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Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

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Memorial service held for slain Christian leader Shahbaz Bhatti who was killed for efforts to reform Pakistan's blasphemy laws

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

An ecumenical prayer service was held March 28, 2011 in Saskatoon in memory of Shahbaz Bhatti, who was recently gunned down for his efforts to reform blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

Representatives of several Saskatoon churches participated in the service at St. Paul's Cathedral in Saskatoon, including Rev. Ron McConnell of McClure United Church, Rev. Amanda Currie of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Rev. Bill Bernard of St. Mary's Catholic Church, and Bishop Don Bolen of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon.



An ecumenical prayer service was held March 28 in memory of Shahbaz Bhatti, who was gunned down in Pakistan March 2, 2011 for his efforts to defend Christians and other minorities against blasphemy laws.

Imtiaz Nadeem Bhatti of Saskatoon spoke about the situation in Pakistan and described the March 2 assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, who was a member of his family and his long-time mentor.

"The brutal murder of our beloved Shahbaz Bhatti has left us shattered, shocked, heartbroken and angry," Nadeem said. "The religious minorities in Pakistan have lost a bold and courageous leader who despite all threats and warning continued fearlessly to raise his voice against discrimination and religious intolerance."

Shabaz Bhatti, the only Christian in the cabinet of the government of Pakistan, spoke out against the misuse of blasphemy laws in that country, even though he knew it placed his life in danger, said Nadeem.

He quoted an interview with Shahbaz Bhatti aired by the BBC several months before his death, in which the Christian member of the Pakistan government predicted his own assassination: "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 I am ready to die for the cause. I am following the cross."

The blasphemy laws that he was fighting are used as a tool to kill Christians and other minorities, Nadeem described. "As an example, in Pakistan, if a neighbour wants to buy my property, and I don't want to sell, he has only to say I blasphemed, and he kills me and he is a hero. There is no need for witnesses."

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Nadeem described recent attacks on Christians, as well as the assassination of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer in January by a member of his own bodyguard. The governor was killed for his support of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death after being accused of blaspheming Muhammad.

“Campaigns to reform these laws will continue, and the blood of Shahbaz Bhatti will not have been shed in vain,” said Nadeem. “I have no doubt in my mind that Shahbaz Bhatti will continue to work for his people from the special place granted to him in God’s home.”

In his homily, Bishop Don Bolen reflected on the beatitudes read from the gospel of Matthew during the prayer service, including “Blessed are those who are persecuted” – words that resonate profoundly in the life and death of Shahbaz Bhatti.

Bolen described the tributes for Shahbaz Bhatti that have come from around the world, acknowledging his courageous commitment to helping persecuted minorities in Pakistan.

The bishop also quoted Shahbaz Bhatti’s own words in the face of death threats: “I can be assassinated. I can be killed. But I will continue to follow the principles that I believe. I will continue to raise the voice of the voiceless. And I will not feel fear because of these threats, because I follow Jesus Christ who has given his own life for us.”

The Catholic Bishops of Pakistan have called on the Vatican to officially recognize Shahbaz Bhatti as a martyr in the Church, the bishop noted.

“Shahbaz said he knew the meaning of the cross which he followed all the way, to his last breath. But he also knew the cross was not the end,” said Bolen, quoting from a prayer service for Shahbaz Bhatti recently held at Westminster Abbey.

Bolen cited Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury who recently expressed how heartbreaking it is to see Pakistan’s founding principles betrayed by its blasphemy laws: “The widespread and deep desire for Pakistan to be what it was meant to be, for justice to be guaranteed for all, and for some of the most easily abused laws on the statute book to be reviewed is being paralyzed by the threat of murder,” said Williams. “Shahbaz Bhatti died, for all practical purposes, as a martyr ... not simply for his Christian faith, but for a vision shared between Pakistani Christians and Muslims.”



Nadeem Bhatti speaks at the memorial service.



Members of the Christian community from Pakistan lit candles during the service in Saskatoon.

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The bishop also reported the outrage and sorrow expressed by the Islamic Circle of North America at the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti.

“We remind those who cite the word of God to justify the murder of innocents that they have misjudged the true meaning of our faith,” said the president of the Islamic Circle. “The tragic killing of Mr. Bhatti is a setback in Pakistan’s struggle for an equal and inclusive society. We call on the Pakistani government and the people of Pakistan to protect the rights of religious minorities in the country, including the right to live and worship in safety.”

Bolen said that in remembering Shahbaz Bhatti it is important to recall his own firm faith in Christ and in the power of God to bring life from death. “In our struggles and in our sufferings we are profoundly linked to Christ’s death and resurrection.”

Members of the Pakistani Christian Community came forward to place candles in a cross on the floor before the altar, with prayers offered for the people of Pakistan and for an end to religious persecution throughout the world.

