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Vatican condemns murder of Pakistani minister

by Sara Angle by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican condemned the killing of a Catholic government minister in Pakistan who had spoken out against anti-blasphemy laws.

"The assassination of the Pakistani minister for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, is a new and terribly serious act of violence. It demonstrates that the pope is correct in insisting on the issue of violence against Christians and against religious freedom in general," Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, said March 2.

Bhatti, the first Catholic to serve in that position, received several threats against his life after criticizing the country's anti-blasphemy laws, which have been used to persecute Christians and other religious minorities.

Bhatti was received by Pope Benedict XVI last September and spoke about his commitment to promoting peaceful coexistence between the religious communities of his country.

"Along with prayers for the victim, with the condemnation of the unspeakable act of violence and with assurances of closeness to Pakistani Christians who are suffering from hatred, we urge that everyone will now realize the dramatic urgency of the need to defend religious freedom and Christians targeted by violence and persecution," Father Lombardi said.

Bhatti was attacked in his car in Islamabad March 2, when gunmen opened fire on his vehicle and proceeded to drag him out, according to press reports. Bhatti was immediately taken to the hospital, where doctors were unable to save him from massive gunshot wounds.

Reports said there may have been a young relative in the car with him, and there were conflicting reports on whether a bodyguard or government security officer was also present.

Bhatti usually traveled with security, but news reports said he may have requested to be unaccompanied March 2.

A note found at the crime scene states led authorities to believe Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, a radical Muslim group, was responsible for the murder, the Catholic agency AsiaNews reported.

Since the Jan. 4 assassination of the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, who defended a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, Bhatti had been one of the only public figures to speak out against the laws.

Despite threats, Bhatti continued promoting religious and social harmony.

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Bishop Rufin Anthony of Islamabad-Rawalpindi told AsiaNews, "The minister lived under constant threat, and the government did not know how to adequately guarantee his safety."

Bishop Anthony knew Bhatti's daily routine, saying, "He would go to see his mother, he would pray with her, then he would call me and ask me every morning to pray for him."

The bishop was particularly affected by the murder because he knew Bhatti as a child, and said he had been a devout Catholic from a very young age.

The bishop described him as "a courageous, fearless man who had taken a very strong position in support of minorities." The bishop believed that because Bhatti was so outspoken about minority rights "the minister paid the price with his blood."

Bhatti spoke at an event in Ottawa, Ontario, Feb. 7 and said, "I follow the principles of my conscience, and I am ready to die and sacrifice my life for the principles I believe."

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