he wanted to raise people's awareness of some thorny issues and taboos that existed in society. He wanted to help people to free themselves of obstacles, prejudices and inferiority complexes."

Thanks to the village “gym” and to these experiences within the walls of educational institutions, the oratory qualities of the young man grew. “Later, having become a leader,” the priest recalls, “Speaking at rallies or participating in radio and television programmes, he often hypnotised the spectators with his stringent arguments and his eloquence. Those debates from his high-school years bore fruit in abundance – people participated in large numbers and appreciated his passionate spirit and the incisiveness of his reasoning, but also the hope that emerged powerfully from his heart.”

The teenage Shahbaz was living through a delicate phase in the history of his country. In the late 1970s, the regime of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1924-1988), began in Pakistan. A general who came to power in a coup in 1977, would turn the country in the direction of Islamisation of society in the 1980s. It was a calculated choice to please Islamist religious parties and obtain the necessary consent to maintain power. In that decade (Zia governed until 1988), an unfavourable climate of growing hostility towards non-Muslim citizens and the Christian and Hindu religious minorities gradually began to develop in the country, and a mentality imbued with discrimination and intolerance, harbingers of verbal and physical violence. Extremist groups increased their social and cultural influence day by day, such that the episodes of exclusion aimed at damaging minorities began to become more and more widespread and evident. In schools and universities, for example, Christian teachers and students were not allowed to eat meals in the can-

teen with Muslim students, in common rooms – they had to find another environment. The whole country found itself pervaded by a wave of hatred and violence, generated by some legislative measures promoted by the government, which legitimised and legalised discriminatory practices. These included the notorious “blasphemy law”¹⁷ which would bring a lot of suffering in the future and have a decisive influence on the violent conclusion to Bhatti’s existence. The same constitutional charter of Pakistan, which had been approved in 1947 on a secular basis, modelled on the British system, was modified by introducing passages and regulations in harmony with *sharia*, the Islamic law.

These themes and challenges came overwhelmingly into the horizon of the young Shahbaz Bhatti of Khushpur, who lived through those years of social and political turmoil in Faisalabad. There were numerous schools and universities in the city. Many young people came from the provincial towns and villages and as a result there was a high demand for student accommodation. However, the government-run facilities were often full and there were few places available for students from religious minorities. “Those few Christians who man-

¹⁷ These are articles 295.b and 295.c of the Pakistan Penal Code. Legislation on blasphemy already existed, a legacy of the British Code: article 295 prohibited damaging any place of worship or sacred object, of any faith; and article 295.a prohibited insulting religious beliefs. General Zia introduced two further paragraphs and increased the penalties: 295.b punished the vilification of the Koran and 295.c forbade defamation of the prophet Muhammad. The penalties also include life imprisonment or the death sentence.

aged to get a room were often mistreated and harassed by young Muslims. They were harassed and invited to convert to Islam,” notes Fr. Emmanuel. To meet these needs, the diocese of Faisalabad decided to create a residence that, although intended for students of all faiths and social classes, would above all welcome the Christian ones, the poorest. After completing his studies, Shahbaz Bhatti was also housed in one of these facilities and stayed there for about two years.

“He attended the morning mass with his companions, before the lessons, and in the evening he recited the rosary with the Dominican friars who ran the college,” Fr. Emmanuel recalls, “He also regularly helped the friars take care of the garden and in the kitchen. Sometimes, in his spare time, he sat with friends on the lawn to talk about ideas and projects. A circle of very close-knit young people soon formed, discussing the problems facing universities, often controlled by Islamic groups that were becoming increasingly aggressive. Shahbaz was very upset seeing how Christian students and those belonging to other minorities were treated. They were considered unclean. Sometimes they had to bring their own glasses to drink water and tea cups from home, because the others didn’t want to get contaminated. The Muslim boys refused to eat with them and some were even driven out of the dormitories.”

Bhatti did not remain indifferent to this climate of intolerance which he considered a betrayal of the authentic spirit of Pakistan, and thought of creating an association to support equal rights. He said to his com-

rades: “Pakistan is also our country. We will not accept that there is discrimination and prejudice in educational institutions. Education is light and those who are governed by hatred remain in the dark. Education frees us from all human and social evils.” The young man was well aware of the direction needed for Christians in Pakistan: to access education as a way of emancipation, to combat any form of “legalised discrimination” that trampled on dignity and human rights. For that reason he insisted, even then, on the concept of citizenship, which went beyond every boundary of caste, religion, social class, and culture.

This idea, which accompanied him throughout his life, was evident in the celebration of 23rd March, a national holiday in Pakistan¹⁸. On that day in 1940 the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent decided to ask for the creation of a nation independent from India, and at that moment the same idea of *Pak-stan*, the “land of the pure” was born. “Shahbaz Bhatti always participated in these events of a national nature, as an honest citizen faithful to his homeland,” recalls his cousin Fr. Emmanuel, “On the occasion of the Republic Day, he joined the young Muslims and their leaders to support the values of freedom and equality, also defending the cause of those

¹⁸ Yaum-e-Pakistan or Pakistan Resolution Day, also known as Republic Day, is a national holiday commemorating the Lahore resolution passed on 23rd March 1940. It also commemorates the founding of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on 23rd March 1956. On this national holiday, military parades, rallies with speeches by political authorities, and public gatherings are organised in many cities.

who were deprived of fundamental rights. On those occasions, and in the name of those principles, he started his battle for the rights of religious minorities, hanging banners and posters and distributing flyers to support them.” For example, “he highlighted the mistreatment and suffering of Christian and Hindu students and, in that case, he faced fierce opposition. Nonetheless, he could not and did not want to stand aside or show indifference. He started campaigning to defend the rights of young people, victims of prejudice, hatred and injustice.” On national holidays, he loved to repeat: “Why do you close your eyes and mouth to the plight of Christians and Hindus who suffer in our country? Why don’t we talk about their pain, their misery and their conditions? It is necessary to do this if we proclaim equality, justice and respect for the rights of all, especially in our beloved nation.”

Realising the urgency of the situation and focusing more and more on his vocation for political social commitment, confident that he could help change Pakistan and make it “a better country”, in 1985, at just 17, Shahbaz Bhatti created a group called the Christian Liberation Front, with the main objective of protecting and promoting the rights of the vulnerable and of those who saw their dignity and fundamental rights trampled on, that is, especially Christians. The organisation had non-violent struggle in its DNA (of an eminently evangelical nature and root) for the liberation, emancipation, social and cultural promotion of Christians. Students belonging to religious minorities regained strength and hope

and all decided to support the movement created thanks to the foresight of a brave new leader.

Politics as a passion for humanity

Shahbaz Bhatti followed a path of political commitment which, for the Christian, constitutes privileged ground in which to exercise the charity of the disciples of Christ in a serious and passionate way, at the service of the common good, in the heart of the city of men. That was for him the path of holiness. Echoing, throughout his political experience, the words of Pope Pius XI who was not afraid to say: “The field of politics, which concerns the interests of society as a whole, is the largest field of charity, political charity, and it can be said that there are no greater ones, except that of religion.”¹⁹ A concept reiterated by Paul VI who spoke of politics as “the demanding way of living Christian commitment in the service of others.”²⁰ Benedict XVI, addressing the administrators of public affairs, also noted: “On the other hand, the reason that moves and stimulates your industrious and laborious presence in the various spheres of public life can only be the will to dedicate yourself to the good of citizens, and therefore a clear expression and an evident sign of love. Thus, politics is deeply ennobled, becoming a high form of charity.”²¹

¹⁹ PIUS XI, Speech of 18th December 1927, at the Italian Catholic University Federation.

²⁰ PAUL VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, n. 46.

²¹ BENEDICT XVI affirmed this in his speech with the authorities on

The example given by Shahbaz Bhatti expresses this fully and eloquently: the Pakistani leader put into practice what French historian and Jesuit Michel de Certeau (1936-1986) defines as “a loving adhesion to the community of men.” Precisely that passionate spirit and that momentum of love for humanity guided the steps of Shahbaz Bhatti who, devoid of any personal or purely selfish interest, zealously dedicated his life to serving in politics. His presence in the *polis* has been linked, since its dawn, to the inalienable desire for justice that dwelt in his heart, and was animated by a sincere charity, by the love he nourished towards humanity.

Shahbaz began his path of attention to public life, to the complex dynamics of society and politics, to the demands of justice, in a very simple and humble way. Starting from grassroots in his birthplace of Khushpur, he was always in the company of the poor and suffering. During school he helped his classmates in difficulty. Very often farmers and workers talked to him about their problems. He used to visit the workers at the brick factories and other workers, and sometimes organised small seminars for them, to reflect on and discuss their rights, their hardships and possible concrete solutions.

“In the first period of his struggle,” Fr. Emmanuel recalls, “He did not have the support of his family and was not helped by any institution. He was self-made,

the occasion of the VII World Meeting of Families (Milan, 2nd June 2012). The text of the speech is included in: *Benedict XVI, Politics. “Elevata forma di carità”* (“Elevated form of charity”), Vatican Publishing House and Piccola Casa Editrice, Rome 2013.

in the true sense of the words. People soon began to regard him as the leader of the poor and suffering. He had no money or property. His closest friends collected small donations, gathering the sums necessary to organise small demonstrations. Sometimes a classroom or club was rented in the city, in Faisalabad, when Shahbaz held conferences.”

In the city and throughout the province of Punjab the fame of the Christian Liberation Front and that young man of high hopes began to spread. Activists, civil society organisations and communities also started to meet with him in the provincial capital, Lahore. There, Shahbaz decided to continue his studies, enrolling in the faculty of political science. “For their residence and activities, Shahbaz and some of his companions rented a small house in Lahore, opposite the Fatima Memorial Hospital. The area was mostly inhabited by families. Shahbaz and his friends were unmarried and, in the beginning, were viewed with some skepticism and suspicion by the residents. But then, thanks to the discipline and friendly character they showed, they won the hearts of the locals. Little by little, they gathered young people and adults around them and became a group committed to supporting the rights of the poor and those who suffered in silence from injustices, abuse or violence.”

Shahbaz Bhatti and members of the Front worked for several years promoting ideas of fairness, justice, truth and non-violence. Over time, the name of this small organisation grew in popularity. And, in the meantime, many members of the Hindu and Sikh communities also

began to participate in the demonstrations, seminars and parades organised by the Front. This interreligious contagion encouraged Bhatti and so he suggested the idea of joining forces, broadening the consensus base so that the struggle for human rights did not only concern the Christian community. Shahbaz declared that he wanted to be “the voice of minorities and voiceless people.” In thinking, sharing ideas, debate, and action for justice, the project to found a platform that would include all the religious minorities in Pakistan took shape.

Fr. Emmanuel recalls a symbolic episode: “In 1992 Nehmet Ahmar, a Christian teacher, was unjustly accused of blasphemy and mercilessly beaten to death by some fanatics in a police station. The real reason for that crime was envy and hatred of Christians who lived in the Faisalabad district. Shahbaz Bhatti went there and was deeply shocked to see that the small Christian community was organising itself to emigrate.” He encouraged everyone to stay by saying, “Pakistan is our country. Our founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, said that people of all religions are free to follow their beliefs and faiths. All citizens of Pakistan have the same rights. We condemn discrimination and violence.” He also asked the police to intervene and protect that scared little community.

The socio-political activity of the young man, who continued his studies but at the same time did not give up being present alongside those who suffered, is filled with these episodes. He followed the progress of national political life with constancy and attention, especially by observing those measures that could have a heavy

influence on the life of the population. At that time, at the age of only 23 Shahbaz Bhatti intervened and committed himself to raising public awareness to protest against a measure promoted by Abdul Sattar Khan Niazi, then Federal Minister for Religious Affairs, head of the religious political party Jamiat Ulama-e-Pakistan. In October 1992, Niazi announced the proposal to include a specific item declaring religious faith on the national identity card. Religious minority groups immediately condemned this move, stating that its implementation would confirm the tendencies towards polarisation and discrimination that already existed in Pakistani society, damaging the spirit of unity. The underlying intent, in fact, was to mark a difference and declare minorities “second-class citizens”: associations, groups, communities, and forums related to minorities began to mobilize against that eventuality. Bhatti organised a procession in Faisalabad attended by thousands of people. Extremist groups like Jamiat-ul-Islam and Anjuman Talba-e-Islam began to oppose and show hostility towards Shahbaz and his companions. To counteract these actions, Shahbaz wrote a manifesto that stated these words: “Being in the minority is not a crime and demanding that one’s rights be recognised is not a crime. We will continue our struggle peacefully until all minorities are accepted as equal citizens.” The Catholic bishops of Pakistan offered their full support for the mobilisation, condemning what they defined in an open letter to the prime minister as “a form of *apartheid* in the name of religion.” There were numerous initiatives of a nation-

al nature and even a hunger strike proclaimed by Bishop John Joseph, then head of the diocese of Faisalabad, a man of prophetic status with whom Bhatti had established a far-sighted understanding. It had an effect: the government decided to cancel that decision.

These were the first times Shahbaz publicly exposed himself to issues relating to the rights of religious minorities and, from then onwards, there were attempts to intimidate him by militant groups and Islamic extremists who saw Clement Shahbaz Bhatti as a potential enemy and an obstacle to their designs. His family began to fear for him and discouraged him from continuing such full direct involvement. Some family friends tried to convince him to stay away from politics, but those suggestions were of no use: Shahbaz, in his twenties, animated by the great ideals of his youth, was determined to carry out his mission in a peaceful but resolute way, conscious of a call that came from above.

At the end of the 1980s, after the end of the period of the Zia-ul-Haq government, there was the political rise of Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, who was prime minister from 1990 to 1993 and then again from 1997 to 1999. The decade of the 1990s marked the full human and Christian maturation and the definitive consecration of Shahbaz Bhatti as a social and political leader. The urgency of power and having to be a point of reference in the non-violent struggle for the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan and for the affirmation of “full citizenship” became increasingly clear in him. Blatant episodes of collective violence against Christians, such as

that of Shanti Nagar²², acted as an alarm bell and motivated Shahbaz more and more to continue his cultural and political commitment.

In August 1998 Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, a businessman, surprised many people by trying to get the 15th amendment to Pakistan's constitution approved: it was the so-called *Sharia Bill*, with which it was intended to establish the supremacy of the Koran and of Islamic law.²³ Despite opposition from secular and liberal parties, the bill was approved by the National Assembly on 28th August 1998. "This meant the political death of all religious minorities. It would have been the end of Pakistan and the birth of an Islamic state," notes Fr. Emmanuel, recalling the widespread mobilisation, concern, and disdain that animated the people at that historic juncture.

It was a decisive step and Shahbaz, with great courage, fought a political battle of great importance, given that, in that case, he saw the future of his country, of Pakistan as envisaged by the founder Ali Jinnah, at risk. Before the law was presented to the Senate for final approval, Shahbaz Bhatti travelled the country far and wide: he met Altaf Husain, leader of the Muttahida Qaumi Move-

²² On 6th February 1997 thousands of Muslim militants attacked the village of Shanti Nagar, in Punjab, made up largely of Christian families from the Salvation Army, organising a mass lynching for an alleged blasphemy episode. 785 houses and 4 churches were destroyed, while 2,500 terrified Christians were forced to flee.

²³ The amendment would have turned Pakistan into an Islamic theocracy, defining the prophet Muhammad's Quran and Sunnah as "the supreme law of Pakistan," and assigning the federal government the task of imposing and enforcing *sharia* law in the nation.

ment, and Benazir Bhutto, head of the People's Party of Pakistan, at that time the leader of the opposition. He also went to the province of Balochistan to speak with Akbar Bhugti, the leader of the Jamhoori Watan Party. In Peshawar he met the leaders of the Pakhtunkhwa National Party. "He really did his best to weave a political canvas that was able to stop that measure," recalls his priest cousin, "Everything was at stake. On 24th October 1998, two months after approval in the Lower House, Shahbaz Bhatti invited 25 political parties to oppose the 15th amendment. Thanks to his courage, his ability to connect political and social forces, and his tenacity, he succeeded in his aim. That amendment did not pass to the Senate, to the great relief of much of the country. The well-known writer Ahmad Saleem talks about it in his book *Pakistan and Minorities*²⁴, with great appreciation."

In this regard, it is worth mentioning two episodes, symptomatic of the personality, the clarity of ideas, and the moral strength that Bhatti, at around the age of 30, had acquired. Fr. Emmanuel recalls the episodes which Shahbaz himself told him: "When he went to discuss the 15th amendment with Nawab Akbar Bugti, he organised a big banquet in his honour and wanted to give him a Kalashnikov automatic rifle. Shahbaz thanked him, but politely refused that gift, synonymous with violence, because he believed in non-violence and democracy. Another time, a person with a bag full of dollars came

²⁴ A. SALEEM AHAD, *Pakistan Aur Aqlietain* (Pakistan and minorities), Karachi 2000.

to Shahbaz Bhatti, asking him to stop the mobilisation campaign. It was an attempt at corruption. Also in that case, Shahbaz Bhatti categorically refused, stating rigorously that he did not want to betray his conscience and the people who believed in him.”

Following what his conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, told him to do – dedicate himself to the mission of the common good in the service of politics – was not an easy path, quite the contrary. The path was fraught with obstacles and traps. Temptations were ready to infiltrate and tarnish a mirrored political career. The more honest, transparent, altruistic and selfless the commitment, the more obstacles and stumbling blocks there will be that put the spirit to the test. For this reason it is essential to remain anchored to a force which is transcendent, which comes from above.

“All sincere leaders in their life path must face hostility, discouragement, derision and humiliation,” Fr. Emmanuel observes. “It is like a test to verify their leadership, just as gold is purified by fire and high temperature. Shahbaz Bhatti was no exception: his life was a road that led to Calvary. He was surrounded by people who opposed him. He even met resistance within his family. His father, Jacob, discouraged his intentions, dreaming of seeing his son work in civil administration or in the army. As Shahbaz was very intelligent, his father thought he might become a lawyer or doctor.” His father had warned him frankly, “Before doing good to others, do it to yourself. Complete your education first. Find a job and have a good career, then you will be able to do some-

thing for others.” Several other family members also did not approve of his plans and activities. “As a member of a minority community you will not bring about any change in Pakistani society. Nobody will listen to you. You’re not going anywhere,” a relative said to him one day. Other people in the village criticised his presumed ambition unjustly or out of envy, claiming that he was only looking for fame, notoriety or money.

Shahbaz Bhatti listened to these words with great serenity and endured everything with great patience. “I swear to God that I have no personal ambitions,” he said to his closest friends. “Greed and gain have no place in my heart and are not in my destiny. I was born poor and I will die poor, but my heart is rich and full of blood. I will shed every drop of blood for the poor and oppressed of my country. In my soul there is a hidden force that drives me to become the voice of those who are voiceless. Suffering, opposition, discouragement, humiliation, and not even death will stop me. I will continue on this painful way until the end.”

That young man from Khushpur was able to embody the Gospel values in his political life, making them the main inspiration of his public commitment. He was able to do so thanks to an authentic Christian education, nourished by the word of God, which was light and life for him, and by the sacraments that always accompanied his daily life as a lay Catholic immersed in secular structures.

His commitment was not an emotional reflection: he aimed to transform society by always giving priority to

the dignity of each person, reaching out to the right, the good, and the best. His was not pure and simple “profession”, but authentic “vocation”, which had a spiritual root and source: it was a call from God to realise His Kingdom. Commitment, then, to Bhatti meant passion. And becoming passionate, of course, is also to suffer. Because the world is not transformed without pain.

Travelling companions

In difficult choices like these, of great human and spiritual breadth, marked by the search for discernment based on reason and faith, we can find some decisive episodes that characterised Shahbaz’s personal history. Episodes related, above all, to some travelling companions, real “guardian angels” who confirmed to him that he was on the right track. A human and spiritual journey never takes place alone, and even Shahbaz Bhatti was surrounded by men and women who were able to accompany, inspire and guide his steps. Shahbaz was continually “doing God’s will” and daily asked, in the words of the saint of Assisi: “Lord what do you want me to do?” In this journey of discernment, meetings with some people with whom he found a special understanding or a particular empathy proved crucial: Cecil Chaudry, Anthony Lobo, and Benazir Bhutto.

The idea of active political commitment also matured in him thanks to the contribution of the Catholic Cecil Chaudry (1941-2012), whom Shahbaz had already met in 1983. Cecil became a significant figure in his intel-

lectual and moral development. An army veteran, war hero, then activist, and educator, Captain Chaudhry, a much appreciated and respected character in Pakistan, became his mentor²⁵: Shahbaz consulted him frequently and often went to visit him in his home.²⁶

With him, the Christian Liberation Front conducted the first national campaign against the blasphemy law. The result of friendship and frequent contact was the reflection on the urgency of repealing the so-called “separate electoral system”, also inherited from the Zia period, which permitted members of religious minorities to vote only for candidates of their own faith.²⁷ Accord-

²⁵ Group Captain Cecil Chaudhry, a Catholic, served the nation as a skilled aviation pilot in two wars between India and Pakistan (in 1965 and 1971). A multi-decorated military man and an excellent teacher, after retirement he devoted himself to the service of education: he became headmaster of St. Anthony College in Lahore, then of St. Mary College in Rawalpindi, making himself appreciated as director, teacher, manager, man of faith and culture, integrity and broad-mindedness. Among his students and, as he liked to say, “among his creatures” was Shahbaz Bhatti, for whom Chaudhry represented a valuable friend and adviser.

