

## On bloody day for Christians, martyr's heir urges 'witness for the weak'

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 30, 2012 NCR Today

**Rome** -- On a day when at least 26 Christians were slain in fresh attacks in Nigeria and Kenya, the brother and political heir of perhaps the most celebrated new Catholic martyr of the early 21st century issued a strong call for a "Catholic-Christian witness for the weakest, for the rights and value of all people", regardless of religion.

In pursuing that aim, he also hinted that he could use American help.

Paul Bhatti, brother of the slain Pakistani Catholic activist and political leader Shahbaz Bhatti, spoke in Rome April 29.

Bhatti argued that the best response to a growing tide of anti-Christian violence around the world isn't to assert special privileges for Christians, but to stake out a principled defense of "a society without discrimination, which respects the rights of all" and, he warned, to be willing to pay a price for doing so.

"To bring peace, you must take risks," Bhatti said.

Few are better positioned to appreciate that point than Bhatti, whose brother Shahbaz was gunned down while leaving his mother's home on March 2, 2011. Bhatti had been the country's leading minority rights activist and, since 2008, the lone Catholic in the national cabinet.

Today, Paul Bhatti has taken over from his brother as Pakistan's Minister of National Harmony.

Though the case remains officially unresolved, credit for the assassination was claimed by a Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban, in retribution for Bhatti's opposition to the country's notorious blasphemy laws. While in theory an insult against any religion is a criminal offense, in practice the law is enforced only for Islam, and charges are often a pretext for rioting and vigilantism.

Since his assassination, Bhatti has become a global symbol of anti-Christian violence. Aid to the Church in Need, a worldwide Catholic relief agency, estimates that 150,000 Christians are killed for the faith each year, while the International Society for Human Rights reports that 80 percent of acts of religious discrimination globally are directed against Christians.

The latest proof of the point came Sunday, with assaults on a Christian service on the campus of a university in northern Nigeria. According to news reports, gunmen first lobbed Molotov cocktails at the service, then opened fire as worshippers tried to escape, leaving at least 21 people dead. Another attack on a Pentecostal church in northeast Nigeria claimed five more victims, while a grenade tossed into a church in Kenya killed one person and left at least twenty-five injured.

Though no one has yet taken credit for the assaults, most observers attribute the Nigerian violence to the militant Islamic "Boko Haram" sect.

Paul Bhatti told a large audience in Rome, gathered for the beatification of 19th century Italian economist and political theorist Giuseppe Toniolo, that such atrocities naturally fuel deep anger – a rage he himself felt, he said, when his brother was slain.

At the time, Paul Bhatti was practicing medicine in Treviso, Italy, and said he initially resisted pleas to return to Pakistan to take up his brother's cause.

"I was very angry with Pakistan. I thought that I didn't want to live in that country, and I didn't want my family there," he said.

Yet his mind changed, Bhatti said, when he returned to Pakistan for his brother's funeral and witnessed a vast outpouring of affection.

"I saw this sea of people, gripped by uncontrollable emotion," he said. "My brother was their leader. He was a symbol not just for Christians but for other minorities, and even for very many Muslims."

Paul Bhatti said that he and his brother come from a deeply practicing Catholic family, in a village where the local church was staffed by Capuchin missionaries. As early as age 14, he said, his brother led a protest against a proposal to require Christians in Pakistan to carry special identity cards. Shahbaz led a hunger strike in front of the parliament building, he said, and eventually the proposed law was withdrawn.

"I saw how a strong faith could change things that seemed difficult, if not impossible, to change," Bhatti said.

Over the course of his political career, Bhatti said, his brother was sometimes offered money by Islamist parties and politicians to back down, and was also faced with a growing series of death threats. At one stage, Bhatti said, he tried to talk his brother into living with in Italy, but he wouldn't bite.

"It wasn't possible to convince him," Bhatti said. "He left his life in the hands of Jesus."

Bhatti there was no mistaking his brother's Catholic identity. When he cleaned out his Spartan apartment after his death, Bhatti said, he found just three items on his bedside table: a Bible, a rosary, and a picture of the Virgin Mary.

Both in Pakistan and among influential Catholic leaders elsewhere, there have been calls to beatify Shahbaz Bhatti and to declare him a martyr. (Formally speaking, a sainthood cause typically cannot begin until five years after the candidate's death).

Yet the secret to his brother's appeal, Paul Bhatti argued, is that his strong Catholic faith expressed itself in concern for the rights of all, not simply a parochial focus on Christian welfare. One of his last projects, Bhatti said, was opening a free school in an earthquake-damaged zone of northern Pakistan for children left homeless. The student body of some 250 children, he said, is entirely Muslim, and the school is still open.

Bhatti said that when he first showed up at his brother's cabinet office, he was stunned by the long line of people waiting to see him. Given that in Pakistan people normally queue up at government offices only for hand-outs, he asked one aide what his brother used to give these people.

"He didn't give them anything," was the reply. "But he listened to them all and supported them all. They needed his voice."

That broad concern for human welfare, Bhatti said, "stirred many hearts," and won support from influential sectors of Muslim opinion.

tToday, Paul Bhatti has taken up his brother's role. He's currently trying to organize a major inter-faith conference in Pakistan, bringing together leading Christian and Muslim figures from around the world.

He's also trying to launch a center of welcome for anyone accused under the blasphemy laws, as well as a college of lawyers to provide legal defense. Bhatti said that's often a problem in Pakistan; when his brother tried to recruit attorneys to defend a Christian farmer accused of blasphemy several years ago, he said, most attorneys were bullied and intimidated into refusing to take the case.

?Like my brother, I'm a Catholic who grew up with the same teachings,? Bhatti said. ?The only ?exit strategy? from intolerance and violence is to follow our faith. We do this not to show how Christian we are, but simply to live these teachings in defense of the value of every human person.?

tSpeaking to NCR after his presentation, Bhatti said he could use American help in getting these efforts off the ground.

tI've never had any direct support from the American community,? he said, either from the government or from the Catholic church in the United States. He said his projects need outside aid, ?because otherwise we're forced to beg for funds from the government and it takes so long.?

tAt the moment, Bhatti said, Pakistan is experiencing a basic calm ?favorable to the rights of the poor, Christians and marginalized people.? Given the unstable political and economic situation, however, he said the situation remains ?turbulent,? and many Christians are simply waiting for the next crisis to erupt.

tIn comments to NCR on the margins of the Rome event, Italian Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco of Genoa, president of the Italian bishops' conference, said that anti-Christian violence such as Sunday's carnage in Africa ?should touch us, and not just emotionally. It should make us reflect on what we can do.?

t?Christians need to respond to violence as Christians,? Bagnasco said, ?not with a vendetta, but with strength of spirit.?

tItaly's Minister for International Cooperation, a Catholic layman and founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio named Andrea Riccardi, warned that Christians have become targets in Islamic societies because they are a ?guarantee of pluralism which Muslim totalitarianism wants to annihilate.?

tSpeaking to the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, Riccardi echoed Bhatti's argument that what's at stake isn't just Christian welfare, but everyone's rights.

t?Today it's Christians who are at risk,? he said. ?But tomorrow it will be different kinds of Muslims, then laity, then women, then ethnic minorities.?

t?Totalitarianism,? Riccardi said, ?is a monster which, in the end, devours everyone.?

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