

“John Allen has been a prophetic voice on behalf of Christians suffering persecution around the world. This book reminds us, who can practice our religion without fear, that some of our brothers and sisters live in constant peril.”

—Thomas Reese, SJ
Columnist, *National Catholic Reporter*

“As God always brings good out of evil, He has raised up heroes to fight for the dignity and rights of the persecuted. One such hero was the Servant of God Shahbaz Bhatti of Pakistan. In this book, John Allen beautifully and lovingly tells the story of his life—and martyrdom.”

—Robert P. George
McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence
Princeton University

“The story of Shahbaz Bhatti, slain for his outspoken criticism of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, is an important and disturbing lesson on anti-Christian persecution. It’s a must-read for Catholics who care about religious freedom. Allen does not skip over the criticism Bhatti faced, even among some Christians, for his ‘pugnacious’ activism and his use of partisan politics in the advancement of religious rights. Yet he makes a strong case for considering Bhatti a modern martyr and a patron of religious freedom.”

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Shahbaz Bhatti

*Martyr of
the Suffering Church*

John L. Allen Jr.



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Introduction

Every human life is remarkable in its own way, often full of hidden drama and quiet tumult. Those who glimpse and discern larger truths at even the most micro level are part of what the poet William Blake meant in extolling the fine art of seeing “a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower.”

What the wider world comes to know and appreciate about any individual life is often a combination of how compelling the person’s story is in itself and how it intersects with the larger movements and tensions of the time. Nelson Mandela’s biography, for instance, would be riveting under any set of circumstances, but through both his reflection and driving a larger movement for the elimination of apartheid, his story took on global significance and made Mandela the leading example in his era of what some observers these days are calling “secular saints.”

In similar fashion, a Polish bishop named Karol Wojtyła would probably have inspired a few biographies under any set of circumstances—a fairly daring philosopher and playwright with an utterly novel approach to youth ministry rooted in his experience as a college chaplain. But by becoming Pope John Paul II and playing a lead role in the collapse

2 *Shahbaz Bhatti*

of European Communism, he became a global sensation and has been recognized as a saint by the church he led.

A Pakistani human rights activist, politician, and devoted Roman Catholic named Shahbaz Bhatti is a perfect illustration of this formula for significance.

On its own, his life was the stuff of a Hollywood movie. He was born in the globally tumultuous year of 1968 in a village in the Punjab region of Pakistan to a father who was a former army officer and teacher and a stay-at-home mother. He was always deeply religious. As a young man he was an altar boy, traveling with his parish priest to serve Masses in neighboring villages, and later he founded a youth Bible study group in his parish.

There are roughly 2.5 million Christians in Pakistan, representing fewer than 2 percent of the overwhelmingly Muslim nation population. It was in college that Bhatti first felt the sting of persecution because of his minority status.

“There were many Christian students who experienced discrimination . . . they were beaten and tortured because the Islamic extremists didn’t want them to study,” he recalled in a 2005 interview.

Later Bhatti founded the All-Pakistan Minorities Alliance, the country’s premier organization fighting for the emancipation of religious and ethnic minority groups. Beyond political advocacy, the group also engaged in direct service to the vulnerable, for example, playing a heroic role in relief efforts after a massive 2005 earthquake in Kashmir that left an estimated 88,000 people dead.

Bhatti was so successful as an activist and human rights champion he was named Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs in 2008, making him the lone Christian in Pakistan’s cabinet, and he used that perch to press for further reform, especially abolition of the country’s notorious blasphemy

laws. He publicly called for the release and exoneration of Asia Bibi, an illiterate Catholic mother of five from the Punjab, who was sentenced to death under the blasphemy laws, following a dispute with some Muslim women in her village over access to drinking water.

By 2011 it seemed clear that Bhatti was swimming against the tide in a Pakistan whose Islamic community had undergone the same pressures of radicalization as other Muslim nations. In January of that year, the Muslim governor of Bhatti's home region of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, was shot to death by radicals for his own opposition to the blasphemy laws. Three months later they came for Bhatti, gunning him down in a residential neighborhood of Islamabad, the national capital, shortly after he had left his mother's home. Ironically, his older sister Jacqueline said he had come to express concern for his mother's safety, and his last words before leaving were "take care of yourself."