²⁶ His children Michelle and Cecil Shane Chaudhry talked to the authors of this book. Michelle remembers the figure of Shahbaz with nostalgia: “I knew and met Shahbaz Bhatti from my youth, for 27 years. He visited our home and had a close relationship with our family. He was a selfless, courageous, and humble person, sincerely committed to the rights of minorities and the vulnerable. I consider myself one of the privileged few to have known the man behind the public figure. I can say he was my best friend. For my father he was like a son. They fought together, with courage and determination, for a fairer and better Pakistan.”

²⁷ General Zia’ government promoted a series of amendments to the constitutional text (the “Hudood Ordinances”) which severely limited minority rights and their role in the public sphere. In addition

ing to Chaudhry and Bhatti, it was a form of “religious apartheid.” According to them, in this way non-Islamic communities were excluded from the main decisions, because the Muslims did not care in the least about the minorities, as they could not get votes from them. In fact, minorities could only choose their co-religionists who, however, had no political or economic weight and could not help their people. Some called it “fake democracy.”

Continuing a campaign that lasted for a decade, involving various civil society groups, the bishops and representatives of Christian and Hindu associations urged the government of General Pervez Musharraf, who had come to power in the 1999 coup, to change the system. Chaudhry and Bhatti, in tune with the Pakistani episcopate, coordinated a demonstration, in which 23 parties and political groups participated, to demand the abolition of the law. Their efforts were successful: in January 2002 Musharraf reintroduced a proportional representation system for religious minorities. Under this system, non-Muslims were able to help elect parliamentary representatives with their votes, but they also had seats reserved in the National Assembly, in the Senate, and in provincial assemblies.²⁸

to the impossibility for non-Muslim citizens to access the highest institutional positions - president and prime minister - the Separate Electorate System Act was enacted in 1985 which also made voting denominational.

²⁸ The seats reserved for minority candidates are not allocated by direct vote, but taken from the lists presented to the Electoral Commission of Pakistan by the various political parties which obtain them in proportion to the number of general seats gained. With this

This social and political process made the need to join forces to form a national representation of all religious minorities in Pakistan – Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and other groups – ever stronger and clearer. And so, from discussions between the two leaders, although Cecil and Shahbaz were of different generations, the idea of creating the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) was born and came to fruition: the project saw Chaudhry making the greatest effort to establish an association that would have Shahbaz Bhatti as its first leader.

The starting point was that, since the creation of Pakistan, religious minorities had remained rather on the margins of social, economic, and cultural development. Over time, and especially after the government of Zia-ul-Haq, their condition had even worsened: discrimination in society was growing and in some cases it was even legalised and legitimised by provincial or federal governments. The political-religious and socio-economic rights of non-Muslims were severely limited. Due to the prevailing mentality in society and discriminatory laws, human dignity was being trampled upon.

The convention that officially created the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance was held on 14th July 2002 in Islamabad, organised by Cecil Chaudry and Shahbaz Bhatti. It

mechanism, all major parties include candidates from religious minorities on their lists. It should be noted that Pope John Paul II also praised that reform, in his speech of 15th May 2003, to the new ambassador of the Republic of Pakistan to the Holy See, available at the link: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030515_ambassador-pakistan.html

was attended by representatives of all religious minorities from all provinces of Pakistan, members of churches, leaders of religious communities, representatives of parochial associations and organisations, and members of non-governmental and parliamentary organisations. It was a historical fact: for the first time in the history of Pakistan men and women of all non-Muslim religious communities gathered on a single platform, showing common purpose and objectives. By acclamation, the vast assembly that proclaimed the birth of APMA unanimously chose Shahbaz Bhatti as its president.

The priority objective, proclaimed there, was

to create unity among the religious minorities of Pakistan so that, from a common and unique platform, a peaceful struggle can be launched to protect, preserve, and promote the religious, social, economic, and political rights of minorities. It is imperative that APMA increases understanding of human rights, promotes democratic norms and helps counter extremism, mitigates the tendency to divide the Pakistani nation on the basis of religious belief, accelerates the construction of a democracy in Pakistan according to the ideals of our founding father, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.²⁹

It was a memorable day for Shahbaz Bhatti, who saw his dream come true. On that occasion, in front of the delegates of the various minorities, even though he was a shy person, who fled from honours, he gave a rich and passionate speech and spoke prophetically:

²⁹ Founding document of the APMA, consulted by the authors.

It is God's plan for all men to be treated equally. Love your neighbour as yourself is the first commandment. Nobody was born to command or to be a slave. Many Christian and Hindu women work in the homes of the wealthy as slaves and are often harassed. Often they are forced to convert to another religion. The APMA will fight with all its strength to prevent all this. We must ask our people to send their children to school. Without education we have no future.

In fact, although Shahbaz Bhatti was very interested in the plight of poor and vulnerable people and did not fail to raise his voice against discrimination and injustice, he did not wish to become a “politician” in the strictest sense: he did not have a political career in mind and did not seek fame or power. He had dedicated his life to bringing peace and justice, mutual respect and tolerance, hope and harmony among the inhabitants of Pakistan: this was the mission he had very clearly in his heart. And he was ready to carry it through to the end. The responsibility the APMA offered him, despite himself, further visibility and fame. But Shahbaz never lost his humility, a hallmark of his person, and never became conceited. This was the logical consequence of having full awareness of his fragility, of recognising himself before God, as a weak and sinful creature.

In this personal work, in the elaboration of a “just consideration of oneself,” based on the one hand on necessary self-esteem (“You are precious in my eyes”, he read in the book of the prophet Isaiah), and on the other recognising oneself in need of God's grace, his relationship with the bishop of Islamabad Anthony Lobo

(1937-2013), who accompanied him throughout his life and became his spiritual father, was of great importance to Shahbaz. The bishop, appreciated for his social works and his work of evangelisation, was defined by many as visionary because he was a far-sighted and very concrete person. In looking at the future of Christians in Pakistan he was strongly convinced that education was the main way to improve their socio-economic and cultural condition. Meeting Shahbaz, the relationship between the friends blossomed, *sintonia cordis*, which characterised their interpersonal relationship until his death. Shahbaz, whenever he had the chance, met him, told him his doubts and problems, opened his heart to him, and approached the sacrament of reconciliation. Lobo continued to follow, advise and encourage Bhatti along every step of his political path, helping the leader to live it with a spirit of service and with a sense of Christian mission. In 2012, one year after Bhatti's death, Lobo said in a heartfelt testimony given on a bed of pain when he was already very ill:

Seeing his leadership skills and goodwill for the church in Pakistan, I encouraged Shahbaz in his studies and direct involvement in politics. He was not interested in making a career or in political power, but agreed to do active politics to protect Christians and other minorities. He lived a busy life for others and for this reason he decided not to get married. He was celibate. He owned nothing of his own and carried on his social ministry only as a service to the common good. I believe that Clement Shahbaz Bhatti was a consecrated layman and martyr of the faith. He lived his political activity with the spirit of following Christ.³⁰

³⁰ Testimony collected by Paolo Affatato in Islamabad in 2012.

A travelling companion in political life, personal friend and a decisive person in Shahbaz Bhatti's life was Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007).³¹ The eldest daughter of the deposed Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir, a leading exponent of the Pakistan People Party, was Prime Minister of Pakistan for two terms (1988-1990 and 1993-1996). She then became leader of the opposition, until her death on 27th December 2007 - the year she returned to Pakistan after a long exile - in a suicide attack at the end of her rally in Rawalpindi. Already three months previously, she had been the victim of an attack that caused 138 victims and at least 600 injured in Karachi, during a procession of her supporters that welcomed the return of the former prime minister to the city, immediately after she had arrived at the airport. Shahbaz Bhatti was part of the convoy and suffered minor injuries in that attack. The two will remain forever united by a common fate, killed at the hands of Islamic fundamentalists and Taliban movements.

After completing his studies, showing some interest in political activity, Shahbaz Bhatti had approached the Pakistan Peoples Party, a party with a reforming, secular and democratic face, in which he rediscovered his world view. Very quickly he attracted the attention of the party leaders and, in particular, of Benazir Bhutto, who was its president. He worked closely with her and soon became her personal adviser on matters relating to religious mi-

³¹ Benazir Bhutto was the first woman to lead a democratic government in a majority Muslim nation. She chaired the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) from the early eighties until her assassination in 2007.

norities. Bhatti had already been in the party's orbit for years, when he officially joined the ranks of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in 2002, and this active militancy opened the doors of the federal government to him.

Fr. Emmanuel recalls the relationship between the two: "When Benazir Bhutto became prime minister for the second time, in 1993, she invited him with conviction to join her working group. She had got to know about Shahbaz's life and ideas, and knew that he was an honest and faithful person. She got to know him and trust him. She admired his transparency, his honesty, his sincerity, his commitment, his sacrifices, and his courage. She chose him as the representative of the Christian Liberation Front: in her opinion Shahbaz was the ideal person."

For his part, Fr. Emmanuel continues, "Shahbaz admired Benazir's insights, political passion, culture, and love for democracy. He appreciated the courage of a person who fought for the rule of law and democracy in Pakistan. After the death of her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Shahbaz sided with her and showed her closeness and solidarity, assuring her of his support and prayers. Upon her return from exile, he went to welcome her taking 500 Christian students with him, and followed her in the procession for many hours. The woman was struck by Bhatti's sincerity and dedication and invited him to her home for a cup of tea. They became very close friends: Benazir called him 'my younger brother'." The political vision of the two matched perfectly: they agreed in upholding equality, rights and mutual respect for all citizens

of Pakistan. “It was thanks to this sincere relationship, to the comparison with her and to their commonality of ideas,” recalls Fr. Emmanuel, “that Shahbaz, however reluctant in the beginning, agreed to join the party and then to join the government as federal minister of minorities. Benazir Bhutto strongly encouraged Shahbaz’s involvement in active politics. Everyone in the Pakistan Peoples Party and in the religious minority communities were thrilled to have a politician like him – kind, modest, honest, committed, and educated, of humble origins and irreproachable behaviour.”

The fight against fanaticism

Shahbaz sensed that fanaticism and radical Islamism were rampant in the country. Supporters of the Taliban or extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda were present within the army and ruling class. The newspapers refused to publish news of the incidents in which Christians and other minorities suffered violence and were killed. It was in the aftermath of the attack of 11th September 2001 and the American reaction, its “war on terror” and military intervention in Afghanistan, that a rift in the country was created. There was a wave of protest and violence that in many cases was directed against Christians, identified or labeled as supporters or accomplices of the West, and deemed hostile to Islam. It was a very delicate historical juncture for Pakistan and Shahbaz experienced it from the inside, observing its dynamics and ideological drifts, which generated hatred, violence, and terror.

One of the episodes that struck Shahbaz's mind and made him consider that the country was taking a tragic downward slope was the attack on Bahawalpur, one of the most important cities in southern Punjab. On 28th October 2001, a group of 15 terrorists stormed the church while the faithful were praying inside. Those unscrupulous men closed all the doors and started shooting people. Fifteen people died, while more than 300 were seriously injured. The killing of those innocents affected the whole nation, and in particular the Christian community.

On the day of the attack Shahbaz Bhatti was in Lahore but, without delay, he immediately went to the scene of the massacre to console the victims, and did everything possible to instil courage in them. "Terrorists are inhuman," he said. "By injuring and killing innocent people, they also oppose God and his creation. They are cowards. They are attacking unarmed and defenceless people." He also asked the government to take appropriate measures to protect religious minorities and their sacred places. That episode was the first in a long chain of attacks and violence against Christian minorities, which continued for several months. Among the many episodes that occupied the national and international papers, a church in Islamabad was set on fire in March 2002. Many people were injured and the building was completely destroyed. On 9th August the hospital of the Christian mission in Taxila was attacked by terrorists, and 25 people, mostly women, were injured. One of the most serious attacks was that on the head-

quarters of the Institute for Peace and Justice, a Christian-inspired charitable organisation, situated in Karachi. The terrorists raided the building and kidnapped seven employees, chained them, blindfolded them, and finally massacred them.³²

Shahbaz Bhatti was living through a period of hyperactivity: he never stopped, he moved constantly from one place to another, visiting the most troubled places and the affected families. The long series of incidents damaged Pakistan's image as a civilised nation and depicted it as a place where Christians were persecuted and killed without mercy. Shahbaz visited the grieving families, was one with them in their suffering, and held several press conferences in which he highlighted the difficult conditions of security and the lack of protection for Christian minorities.

In that period when the theme of a "clash of civilizations" occupied the national and international scene, Bhatti also decided to go abroad to help make known to the world what was happening to minorities in Pakistan. He went to the United States and some European countries. After those trips, the American secretary of state, Colin Powell, wrote to the Pakistani government

³² That series of attacks suggested the government to adopt a controversial provision: that is, to require churches and Christian organisations to equip themselves, at their expense, with walls and personnel responsible for surveillance of places of worship, under penalty of closure. Although it was a very expensive measure, which fell entirely on the churches themselves, Christian communities had to adapt. Since then, most of the Christian churches in Pakistan have been surrounded by walls and barbed wire and have a special security service.

to express his fear and concern about the condition of religious minorities. In his homeland, in October 2003, Shahbaz invited ambassadors and representatives of 25 nations to the British High Commission to explain the plight of Christians in his country.³³ And, a few days after that meeting, the then Pakistani interior minister, Faisal Saleh Hayat, called him with a certain displeasure and warned him about the dangers he was running. “In that message it was already clear that his life was hanging by a thread,” recalls Fr. Emmanuel. Already in those years, his activism, both in Pakistan and abroad, irritated or was not viewed favourably by extremist groups but also by sectors of politics, and by government officials who judged it harmful to the country’s image in the international community.

Shahbaz Bhatti convened the central committee of his organisation, the Christian Liberation Front, and said:

We are neither against the government nor against Islamic groups. We protest against the injustice and discrimination that has ruined our lives. We must prevent Pakistan from falling into the hands of radical and fundamentalist forces who will first destroy us and then throw the country into civil war. We are just talking about basic human rights. I am ready to spend my whole life in prison, but I will never compromise with the forces of death and destruction. If I violated my principles I would no longer be Shahbaz Bhatti.³⁴

³³ The British High Commission in Pakistan, based in Islamabad, is the political-diplomatic body which maintains and develops relations between the United Kingdom and Pakistan.

³⁴ Statement collected by the authors and taken from the account of activists and members of the Christian Liberation Front.

The years following 2002 were very intense, risky and demanding for Shahbaz Bhatti, who understood more and more clearly the importance of his mission. “He was always on the move, trying to create awareness among the poor and voiceless, supporting them and defending their arguments with the authorities. At any time, accompanied by his group of loyalists, when he reached a place where an injustice had been committed, he tried to make himself the mouthpiece of the suffering and persecuted. Many fanatics did not appreciate such behaviour and began to threaten him. He suffered repeated attacks and received many threatening calls, but he was determined to carry on his mission,” recalls Fr. Emmanuel, recounting those years. “I promise the poor and persecuted that I will never abandon you,” Shahbaz reiterated. “My relationship with the poor is more important than blood ties. Nobody can come between us.”

One of the episodes that touched Bhatti’s heart closely was the murder of the Catholic priest George Ibrahim, parish priest of Renala, in the Okara district of Punjab, on 5th July 2003. The parish priest was trying to help the Franciscan nuns to obtain the management of a secondary school for girls from the government, but he was opposed by the Muslim principal, Shazina Siddiqi. The principal had invited militants to support him, informing the priest of the serious consequences he would face if he did not give up on his intentions. One evening, while returning to the manse, he was attacked and killed. When Shahbaz Bhatti was informed of the priest’s death he went to Renala Khurd and held a press conference

in which he condemned terrorism in very harsh words. He also asked for essays, poems and texts that encouraged religious bias, extremism, discrimination and holy war, to be removed from school curricula. He courageously presented himself to journalists in Islamabad to launch an appeal to the government, then led by General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali, demanding the arrest of the assassins of Father George within three days. Many Christian and other religious leaders present that day expressed support and solidarity with Shahbaz Bhatti.

On 30th July 2003, the day after the press conference, Shahbaz Bhatti visited all the guests staying at the Holiday Inn Hotel in Islamabad. He had breakfast with them and then went to buy newspapers. At 12.30 he made an emergency call to a close friend saying, "There is a car following me closely with two armed men. I am worried." He also told his friend where he was. The tam-tam was very fast. After being informed, many of his friends hurried to where Shahbaz was, sensing the danger. Gunfire started from the car that had been following him. A commotion broke out and the terrorists, seeing many people and cars approaching, fled. Fortunately there were no injuries. It was the first real attack on Shahbaz. However, the episode did not have the effect of discouraging him in any way or make him take a step back.

It was a rather critical moment for Shahbaz's political activity: on the one hand due to the attention of extremist and terrorist groups which delivered intimidation and

death threats to him and, on the other, for his relationship with the government that had deteriorated to the point that on 14th October 2003 the name of Shahbaz Bhatti was included by the authorities in the Exit Control List, a list of people prohibited from leaving the country. For about a year, Bhatti had received warnings, direct and indirect, to stop his public activities. Shahbaz's entourage, on his express mandate, legally opposed it and, after about a month, the measure was withdrawn.

However, Shahbaz's activity was not restricted only to "emergency interventions", when a particular case or crisis arose. It was always wide-ranging and extended to the cultural level, to the "idea of Pakistan", a vision of the future of the country. In this regard, his work was exemplary when, in May, 2004, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, a platform composed of the union of six Islamic fundamentalist parties, presented again a draft law to the Pakistani government that intended to Islamise society: the law, which required men to wear beards and women to wear *burqas*, demanded that all religious matters be governed according to the rules of Islam and *sharia*. Fr. Emmanuel reports: "The assembly of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province had approved it locally but, before it was presented to the National Assembly, Shahbaz Bhatti vehemently opposed it, calling it 'religious martial law'. The former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was also convinced by his opinion, condemning the proposal as unconstitutional."³⁵

³⁵ The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), thanks to the majority

“No civil society in the world suppresses the religious freedom of its members. This bill destroys national solidarity, religious and social harmony and the constitution of Pakistan. We strongly oppose and condemn it,” Shahbaz Bhatti declared fearlessly in a public meeting. Soon, other liberal political leaders joined him, followed by representatives of the Hindus and Sikhs. In December of that year, on the occasion of World Human Rights Day, Shahbaz Bhatti organised a large demonstration in which thousands of people participated, rejecting the proposal. “It was another success of Shahbaz’s mobilisation and struggle for human rights. Thanks to his great efforts and popular mobilisation, the law proposed by the MMA lapsed and was never passed,” recalls Fr. Emmanuel.

In those years, the debate on the Islamisation of Pakistan was centre stage. Many remembered the figure of General Zia ul-Haq, known for using Islam to strengthen his power and prolong his government. Zia created the Council of Islamic ideology, the body responsible for examining the conformity of laws with the precepts of Islam and thanks to which the issue of the role of *sharia* and the constitution once again occupied the mass media.

held in the provincial assembly of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, managed to introduce an Islamic-style penal code in the province in July that year, similar to the one applied by the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. The law established the figure of the *muhtasib*, a sort of religious guarantor to monitor citizens’ adherence to Islamic values. On 4th August 2005, the Supreme Court of Pakistan annulled the measure declaring it unconstitutional.

“Shahbaz Bhatti was invited to express his opinion in several debates organised by Pakistani television,” Fr. Emmanuel notes. “Playing the cards with his usual calm and brilliance, he proposed a surprising idea. In his opinion, instead of creating the Council for Islamic ideology, it would have been right to set up a Council for Interreligious Harmony, to see whether a law would bring harmony or polarisation to society. The following day, 26th June 2005, the *Daily Times* newspaper published an article expressing strong appreciation for the proposal, confirming that it would strengthen and unite the nation of Pakistan.”³⁶

Despite the commitment and courageous campaign led by Bhatti and all APMA representatives, the violence did not stop. An event that caused outrage and pain happened in Sangla Hill, a town in the Nankana Sahib district of the Punjab province. On 12th November 2005, some Christians and Muslims were gambling together but at some point an argument broke out. The Muslims came out of the room shouting that the Christians had torn and burned the Koran. All the Muslim citizens gathered and began to announce from the mosque that they would punish the Christians. Fr. Emmanuel remembers with bitterness: “An angry crowd began to destroy and set the properties of Christians on fire: houses,

³⁶ See the article *Islamic laws and social unity*, published in the English-language Pakistani newspaper “Daily Times” in the 26th June 2005 edition. The newspaper was founded in 2002 by the former governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, who was killed on 4th January 2011, a few months before Shahbaz Bhatti.

the church, schools, the clergy house and the convent. The police, made up of Muslim agents, stood by watching and did not intervene to stop those violent actions. The Muslims also burned all the Bibles, religious books, crosses, statues, and other objects of devotion. On the same day, having heard the news, and without delay, Shahbaz Bhatti visited all the terrified people. Many had fled to other cities to find refuge with relatives.”