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Nadeem Imtiaz Bhatti of Saskatoon asks international community to speak up against persecution in Pakistan

By Andréa Ledding

Saskatoon resident Nadeem Imtiaz Bhatti, a close relative of Pakistan’s martyred Catholic Christian Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, is asking the international community to step forward to protect all minorities in Pakistan.

Nadeem sought refuge in Canada as a last resort, to remain alive for his wife and two sons who are still in Pakistan, but his slain uncle Shahbaz knew it was only a matter of time before he would face certain death from Islamic extremists.

“There have been over 4000 cases registered of families shot dead – the killers think that whoever will kill the blasphemer will get directly to heaven,” Nadeem explained, adding that in his uncle’s case, a pamphlet was left with the bullet-strafed car, quoting verses from the Koran which justified the killing of “non-believers”, and warning whomever else protested or attempted to reform the blasphemy laws would also be killed by members of the Punjab province Al-Qaeda.

“All the other ministers in Pakistan have two bullet-proof BMW’s – standard issue – but my uncle was refused any. I will say that I think the Pakistani government wanted him out of the way.” Another politician had already been killed by his own bodyguard.



Bishop Don Bolen, Rev. Ron McConnell, Rev. Bil Bernard, and Rev. Amanda Currie (l-r) at the Saskatoon ecumenical service in memory of Shahbaz Bhatti.

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Nadeem called Shahbaz “uncle” but as he was only a few years older, Shahbaz was more like an elder brother, a close friend, and certainly a leader and mentor. Going to school together in their youth, they faced great persecution by the Muslim majority, but encouraged other Christians to remain strong in their faith despite threats of violence and death.

The Pakistan blasphemy laws, which call for death to any accused of blaspheming Islam or the Prophet, are often the tools to eliminate Christians for any reason whatsoever, explained Nadeem.

“As an example, in Pakistan, if I a neighbour wants to buy my property, and I don’t want to sell, he has only to say I blasphemed and he kills me, and he is a hero, there is no need for witnesses,” he said, explaining that to fundamentalists and extremists, Christians are synonymous with non-believers, and their death is justified – desirable even at a spiritual level. “When they hear the accusation of blasphemy they reach for whatever is handy, even sticks and stones: it is easy to raise a mob. It is believed the killers will be rewarded in the next life.”

But even in this life, some of them are showered with rose petals when they appear publicly after a killing.

Shahbaz had plans to visit Saskatoon this June, to see Nadeem and continue to lobby for international help in urging the Pakistan government to protect minorities rather than persecuting them. He was targeting all the foreign governments who are currently providing aid to Pakistan as an underdeveloped nation. Bhatti had recently met with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Minister Jason Kenney, and was a tireless campaigner when it came to championing the rights of Pakistan’s heavily persecuted Christian minority.

“Our struggle together began in 1989, there were lots of problems due to amendments and the blasphemy laws, calling for death to anyone who blasphemed Mohammed – peace be upon him,” explained Nadeem. “We were committed to work for the marginalized Christians being abused by these laws.”

That year, under the committed and strong leadership of Shahbaz Bhatti, several of them took an oath to struggle for the rights, justice, and human dignity of Christians, becoming politically active, agitating, and vocalizing against actions such as the government’s decision to include a religion column in the national identity card in 1993.

“We knew this would take lots of sacrifices – the Islamic fundamentalists are very brutal and will not allow anyone to talk,” said Nadeem, who was brutally beaten in college for being Christian. “Since he became a Member of Parliament, he had more chances to raise his voice.”



Nadeem Bhatti



Travelling as the Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz pleaded with the international community, had an audience with Pope Benedict, and recently left an interview with the BBC predicting his assassination.

“He knew that he was a certain target, that it would only be a matter of time, he had been under attack for about six months, living under threats,” said his nephew. “He had been asking for security, but was not given enough to survive. If he had a bullet-proof vehicle, he would have been saved. But he was willing to make that sacrifice, whatever the cost. The Bishops Conference in Pakistan has already put his name forth as a martyr.”

“Our only hope for a peaceful coexistence is to reduce extremism. International investors are afraid to go to Pakistan – unless we have a friendly and peaceful environment the country cannot make progress.”

Nadeem thinks change can occur, but not easily – he hopes Bhatti’s martyrdom will be the catalyst to bring aid to his impoverished and marginalized Christian community, and that Canadian citizens, government, and development agencies will write and apply pressure to Pakistan’s government. “The struggle against fundamentalism and fanaticism is very hard,” he noted. “Devotions and prayers are our tool against bloodshed and killings. Christians are not safe at all, but at the same time they are ready to sacrifice their lives for their faith.”