

The Faithful Life of Shahbaz Bhatti

Shahbaz Bhatti was born to Christian parents in 1968; he was raised with four brothers and one sister in a well known Christian village.¹ He cared about his Catholic family and his community, and it pained him to see the continuous violence used to destroy his community for its faith.² From a youth, he spent his life as an activist promoting religious freedom and striving to be a voice for the oppressed religious minorities. His work for minorities began as a college student in 1985, when he mobilized minority groups throughout Pakistan to campaign for religious tolerance. In 2002, Shahbaz Bhatti founded the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, an umbrella organization for religious minorities in Pakistan. Its objective is to promote national unity, interfaith harmony, social justice, human equality, and democratic culture, and particularly by uplifting and empowering the downtrodden and marginalized communities of Pakistan.³

In 2008, Shahbaz Bhatti was elected the only Christian member of Pakistan's National Assembly and shortly thereafter he became the first Federal Minister for Minorities. Shahbaz had been campaigning for the rights of Pakistani minorities for 23 years before taking a seat in the National Assembly. He had been offered political positions in the past but had rejected them, however, in 2008 he stated that "the growing persecution...the increasing incidents of discrimination of Pakistani minorities' communities and failure of the former minority lawmakers in getting minorities' demands materialized were from among several factors that made him take the decision of raising the voice of the marginalized people in Parliament."⁴ During his time as Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz introduced several legislations including: a ban on hate speech and literature, a proposition to include comparative religion curriculums in schools, and quotas for religious minorities in government, and Senate positions.⁵

Collaborators for Peace: Shahbaz and the Community of Sant'Egidio

In March 2009, Shabbaz met members of the the Community of Sant'Egidio, which had been present in Pakistan since 2000. He heard of their service to poor children and their efforts in interfaith dialogue with their Muslim neighbors, and recognized their shared vision for a peaceful Pakistan. Shahbaz had first become aware of the Community when they provided aid to those affected by severe flooding which ravaged Pakistan in 2005. In October 2009, Shahbaz accompanied the president of Pakistan for an official visit Pope Benedict XVI. While in Rome, he arranged a meeting between the president and the Community Sant'Egidio to discuss collaboration of a national dialogue between religions.⁶ Thereafter, Shahbaz Bhatti became a close friend to the Community. He began to visit the organization in Pakistan

¹ "Mr. Shahbaz Bhatti a Journey Through Life," accessed October 2, 2014, <http://www.sbmt.org/biography.html>

² "Christian leader voices minorities' concerns in Pakistan Parliament," accessed October 2, 2014, <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2008/s08030180.htm>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ "Shahbaz Bhatti: The Life and Martyrdom of a Christian in Pakistan." accessed October, 30 2014. Print.

and made several trips to its headquarters in Rome. Shahbaz “shared the difficult and patient work of the Community to create dialogue and linkages among”⁷ the minorities and the Muslims in Pakistan.

A primary concern of Shahbaz was the use anti-blasphemy laws, which forbids defiling the Quran and defaming the prophet Muhammad, to discriminate and persecute religious minorities. But Shahbaz met heavy resistance when speaking out against the anti-blasphemy laws and received numerous death threats for urging reform. Yet he never wavered in his advocacy and drew upon his own faith to continue to work for peaceful coexistence:

When I'm leading this campaign against the Shariah laws for the abolishment of blasphemy laws and speaking for the oppressed and marginalized persecuted Christians and other minorities, these taliban threaten me. But I want to share, that I believe in Jesus Christ who has given his own life for us, I know what is the meaning of the cross and following of the cross...I'm living for my community and suffering people and I will die to defend their rights. So these threats and these warnings cannot change my opinion and principles. I would rather die for my principles and for the justice of my community, rather to compromise on these threats.⁸

Shahbaz did not want to die, but neither did he want to abandon the marginalized and persecuted. So he did not let fear and threats motivate him, but chose to act on his compassion and always seeking to foster dialogue. But in March of 2011, just four months after this aforementioned comment, Shahbaz' car was ambushed by gunmen and shot dead. This brave politician sacrificed his life for religious freedom in Pakistan. There are still many obstacles standing in the way of religious equality, but Shahbaz through his life work and his death, opened up a dialogue for religious peace in Pakistan.

A Brother's Forgiveness and Continuation of Mission

A month after Shahbaz' death, his older brother Paul Bhatti traveled to Rome for a conference held by the Community of Sant'Egidio in Shahbaz memory. There Paul publicly forgave his brother's killers, stating “our brother Shahbaz was a Christian and the Christian Faith tells us to forgive.”⁹ Shahbaz' death was a transformative moment in Paul Bhatti's life. Prior to his brother's assassination, he was living in Italy practicing plastic and cosmetic surgery. After the passing of Shahbaz, Paul stepped up to fill his brother's role as the Minister of National Harmony and Minorities Affairs and was elected chairman of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance.¹⁰ With the public forgiveness of Shahbaz' assassins, Paul Bhatti was able to transform the potential of violent escalation into potential for reconciliation.

⁷ “The murder of Pakistani Minister Bhatti: the moved memory of the Community of Sant'Egidio,” accessed October 3, 2014, http://www.santegidio.org/pagelD/3/langID/en/itemID/3837/The_murder_of_Pakistani_Minister_Bhatti_the_moved_memory_of_the_Community_of_SantEgidio.html

⁸ “Pakistan Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti shot dead.” accessed September 29, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12617562>

⁹ “The testimony of Paul Bhatti,” accessed September 30, 2014, http://www.santegidio.org/pagelD/3/langID/en/itemID/6901/Pentecost_2013_The_testimony_of_Paul_Bhatti.html

¹⁰ Ibid

This act of forgiveness shaped his ministerial role and allowed him to continue the work of Shahbaz on behalf of the poor and minorities of Pakistan in a compassionate manner. As Federal Minister, Paul was a key player in the release of Rimsha Masih, a Christian and mentally disabled girl who was imprisoned for blasphemy. He believed that to create interreligious harmony, violence cannot be condoned. In November 2011, Paul Bhatti condemned Nato for their attack on the Pakistan-Afghan border which resulted in the death of 24 Pakistani soldiers. He stated that this attack “compromises the fight against terrorism but also interreligious harmony, intercultural dialogue, and peace in Pakistan.”¹¹ He then publicly expressed sympathy and his condolences to the families of the dead soldiers.¹² After he left that position he still worked to promote dialogue.

Currently, Paul Bhatti continues Shahbaz’ work by advocating for the freedom of religion, he argues that it is the key in obtaining world peace. Through the dialogue between religious groups we can bring awareness “that inherent in every faith tradition are woven beliefs for future generations to see others as members of the one human family.” Interfaith dialogues will shed the world of violence , by bringing to light what unites rather than what separates religious beliefs. This creates an environment which allows people to respect human dignity and learn to love their neighbor.¹³

¹¹ “Paul Bhatti: “The NATO attack may compromise the fight against terrorism and religious harmony in Pakistan,” accessed October 3, 2014, http://www.fides.org/en/news/30440-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Paul_Bhatti_The_NATO_attack_may_compromise_the_fight_against_terrorism_and_religious_harmony_in_Pakistan#.VC8COfldVqE

¹² Ibid

¹³ “Religious Freedom: Road to Peace by Paul Bhatti,” accessed October 3, 2014, http://www.santegidio.org/pagelD/2386/langID/pt/text/418/11_de_Setembro__Religies_em_dilogo_pela_paz.html