It was yet another mass violence against innocent and defenceless people. “All members of the Christian Liberation Front intervened on behalf of the victims and protested against the violation of fundamental human rights. The state authorities, however, seemed to be downplaying it and the police wanted to silence everything, so as not to create another international scandal. Since the church had been burned and destroyed, Shahbaz Bhatti asked the faithful to organise a Sunday of prayer in the park in the city centre.” The police intervened to prevent it, but the Catholic leader said indomitably through the speakers:

We believe in freedom. Today we want to pray for all those who persecute us. Jesus asked us to pray for our enemies. We also want to pray for equality, tolerance, harmony and dialogue. If the government encourages hooliganism and violence and the police are unable to protect us, we will make our situation and suffering known to the world.

The story took on an international dimension. Symbolically and very effectively on a communicative level, Shahbaz Bhatti attended a press conference, holding a burnt Bible in one hand and a broken cross in the oth-

er. “He asked the government,” says Fr. Emmanuel, “to condemn what had happened, to investigate, to punish the guilty, and to reimburse all the damages suffered by the Christian community. Events like that were a stain on the whole of Pakistan: this was his clear and unambiguous vision.”

Women, the poor, the vulnerable: Shahbaz’s friends

In the years between 2002 and 2008, when Shahbaz’s social and political commitment was blossoming, his actions were clearly characterised by closeness to all those who were suffering or in distress: the poor, the marginalised, the victims of injustice and abuse of dignity and human rights. He was the good Samaritan of the Gospel, capable of seeing, stopping and touching the suffering of others. For this reason his loving attention and his actions of solidarity were directed to women, victims of oppression, to earthquake victims, to the weakest and most vulnerable people, powerless in the face of the violence they suffered.

His reaction to the violent earthquake that shocked the country on 8th October 2005, was exemplary. An earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, one of the most violent in the nation’s history, hit Islamabad, Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Balakot, Mansehra, Batlai and Abbotabad, causing the deaths of about 100,000 people and the destruction of a large number of public buildings and

houses. Shahbaz Bhatti could not stand by and watch or limit himself to only verbal support. As he was a man of thought, prayer and action, he quickly telephoned all sections of the Christian Liberation Front, organised various groups and sent them to help the victims in the places affected by the earthquake, to bring drinking water, food, milk, medicine, and tents. He did the same with APMA members, involving volunteers from minority religious communities in a commitment of closeness and support to the people affected by the earthquake, mostly Muslims. Fr. Emmanuel recalls his commendable effort: "Shahbaz himself visited the wounded in the hospital of the district of Muzaffarabad, where many people were lying outside in the cold. There were no doctors available, nor warm clothes for the injured and dying. He immediately procured quilts and blankets and invited his medical friends to intervene to take care of the victims of the earthquake. He worked very hard, organising fundraising activities for the benefit of the people affected by the earthquake." Bhatti often reminded his collaborators: "We are not doing this to be remembered in books or to become famous. We consider it the duty of every human being to help people in serious difficulties. The parable of the good Samaritan teaches us. We will do everything possible to put ourselves at the service of our brothers and sisters who are in need."

In Balakot, APMA volunteers established a base camp which acted as a starting point for humanitarian aid for the surrounding territories. More than 10,000 families, mostly Muslims, received emergency aid thanks to op-

erations coordinated by Bhatti and his organisations. The promptness of the intervention and the choice to help people in difficulty without any religious distinction, earned him public certificates of recognition from the army and government. And, a month after the earthquake, the APMA asked the government for permission to take care of 500 orphaned children – providing them with food, housing, and education.

Shahbaz, as usual, committed himself, rolling up his sleeves. He was not a man who liked to delegate the toughest jobs or a boss who sent his employees on ahead, remaining in the control room. He knew that being an example leads the way, so he got moving and became directly involved. Furthermore, his actions were never a flash in the pan or only temporary. And so, to keep national attention awake and convince as many people as possible to help the displaced, Shahbaz Bhatti organised a solidarity march with the victims of the earthquake on 2nd November 2005 attended by many people of all religions.

“To bring some joy into the lives of the survivors,” Fr. Emmanuel recalls, “Shahbaz Bhatti celebrated Christmas with the victims of the earthquake. They were all Muslims and had never seen a Christian celebration before. Shahbaz Bhatti brought a Christmas tree, some typical sweets and soft drinks. He invited army officers from the area and other prominent people, and distributed gifts to the poorest children and families. He also brought a choir of children to sing Christmas carols. It was an un-

forgettable evening that brought some joy and serenity to the suffering families.”

The following spring, at a public demonstration organised by the Christian Liberation Front and held on 23rd March 2006 in Warispura, Faisalabad district, Shahbaz Bhatti encouraged and thanked all those who had contributed to the solidarity campaign and added a note to silence all the rumours intended to discredit or exploit the aid campaign:

Everyone must help his fellow citizens. The government receives money from the West, which is a good thing, but aid does not reach the needy. It is sad to see that a Christian association that wants to help its compatriots, with its own means and the support of benefactors, is accused of proselytism, as if it wanted to convert Muslims to the Christian faith. It is not true at all. We are only helping others for humanitarian reasons. We are following the teaching of Jesus and the prophets.

Four years later, in 2010, having become a parliamentarian and minister, the process repeated itself. When massive floods occurred in Pakistan, Bhatti raised awareness and instructed APMA volunteers across the nation to participate in relief operations, providing humanitarian aid to people affected by floods, regardless of their religion.

Beyond emergency interventions, there were structural issues and challenges that Bhatti wanted to address, such as the situation of women in Pakistan. In the country, the situation of women is systematically dependent on their gender role although it can vary considerably according to social class, geographical area, socio-economic

situation, and ethnicity.³⁷ The status of women, often discriminated against or abused for reasons of male-dominated culture and power, was never indifferent to Shahbaz, as is evident from some incidents.

On 8th March 2006, International Women's Day, Shahbaz Bhatti organised a convention for women attended by 1,600 representatives. On that occasion he said: "This congress proposes to strongly reaffirm the value of women. We want to join them, support them, encourage them, respect them and allow them to protest against all cases of injustice, violence, and restrictions on their freedom and dignity."

He cited the sad cases of the violence suffered by Dr Shazia Khalid,³⁸ raped by a military man, and of Mukhtar Mai,³⁹ raped by torturers who were declared innocent,

³⁷ According to the World Economic Forum, Pakistan is in penultimate place in the world in terms of women's rights and gender equality. Indicators such as the presence of laws and their application, the presence of women in politics and in the world of work, access to education and medical care are taken into consideration when drawing up this ranking. The data is available in the Global Gender Gap Report 2018 at the link: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>

³⁸ On 2nd January 2005, Dr. Shazia Khalid, who worked for Pakistan Petroleum Limited, was raped by an officer of the Pakistani army. The attempt to cover up the case infuriated the local population. The nationalists in Balochistan, the province from which the woman came, considered the incident as an affront to the honour of their people. The situation deteriorated causing a dangerous clash between the army and the Balochistan nationalists, which risked destabilising the whole country.

³⁹ The Muslim Mukhtar Mai has become famous throughout the world for not giving in to the oppression of a powerful tribal clan. Born in Pakistan in 1972, she lives in a small village in Punjab, on

and other tragic events in which women had been victims of unpunished violence. And he added prophetically: “Women are killed to safeguard the honour of the family. Furthermore, women belonging to religious minorities are doubly vulnerable and discriminated against: they can only be garbage collectors or maids, all other activities are denied to them.” He added: “Nowhere is it written that your destiny is to suffer from hunger and misery, violence and oppression, or that you are forced to marry or that you must be killed for honour. A bright future of freedom and education and an appropriate role await you in society. We are convinced that we want to be with you in all situations.”

Various demonstrations were organised on 8th March in Faisalabad, Lahore, Peshawar, Karachi and Islamabad. Shahbaz declared at Karachi, in front of a crowd full of women of all backgrounds, cultures and religions:

We’re not just fighting for ourselves. We are trying to safeguard the rights of the poor, of the threatened, suffering, and the persecuted. We want to protect our country from sectarianism, exploitation of the vulnerable, and social polarisation. We would like Pakistan not to be a nation divided between a few very wealthy families and a majority of extremely poor people. I swear on my mother that I will sacrifice everything for you. Torture, prison and fear of death won’t stop me.

It was clear in those years that one of the main themes at the top of Bhatti’s commitment and thoughts was the

the border with India, where she continues her battle in defence of abused women.

presence and role of religious minorities in Pakistan. Bhatti's fundamental reference was "the Pakistan of Mohammad Ali Jinnah", the nation's founder, who had ensured equal rights, freedom, and justice for religious minorities in Pakistan.⁴⁰ Bhatti often repeated:

Members of religious minorities have contributed to the foundation and development of Pakistan; they have proven to be true citizens of Pakistan. All Pakistani citizens are equal: the concept of considering a person on the basis of majority or minority criteria should be removed. We are faithful to our beloved homeland, Pakistan. We are not strangers to it: our churches, religious institutions, hospitals and buildings have a Pakistan flag hoisted. We have lived in this land for centuries and are at the service of the population, with honesty and dedication, for the good of Pakistan.

In order to carry these ideas forward and spread a new mentality, Shahbaz was willing to attend assemblies and forums in the most disparate places. On 20th November 2006, Bhatti was invited by the Bar Association to speak at their headquarters in Lahore. Many lawyers and judges attended the meeting. "It was the first time," observes the cousin priest, "that a Christian leader had addressed

⁴⁰ In a famous speech of 11th August 1947, presenting the Constitution of the newly formed nation of Pakistan, formed to host Muslims of the Indian subcontinent but not as an Islamic theocracy, Ali Jinnah said, reassuring non-Muslim citizens: "You are free. You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the State." The speech is an inescapable reference for Pakistani citizens who do not profess the Islamic faith, especially for the more substantial minorities, such as Christians and Hindus.

such an audience. Shahbaz Bhatti was truly a pioneer in many fields. He was warmly welcomed by everyone with garlands of roses. He thanked those present, expressing his appreciation for the role played by lawyers in the defence of the innocent and the punishment of the guilty. He then described the sad conditions of minorities and invited all participants to sustain and support their rights in the country. He cited the case of under-age girls kidnapped by thugs, raped and murdered. I'm talking about Christian and Hindu girls kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam. Minorities lived in a situation of fear and insecurity. He called on everyone to courageously fight violence and lawlessness in the name of the rule of law." He assured his support to create a just and liveable society, declaring, with his usual constructive spirit and the hope that animated him: "Let us create together a Pakistan in which love grows, peace flourishes and mutual respect is a daily norm."

At the end of the session, receiving the favour of the lawyers present, he summarised in some points the intentions of the organisations he presided over, the CLF and the APMA: to create a democratic conscience; fight for fundamental human rights; defend women's rights; improve education and guarantee it for all; safeguard the fundamental rights of children; improve the conditions of detainees; and detect and address the problems of religious minorities.

In this spirit, Shahbaz Bhatti decided to organise a demonstration on 11th August 2007 – the 60th anniversary of Jinnah' famous speech on 11th August 1947 – at

the large Minar-e-Pakistan park in Lahore, an area capable of hosting hundreds of thousands of people. All the most famous political leaders have organised massive rallies there: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, Benazir Bhutto, and Mohammad Tahir-ul-Qadri. “Shahbaz Bhatti mobilised the APMA and chose that symbolic place to talk about the contribution, problems and aspirations of all minorities in Pakistan,” Fr. Emmanuel reports. “Despite the many difficulties, more than 300,000 people came from all over the country. The park was full of Pakistan flags and photos of Shahbaz Bhatti. Other important minority leaders were also represented on the banners.”

On that historic occasion, Shahbaz Bhatti presented a *magna carta*, worked on by him, with 24 proposals for peace, harmony and development in Pakistan. The document spoke of: freedom of speech; fair representation of minorities in parliament; revision of the blasphemy law; abolition of discriminatory laws; promotion of social harmony between various creeds and cultures; eradication of extremism, child exploitation and terrorism; safeguarding and protection of brick factory workers; release of innocent prisoners; and support for women’s rights. “On that occasion, it was proposed to celebrate a day of interreligious harmony and to remember the rights of minorities on 11th August each year,” notes Fr. Emmanuel. And so it would be. From 2009, on the initiative of Bhatti himself, 11th August became the National Day of Religious Minorities, celebrated with initiatives, meetings and events across the nation. That special day

is an integral part of the Shahbaz's legacy in the social, cultural and political life of the country.

Aware of how the operation to change the current mentality needed time and the broadest basis possible for consensus and awareness, Shahbaz Bhatti always held scholars, intellectuals and writers in high esteem, "appreciating their role as communicators of truth, and their courage to fight against the evils of society," explains Fr. Emmanuel. That is why in April 2007 he invited all writers, poets and scholars to participate in the All Pakistan Cultural Forum, organised under the auspices of the APMA. A large number of people attended the meeting and expressed strong support for Shahbaz on a platform of initiatives: to unite and encourage all writers and intellectuals from the various minorities; organise seminars and conferences to support social harmony; build libraries and study centres; write books and articles to expose the virtues and best aspects of non-Islamic communities and their contribution to the nation; invite writers and educated people to teach Gospel virtues to readers; and create a cultural award and establish an APMA art academy, to raise awareness in the effort to bring all people of good will together.

Bhatti paid the same attention to the world of politics: on 30th September 2007 Shahbaz Bhatti met all the Christian members of the National and Provincial Assemblies and discussed the discriminatory laws against minorities with them. "He also invited Hindu, Sikh and members of other small minorities. The discussion on various pressing topical issues was fruitful," explains

Fr. Emmanuel. “There was talk of the phenomenon of forced Islamisation and the kidnapping of girls belonging to religious minorities; some existing practices linked to *Hudud* decrees were recalled, whereby a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman but a Christian man cannot marry a Muslim woman; *Qanoon-e-Shahadat*, a provision according to which the testimony of a woman is not reliable, was condemned.”

Together, all the Christian politicians involved and present in the various assemblies of the nation “deplored and condemned 135 cases of terrorism, violence, kidnapping, rape, and forced conversions. Many of these cases involved women and children. Impunity was noted, since no culprits had been arrested for those crimes, while the families of the victims were threatened, eyewitnesses killed, lawyers and judges received warnings across the board, and the police covered for the criminals.”

In a situation of darkness and illegality, Shahbaz Bhatti tried to turn on the lights of hope and courage: “They remained deaf in the face of our suffering and our situation. There is no one we can trust, the state departments are corrupt. Victims are tortured instead of criminals. It seems that fear, insecurity and violence reign over our country. We must face evil with courage, without falling into despair. We believe in justice, our path is charity.”

In Shahbaz’s vision, developed over 25 years of active social and political commitment, “justice was the twin sister of charity,” Fr. Emmanuel concludes, citing some passages of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* which, in his opinion, fully express Shahbaz’s spirit, attitude and deep-

est motive in his long commitment to social and political life:

Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI's words, "the minimum measure" of it, an integral part of the love "in deed and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18), to which Saint John exhorts us. On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God's love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world.⁴¹

Caritas in Veritate, issued in 2006 by Benedict XVI, was very present in Bhatti's mind and political action. According to Fr. Emmanuel, another passage of the Vatican document perfectly explains the spirit with which Shahbaz, as a Christian, was ready to give all of himself to make Pakistan a better nation:

To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is a *requirement of justice and charity*. To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give

⁴¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 6.

structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or “city”. The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*. When animated by charity, commitment to the common good has greater worth than a merely secular and political stand would have. Like all commitment to justice, it has a place within the testimony of divine charity that paves the way for eternity through temporal action.⁴²

“His mission, his whole life,” observes Fr. Emmanuel, “was spent, without reservations, as a commitment addressed to the common good, motivated by Christian charity, by love for the nation, for people, for others, and for humanity.”

⁴² BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 7.

CHAPTER III

A “servant” minister

“The youth of Khushpur and the neighbouring villages soon recognised in Shahbaz the only hope and the only leader of a people who lived in the darkness of discrimination and constant threat. With him they organised demonstrations and seminars to create awareness among the people. Workers, farmers, small traders and workers from the brick industry participated en masse at these meetings arranged by Bhatti. In his eyes they saw a promise of freedom and recognised in him a sincere, faithful and committed leader, who had come to help them. Shahbaz Bhatti’s speeches were a great inspiration to everyone. Even moderate Muslims shared the same ideas and often congratulated him.” Like this, Fr. Emmanuel recalls the hope that Shahbaz Bhatti, thanks to his activities as a charismatic leader, concrete and anchored in the Gospels, had infused into the Christian community in Pakistan, starting with his native village, Khushpur. This hope grew exponentially when Bhatti became the minister for the defence of minorities in the government led by the Pakistan Peoples Party, which he officially joined after the death of Benazir Bhutto. The disappearance of the leader and friend, following the

terrorist attack in Karachi, had been a terrible blow for Shahbaz who, precisely at that juncture, severely affected by that tragic and painful event, dissolved his last personal reservations and accepted the idea of being committed personally and directly in active politics, running for election first and then accepting the call from the federal government. In the past he had refused to run, but at that moment, as he confided to his friends, “given the increasing incidents of discrimination and violence against the Pakistani minority communities and the failure of former members of parliament for those communities,” he overcame his doubts and decided to put himself on the line.

Pakistan was emerging from a troubled period, culminating in the 17th February 2008 elections. The vote took place in a very tense social and political climate, marked by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on 27th December of the previous year. Two months earlier, Benazir Bhutto had returned to Pakistan from exile, along with the other former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, to take an active part in the electoral process. President Pervez Musharraf, who had come to power in a coup in 1999, declared a state of emergency and postponed the elections to a date to be defined. In November 2007, following international pressure, Musharraf had restored the constitution and finally called for a vote. In a nation that had been shaken by the Bhutto murder in the meantime, the ballot box gave the Pakistan Peoples Party a relative majority, with 125 seats out of 342 in parliament. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz followed with 91 seats: the two par-

ties, historically rivals, formed a government of national unity in March. In the following August, President Musharraf left power, under the threat of impeachment for corruption. A decade marked by the fearful presence of General Musharraf ended for the nation.

The new government led by Yousaf Raza Gillani, made up of 23 ministers, was sworn in on 31st March 2008 but in the following autumn the executive was enlarged to include 22 other ministers. Shahbaz's time had come. The appointment that catapulted Bhatti to the attention of national and international news came on the night of Sunday 2nd November 2008. For the first time in the history of the country, the department concerning minority affairs rose to the rank of an ordinary ministry, just like the others which formed the government. In the past, the protection of minorities was entrusted to a lower-ranking person, in a department within the Ministry for Religious Affairs. Bhatti took an oath before President Asif Ali Zardari during a special ceremony held the following day in Islamabad. It was a fact of historical significance and did not go unnoticed in the Christian community and in other small communities scattered throughout the nation. Volunteers, workers and supporters of the APMA, in different areas of Pakistan, celebrated the event by distributing sweets and dancing to the rhythm of the drums. For the APMA, it was the crowning glory of a political action that had begun at least six years earlier, focusing on the values of unity, interreligious dialogue, social justice, human rights, and religious freedom for

all religious minorities in Pakistan: Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and other groups.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Bhatti, visibly excited, gave a short but incisive speech, remarking: "I have agreed to become federal minister for minorities to support the oppressed and marginalised communities of Pakistan. I have dedicated my life to fighting for human equality, social justice, religious freedom, and strengthening the communities of religious minorities in Pakistan." In addition, added Shahbaz, the choice of a Christian minister, the first in the history of Pakistan, "sends a message of hope for those who live in suffering and pain." "I welcome this position and the portfolio of federal minister of minorities," he declared, "to serve humanity and suffering minorities and to spread a message of hope to people living a life of disillusionment and despair."

The new minister did not fail to recall the root of that mission: "To carry out the new task in the best possible way, I entrust myself to Christ, the central nucleus of my life. I want to be his true follower through my actions, sharing the love of God with the poor, oppressed, victims, the needy and the suffering of Pakistan."

"It is my intention," added the Catholic parliamentarian, "to propose laws to protect the rights of minorities. I will increase efforts to promote unity and mutual understanding in order to combat intolerance, hatred, prejudice and violence," helping to "fight for the abolition of all inhuman and discriminatory laws." Finally, Bhatti thanked President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime

Minister Gillani for recognising “the value of minorities within the country’s equilibrium”, giving “a sense of equality in the rights of all components of Pakistani society.” With great determination, the leader from Khushpur declared that he wanted to plan a campaign for the promotion of interreligious harmony and reconciliation, reiterating that “each person should respect the other person’s religious beliefs and nobody should be discriminated against.”

It certainly wasn’t a muted start. Shahbaz Bhatti, with an experience of over 20 years of social and political commitment, began his service with clear ideas and with the attitude of a charismatic leader, who knows what he wants, without fear or hesitation. That announcement on the day of the oath and inauguration was a real political programme. Proclaimed both gently and firmly.

However, federal ministerial service did not have the effect of exalting Shahbaz, who never put himself on a pedestal. Indeed, he continued to walk alongside men and women who turned to him, the poor and the oppressed. Like this, Fr. Emmanuel explains his approach: “Shahbaz understood the term *minister* in its etymological and biblical meaning, that is, as a servant. There was no idea in him of position, authority, honour or power: meanings that are, among other things, far from the original meaning of the Latin term *minister*, that is, servant, or helper. Shahbaz was well aware of the use of the term in the special language of the church: the minister of the Lord is a servant of God and brethren. And so he understood his mission.”

On that night of 2nd November, when he was called to join a federal cabinet that would lead the nation, the words of Jesus echoed in the mind and heart of Shahbaz in that passage of the Gospel that says: “Anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all.” (Mk 10:43). This was the spirit with which Shahbaz Bhatti lived his *ministry* in public life in every moment, which led him to the end of his earthly existence, until he embraced the Heavenly Father. In this regard, Fr. Emmanuel recalls some of the words of Pope Francis: “The Pope recalled that St. Paul wanted to be a minister of Christ Jesus. He took this vocation seriously and gave himself completely to his service, always going further, without stopping. Paul was a minister *to serve, not to serve himself*. This expression of Pope Francis applies perfectly to the fire that Shahbaz had in his heart and to how he conceived and lived the last years of his short life.”⁴³

The word *minister* derives from and incorporates the Latin term *minus*. Bhatti’s attitude was always in accordance with the idea of the *minority*: he never felt superior to others, nor did he ever arrogantly affirm the supremacy of his ideas. He was available 24 hours a day because that service was for him the fulfilment of a voca-

⁴³ Pope Francis, Morning meditation in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, *Servire, non servirsi* (Serving, not serving oneself), Friday 6th November 2015. Available, in Italian, at the link: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/cotidie/2015/documents/pa-pa-francesco-cotidie_20151106_servire-non-servirsi.html

tion and a mission. In the years he spent at the helm of the ministry, he never took a vacation and worked many hours overtime without any remuneration. Selfless and generous, he gave himself completely, without reservation, sacrificing much of his personal life for the benefit of the needs of others, especially the poor and oppressed. “He never lost sight of his noble goal, not even for a minute, even when he became a minister,” recalled his mentor Cecil Chaudhry,⁴⁴ “He firmly believed in the ‘Pakistan of Jinnah’ and for this he dedicated his life to trying to create the Pakistan that the father of the nation had imagined.”

Shahbaz made his first decisive leap into active political life by running and being elected to parliament in the February 2008 election. Already in that assembly he immediately demonstrated his temperament and courage. During his inaugural speech to the Pakistani parliament on 29th March 2008, Shahbaz raised a number

⁴⁴ Cecil Chaudhry wrote this in a tribute to Shahbaz Bhatti read in the aftermath of his death, on 17th March 2011, in a ceremony at Westminster Abbey. Due to poor health, Chaudhry was unable to travel to London, so he sent his speech, which he gave to the author of this book. In that speech, Chaudhry describes Shahbaz as follows: “He was a bold and courageous person; he knew what he wanted and how to achieve it and nothing and nobody could dissuade him. He was an extremely humble, shy and down to earth person. Even after taking up the post of federal minister, he continued to live a simple life. He avoided the fascination that came from the position he held and his only concern was to make Pakistan a non-discriminatory state, in which people of all faiths could enjoy equal rights, religious freedom and equal opportunities in the progress of the nation.” Cecil Chaudhry passed away a year later on 13th April 2012.

of issues such as the treatment of minorities on the basis of equality, the repeal of discriminatory laws, the national celebration of non-Islamic religious holidays, as well as the declaration of “non-working days” for some special religious days of the Christian and Hindu faiths.

From the first day of his election to the National Assembly, he studied and worked on the draft laws that he intended to present in parliament. Aware of the urgency of the issues at stake, he presented a bill to the National Assembly secretariat only 30 days after taking office. The bill provided for the doubling of seats reserved for minorities in national and provincial assemblies and the allocation of about nine seats reserved for minorities in the Senate. The leadership of the People’s Party of Pakistan did not penalise this political hyperactivity of Shahbaz who had a relationship of trust with both Prime Minister Gillani and President Zardari, also of the PPP. The prime minister, when Bhatti told him about it, was in favour, for example, of providing places of worship for religious minorities in prisons.

“He dealt with issues that were close to his heart, such as justice, rights and equality, with passion and indomitable spirit,” Fr. Emmanuel points out, “but he was certainly not an extremist: unlike radically-minded people, he always urged people to fight for their rights peacefully, without ever resorting to violence. This, he said, distinguishes us Christians.”

Fr. Emmanuel was present at a day which is still in the eyes and minds of many. He recalls it as follows: “Three months after his appointment as minister, Shahbaz de-

cided to visit his native village. For the people of Khushpur it was a historic moment: all the inhabitants poured into the streets to greet him. When the procession of government cars appeared, shouts of joy resounded loudly. The enthusiasm of the crowd was sky-high. Everyone started shouting slogans in his honour. Everywhere there were coloured banners, flags, and flowers. Rose petals were scattered all over the streets where they imagined Shahbaz would pass. Choirs from different areas of the country sang the national anthem and other songs with messages of peace and love. Priests, nuns and catechists from Khushpur arrived with many families to greet him. They clapped their hands and sang psalms to pray and thank the Lord. They were all very proud to see one of their children hold such an important position. Such a thing had never happened before.”

It was a memorable day: “At the beginning of the procession there were children carrying flags and bells. Everyone was celebrating the Pakistani minister from the village. Muslims also appreciated his efforts for peace and justice. When the car finally reached the village, people’s joy exploded. Everyone prayed to God and thanked him for his wonderful deeds. A crowd of people flocked to greet and kiss Shahbaz, so much so that the procession was unable to go on. It was a happy day for many people. Spontaneously everyone thanked God for his great mercy. And so began the songs of the psalms to express gratitude and joy.”

Bhatti did not imagine all those honours as being for himself: “First of all, Shahbaz, having arrived in front

of the village parish, stopped in front of the grotto built there in honour of Our Lady of Lourdes and recited the *Salve Regina* (Hail Holy Queen) in Urdu, together with the faithful. Then he entered the church of St. Fidelis, which he had attended since he was a child, where the parish priest was waiting to bless him. He knelt before the Blessed Sacrament to receive the blessing. Meanwhile the choir sang hymns from the Christian liturgy singing: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Later Shahbaz went to the sports field of St. Thomas High School, where a stage had been set up, to speak to the crowd. Expressing gratitude for the prayers and best wishes that had been addressed to him, he addressed those present by delivering this speech:

Inhabitants of my beloved village Khushpur, I don't address you as a minister, but I am happy and proud to be called a son of this magnificent village. I owe everything to it: here I learned to pray, read and write. This village was founded by Capuchin missionaries who brought together poor Christians from all over Punjab, built the church and two schools. Khushpur is one of the luckiest places in Pakistan, because many religious people, nuns, friars, priests and bishops come from here. Here you participate in the Holy Eucharist every day, listen to the Angelus at noon and recite the rosary in the evening in the presence of many devotees. All Christian holidays are celebrated with great devotion. Many teachers, lawyers and doctors also come from Khushpur, who work in our country and in the world. The St. Albert training centre educates catechists throughout the country. All these services, joys and privileges motivate the inhabitants to spread the Good News and to proclaim the

kingdom of God everywhere. I would like to make it clear that we, the people of Khushpur, have a duty to speak up for justice, truth and equality. I am grateful to God for his blessings and I am grateful to you for your support and prayers.

Then, with much pride and joy, he announced that Khushpur would soon join a government programme that aimed to solve problems related to agriculture, irrigation and sewage systems. Furthermore, gas would be supplied for kitchens and factories. “People continued to applaud and shout slogans for a long time, throwing roses and other fragrant flowers into the air. So Shahbaz Bhatti became a symbol of light, joy, hope, progress, and happiness for all Pakistanis,” concludes Fr. Emmanuel, remembering that very happy day.

Political activity: a leader among the people

A span of just over two years - from 3rd November 2008 to 2nd March 2011 - in which Shahbaz Bhatti led the Federal Ministry for Religious Minorities will remain a crucial period in Pakistan’s history. During his tenure, Shahbaz promoted and introduced several laws that aimed to promote and put into practice the values that he had always fought for.

Among the bills on which he worked were: one banning hate speech in the education system and in literature; one to include the comparative study of different religions in school curricula; and one to increase

the proportion of representatives of religious minorities in government and political representation assemblies. Not all of them reached the parliamentary process, not all of them were debated or became law, but all of them were the expression of Bhatti's political commitment, a man who always gave his best, with intelligence, tenacity, and full awareness of his means.

One of the flagships of Bhatti's legislative activity was the provision to reserve 5 per cent of public employment jobs for members of religious minorities. The proposal was presented by Bhatti and approved on 20th May 2009 during a meeting of the Council of Ministers, as a means to decrease discrimination and promote integration. The minimum quota reserved for minorities, according to the minister, was to relate to public offices, related departments, autonomous entities, public companies and state-controlled companies. "Religious minorities," Bhatti stressed in a press conference on 21st May, "have suffered social exclusion and discrimination. Their members are often illiterate or underdeveloped, have little political weight and even at an economic level there is a high level of unemployment and poverty." The new measure, according to the minister, could become an opportunity for social redemption, without affecting the possibility of being hired on personal merits. In addition to the 5 per cent reserved by law, in fact, it was still possible to obtain public assignments on ability, competence and curriculum. "This significant decision by the Pakistan Peoples Party," added Bhatti, "will play a vital role in the economic growth of religious mi-

norities” which would benefit from “new sources of income and improve their standard of living.”

The Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities enthusiastically welcomed the resolution, expressing gratitude to Minister Bhatti who had worked extensively for the approval of the law. In particular, Christians celebrated the event on 31st May with a special day of prayer, praying and giving thanks for the progress of the nation and the well-being of minorities.

At the same time, as a humble, quiet but charismatic leader, he continued his work to unite the country’s healthy, democratic, and constructive forces, with that basic trust and that original maieutic approach of “getting the best out of Pakistan.”

Animated by this spirit, in 2009, noting a certain fragmentation even within the Christian community, Shahbaz Bhatti invited all the Christian leaders and parties to come together and discuss together. The conference was attended by some members of the National and Provincial Assemblies. Shahbaz Bhatti warmly welcomed everyone and spoke in a brotherly tone:

Union is strength. None of us is as strong as all of us together. Let’s not weaken ourselves by dividing. We are already a weak and small minority, only 1 per cent of a nation with a large Muslim majority. Our people suffer everywhere. Let’s join hands and walk together to be a real help to our people.

Fr. Emmanuel recalls that “everyone supported his ideas and, at the end of the assembly, a resolution was passed with the following slogan: “Start walking, Shahbaz Bhatti, we will follow you.”

But Bhatti's idea was not to ghettoise Christians or religious minorities, even less to entrench them in a fort. Quite the opposite. Instead, he had the prospect of the common good of the nation and always remembered the crucial role of non-Muslim men in the birth of Pakistan and in the development and progress of the country. For this reason, looking back on the good results obtained with the APMA, he widened the horizon and asked all democratic parties in the country to form a coalition to eliminate all the discriminatory laws in force in the system and discriminatory articles also present in the constitution. In an astute way, he called for the alliance to be made up of well-known Muslim leaders, alongside prominent personalities, intellectuals and politicians from all backgrounds and communities. Shahbaz Bhatti invited those present to unite to create a liberal, brighter and more democratic Pakistan.

This energetic awareness-raising activity, of an eminently cultural nature – as it aimed to build a new mentality and a new culture in Pakistan – was a distinctive feature of his political activity, even in the two years in which he was minister. Shahbaz did not think of his institutional position as “office work” or “palace activity”, but as a total and selfless service to citizens. He was always among the people and he never tired of listening, sharing, and advising, to understand how best to act. “He was always in action, he did not allow himself rest or breaks. He didn't want to remain passive,” recalls Emmanuel. “He had devoted his whole life to building a better future for his people. And he kept doing so. Each

week he organised a meeting, a conference, or a seminar to create an atmosphere of peace, justice and equality. In June 2009 he called on minority leaders from all the provinces and prepared a document of demands. Together they discussed and studied the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They selected the following points to work on together: eliminate the violation of religious freedom supported by the constitution; give minorities fair representation in parliament and in the Senate; amend the two articles 295.b and 295.c of the Penal Code, that is, the blasphemy laws; ensure equal opportunities in access to positions of responsibility in the army, government and civil administration; allow the celebration of marriages with Christian and Hindu rites; create a national commission on religious tolerance; intervene in school texts in order to avoid the rise of hatred and religious prejudice; and stop forced conversions.”

With the resoluteness of a concrete and proactive leader, who did not stand by and who knew how to respond promptly to emergencies, on 2nd August 2009 Shahbaz found himself facing yet another incident of serious suffering for the Christian community. In the village of Korian, about six kilometres from Gojra, a town in Punjab, after an episode of alleged blasphemy (a Christian was accused of having desecrated the Koran), on 1st August a crowd of militants set the homes of Christians on fire. The inhabitants fled, some hid in the middle of the fields, others left their homes at night to find refuge in neighbouring villages. The tragic toll was eight Christians killed, and among them a woman and a child.

“Shahbaz Bhatti did not just visit the place shocked by these atrocities,” Fr. Emmanuel recalls, “but publicly condemned the local administration that had not acted to protect that defenceless minority. The police hesitated to arrest the culprits, but Bhatti said they would not bury the victims until an official complaint had been registered. In the meantime, he received death threats. His friends tried to convince him to leave and hide because, as a minister, his life was important.” But Bhatti replied, “I won’t back down. For the sake of the oppressed and suffering Christians I am willing to sacrifice hundreds of these ministries!” Following his insistence, the governor and the prime minister of Punjab visited those places condemning the violence, and promised to protect Christians. Thanks to his contribution, a commission of inquiry was set up to investigate what had happened.

In his ministerial life, Shahbaz Bhatti never forgot that he was “a son of God and a son of the church.” Even in the conception of the sound secularism of his political action, completely non-denominational, he always showed great love and respect for bishops, clergy and the religious. In December 2009 he met all the leaders of the various churches in the country and shared with them his views on peace and justice in Pakistan. The bishops assured him of their support and their prayers, encouraging him with these words: “Be firm. Follow the voice of your conscience. You are on the right track. You are accompanied by the prayers of all your compatriots.” Shahbaz Bhatti was very happy with this meeting and

reiterated his intention to continue on the same path: “I would like to express my gratitude and satisfaction for meeting you. I wish to inform you once again that every day and every night of my life belongs to my people. Your prayers and your support strengthen me. I will not disappoint my people who have placed their hopes in me.” Aware of the power of prayer and the need to put all human action back into the hands of God, Shahbaz often relied on bishops, priests and religious people he knew, asking them to fast and pray that his political initiatives would be successful.

In a hard-working bustle of meetings, seminars, and cultural activities, one theme was particularly dear to Shahbaz: the relationship with young people. Shahbaz felt within himself that it was very important to remain in close contact with the young people of his country. “He knew that many young people were attracted by drugs and violence,” Fr. Emmanuel recounts. “The proximity to Afghanistan, the spread of the Taliban and drug traffickers were a source of concern throughout Pakistan. The Taliban continued to indoctrinate boys and young people everywhere, inviting them and training them to kill sinners and infidels. They encouraged suicide bombings to destroy the evil present in society, assuring young people that they would be welcomed in heaven after this heroic death. Attacks and violence followed. Shahbaz Bhatti wanted to inspire young people with an ideology opposed to this. He claimed that God had created the world out of love and that all humans were required to spread and promote this love.

It was necessary to start with young people, Shahbaz thought, to create a culture of mutual respect and interdependence in Pakistan, fighting evils such as prejudice and hatred.”

So Shahbaz thought of organising a rally dedicated to the young people of Pakistan. Preparations soon began, with meetings, conferences and discussions. The chosen location was the Lahore stadium, where meetings, singing competitions, debates, shows, quizzes, music, and folk dances were held. The date of 5th September 2010 was chosen, preceding the Defence Day celebrated on 6th September in Pakistan to pay homage to the forces that had protected the nation from the invasion of enemies and to instil in young people the values of courage, martyrdom and sacrifice. “Shahbaz thought of linking his gathering to that event, preparing young Christians and those of other minorities to join the nation with pride and honour. He was convinced that all minorities should do their best for the development, progress and glory of Pakistan,” explains Fr. Emmanuel.

Finally the big day arrived: the stadium was adorned with national flags and many other decorations. Young people came from all over the country and there were about 90,000 participants. Many professors, assistants, teachers, young lawyers, priests and nuns also participated. “That place seemed like a valley of peace and harmony,” Fr. Emmanuel continues. “Shahbaz Bhatti arrived at the stadium on time at ten o’clock, along with many civil and government authorities. The stadium resounded with a thousand joyful voices and applause. The guest

of honour, the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer⁴⁵, was very impressed by the number of young people present and the preparation of the event.” Governor Taseer said, “Events like this, that promote peace, love, truth, justice, and patriotism, are very rare. I am happy to have taken part in this initiative and I wholeheartedly congratulate Shahbaz Bhatti. In Pakistan we need leaders like him.” Then he embraced Shahbaz. That embrace was an omen. The two leaders would be united by a common destiny: both would die, killed by terrorist hands, a few months later.

On that occasion the Gospel of the Beatitudes was proclaimed (Mt. 5:3-12), which everyone listened to in religious silence:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

⁴⁵ Salman Taseer (1944-2011), a politician and member of the Pakistan People's Party, was governor of Punjab from 2008 until his assassination in 2011. A man of liberal ideas, during his government he criticised the blasphemy laws and intervened in defence of Asia Bibi, a woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in October 2010. This commitment cost him his life. He was killed on 4th January 2011, in Islamabad by his bodyguard, Malik Mumtaz Qadri, with 27 bullets. That murder was a precursor to that of Bhatti, who suffered the same fate two months later.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

It was a page of Scripture that Shahbaz particularly loved, which spoke to his heart, and which he felt very close to his life experience and story. A thrill of spiritual emotion went through him which was also felt in that vast, suddenly completely silent, audience.

Shahbaz, visibly happy for that day, addressed the young people with these words:

I would like to thank each of you for accepting my invitation to show your qualities and your talent. I admire you for what you have done. Youth is the most precious blood that flows in the veins of a nation. If the blood is healthy and strong, it revives the body and keeps it healthy. The youth have the gift of building and exalting the nation. The youth are the hope of the people. Nobody can live without hope. If we have educated, disciplined, active and open-minded young people, the future of our nation will be bright and promising.

And he continued:

It is sad that the world is looking for solutions to problems through wars, weapons and violence. Our young people are immersed in a fire of brutality and evil. Our young people must promote a culture of kindness, care, truth, compassion, service and sacrifice. Our young people don't need weapons, they need books. They should not be driven to war or suicide, but encouraged to play sports and instructed in the loving care of others. They should not be led to destroy, but to protect and safeguard life."

He announced that he would organise various sports, music, poetry, and cultural initiatives dedicated to young people. Then he said:

We must encourage our young people to pursue higher education and research. We must do our best to offer our nation a positive and talented youth. We must be proud to show the world the peaceful, promising, shining and smiling face of our young people. Once again I want to thank you and congratulate you all. Pakistan Zindabad (Long live Pakistan)!

Fr. Emmanuel Parvez recounts another singular episode that shows not only Bhatti's special attention to young people but also his extraordinary availability toward anyone who turned to him, even for minor issues:

A young twenty-year-old of the Bahá'í Faith⁴⁶ wanted to take an exam to become a judge. To be admitted to the test, she needed a letter of recommendation from a federal minister. She had asked many, but she was very poor and no one had consented to her request. She had heard of Shahbaz Bhatti, who at that time dealt with minorities in the Pakistani government. So she decided to go and find him. The young woman embarked on a long journey, travelling about 800 kilometres by bus to reach Islamabad. She had to change several means of transport and then arrived in the city in the evening. Usually all government offices close at six in the evening. The minister had spent the previous night with

⁴⁶ The Bahá'í faith is a monotheistic religion founded in Iran during the mid-nineteenth century, which emphasises the spiritual unity of all humanity. The members follow the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), prophet and founder. According to government officials, there are around 30,000 citizens of the Bahá'í faith in Pakistan.

some Christian families affected by extremist militants, who had burned down their homes. After an all-nighter, in the morning he went back to his apartment to take a bath and change his clothes, then he had returned to his office, where more than 300 people were waiting for him, each with a problem to put to him. He didn't even find time for lunch. He talked to everyone and was busy until six in the evening, then began to doze off from fatigue and lack of sleep. Even the men on his staff were tired and so everyone decided to leave work to go home. At that point, while Shahbaz was getting into his car, the Bahá'í girl approached him and told him that she had made a very long and difficult journey to meet him. Then she implored him to write a letter of recommendation for her. "For me it's a matter of life or death," she said. Although exhausted, hungry and sleepy, Shahbaz got out of the car and asked everyone to reopen the office. He dictated the text of the letter to the clerk, signed it and applied the ministry stamp. The girl thanked him with tears in her eyes. Shahbaz smiled at her and sent her home happy. That young woman today is an important government official, and she always remembers Shahbaz with immense gratitude and nostalgia.

The blasphemy law and the Asia Bibi case

The name of Shahbaz Bhatti will remain forever linked to a theme that has run through the life of Pakistan since the mid 1980s, that of the controversial "blasphemy law": this concerns two articles of the Penal Code introduced by the government of General Zia- ul-Haq between 1982 and 1986 with the aim of appeasing Islamic parties and maintaining power. To the already existing legislation

concerning the offence against religion in a general sense codified in article 295, paragraphs b and c were added, which punished vilification of the Koran and defamation of the Prophet with life imprisonment or the death penalty. The point is that, over the years, the law has become a sword of Damocles which hangs above the heads of religious minorities, and is brought up in disputes that have nothing to do with faith, to strike out at any opponents, of any religious faith, or even to punish those, Christians and Hindus, who rebelled against the latent culture of discrimination.

Within this framework, Shahbaz's life is inextricably linked to the story of a Christian woman unjustly condemned to death for blasphemy, Asia Noreen Bibi.⁴⁷ She was indicted following a plot hatched, with false accusations, by some Muslim women, her colleagues in the fields of Punjab, after a dispute that arose because Asia, in a burst of pride and dignity, had rebelled against the accusation of contaminating a source of water only by touch. Bhatti's courageous public speeches on that law

⁴⁷ Asia Noreen Bibi, born in 1971 in the village of Ittanwali, in Punjab, is a Pakistani peasant woman of Christian faith, married and mother of five children. From 2010 to 2018 she was the subject of a judicial ordeal. She was arrested in 2009 for alleged blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2010 by a court of First Instance in the city of Nankana Sahib. The sentence was confirmed by the Lahore High Court in 2014, finally being overturned by a full acquittal verdict issued by the Supreme Court of Pakistan on 31st October 2018. After her release, she was expatriated with her family to Canada. The case has had wide international coverage.

and on the case of Asia Bibi were decisive in his assassination.

While he was minister, cases where Christians were falsely accused of blasphemy were not uncommon. When one occurred, the situation became very delicate: in fact, as a result of that slander, Christians and their properties ran serious risks. In accordance with a mechanism of “collective punishment” and summary justice implemented several times, Muslim militants organised themselves to set fire to churches and Christian neighbourhoods, claiming many victims.

Shahbaz Bhatti made statements to newspapers, held seminars, and spoke several times in television debates to explain his views on the blasphemy law. And he said:

We are a people of faith. We respect all the prophets and venerate all the Holy Scriptures. No member of the minorities could ever even imagine blaspheming. The problem is that we are often wrongfully accused. Secondly, when a Muslim is accused on the basis of the same law, only the individual is in danger, while when a member of a minority is accused, all members of the community and their properties are in danger. We are not asking for this law to be abolished, but we are asking the government to modify it so that no innocent people lose their lives and that no one can abuse the law. After a careful investigation, a complaint must only be filed against the accused. Furthermore, those who misuse the law, calling it into private conflicts, and are found guilty, deserve severe punishment.

It was a sensible and reasonable position, which took into account the fundamentalist balances and pressures

which exist in Pakistani society. At that time there were some members of the Christian community who were campaigning for the total repeal of the law, meeting strong opposition from conservative Islamic parties and groups. The law, they said, “is a patent violation of human rights, permitted and legitimised by the state. It is a measure that allows and justifies injustices, discrimination and persecution; it is a law to be abolished.”⁴⁸

The legislation affected religious minorities, but many Muslim faithful were also victims of it⁴⁹ and, for this reason, the revision project to prevent its improper use met with the favour of moderate Islamic leaders, civil society groups, and liberal political parties. The debate over the controversial “black law,” as it was nicknamed, was more alive in civil society in those months than ever before.

Bhatti was not intimidated in the slightest and, at that time, he was among the clearest and strongest voices in reporting the distortions, damages and injuries that the legislation inflicted on the democratic fabric and the rule of law. This position did not fail to create problems, enemies, and hostilities for him. This was clearly understood in the case of the two Christian brothers, Rashid Emmanuel and Sajid Masih Emmanuel, on trial

⁴⁸ Fides News Agency, 9th December 2010. The appeal is by Fr. Mario Rodrigues, then director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Pakistan, found at the link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/27970-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Blasphemy_law_at_the_centre_of_Human_Rights_Day

⁴⁹ According to data released by the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) of the Catholic bishops of Pakistan, between 1987 and 2018 a total of 776 Muslims, 505 Ahmadis, 229 Christians and 30 Hindus were indicted under various articles of the blasphemy law.

for blasphemy, and victims of a summary execution before the Faisalabad court. They were gunned down after the hearing was over, while they were returning to prison. The court had exonerated them, but Islamic leaders had been stirring the crowd for days, demanding the death of the two.⁵⁰

Shahbaz Bhatti remarked that “the false accusations against the Christians, had been artfully fabricated by people who harboured personal grudges against the two brothers,” and condemned the murder in no uncertain terms. After those statements, Islamic groups began to criticise Bhatti, demanding his immediate resignation. Society and politics were in turmoil. Muslim jurists and scholars also noted that that law was “the dark evil of Pakistani society”, it disturbed balance, harmony, and legality. At the very least procedural changes had to be made to prevent the prosecution of innocent people.⁵¹

In an already overheated social and political climate, in November 2010 the news of Asia Bibi’s death sen-

⁵⁰ Rashid Emmanuel and Sajid Masih Emmanuel, 32 and 30 years old, Catholics, were arrested in early July 2010, after the discovery of some leaflets that profaned the name of Muhammad on which they were allegedly named. On 19th July, the court of First Instance, having established their innocence, ordered their release. Then the tragic murder, which preceded the mass attack on the Christian suburb of Warispura, near Faisalabad. The news can be seen on Fides News Agency from 20th July 2010 at the link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/27125-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Mob_attack_on_Christians_sleepless_night_for_the_Church_in_Faisalabad

⁵¹ Fides News Agency, 23rd July 2010: http://www.fides.org/en/news/27148-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Blasphemy_law_an_evil_of_society_Muslim_lawyer_says

tence, issued by the Nankhana Court of First Instance, which confirmed the validity of all the charges against her and excluded any mitigating circumstances, came as a detonator.

Civil society in Pakistan, the bishops, and the Christian communities mobilised for the woman, obviously innocent and victim of a plot against her, hatched also due to the work of the local imam. Asia was the first Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy. “We support Asia Bibi and we will organise a large protest campaign on her behalf. We will take all the necessary steps, at a legal level, to ensure that the trial is completely overturned on appeal to the High Court of Lahore. Her case is representative of the abuse of the blasphemy law to the detriment of religious minorities. This is a blatant violation of human rights,” Fides News Agency was told by Mehdi Hasan, a Muslim journalist and academic, president of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, one of the most important and most widespread non-governmental organisations in Pakistani society.⁵² That case, which involved an illiterate farming woman from a rural village in Punjab, took a decisive turn when Pope Benedict XVI expressed “closeness to Asia Bibi and her family” at the conclusion of the general audience of 17th November 2010, launching an ap-

⁵² Fides News Agency, 12th November 2010: http://www.fides.org/en/news/27796-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Muslim_lawyers_and_human_rights_activists_rallying_for_Asia_Bibi and http://www.fides.org/en/news/27790-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Bishops_of_Pakistan_make_appeal_to_the_Pope_and_to_all_the_mothers_in_Pakistan_for_Asia_Bibi

peal and asking that freedom be restored to her as soon as possible.⁵³

That intervention by the pontiff, on the one hand galvanised the community of the baptised in the “land of the pure,” while on the other, it had the effect of polarising the discussions on the case, which continued with exacerbated tones. The story of Asia gradually took on a symbolic character that had the effect of disconnecting it from the reality of the facts and procedural truth, transforming the woman into a symbol of the “clash of civilisations” between the Christian West and Islamic civilisation that extremist groups encouraged, instigating hatred and promoting violence. The story and conviction of Asia Bibi, the Christian already labelled and irrevocably condemned as blasphemous before the truth had been ascertained, and awaiting the conclusion of the trial, became a point of no return, a question of principle that provoked evident instrumentalisation and ended up involving and marking the life of Minister Bhatti forever.

At that stage Bhatti and other democratic forces still saw glimmers of hope and scope for action to revise the blasphemy law, which a few months later were, instead, drastically reduced and finally closed completely. In the wake of a movement of open-minded opinion, which recognised that the law lent itself to patent abuse, in November 2010 Sherry Rehman, an MP of the Pakistan Peo-

⁵³ BENEDICT XVI, *Udienza generale*, (General audience), Wednesday 17th November 2010 at the link: http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101117.html

ples Party and president of the Jinnah Institute, a prestigious institute of political studies in Islamabad, presented a motion for the revision of the law to the National Assembly.⁵⁴ It was a test in the fight against radicalism and extremism: the intention was to revive the subcommittee on blasphemy, which existed within the Parliamentary Commission on Religious Minorities, and then involve the whole parliament. The attention of the institutions was at its highest. Pakistan President Ali Zardari asked Minister Bhatti to draft and deliver an official report on the Asia Bibi case. Minister Bhatti and the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, hoped, by mutual agreement, for a new investigation into the case of Asia Bibi and a fair appeal process before the Lahore High Court.

Taseer showed great courage in that case, challenging the extremist groups: on 20th November he visited Asia Bibi in prison, getting her to sign an appeal for clemency addressed to President Zardari and publicly declaring her innocence. The move unleashed the wrath of the Islamic militants of the Tahafuz-e-Namos Risalat Muhaz organisation (Front for the Protection of the Prophet's Honour), a platform of extremist groups that opposed any attempt to abolish or modify the blasphemy law. Muhammad Ali Naqshbandi, secretary general of the Front, harshly criticised Taseer for supporting the release of Asia Bibi, announcing a public protest in front of the governor's palace, considering him complicit.

⁵⁴ Fides News Agency, 26th November 2010. The news is available at the link: : http://www.fides.org/en/news/27870-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Proposed_revision_of_the_blasphemy_law_lands_in_Parliament

it and therefore, himself, “blasphemous.” In a completely unveiled threat, he said, “His position hurts millions of Muslims. It will force them to follow in the footsteps of Ghazi Ilmuddin Shaheed, who killed a blasphemer.”⁵⁵

Everyone, at that time, denounced the climate of growing intolerance. They were on the crest of a historic passage, which would be crucial to the fate of the whole nation. Twenty years after the approval of those draconian measures, it had come to a climax in which, given the political and social consensus, the goal of revising the blasphemy law seemed within reach. To stop this process, the reaction of the extremists was unspeakably violent.

Fr. Emmanuel remembers it emotionally: “Shahbaz Bhatti’s efforts had borne fruit. There was general consensus in the Pakistani government to make some changes to the blasphemy law to prevent anyone from using it for the wrong purposes. However, some Islamist leaders believed that the attempted modification itself constituted an act of blasphemy. Shahbaz criticised the hypocrisy of politicians and condemned the religious leaders as obtuse. As a result, many of them began to resent him. Shahbaz Bhatti was appointed head of the commission which was to suggest proposals and recommendations for changing the law. The process went on and this, for the extremist groups, was intolerable. The determination

⁵⁵ This refers to the story of Ghazi Ilmuddin Shaheed, called the “hero of blasphemy”: he was a carpenter from Lahore who, in 1929, killed the writer Shaheed Mahashay Rajpal, author of a book deemed blasphemous towards the prophet Muhammad.

to eliminate him grew. The situation became very dangerous for Bhatti: there were intelligence reports, and the interior minister, Abdur Rehman, secretly visited him to inform him of the risks he was running. The government promised him an armoured car which, inexplicably, never came.”

A predicted death

An attack was in the air. The signals multiplied. A death threat that the secret services believed to be very credible was spread on 4th December by the Islamic terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the largest in South Asia. Minister Bhatti was targeted by the militants because he was “an accomplice of blasphemy”.⁵⁶ The situation was taking a tragic turn, given the pressure from fundamentalist groups. There was strong concern about possible violence against Christian communities and places of worship.

A few days after the publication of that proclamation, and after the warning received by the interior minister in December of that year, Shahbaz Bhatti seemed rather darkened, almost as if he understood the fate that awaited him. It was his Gethsemane. The full awareness of being in danger of death generated in him greater attachment to prayer and continuous reliance on God. He

⁵⁶ Fides News Agency, 4th December 2010: http://www.fides.org/en/news/27946-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Terrorist_groups_raise_aim_Eliminate_Minister_Bhatti

was, all the more in those months, a man “both present and for himself,” who knew what he was doing, why, and what the outcome of his actions would be. But the figure and experience of Christ in the Garden of Olives, his supreme sacrifice, continued to inspire his steps and give him the strength to go on. “Let this cup pass from me,” he implored God in the words of the Gospel, “but your will be done. I will not flee.”

He then asked to meet the executive committee of the Christian Liberation Front, the people who, in fact, were closest to him and who had worked tirelessly with him for many years, and explained the situation: “They have decided to kill me. All of you must be prepared for this eventuality. I am ready to offer my life so that my people and other minorities can live free and without fear.” When a member of his group suggested that he resign as head of the commission to preserve his life, Bhatti refused saying, “I can’t do it. It’s now or never. I can’t back down. I have managed to bring the demands and needs of my people before the government. My conscience is at peace and satisfied. The fear of death doesn’t haunt me.”

Shahbaz Bhatti did not let himself be discouraged nor intimidated by the new, terrible and public threats from the terrorist groups: “My mission for justice, for human rights, and for the protection of minorities will continue. I trust in God’s help,” he said in a press interview, after the intimidating messages had been spread.⁵⁷ “The mis-

⁵⁷ The interview took place with the author of the book Paolo Affata-
to, and was published by Fides News Agency on 4th December 2010. It
was a conversation with passionate and emotional notes. It is available

sion of my life is to protect religious freedom, minority rights, justice and equality: I will continue to do it without delay. I will continue my efforts despite the proclamations of these groups which, among other things, are illegal and damage the image of the country.”

Bhatti was aware he was risking his life because, he said, “whoever engages in this field ends up in the sights of the extremists,” and added, “More than in bodyguards, I believe in the protection of God, I believe in His help and I trust in providence.” He confirmed his commitment to the commission for the revision of the blasphemy law and said he was ready to face obstacles, that is, the action of radical and violent groups who “want to sow hatred, polarise the country, and bring instability, using religious pretexts.” Thanking the Pope “for his closeness and solidarity with the Christians of Pakistan,” he concluded with a premonitory appeal: “I ask the Holy Father and all the faithful of the world to pray for me.”

That Christmas of 2010 for the Christians of Pakistan was spent amid strong tensions. A cross-party alliance of Islamic radical groups, which included religious parties, Islamic movements, and organisations close to terrorist groups, called for a national mass demonstration, entitled “Namos-e-risalat” (In defence of the honour of Prophet Mohammad), after the Friday prayers on 24th December, to contest the possible release of Asia Bibi and any modification of the blasphemy law.⁵⁸ The in-

at the link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/27947-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Minister_Bhatti_tells_Fides_My_commitment_to_justice_goes_on

⁵⁸ Fides News Agency describes the scenario well in a report

initiative raised further dismay: interpreting the desire to modify or improve the blasphemy law as an attempt to dishonour the Prophet meant inciting hatred and religious conflict.

To turn hatred into terrorist violence is only a small step. At the beginning of the new year a tragic event shook the nation: Salman Taseer, governor of the Pakistani province of Punjab, was killed on 4th January 2011 by one of his bodyguards in Islamabad. Mumtaz Qadri, the self-confessed murderer, said he had acted to punish the politician who had joined the front for the abolition of the blasphemy law. Thousands of people and dozens of political and government representatives attended his funeral in Lahore, amidst state honours. Christians had no qualms about calling him “a martyr of justice and religious freedom.”

With this vicious murder the extremists had raised the stakes and the level of confrontation. Incitements to murder were openly spread by the leaders of the Islamic network Tahafuz-e-Namos Risalat Muhaz, which praised the governor of Punjab’s killer and encouraged the militants to kill Asia Bibi and everyone who was in favour of changing the blasphemy law.

On a hypothetical list, the next victim was Shahbaz Bhatti. The alarm was raised clearly by the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, the network of religious minori-

dated 16th December, 2010, at the link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/28013-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Islamic_radicals_a_Christmas_protest_against_Asia_Bibi_for_the_honour_of_the_Prophet

ties of which the minister was founder and president.⁵⁹ The APMA reported information from a Pakistani intelligence service report, saying it was “deeply concerned about the reports of an imminent attack on Minister Bhatti, who had become the number one target because of his commitment to the abolition of the blasphemy law.” The terrorists were finalising their plan to strike him dead.

Bhatti reacted with these words, placing his life once again in the hands of the Most High: “Pray for me and for my life. I am a man who has burned his bridges: I can’t and don’t want to go back on this commitment. I will fight extremism and fight for the defence of Christians until I die.”

The death of his party colleague Taseer, a politician in the service of the state, was an opportunity for Shahbaz to reflect deeply, including in a spiritual way. The passage of the Gospel that often recurred in his mind reads: “Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest” (Jn 12:24). And then continues: “Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (Jn 12:25). By ruminating on these passages of Scripture, Shahbaz succeeded in seeing beyond death, indeed he succeeded in seeing fruitfulness in his death. Shahbaz, who had spent all his childhood among the fields and farmers, saw death

⁵⁹ The warning signs were reported by Fides News Agency on 28th January 2011: http://www.fides.org/en/news/28200-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Preparing_a_terrorist_attack_to_eliminate_Catholic_Minister_Bhatti

as a seeding: the seed must fall to the ground, be buried and die to give rise to a new plant that multiplies the seeds in the ear. As for Jesus, men and women following him have to fall to the ground and even disappear to bear fruit. True death is the sterility of those who do not give, of those who do not spend their lives but want to preserve them jealously; while giving life until the end, until death, is the path of abundant life. Bhatti, as a humble servant of the Lord, simply welcomed this, embracing this fate. And with faith, even though troubled by a death that he sensed was imminent, he knew how to pronounce his “amen,” always remembering the supreme sacrifice of Christ who, since he was a child, had inspired and irresistibly attracted him. The reflection on the passion and death of Jesus dwelt constantly in his heart and confirmed his steps.

A few days later, another mourning fell on his family: on 10th January 2011 Jacob Bhatti, Shahbaz’s father, died. Already hospitalised in Islamabad, his condition worsened, his family members say, after the news of the murder of Salman Taseer. He had entered a form of psychophysical depression which led to cardiac arrest. The funeral was celebrated on 12th January in Khushpur by Fr. Emmanuel Parvez. At the end of the rite, Shahbaz Bhatti addressed the faithful present in the church saying: “I will always keep the memory of my dear dad, who taught me to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, between good and evil. I commit myself before everyone to proclaim the truth and I will be happy to die for this purpose.”

To the local people, distributing aid to the sick and needy, to widows and orphans, he said: “I hope that all Pakistanis will live in peace and harmony. I pray that nobody will abuse the blasphemy law. They tell me to shut my mouth and leave the country. Well, this is my answer: rather than going abroad to live a comfortable life, I prefer to be a martyr in my homeland.”

The violent campaign against him did not end. On 30th January, Islamic radical groups gathered in the Tahafuz-e-Namos Risalat Muhaz network organised a demonstration that saw over 40,000 militants parade through the streets of Lahore, burning images and dummies representing the Pope and Shahbaz Bhatti. That procession confirmed the hatred toward the minister for minorities. According to the APMA, it was “yet another, open threat to the minister, who is in serious risk of death, as he has been left completely alone at the political level. The security measures in place to defend him are completely insufficient: it is urgent to provide greater protection.”

It was known to everyone that Bhatti had been targeted by terrorists. Shahbaz also received encouragement and solidarity from the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, whom he had met in Washington on 4th February on a short trip across the ocean, where Bhatti received US support for the promotion of human rights and full religious freedom in Pakistan. That episode abroad was short: domestic politics and its upheavals required the presence of Shahbaz. A government reshuffle was on the horizon and Prime Minister Gillani was

studying a drastic reduction in departments (from over 50 to 22). The ministry for minorities was on the point of being abolished, becoming a department of the ministry for religious affairs, but at the last minute the ministry was confirmed. Shahbaz Bhatti did not hide his satisfaction and spoke of “a clear signal of government attention toward religious minorities.” He went on:

My new appointment will certainly create protests and discontent in many Islamic extremists. But my fight will continue, despite the difficulties and threats I have received. My sole purpose is to defend fundamental rights, religious freedom and the very life of Christians and other religious minorities. I am ready to make any sacrifice for this mission, which I carry out with the spirit of a servant of God.

Then the profession of faith: “There is still a lot to do, we have to face very serious challenges, such as that of blasphemy. I will try to bear witness, in my commitment, to faith in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁰

His hour was approaching. A few days before his death, Shahbaz Bhatti expressed his views to some Pakistani television journalists. And he clarified which part of the story he wanted to be remembered for. He clarified the attitude that he lived, every day, as a true disciple of Christ:

I would like to establish a dividing line between terrorists,

⁶⁰ Interview released to Paolo Affatato. Fides News Agency reported it on 12th February 2011. The link is: http://www.fides.org/en/news/28318-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Ministry_for_Religious_Minorities_confirmed_Bhatti_to_Fides_Commitment_and_faith_in_Christ

the promoters of violence, and us, the peacemakers. The former are blinded by hatred and hypocrisy, we respect the commandment of love and goodness. They believe in judgement and condemnation, we proclaim forgiveness and tolerance. They take away joy and life from people, we offer our lives to save our enemies. They carry weapons and bombs, we hold doves of peace and love in our hands. They bring garlands and flowers to the perpetrators of massacres, we turn on lights of hope in the tombs of our martyrs. They kill to obtain paradise, we try to turn this world into a paradise. In their dictionary the word mercy does not exist, in our books we write songs of peace.

Then, answering a question, he went on:

I would like to express to my Muslim brothers my point of view on the blasphemy law. They taught us to venerate all the Holy Scriptures and all the prophets. Christians do not blaspheme, but bless. In our churches we profess love, peace and truth. We do not condemn anyone as unfaithful or ungodly. Our religious leaders do not condemn anyone to death.

And he added, with a streak of sadness: “We are only afraid that the blasphemy law will be misused. Many people are wrongly accused. Through personal grudges and thirst for revenge, false accusations are created against irreproachable Christians. We don’t want to defend the guilty, but to protect the innocent.”

The days of Shahbaz Bhatti’s earthly life were drawing to a close. Fr. Emmanuel Parvez remembers his last meeting with Shahbaz with nostalgia and emotion: “Three days before his assassination he asked me to come to Is-

lamabad. He often consulted me on spiritual and biblical issues. He thanked me for joining him from Faisalabad. After the exchange of fraternal greetings we began to converse.” What follows is an account of that interview.

Shahbaz: “I heard that you are trying to get houses built for the workers of the brick industries.”

Emmanuel: “Yes, it’s true. There are many homeless families who can’t even imagine building one.”

Shahbaz: “I fully support your idea. After Easter I will come to you and visit the place. You can count on my help in the future.”

Emmanuel: “Thank you. Did you call me to Islamabad for any particular reason?”

Shahbaz: “Yes, of course.” (Silence). “Maybe you know I’m constantly receiving death threats. They want to kill me at all costs. The enemies are many and the victim only one. The circle is tightening around me. Every day could be the last.” (Silence).

Emmanuel: “Why don’t you come to Khushpur? The whole village will protect you.”

Shahbaz: “I know, but people who suffer are waiting to be helped and supported everywhere in Pakistan. I can’t hide. I have to go to people who are victims of prejudice, oppression, injustice and violence.”

Emmanuel: “Maybe a short absence from the country could help you avoid these problems and calm the waters.”

Shahbaz: “Everyone is giving me the same advice, even some Muslim friends. Many politicians make this choice

and leave, but I won't. I was born in Pakistan and will die in Pakistan. I will not disappoint my people and I will not abandon my country."

Emmanuel: "Then you just leave us only the opportunity to pray for you and fight with you to make your mission a reality. We are by your side. You can count on us!"

Shahbaz: "Thank you. You have always been a strong spiritual support for me. I would like to ask you about the presence of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane."

Emmanuel: "What do you want to know?"

Shahbaz: "The angel who comforted Jesus in his agony: tell me something about him."

Emmanuel: "In his humanity, Jesus needed the support and strength of his disciples. He asked Peter, James and John to stay awake and pray. God sent him help from heaven through an angel. Sometimes we all need angels. That heavenly creature gave strength to Jesus and prepared him to face a violent and painful death."

Shahbaz: "Thank you. Christ always gives me inspiration and courage. As he says in the Gospel: if the grain of wheat does not die, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Emmanuel: "You will surely also remember: nobody has a greater love than this – to give his life for his friends."

Shahbaz: "Talking to you is always very illuminating and comforting. Thank you."

"That day," concludes Fr. Emmanuel, "we had dinner together: it was the last time we saw each other. It was

quite serene, but it seemed that his gaze was directed towards a distant galaxy.”

A dark day for Pakistan

And then came 2nd March 2011, one of the most tragic and dark days in the history of Pakistan. Shahbaz Bhatti's voice was silenced by a ferocious terrorist attack. The world's poor lost a true friend. Millions of oppressed and voiceless people became orphans. Fr. Emmanuel recalls it like this: “In the morning, as usual, Shahbaz recited his prayers, had breakfast and went to his mother to receive a blessing from her. As always, she encouraged him to continue on the difficult path he had chosen, with faith and without fear: ‘Never forget how many obstacles and how much suffering our Saviour, the Lord Jesus had to endure. Be his worthy disciple,’ was her loving advice.” A few minutes later, the people who had ambushed him attacked him and killed him. A white jeep blocked his black Corolla in a residential street in the I-8/3 district of Islamabad. Three armed men forced the driver out. Then after two endless minutes of gunfire, they escaped. The race to the hospital was in vain. Shahbaz died with his face and body disfigured by 62 bullets.

At the scene of the crime, the investigators found a leaflet justifying the death of Shahbaz Bhatti “because he was a Christian, an infidel and a blasphemer.” His assassination was part of a “religious war to eliminate those who want to change the blasphemy law,” continued the

document, “By Allah’s grace, all who are members of the Law Review Commission will go to hell.” The text was signed by the network of Taliban groups Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.

The whole world mourned the death of Bhatti. Numerous nations and international organisations expressed condolences for what had happened. The murder generated indignation, sadness and bitterness among Pakistani Christians. “We are very sad and we deplore this gesture against life. It is a perfect, tragic example of the unsustainable climate of intolerance that we experience in Pakistan. We ask the government, the institutions and the whole country to recognise and resolve this issue with determination,” said Lawrence Saldanha, then archbishop of Lahore and president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Pakistan. “We are alarmed: it is the sign of fanaticism that indiscriminately affects all those who are engaged in the defence of truth, justice and peace,” added Joseph Coutts, who then led the diocese of Faisalabad.⁶¹

The Christian community in Pakistan, shocked by grief, reacted to the event with spontaneous demonstrations of peaceful protest, prayer vigils, and the announcement of three days of public mourning, from Friday 4th to Sunday 6th March.

For many days all Pakistani television channels continued to talk about him, his noble character and his life

⁶¹ FidesNewsAgency, 2nd March 2011, at the link: : http://www.fides.org/en/news/28449-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Bishops_on_Bhatti_s_murder_A_tragic_example_of_the_intolerant_climate_in_which_we_live

dedicated to the poor. Everyone felt they had lost a trustworthy, authentic, compassionate, revolutionary, and loyal leader, a friend of the weak and voiceless.

This is how Fr. Emmanuel remembers that tragic day: “On 2nd March 2011, I celebrated the six o’clock Mass with the students of St. Paul High School. After breakfast I went to the institute for some English and science lessons. Then I went back to the parish house where I had a meeting with the catechists. It was a very pleasant day. I had just returned to my room when I received a call: Shahbaz Bhatti had been murdered. In reality they only told me that he had been seriously injured. So I rang the bell and asked the faithful to pray to God for him. Later a friend called me to tell me that the terrorists had stopped his car and opened fire on him. The attack had been so violent that Shahbaz Bhatti had died instantly. The news shocked me deeply. It was as if the world had collapsed on me. I stayed like that for a few minutes, without really realising what had happened. I could neither move nor think. To be sure, I phoned my cousin Aleksander, Shahbaz’s older brother, who confirmed his death with a trembling voice.”

It was a day of mourning: “With a broken heart and a body as cold as ice, I informed my parishioners of the martyrdom of Shahbaz and asked them to gather in church to recite the rosary. Soon afterwards I drove to my hometown of Khushpur. On the way, I kept asking myself agonising questions: Why are innocent, kind and friendly people like Shahbaz killed? Men faithful to God who want to follow him? Shahbaz was a messen-

ger of peace, love and harmony. Who could wish for his death? When I arrived in the village, I felt overwhelmed by an unreal and painful silence. Everyone was shocked by the terrible news. Everywhere sighs and moans were heard. No one went to work that day. There was no music around, there was no noise, not even the screams of children and women. People couldn't believe Shahbaz was dead. Nobody could believe that a person full of life like him was gone."

The village was in shock: "Initially the inhabitants of Khushpur were reluctant to abandon themselves to tears. They had feelings halfway between fear and pain. Their hero had been cruelly killed, but nobody wanted to believe it. He was dead, but he continued to be alive in people's hearts and memories. Everyone was shocked. They didn't want to accept a tragedy of that magnitude. Nobody spoke. Nobody ate or drank. The village seemed inhabited by statues and stones. Then, slowly, groups of caravans, buses and cars began to arrive from every direction. In the afternoon the gathered crowds were huge. Many arrived with wagons, carts and rickshaws. Everyone was crying, shouting and beating their chests. Khushpur began to resonate with slogans of all kinds about Shahbaz Bhatti, which expressed grief, sorrow, despair and anger. Some called for revolution, mutiny and revolt. Simply, nobody could accept the tragic end of a great figure so loved by everyone. They said: 'Your blood will change the face of our homeland.' Or laments such as these were heard: 'Shahbaz Bhatti, we will cry for you for eternity. Who can ever replace you,

Shahbaz?’ Others angrily chanted the slogan: ‘An eagle has fallen prey to vultures.’ And finally, between tears, moans and screams: ‘The blood of a martyr revives a poor nation.’ ”

The whole nation was shaken by the murder of a peaceful and gentle leader. The funeral, an ecumenical celebration attended by civil and religious authorities, was held on 4th March in Khushpur. The authorities and various religious leaders took to the floor for a short message, while thousands of Christian faithful from other communities participated in the ceremony, which was conducted in an atmosphere of recollection, composure, emotion and silent prayer.

Fr. Emmanuel reports about that “dark day” in the history of Pakistan: “The day of Shahbaz Bhatti’s funeral was incredibly sad. People came from all over Pakistan to attend the ceremony. Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Bahá’i faithful, and Christians from all churches came to show love and respect for that great leader. His body was transported by helicopter from Islamabad to the Don Bosco Stadium in Khushpur. The whole of the surrounding area was crowded. There were so many buses, cars and wagons that traffic was stuck for many hours. The stadium is located about a kilometre east of the town, and was surrounded by a multitude of people. The streets around were so full of people that it was difficult to get around on foot or by public transport. Hundreds of thousands of people had come to pay homage to an exemplary leader. A large number of young people occupied the road between the town and the stadium: they shouted,

cried and beat their chests. They wore black clothes and dark bands around their foreheads. They were shouting for the killers to be arrested. Everyone showed their great love for Shahbaz Bhatti. The cries and wailing of the women were unbelievable.”

The parish priest continues: “Even the Muslims who lived in the villages near Khushpur arrived as a sign of respect for the deceased, joining the large procession that was formed to receive the body of a legendary hero. Banners were hanging everywhere. People from all over Pakistan continued to gather. At ten o’clock, two helicopters landed at the stadium. There were thousands of policemen and security agents but they could hardly maintain order. It is estimated that there were 300,000 present. All around, you could hear roars and screaming. Everyone had tears in their eyes. When the helicopters landed, everyone welcomed the body with sadness, respect and love. Among the authorities were members of the government, national and provincial assemblies, bishops and representatives of various churches, representatives of the Christian Liberation Front and the APMA, civil officers, priests, nuns, and many other important figures from various sectors of culture and society. Shahbaz’s body should have been transported from the stadium to the church where the funeral was to take place, but the crowd was so large that it took two hours to travel a kilometre. During the journey, many sad things happened in the streets. Some committed self-harm, many lost consciousness from pain and despair. Others even wanted to set themselves on fire. It was very difficult to

keep the situation under control, despite the efforts of the police and security agents. At one point, on the road, there were about 500 young people on the ground. Some were seriously injured. Eventually the body reached the church, but the crowd was so large that it was not possible to hold the funeral inside the building. So it was decided to move the funeral to the St. Dominic school. The number of mourners was so high that it was not possible to find a place in the school compound, not even standing. Bishop Joseph Coutts celebrated the funeral.”

In that liturgy, it was Fr. Emmanuel Parvez who gave a short homily, deeply felt and inspired, remembering the figure of Shahbaz. This is how the priest began:

With a heart swollen with pain and eyes full of tears, we say goodbye to a person who was very dear to us all. The whole world is sad because a voice representing the voiceless has been silenced. Evil forces seem to have triumphed. Men of goodwill struggle to understand this immense and painful tragedy. A light goes out and darkness seems to prevail. A star has disappeared into boundless space. However, this is not the end. After Calvary there is the resurrection. There is light after a dark night. Nobody can bury the truth that has the power to rise from the grave. Those who killed Shahbaz must not think they have won. History will prove them wrong. Shahbaz’s voice will travel the world like thunder and lightning.

In front of the huge assembly, overcome by powerful emotion, Fr. Emmanuel went on to say:

The killers think they are loyal to their religion. Let me clear up their misunderstanding. No religion allows one person

to take another person's life. They think that in this way they will obtain paradise. We do not have the slightest desire to go to a paradise where murderers reside and thrive. We don't believe in a God who rewards murder with a place in heaven. We believe in a God who is a God of love and life. Only he has the right to create and destroy. No human being can claim that right.

Fr. Emmanuel concluded, in deafening silence:

Shahbaz Bhatti entered politics to give politics a new face. To bring a new character, marked by honesty and transparency, sweetness and dedication, wisdom and sacrifice, service and commitment, sincerity and unconditional love for humanity. For centuries the earth will mourn the martyrdom of our hero Shahbaz, who leaves behind a precious legacy of dignity, sound principles, and dedication. He will always be remembered with love and respect.

After the rite, the body was transported to the village cemetery. Although the distance was less than 500 metres, it took an hour to arrive. "At sunset," Fr. Emmanuel concludes, "the nation's rising star was placed in the grave for his eternal rest, surrounded by tears, cries, and prayers. The cemetery and the village overflowed with people, prayers and psalms were being sung everywhere, accompanying Shahbaz's departure from earthly life."

The long wave of that loss travelled the whole world. And after the Angelus of 6th March 2011, Pope Benedict XVI made an appeal to comfort Pakistani Catholics traumatised by the murder: "I ask the Lord Jesus that the moving sacrifice of the life of the Pakistani minister Shahbaz Bhatti awakens courage and commitment in

consciences to protect the religious freedom of all men and, in this way, to promote their equal dignity.”⁶²

Impunity and justice

“These are our hands, They praise the life of you... Peace is the star, That guides our hearts to you... His blood cries out...” - these are the words of the song *Blood Cries Out*, written in 2012 by the English pop music group Ooberfuse and dedicated to Shahbaz Bhatti.⁶³ Bhatti’s blood cried out for justice. After the outrage at yet another murder of a political figure, Pakistan asked for a quick and impartial investigation to shed light on the incident and to punish the principals and perpetrators.

When the police launched an investigation into the latter, the murder offered certainties about the perpetrators: the extremist groups who intended to sow hatred and intolerance in society. “We expect all the institutions, government, judiciary, and police forces, to work together to face this challenge: those who believe in law, peace,

⁶² BENEDICT XVI, *Angelus* of 6th March 2011: http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20110306.html

Earlier, on 2nd March 2011 there was a Statement by the Director of the Press Office of the Holy See on the murder of the Pakistani Minister for Minorities, at this link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/28464-VATICAN_Statement_by_the_Director_of_the_Press_Office_of_the_Holy_See_on_the_murder_of_the_Pakistani_Minister_for_Minorities

⁶³ The Ooberfuse song can be heard on the group’s Youtube channel, at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKhHK2JkAp0>

justice, and freedom are opposed to those who advocate extremism and violence, discrimination and death. How many righteous have yet to die before the whole nation mobilises to overcome this challenge?”, wrote the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) of the Catholic bishops.

The police began by following all leads and questioning witnesses and suspects. One of these was Gul Sher, the driver of Bhatti’s car who, at the time of the attack, rushed out of the driver’s seat, and was completely unharmed. Sectors of civil society called for the creation of a special judicial investigative commission, calling for “commitment and transparency.”

In the days following the murder, the interior minister presented parliament with the first report on the state of the investigation, stating that the police had arrested several suspects and that the attack “had been carefully planned.” Minister Bhatti used to sleep at his mother’s residence, and often did not use an escort for his movements, perhaps because he did not trust them after what had happened to Governor Taseer, who had been killed by one of the men from his escort.

After a few sordid attempts to mislead or misrepresent the murder as “a personal enmity attack,” the investigation turned to Taliban terrorist groups. The task force prepared by the minister of the interior announced that, according to the investigations carried out, the Al Qaeda Brigade 313 known as the “ghost army” led by the Pakistani Taliban leader Ilyas Kashmiri, had organised the murder. According to the commission’s report,

the group had tasked a Taliban commander from the Punjab province, Asmatullah Mawaia, to eliminate the minister, and the plan had then been carried out by elements of the extremist Tehrik-e-Islami group, together with a faction of the Ghazi Force in Islamabad. Brigade 313 was the military organisation of Al Qaeda in Pakistan and was recognised as responsible for numerous attacks. It encompassed Taliban groups and Islamic jihadist groups of various backgrounds such as: Laskar-e-Jhangvi, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, Laskar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Jundallah, and others. According to some analysts, the brigade had infiltrated the Pakistani army and intelligence services.

Based on these investigations, in September 2011 the Rawalpindi Special Counter-Terrorism Tribunal (ATC) issued an arrest warrant against two militants, Ziaur Rehman and Malik Abid, suspected of being the perpetrators of the murder of the Minister of Religious Minorities. In May of that same year, the killing of Osama bin Laden and the number two of Al Qaeda, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, took place in Pakistan. These events were considered a serious blow to the global terrorist organisation. The hope that animated everyone was that Pakistan could disprove its chronic weakness in pursuing terrorists.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The US Department of State report on Terrorism, released in September 2011, stated that Pakistan was unable to prosecute terror suspects, as three out of four defendants were acquitted and many cases remained unsolved and unpunished. The report criticised Islama-

However, the Christians in Pakistan noticed some confusion about the story: the crime was primarily attributed to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement, then to the underground group Punjabi Taliban or to the Al Qaeda Brigade 313. Finally, Minister Malik indicated that it was the responsibility of the Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) armed underground movement, stating that the killers had fled to the Middle East. The picture remained nebulous, just as the galaxy of jihadist formations that moved, crossed, and fragmented the area between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

As months and then years passed, national and international commitment and pressure weakened, and so did the attention of Pakistani institutions. A flashback occurred in 2013 with the killing of Hakimullah Mehsud, leader of the “Pakistani Taliban,” the militant movement that constituted the most serious threat to the security of the country, the one who was considered to be the *de facto* instigator of the murder of Shab haz Bhatti was eliminated. Mehsud was the leader of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement, which had left a statement claiming responsibility at the scene of the minister’s murder.

As time passed and the investigation situation remained rather hazy, Christians in Pakistan began to fear impunity for the killers. Among other suspects, Zia-ul-Rehman, in prison for the Bhatti murder, was ac-

bad’s inability to outlaw terrorist militant groups who escaped bans by changing their names.

quitted in May 2012 due to lack of evidence. In August 2013 Hammad Adil and Muhammad Tanveer, two other Tehreek-e-Taliban group militants, were arrested by the police for attempting to attack a Shiite mosque. During the investigation, Adil confessed that he had organised and carried out the murder of Shahbaz with the help of Muhammad Tanveer and Umer Abdullah. According to the investigators, Adil had been keeping the minister's home under surveillance and had prepared the plan, Tanveer procured the AK-47 rifles and other weapons used in the ambush, while Abdullah supplied the car.

In 2014 the court, before the case was transferred to a military court in 2015, released Umer Abdullah, the main defendant in the Bhatti murder case, on bail. Abdullah, who had confessed to the Bhatti murder, was also accused of killing prosecutor Chaudhary Zulfiqar, the prosecutor in 2013 in the case of another notorious murder, that of the leader Benazir Bhutto. Struck on the back by the magistrate's bodyguard, Abdullah was paralysed and released on bail for health reasons.

In 2015, the Islamabad anti-terrorism tribunal noted that the prosecutor's case was rather weak: there were no eyewitnesses and many observers were ready to bet on the acquittal of the defendant. One of the key witnesses could have been Gul Sher, Bhatti's driver, the only one to have seen the men who had fired close up, and who therefore could have identified them. But Gul Sher had soon chosen to travel to Thailand where he had applied for asylum and asked for refugee status, claiming to fear for his life in Pakistan.

The fact is that in 2016, five years after that murder, “the assassins of the Catholic minister Shahbaz Bhatti had not been brought to justice or convicted,” noted the Christian lawyer Sardar Mushatq Gill, engaged in the defence of Christians in Pakistan, condemning the poor commitment of the government and the judiciary.

In the following three years, there were no significant changes in the investigation or judicial proceedings against the alleged offenders, let alone convictions ordered by the court. The cry of justice raised by family, friends and all Pakistani Christians was still unheard. So much so that Peter Bhatti, brother of Shahbaz, who has long since emigrated to Canada, said:

We aren’t satisfied with the handling of Shahbaz Bhatti’s case. We demand that the government arrests Bhatti’s killers, who are still at large. The authorities have not supported us. The extremists who openly claimed responsibility for Bhatti’s murder, threatened us into not going to court. Due to these threats, we cannot pursue a legal course in Pakistan.⁶⁵

His brother Paul has also denounced the risk of impunity several times. After Shahbaz’s death, he continued his political commitment in Pakistan, holding the position of Minister for National Harmony and Minor-

⁶⁵ The interview given to the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle on 7th November 2018 is at the link: <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-asia-bibi-and-the-countless-victims-of-blasphemy-laws/a-46189842>. After the assassination of Shahbaz, one of his sisters and his mother Marta were forced to take refuge in Canada, where his brother Peter had long since moved. His brother Aleksander still lives in his native village, Khushpur, in the Faisalabad district.

ities for two years from May 2011, and becoming president of the APMA.

There is also an aspect concerning the moral drivers of the assassination. A few weeks before Bhatti's murder, Tahir Ashrafi, Islamic leader of the *Deobandi* Sunni school, head of the Ulema Council of Pakistan, pronounced a violent public invective against Shahbaz Bhatti, in which he explicitly spoke of "physical elimination" if the minister did not repudiate his opposition to the blasphemy law.⁶⁶ That speech is still considered the "signature on the death sentence" for Bhatti. But no measures have since been taken against Ashrafi, considered by many to be the instigator of the crime.

⁶⁶ The invective, in Urdu, is visible on YouTube at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OReb-fHiryI>

CHAPTER IV

Story of a soul

Shahbaz Bhatti's life was authentically evangelical. The fundamental coordinates of his being and his actions were love for God and love for others. The people who were close to him, who collaborated with him, who accompanied him on his path of human and spiritual growth, tell us this in agreement. Shahbaz loved prayer and reading the psalms, and he was inspired by those words. He often expressed his faith in God's providence and action by repeating Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He restores my soul, He leads me in right paths. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; For you are with me." This testimony of faith emerges forcefully and clearly from the accounts of the minister's daily life. "Shahbaz Bhatti was a man who encountered Christ in his life and cultivated a profound relationship with God," Fr. Emmanuel affirms. "Each morning he never failed to entrust his life to the Lord. He read many books, but his favourite reading was the Bible, especially the Psalms, the books of the prophets and the Gospels: from these he drew the strength and grace to go on with his mission, always with faith." The one who, one day back in 1997, professed with simplic-

ity to his “little brothers”, the altar boys of the church of St. Martin in the city of Jhang, in Punjab. After visiting their parish, he said to them:

During the Eucharistic celebration I felt like I was in heaven, surrounded by angels. Angels are divine messengers of peace, joy, and happiness. They bring the good news to the sad and God-fearing people. Angels call on us to love and pray to the Lord. I feel lucky and blessed to be here. It is as if my faith in the Father and in life has been renewed. As a child, I also assisted the priest in the liturgy. As children we help in church and, as adults, we must help the Church in every place and situation in which we find ourselves.

Full faith and trust in Christ and in the church is one of the hallmarks of Shahbaz’s existence who, starting from this certainty, had another peculiarity in his human and spiritual attitude: that of knowing how to give hope. Shahbaz was a gentle and humble-hearted man, smiling, open, and welcoming. Thanks to the light that shone in his eyes and heart, he knew how to encourage and console people who were suffering or in difficulty. He always looked at life with hope and trust. Because of this he was a “man of hope,” he was seen as a liberator of the oppressed. Emmanuel recalls that in this episode: “He used to visit some Christian families who worked in a brick factory near Samundri. They shared all their problems and suffering with him. After finding out about the miserable situation in which they lived, Shahbaz decided to become their spokesperson and explain their problems to the factory owners, who did not like his interference.” Shahbaz reassured them: “I am deter-

mined to stay on your side. I will be back soon with the good news that I have obtained respect for your rights. You are my people.” The parish priest continues: “The workers saw in him a liberator, like Moses, and read in his eyes the light of truth and freedom. They knew he was a true leader, a lover of the poor.”

Shahbaz consecrated himself fully, in full consciousness, to this mission of service to others. His celibacy was also motivated by this choice, which expressed his desire to expand the gift of life. Fr. Emmanuel recalls that when Shahbaz was a little over twenty years old, at a reception in his native village, he said to his relatives and friends, “In this society many people live thinking only of themselves and their families. Yet in the world there are many people who need help. We can dedicate our whole lives to those who need our support. If we are celibate, we can help many people, many families in the world.”

So he did, starting with himself. Shahbaz Bhatti was, in fact, a modest, polite and also very attractive young man. “It was logical and natural that many girls appreciated him and wanted to get engaged to him,” emphasises the cousin priest. “Everywhere he went, there were women who said they had fallen in love with him. Shahbaz would have been happy to get married, but he didn’t: he had a mission to accomplish and nothing was to stand in the way of his vocation. He gave up, in full conscience, a family of his own for the love of the community of humanity.” Moreover, as Shahbaz confided to his closest friends, by choosing not to marry, he intend-

ed to prevent other people and other family members close to him – perhaps a wife or children – from experiencing suffering, pain, and torment, since deep in his heart, he himself sensed that he might be killed.

Alongside chastity, consciously chosen so as to be able to devote himself to serving others, another important aspect of his life is remembered by the Pakistani non-governmental organisation Life for All which wrote: “Shahbaz Bhatti never abandoned the cause of the poor. He had no time for luxury. He sacrificed his personal and family life to dedicate himself to his community.” It is well-known that Shahbaz lived, until the last day of his life, in the utmost simplicity and sobriety, never indulging in luxury or glamour, never indulging in vices or corruption.⁶⁷ Morally impeccable, he did not accumulate money, nor did he leave any hidden financial assets. He had simplified his personal needs as much as possible and lived with peaceful detachment from earthly goods, aware that he was an administrator of goods received from God. He was extremely generous and frequently helped the poor by donating from his own pocket. And it was often his family, friends or people who trusted in him who, in secret, donated money for his activities and initiatives.

Shahbaz was determined to follow Jesus and often quoted a passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew which,

⁶⁷ Fides News Agency, 2nd March 2016, available at the link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/59537-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Nation_marks_fifth_anniversary_of_the_assassination_of_Shahbaz_Bhatti

in his view, captured the meaning of his action in private and public life, based on the sole criterion of charity:

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." Then the upright will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we find you sick or in prison and go to see you?" And the King will answer, "In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." (Mt 25: 34-43)

In this sense, Shahbaz Bhatti was also a prophet of the "sacrament" of the relationship with humanity. He did not conceive of his Christian being in a sectarian way, as a "purer being" or "better than others." He had no vision of faith as a way of ghettoisation or, worse, of polarisation and confrontation. He was not and did not feel like a "crusader" engaged in a religious war. In a television interview, in the presence of some Muslim leaders, he explained it with his usual intelligence.

The purpose of any religious faith is to unite and keep people together; it shows us that humans are important. Religion protects people's rights and creates harmony in society. Religion transforms individuals and offers them a sense of the sacred. Religion paves the way for a civilised society.

Religion begins with the human and leads to the divine. For us Christians, the Ten Commandments are the way that encourages us to worship God the Creator and love other human beings. Our faith prohibits killing, stealing, committing adultery, being selfish, greedy or lying. It encourages unity, harmony and solidarity, and love between people.

To fully express the vision of himself and the world are the powerful words of what has been considered his “spiritual testament,” a clear testimony that flowed from his heart:

My name is Shahbaz Bhatti. I was born into a Catholic family. My father, a retired teacher, and my mother, a housewife, raised me according to Christian values and the teachings of the Bible, which influenced my childhood.

Since I was a child, I was accustomed to going to church and finding profound inspiration in the teachings, the sacrifice, and the crucifixion of Jesus. It was his love that led me to offer my service to the Church.

The frightening conditions into which the Christians of Pakistan had fallen disturbed me. I remember one Good Friday when I was just 13 years old: I heard a homily on the sacrifice of Jesus for our redemption and for the salvation of the world. And I thought of responding to his love by giving love to my brothers and sisters, placing myself at the service of Christians, especially of the poor, the needy, and the persecuted who live in this Islamic country.

I have been asked to put an end to my battle, but I have always refused, even at the risk of my own life. My response has always been the same. I do not want popularity, I do not want positions of power.

I only want a place at the feet of Jesus. I want my life, my character, my actions to speak of me and say that I am following Jesus Christ.

This desire is so strong in me that I consider myself privileged whenever – in my combative effort to help the needy, the poor, the persecuted Christians of Pakistan – Jesus should wish to accept the sacrifice of my life.

I want to live for Christ and it is for Him that I want to die. I do not feel any fear in this country. Many times the extremists have wanted to kill me, imprison me; they have threatened me, persecuted me, and terrorized my family. I say that, as long as I am alive, until the last breath, I will continue to serve Jesus and this poor, suffering humanity, the Christians, the needy, the poor.

I believe that the Christians of the world who have reached out to the Muslims hit by the tragedy of the earthquake of 2005 have built bridges of solidarity, of love, of comprehension, and of tolerance between the two religions. If these efforts continue, I am convinced that we will succeed in winning the hearts and minds of the extremists. This will produce a change for the better: the people will not hate, will not kill in the name of religion, but will love each other, will bring harmony, will cultivate peace and comprehension in this region.

I believe that the needy, the poor, the orphans, whatever their religion, must be considered above all as human beings. I think that these persons are part of my body in Christ, that they are the persecuted and needy part of the body of Christ. If we bring this mission to its conclusion, then we will have won a place at the feet of Jesus, and I will be able to look at him without feeling shame.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ BHATTI, *Christians in Pakistan*, p. 39

These are thoughts full of courage, of extreme offering for the cause of the Gospel, for the commitment to dialogue and cooperation between religions. Thoughts that tell the human and spiritual face of the Catholic leader completely. “Shahbaz Bhatti was a man who followed God’s plan for his life. He was a man who did God’s will, with faith, obedience, and hope, in the certainty of the Kingdom,” explained Rufin Anthony, who was born in the same village as Bhatti and was at that time bishop of Islamabad, shortly after Bhatti’s death. In his life “Bhatti fulfilled God’s will. He was aware that commitment in the world, without help from above, is incomplete and bears no fruit. Even service in politics, without reference to faith, remains arid and exposed to the evil one,” he concluded, citing it as an example for all lay Christians.⁶⁹

A martyr of our time

“From the beginning Shahbaz Bhatti expressed his willingness to give his life and be a martyr,” notes Fr. Emmanuel. “In his spiritual journey of conformation to Christ he maintained that, without shedding one’s blood, it is not possible to achieve the goal of being a true disciple. He knew the tradition of the prophets who died affirming the truth and fighting against injustice. He knew

⁶⁹ Fides News Agency, 4th March 2011 at the link: http://www.fides.org/en/news/28479-ASIA_PAKISTAN_He_was_a_man_who_did_the_will_of_God_said_the_Archbishop_of_Islamabad_at_the_Memorial_Mass_of_Minister_Bhatti

Christian history, full of martyrs who, from the earliest times until today, have offered their lives for the truth, justice and love of neighbour.” Bhatti always remembered the people killed by fanatics and terrorists. “Revolutions require blood,” he said. And he called his way “the way of Calvary.” “My life,” he repeated, “is a gift from God and I want to return this gift to him in a worthy way.”

This desire for the supreme gift of life for Christ, for a commitment “to the end,” he expressed visibly in 2007, on the day of his 39th birthday, asking all members of the Christian Liberation Front to dress in white and wear a red sash: signs that indicated the will to dedicate one’s whole life to peace, equality and justice, right down to the last drop of blood.

Many today ask for his martyrdom to be officially recognised by the church. The first to request this were the Pakistani Catholic bishops who, meeting in assembly in the days immediately following the killing of the leader, officially asked the Holy See to proclaim the Catholic minister “martyr and patron of religious freedom.”⁷⁰ And then, five years after his death, they began to collect stories and testimonies useful for organising and initiating the canonical process, at the diocesan level, to declare Bhatti a martyr.⁷¹ Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, then

⁷⁰ Fides News Agency, 26th March 2011: http://www.fides.org/en/news/28665-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Bishops_write_to_Pope_Shahbaz_Bhatti_is_a_martyr_and_patron_of_religious_freedom

⁷¹ Fides News Agency, 1st March 2016: http://www.fides.org/en/news/59521-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Shahbaz_Bhatti_diocese_collects_testimony_for_Martyrdom

president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, agreed in 2012 recalling the figure Shahbaz Bhatti in Rome, on the first anniversary of his death, saying: “The life of Shahbaz Bhatti was a sacrifice offered to God. Bhatti was an authentic witness of the faith.” He then remarked: “Bhatti reminds everyone that true Christians are uncomfortable, that every believer must have the courage to give his life, that the power of Christians is the power of love and the power of the heart.” Expressing solidarity with all the Pakistani faithful, the cardinal said that, expressing the dynamics proper to Christian martyrdom, “Bhatti’s life teaches us that love is stronger than hatred.”⁷²

This is the meaning of Christian martyrdom: not an act of self-harm, but an act of fidelity consumed in freedom, an extreme experience that shows how love is stronger than violence and death. In this sense, Bhatti’s spirit was a clear reflection of the attitude of Christ who, in the extreme anguish of his last hours, welcomed the prospect of the cross as a choice to spend his life, to the end, in love for God and for others. Bhatti offered, in the course of his existence, a testimony of free and conscious faith, without ever escaping and without wanting to flee in times of difficulty. He spent his life unreservedly putting the Gospel into practice, even in places and circumstances that could cause suffering and persecution. And he did it by concrete imitation of the life and

⁷² Fides News Agency, 17th March 2012 (in Italian): http://www.fides.org/it/news/38706-ASIA_PAKISTAN_IL_Card_Tauran_With_the_sacrificio_Bhatti_ci_ricorda_che_il_potere_e_servizio

way of Christ. It was very clear to Bhatti that suffering and enduring in faith is part of the *sequela Christi*, of the identity of the disciple, and that martyrdom, that is, the loss of life for loyalty to Christ, is a possible outcome of Following Him. Indeed, it is the highest outcome, the one that attests in the most certain way the authenticity of the believer's journey.

In his everyday life, Shahbaz Bhatti embodied the experience of *mártýr*, a Greek term that originally meant “witness,” that is, one who confesses faith in deeds and not simply in words. His existential vicissitudes, recounted in this book, present in a vibrant way the personal dynamics of Christian martyrdom, which challenge every Christian in Pakistan today. Not as a pretext for identity mobilisation, nor as a starting point for indignation campaigns, set in a cultural-political context. Looking at Shahbaz, one can grasp the personal traits of Christian martyrdom: patience, meekness, mercy, absence of hatred for persecutors, and love for enemies. This attitude, which is a gift from Christ himself, gives consolation and victory to those who suffer in his name. Indeed, martyrs are victorious because the strength they receive from Christ stands out in them.

It must be said that, as in many other stories of martyrdom, Bhatti's life also crossed the convulsions of the world, clashes of power, and the relationships between opposing forces. But, within this scenario, Shahbaz did not make his faith an ideological flag and was far from instrumentalising the suffering of the faithful in a state of persecution for economic, cultural or political reasons.

Nor did he treat them in accordance with a lobbying approach of mere “claiming of rights”, which designs a “model Amnesty” church. Shahbaz Bhatti’s example still inspires all Pakistan’s baptised, small minority and discriminated against communities, to be witnesses of mercy toward enemies and persecutors, even at the cost of their lives. Remembering his life means drawing on the sources of martyrdom history, to find that seed of authentic evangelical witness that becomes nourishment to live here and now in the charity of Christ, a supreme gift for the world.

Shahbaz Bhatti, as the accounts told in this book confirm, did not seek a glorious death to gain fame, but walked toward death with feelings that were never hostile to anyone, not even to his executioners. His death was consistent with his faith: the act of surrendering his life was not “against someone,” but represented a gesture to break the spiral of violence, to bring out the truth, and show, like the Lamb sacrificed, that love is stronger than hatred.

And he left Pakistani Christians an admirable example, which Fr. Emmanuel summarises as follows: “In Shahbaz there was full coherence between his professed faith and the life he lived. His life was a fulfilment of the Gospel. And his martyrdom was the fulfilment of the Christian life that began with his baptism.” Here is the legacy that the leader leaves behind: “Bhatti showed the Christians of Pakistan that salvation passes through love,” Fr. Emmanuel notes. “It does not depend on success, money, or possession of goods, but on the ability to

love and accept to be loved, day after day. With his martyrdom Shahbaz affirms, with Christ, it is not suffering and death that have the last word, but love.”

Fr. Bonnie Mendes, an elderly priest from Faisalabad who knew Bhatti from childhood, adds:

We Pakistani Christians are called to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our vocation is to live the Gospel in Pakistan. This means being men and women of peace, responding to evil with goodness, willing to carry the cross with Christ. In this mission we confide in salvation which comes from God not from men. This is the mission lived by Shahbaz Bhatti. He learned from his father to have deep faith and to be faithful to the end. Shahbaz Bhatti was faithful to the point of martyrdom.⁷³

“Shahbaz Bhatti’s sacrifice is bearing many fruits of hope. They are fruits of dialogue, understanding and reconciliation, fruits of strength, courage and meekness,” notes the Dominican James Channan, director of the Peace Center in Lahore, recalling the passage of the Gospel that Bhatti often quoted: “Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.” (Jn 12:24). Fr. Channan, part of the delegation of Pakistani laity and religious people who were received by Pope Francis on 30th November 2018, reported: “Francis encouraged Pakistani Christians and their faith, which endures in sometimes difficult circumstances, urging them to build bridges of

⁷³ Fides News Agency, 1st March 2016: http://www.fides.org/en/news/59521-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Shahbaz_Bhatti_diocese_collects_testimony_for_Martyrdom

brotherhood between religions, to foster relationships of respect and mutual trust.” And he continued: “He invited us to persevere in our evangelical witness, which combines steadfastness with meekness, to assist the victims of false blasphemy accusations, to find concrete ways to combat poverty and modern forms of slavery.” The pontiff then urged the Pakistani faithful to “stand firm in the Christian faith by looking at the martyrs of our times and the testimony of Shahbaz Bhatti, and to promote love and not hatred.”⁷⁴

Today, Shahbaz Bhatti’s bible, that book worn from the daily use of a lifetime, a book that Shahbaz jealously guarded in his room and that he frequented assiduously, is located in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew in Rome, a memorial place for twentieth and twenty-first century martyrs and witnesses of the faith. That book – as Joseph Coutts, archbishop of Karachi, proclaimed cardinal in 2018 by Francis, said – reminds us that “every day our mission is to be witnesses of peace and love in a country where there is so much violence, in a country devastated by terrorism. As Christians our mission is love, and love of Christ ensures that we do not lose hope.” Bhatti “showed us the way. He was a good Catholic and gave his life for his mission. He was killed because he was a Christian. And even though many suggested he leave the country because he was being threatened, he wanted to stay in Pakistan and carry out his mission to the end.

⁷⁴ Fides News Agency, 4th December 2018 (in Italian): http://www.fides.org/it/news/65200-ASIA_PAKISTAN_P_Channan_Il_sacrificio_di_Shahbaz_Bhatti_sta_portando_frutti_di_perperanza

On the first anniversary of Bhatti's death, Andrew Francis, then bishop of Multan, Punjab, who was also chairman of the commission for interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan, echoed those sentiments, saying: "For the people, Shahbaz Bhatti is already a martyr because he gave his life for faith. We hope that the church can officially recognise his martyrdom."

Relations with Islam

An essential point of Bhatti's human approach and political programme was to build good relationships with Muslims: from religious leaders to all politicians, activists, and intellectuals who shared the idea of building a nation according to the principles of democracy, respect for human rights, peace, justice, and social and religious harmony. Shahbaz was and felt, in all respects, a "son of Pakistan" and, in a 90 per cent Muslim nation, he understood the crucial role of interreligious dialogue and fruitful meetings between believers of different faiths, to contribute together to the common good of the nation.

With some men and women of the Muslim religion Bhatti established real bonds of friendship: it happened with the leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party, Benazir Bhutto, and with the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer. Relationships with numerous Islamic religious leaders who saw Shahbaz as a Christian and a public figure, a tenacious promoter of interreligious dialogue and harmony, were courteous and cordial.

Haji Mohammad Latif, the imam of the small mosque built in Khushpur, a building where the few Muslim families in the area gather to pray, also remembers him with those qualities. In the Catholic village, the small minority of the prophet Muhammad's faithful has always had cordial relations with Christian citizens, attending religious feasts and weddings with each other and burying the deceased in the same cemetery. "I cried when I found out about the assassination of Bhatti. He was a leader who always talked about love, peace, and harmony. That's why I loved and admired him enormously," said Latif.

Many Muslim leaders and imams have recognised and appreciated Shahbaz's work and have said they are ready to share his legacy. Mehfooz Khan, an imam from Lahore and a member of the Council of Islamic Ideology, says that over the years he developed a close relationship with him that he defines today as "based on friendship and respect." For Khan, Shahbaz Bhatti was "a precious ambassador of interreligious harmony. His commitment to religious minorities in Pakistan was very significant and important for the future. He put everything he had into it and fought for the values he believed in. His sacrifice will not be in vain. He will be remembered as a voice for the voiceless."

Shahbaz had a very special personal relationship with the imam of the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, Abdul Khabir Azad. Asked on the subject, the imam said:

Shahbaz Bhatti was my good friend. Ours was a deep friendship cultivated over about 20 years. I found him an honest,

supportive person, worthy of the utmost trust. He was a man of sound and solid principles and his mission was to promote interreligious peace and harmony among people of all religions in Pakistan.⁷⁵

“We worked so much together to promote interreligious harmony,” continued the Muslim leader. “Shahbaz Bhatti’s contribution to harmony and interreligious dialogue in Pakistan was remarkable.” He then recalled: “Whenever Christian communities were attacked, in any part of Pakistan, we mobilised together to solve the prevailing problems, so as not to risk them deteriorating. Many times, thanks to our joint efforts, we managed to restore or maintain peace. Today we miss his presence and his passion in promoting interreligious harmony, unity, and peace.”

Abdul Khabir Azad recalls that “Bhatti wanted to paint a good image of our country and he put all of himself into helping the different religions live in peace, harmony, and mutual respect. He worked to address the problems of religious minorities, in the belief that they can play a valuable role in improving our country.” He said:

I was really happy when he was appointed federal minister for minorities. He did an excellent job as a federal minister. He organised interreligious conferences and seminars across the country. Very often he contacted me and asked me for advice on various important issues. In particular, we consulted on issues concerning interreligious relations in Pakistan. I was very happy when, thanks to his efforts,

⁷⁵ Abdul Khabir Azad’s statements in memory of Bhatti were released to Paolo Affatato, in Pakistan, in 2018.

the parliament of Pakistan approved the reservation for four seats in the Senate for members of minorities, when Minority Day was proclaimed on 11th August, and when the provision was passed to reserve 5 per cent of public office jobs for religious minorities.

I have many memories of my personal relationship with him: a humble person, lover of peace and justice. I remember with joy when he contacted me and told me that he would like to visit the places of worship of the various religious communities in Lahore together. It was one of his ideas, in his creativity to build peace. Shahbaz Bhatti came to visit the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore. We both then went to the Sikh Gurudawara temple near the mosque. The visit of the famous Hindu temple Krishna Mandar followed and, finally, we stopped at the Protestant Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ and the Catholic one of the Sacred Heart. It was a very important symbolic pilgrimage. We met the other religious leaders, offering all citizens a demonstration of respect for all religions and their places of worship, in a sign of pluralism.

The imam continues: “Shahbaz Bhatti had great concern for those who suffered and were discriminated against. After the notorious Gojra incident, when some Christians were burned alive, in a great tragedy and crime against humanity, Shahbaz and I spent four days together in Gojra, meeting Christian and Muslim religious leaders, visiting the burnt houses and families in mourning. We also met the local authorities, expressing together deep pain and solidarity with Christians, and asking for justice. Thanks to that joint action, compensation was ordered for the affected families and an official complaint was filed by the police against the militants,

the perpetrators of the violence. Shahbaz Bhatti played an important role in bringing peace and reconciliation to Gojra. Such great things, and many other humanitarian acts of Shahbaz Bhatti, will always be remembered with great respect and thanks.”

On Bhatti’s death, the Muslim leader said: “The assassination of Shahbaz was a major shock to me and a trauma to the whole nation. I have lost a personal friend and a trusted man. I strongly condemn this act of violence and the killing of this great Pakistani Christian leader. I hope and pray that one day justice will be done and that the guilty will be brought to justice.”

“In his memory,” Abdul Khabir Azad concluded, “I vow to carry on the mission of my dear friend Shahbaz Bhatti. I will continue to work for interreligious harmony and peace, values for which Shahbaz Bhatti gave his life.”

There is holiness in Pakistan

“People like Shahbaz Bhatti are rarely born. He was a very special creature in the eyes of God. He was a man loved by all who knew him,” says Alexander Malik, Protestant bishop of the Church of Pakistan, part of the Anglican Communion. At the head of the diocese of Lahore from 1980 to 2012, Malik is a man who knew and worked with Shahbaz, sharing with him many initiatives and campaigns for the promotion of peace, for the defence of human rights, and for the human development of Christian minorities.

The bishop has no hesitation in saying that “Shahbaz is the living testimony that the seed of the Holy Spirit lives and flourishes in Pakistan, there is the presence of God who loves his people: there is holiness. This instils immeasurable hope in all of us.” Malik recalls: “Shahbaz was a man who always saw the bright side of things. He was a man of hope who upheld human dignity, equality, and mutual respect. He dreamed of an era of peace and fought to make it happen.”

The bishop then mentions three fundamental aspects of Shahbaz’s personality, which he had the opportunity to find in his personal relationship with him:

He was a man of faith and prayer. He always started the day by reading the Bible. He often recited the psalms. He prayed every day before breakfast. Usually he prayed for all the suffering and for people afflicted with various problems. On his table there was always a cross, an image of the Virgin Mary and the Bible. He was very devoted to St. Anthony and Padre Pio. On Sunday he never failed to attend mass and he received holy communion, a source of strength for his journey in the world. He was a man who wanted to follow Jesus to the end.

A second remarkable aspect, says Malik, was that of mercy, understood in an etymological sense:

He always had a heart for the poor, the destitute and the suffering. He was always very considerate and attentive to the situation of the poor who lived in houses similar to shacks, he suffered for those who lived as slaves at the mercy of a master, or for the workers who risked their lives in brick factories. He constantly said: ‘If I were reborn ten times, I

would always devote my life to eliminating suffering and misery in the world around us.'

Finally, the Anglican pastor highlights out a third distinctive feature:

Bhatti was a fearless leader because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Shahbaz received many death threats, but refused to flee overseas. He always remembered that he was a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ and that he had to drink the cup which, by God's will, had been reserved for him. In the last months of his existence, although he sensed that he did not have much longer to live, he confirmed, without fear, that he was willing to defend the oppressed and the voiceless to his last blood. He entrusted his life to God's hands at all times.⁷⁶

This is echoed by Joseph Arshad, archbishop in the diocese of Islambad-Rawalpindi, saying:

Holiness pulsates where there is a soul that lives the Gospel. Shahbaz Bhatti responded to what the Council defines in the *Lumen gentium*, as a universal vocation to holiness. It is that call that God addresses to every man saying 'Be holy, for I am holy'. The call of God reaches every person in the uniqueness and unrepeatability of their living conditions, in their life story which, for Bhatti, was the life of a Christian in Pakistan. Shahbaz, to the vocation of God replied 'Here I am, send me!' (Is 6:8). In the situation and everyday life of his existence, immersed in Pakistani society, he lived with love, offering his testimony of faith in his daily occupations, in his state of life. Looking at the life of Shahbaz Bhatti, that

⁷⁶ The testimony of Bishop Alexander Malik was collected by Fr. Emmanuel Parvez.

of Akash Bashir,⁷⁷ and of many faithful who confess the faith in a meek and humble way, even in the midst of difficulties and persecution, we see that the Holy Spirit pours holiness into God's people in Pakistan. The baptised in our land render the evangelical seeds of a holiness lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

Bhatti's example of holiness remains in the hearts of many. Anjum Nazir, priest of the diocese of Faisalabad and pastor of the church of St. Fidelis in Khushpur, explains:

Shahbaz Bhatti is alive in our hearts because he loved humanity and was ready to die for his community. He had a deep faith in Christ and said: 'I know the meaning of the cross. I am ready, if it is God's will, to give my life, like Jesus, for my brothers and sisters.' Even after death our community loves him and feels close to him. For us he should be proclaimed a saint.

And Francis Gulzar, parish priest and vicar general of the archdiocese of Lahore, remarks:

Shahbaz is a hero for us. He lived with a Christian spirit in public life, expressing himself personally for the respect of human rights. He gave his life for everyone, especially for the poorest and most deprived. The enemies of peace and humanity killed him. We acknowledge all the efforts he

⁷⁷ Akash Bashir was an eighteen-year-old Catholic, a former Salesian student, working in the law enforcement service in charge of the protection of the Catholic church of St. John in Lahore, in the Christian quarter of Youhanabad. Sunday 15th March 2015, he blocked a suicide bomber who was about to enter the church: the man blew himself up and caused the death of 20 faithful, including Akash, who prevented an even greater massacre.

made as a man of God. May God welcome him as one of our martyrs and saints.⁷⁸

A reflection in line with the thoughts of many members of the Catholic Church in Pakistan was offered by Cardinal Fernando Filoni, then Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, when during his trip to Pakistan in November 2013 he said:

The solemnity of All Saints was established to commemorate all the saints in the church, both known and unknown. I am absolutely certain that there are innumerable unknown Pakistani saints in heaven who now enjoy eternal bliss with God.

Then he quoted the First Letter of John (1 Jn 3:2):

My dear friends, we are already God's children, but what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed. We are well aware that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He really is.

And he stressed:

To this day, this world continues to be steeped in the blood of Christians, who courageously and faithfully preserve the faith, until they die for it. Yours too is a land of well-known and unknown confessors of the faith. We trust that the faithful and commendable witness of our Catholic faith here is salt and light in this noble land, and contributes to the life of the whole church.

⁷⁸ The interviews with Archbishop Joseph Arshad, with priests Anjum Nazir (in Khushpur) and Francis Gulzar (in Lahore) were collected in Pakistan by the authors of this book.

In this regard, Cardinal Filoni then expressly recalled the “brilliant and heroic testimony of Shahbaz Bhatti, ardent promoter of love between religions and in giving voice to religious minorities”.⁷⁹

Fr. Emmanuel says, taking stock of Bhatti’s life and him being a message for Pakistan: “Shahbaz Bhatti embodied the Gospel values in his life as a man, citizen, and minister. He was nourished by the word of God and the sacraments he received in the church. Each saint, as Pope Francis says in the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, is a message that the Holy Spirit draws from the richness of Jesus Christ and gives to his people. Shahbaz was a gift from God to Pakistan. As a disciple, he listened to and put into practice Christ’s invitation: ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.’ (Mt 16:24). Shahbaz took the path of the cross and walked to the very end. If Christians take the message of the cross seriously, there is hope for Pakistan. The cross means: love knows no limits, it begins with your neighbour and extends to those who are far away. The cross leads to the resurrection and says: life is always stronger than death.”

Fr. Emmanuel concludes this journey in the life and inner world of Shahbaz with a prayer that he has com-

⁷⁹ This was reported by Fides News Agency on 1st November 2013 (in Italian): http://www.fides.org/it/news/53890-VATICANO_Il_Card_Filoni_ordina_il_nuovo_Vescovo_di_Faisalabad_la_testimonianza_of_your_faith_cattolica_e_sale_e_luce_in_questa_tabile_terra_e

posed and that the Pakistani faithful often recite, in Khushpur and in other churches:

Holy Trinity, we thank you for giving us a faithful, committed, courageous, and zealous leader like Shahbaz Bhatti. He always drew energy, inspiration and strength from the most holy Trinity. He was a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. His devotion to the Virgin Mary was exemplary. He loved and respected people of all faiths and cultures. He was strengthened by the example and intercession of all the saints, especially Saint Dominic, Saint Francis, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Saint Pio. Grant him peace and eternal reward in your glory. May his example strengthen and inspire many faithful, in Pakistan and around the world. Amen.

Afterword

Shahbaz Bhatti, God's gift to Pakistan

“The righteous are in the hands of God and no torment will touch them. They are in peace” (Wis 3,1-3).

Shahbaz Bhatti was a righteous man. He was a man who lived in peace because he held the greatest treasure in his heart: Christ Jesus. As a lay Catholic in Pakistan, he was a man engaged in social and political life for the defence of Christians and the rights of all the oppressed. An authentic “beggar of the grace of God,” he was sometimes noticed raising his eyes to heaven before a speech in Parliament, ruminating a Rosary while travelling in his hectic public life, or reciting a prayer of entrustment to God before an important meeting.

Bhatti was “present in himself” and, in the words of St. Paul, there was no lack of “recapitulating in Christ all things, those of heaven as well as those of the earth.” This was the secret of peace, serenity and meekness that dwelt in his heart and illuminated his face. This was also, in a soul reconciled with himself, with God and with his neighbour, the root of the inner strength and benevolence that he gave to everyone he met on his way. His

life was one of a “mystic with his feet on the ground,” an existence marked by faith and by the presence of God in the ordinariness of everyday life.

Shahbaz Bhatti appears today as an example for Christians and non-Christians in Pakistan because he was a man who lived the *shalom*, that is, the fullness of a spirituality, a gift of the Most High, which characterised every moment of his life, even amidst difficulties, hardships, fears and risks. He carried with him, until his death, which occurred violently with the assassination of 2nd March 2011, the *ministerium pacis* which is the beginning of all wisdom.

As a mature Christian, Shahbaz Bhatti was well aware of the meaning and value of his baptised vocation and mission. That sacrament, which had grafted him into Christ like a branch in a vine, had made him a *priest*, ready to offer himself to the glory of God and for the salvation of humanity; it made him *king*, calling him to build the Kingdom of God in history, but also to face spiritual combat to overcome, in himself, the kingdom of sin, directing him towards holiness; it had made him a *prophet*, capable of expressing words of truth, denunciation and hope, committed to witnessing the Gospel with words and deeds, ready to devote himself to the respect of the dignity of all men.

Animated by this spirit, Shahbaz Bhatti made a crucial contribution to the identity and history of Christians in the “land of the pure,” presenting a model of the believer who, immersed in an Islamic society, does not live with an “inferiority complex,” nor with a “minority”

one. Such attitudes, when taken on, generate pessimism, victimism, grievances and pity or, at most, feed the proud claim of rights, with campaigns by activists, typical of civil society organisations.

Shahbaz Bhatti, in his short but intense life, suggested another approach: being a Christian in Pakistan meant for him to live the *hic et nunc*, trusting at all times in the grace of God. Taking on the historical, political, cultural and religious reality of Christians in Pakistan, he also made the elements of suffering and discrimination his own, with faithful abandonment to the will of God, trusting in his unfathomable wisdom.

Bhatti lived his position as a Pakistani Christian with profound *faith*, in the certainty of being the beloved son of a Father who takes care of His children; he was guided by *hope* and a commitment to place the Gospel as a source of values, human rights and the inalienable dignity of every human being, of any religion, ethnic or social group; he was immersed in *charity*, the highest expression of the crucified Christ who embraces all humanity, at all latitudes.

Many throughout the world who know the figure of Shahbaz Bhatti have been fascinated and impressed by the words of his spiritual testament: “I just want a place at the feet of Jesus. I want my life, my character, my actions to speak for me and say that I am following Jesus Christ. (...) I want to live for Christ and to die for Him. I have no fear in this country. Many times the extremists have wanted to kill me, imprison me; they have threatened me, persecuted me and terrorised my family.

I say that as long as I live, until my last breath, I will continue to serve Jesus and this poor, suffering humanity.”

This book tells of and deepens the spirituality and actions of Shahbaz Bhatti. Many in the Pakistani Catholic community would like to see him raised to the glory of the altars, for the supreme gift of life that they already call “martyrdom” in Pakistan. In this frame, the careful research and the original reconstruction of his existence, carried out in this work, can constitute a valid contribution to help to know his rich personality better and favour the process for the recognition of his virtues.

Shahbaz Bhatti has been and continues to be a priceless gift for the Catholic community of Pakistan, which lives as a “small flock” in a largely Muslim nation. He is not simply a symbol: he is above all an authentic son of his country, a man who has built human brotherhood, peace and common coexistence in an exemplary way. His life offered to God, to neighbour, to the nation, to the universal Church, and his sacrifice generate fruits of blessing, dialogue and holiness.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni
Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre

Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to the realisation of this work, which sought to highlight a part of Shahbaz Bhatti's inner world and personality. Many Pakistani citizens have been helpful, because Shahbaz Bhatti is a figure that unites all men of good will in Pakistan. Sincere thanks go to the family of Shahbaz Bhatti, his brothers Paul and Aleksander, who facilitated the research and visited the places where Shahbaz was born and raised, to reach those who were close to him, such as Bishop Anthony Lobo, Cecil Chaudhry and his children, Cecil Shane and Michelle, as well as several members of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, in Punjab.

Among the leaders of the Catholic Church in Pakistan it is right to thank the bishops Joseph Coutts, Joseph Arshad, Sebastian Shaw, Benny Travas and Samson Shukardin. Alongside them, many priests and religious people accompanied me, listened to me and dedicated time on my various trips to Pakistan: Nazir Anjum, parish priest of Khushpur; Francis Gulzar of Lahore; Francis Nadeem and Inayat Bernard, passionately engaged in interreligious dialogue; Emmanuel Yousaf Mani of the Justice and Peace Commission; Qaiser Feroz of the Social Communications Office; Mario Rodrigues, responsible for youth ministry in Karachi; Shahzad Khokher;

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Among the laity we cannot overlook Khalil Tahir Sandhu and Khalil George, Christians engaged in politics; but also Anjum James Paul, Joseph Paul, Joseph Nadeem, and Younas John. The assistance of young communication professionals such as Ayyaz Gulzar of Karachi, Khurram Shahzad, Kashif Aslam, and Samson Paul in Punjab proved to be crucial. I am also so grateful to the Muslim leaders who welcomed me and opened their doors wide: among them Abdul Kabir Azad, Shafaat Rasool, Sayed Ashiq Hussain, and Badar Munir.

Discussions with two people who have Pakistan in their hearts, Robert McCulloch and Monika Bulaj, companions of many adventures, have always been a precious source of inspiration.

Finally, a special thanks to my wife and my daughters, for sharing this work with smiles and patience when it unduly occupied domestic spaces. (P.A.)

When many people of good will get together and collaborate, the result is very often exquisite. So it was with this book. Many members of Shahbaz Bhatti's family, relatives, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers have helped us make this book. I would like to mention Aunt Resham, Uncle William, Joseph Paul, Akmal Bhatti, Asif Javed Khanna, Peter Qaiser, Nazir Bhatti, Emmanuel John, Almas John, Nathaniel Bhatti; and with them, my sisters Bimla Rustam, Easter Rose, Rachel Rashid and

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A challenge to our times

A martyr is always a challenge to those who are honestly searching for meaning in life. Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, a Pakistani Christian, politician and martyr, reveals how human life and death are so intertwined when truth and love, religious difference and social unity, come together for the sake of the common good. Politics as the highest form of charity requires men and women open to self-sacrifice. Faith in God, love of the neighbour and professional competence nourish their social engagement and public service. Building a society where all can live in peace, justice and prosperity, invites all men and women of good will to work together inspired and supported by their religious belief. Beyond any religious or ethnic discriminations, all peoples count for those who are unselfishly committed to love, serve and self-gift.

The Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) has decided to sponsor and add the English edition of this exciting and fascinating biography of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti to its *Omnis Terra PMU CIAM Publications*. Inspired by his life, taught by his social and political work, driven by his Church commitment, Christians and Muslims alike, men and women of all religions can convincingly live together in peace and harmony. Our personal life and our

families can support and enrich each other when human dignity is fully respected in society and in work: authentic faith makes us meet as brothers and sisters because we all are children of God. Death as martyrdom is always fruitful because of one's love for God and neighbour: we love because of God's love working in and through us up to mercy and forgiveness in justice and respect. In spite of all threats and dangers, one never escapes his responsibility and social duty because of his faith commitment to the Truth.

Shahbaz's friendship with many Pakistani Muslims grounded in his Catholic faith, took him to fight together for common just causes, for all citizens' rights and better laws for the Pakistani nation. His assassination (2nd March 2011) and the killing of his Muslim friend Salman Taseer (4th January 2011) seal their common civil and political struggles generating a brotherhood in blood and a unity in self-sacrifice. Shahbaz was slaughtered for Christ as a missionary disciple capable of dialogue and ready for martyrdom. More than a martyr of dialogue, he stands for dialogue and unity because of his martyrdom. His deep faith in Jesus Christ committed him to love God and his fellow Pakistani Christians. His death reveals how he loved all Pakistani people despite religious or ethnic differences. The Gospel's grain really fell into the bloody Pakistani ground, died and still brings abundant fruits. May his sacrifice glorify God, foster friendship and dialogue between peoples and religions, boost peace and justice in Pakistan, and intercede for holiness and fruitfulness in the Catholic Church.

PMU would like to thank Paolo Affatato, Fides's journalist, and Fr. Emmanuel Parvez, a Pakistani diocesan priest of Faisalabad diocese, for their dedicated work and fascinating narration on the challenging Christian witness of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti's life, message and death.

Rome, March 2, 2020

9th Anniversary of Shahbaz Bhatti's sacrifice

Fr. Fabrizio Meroni, Pime

PMU Secretary General

CIAM and Fides Director

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Shahbaz Bhatti (Faisalabad 1968 - Islamabad 2011), founder of the "Christian Liberation Front" was a member of the Pakistan Peoples Party and in 2008 minister for Pakistan's minorities.

He was born into a catholic family from Kushpur, a village in the province of Punjab. He was committed to the fight for human rights, religious freedom, equality, social justice and the revision of the blasphemy law.

On 2nd March 2011 he was the victim of a terrorist attack in Islamabad.

Paolo Affatato, journalist and writer, is head of the Asia editorial staff at the Vatican news agency "Fides". He is author of articles and reports on different Asian situations and countries, and he is a member of the International Association of Religion Journalists (IARJ).

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