Bhatti's car was riddled with bullets; investigators later pegged the number of separate shots at twenty-seven. Authorities initially tried to blame his death on a family dispute or perhaps on financial irregularities in his personal life or the government ministry he led. Quickly, however, the terrorist group Tehrik-i-Taliban took responsibility for the murder, boasting about having slain a "known blasphemer."

On March 31, 2011, the Catholic bishops of Pakistan wrote to then-Pope Benedict XVI to say they had unanimously approved a petition that Bhatti be enrolled "in the martyrology of the universal church," meaning declared a saint. After the church's customary five-year waiting period for the launch of a sainthood cause expired in 2016, a procedure for his eventual beatification and canonization has been formally opened by the Diocese of Islamabad-Rawalpindi. Although politics may slow things down, Bhatti

is now known as a “Servant of God” and may one day be explicitly recognized as a Catholic saint.

Under any set of circumstances, such a life and death would be compelling. Bhatti was a driven believer who repeatedly put his life on the line to serve others and whose advocacy for his own community broadened into a vigorous and heartfelt defense of religious freedom for all. By itself his story would be enough to stir the imagination, and it’s done just that. A pop band in the United Kingdom named Ooberfuse released a single called “Blood Cries Out” in honor of Bhatti on the first anniversary of his death in 2012. He also has been the subject of countless posthumous awards, biographies, celebrations, and monuments, including several from Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and other minority groups who saw Bhatti as a friend and champion.

Yet that’s not the complete picture, because what elevates Bhatti’s life to the level of truly global significance is the way it so neatly captures the most dramatic human rights situation, bar none, of the early twenty-first century—a global pandemic of anti-Christian violence and persecution, making Bhatti the perfect patron saint for Christianity’s sadly abundant harvest of new martyrs.

The Global War on Christians

Since the rest of this book will be devoted to Bhatti’s story, this section explains why his story represents the broader Christian story of today’s era.

Though precise counts of victims are notoriously difficult to determine, it’s widely acknowledged in terms of raw numbers that Christians today are by far the world’s most persecuted religious body, a point current German chancellor Angela Merkel stated in November 2012 and former British prime minister David Cameron confirmed in April 2014.

In part that's because Christianity is the world's largest religious body with 2.3 billion adherents, meaning that statistically speaking Christians are more exposed to harm. By way of comparison, there are roughly 1.7 billion Muslims. Further, the zones of Christianity's greatest growth today, including sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, are often regions where religious freedom is more honored in the breach than the observance. Another factor is that due to the psychological and political tendency in many quarters to identify Christianity with the West, in various global hot spots, radical groups with axes to grind against Western economic or military policies often take out those frustrations on local Christian communities, despite the irony that those communities often have far deeper roots in the area than the radicals themselves do.

Whatever the explanation, the numbers are harrowing.

- According to the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life (a widely respected secular think tank in Washington, DC, not sponsored by any church or confessional organization), between 2006 and 2010 Christians had been harassed either *de jure* or *de facto* in 139 nations, more than two-thirds of all the countries on earth, and had the highest total for any religious group. The center found the total alone in 2016 was 108 nations out of 198 surveyed, up from 102 in 2013.
- The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (known by the acronym START) was established in 2005 by the US Department of Homeland Security and is based at the University of Maryland. In 2003 the group found that Christians were explicitly attacked by terrorists in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East eleven times, while in 2010

Christians faced forty-five such assaults. As the START analysis points out, that represents a stunning growth rate of 309 percent in just seven years.

- The evangelical advocacy and relief organization Open Doors has been providing aid to persecuted Christians since it was founded in 1955 by a Dutch Protestant named Andrew van der Bijl, better known as “Brother Andrew,” who began by smuggling Bibles into the Soviet sphere. In its 2016 annual report, the group estimated that 215 million Christians around the world face the threat of legal discrimination, physical assault, arrest, torture, and even death on a daily basis.
- In January 2013 Fr. John E. Kozar, a longtime expert on the Middle East and the Secretary of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, estimated that there were 25 million Christians in the Middle East alone “exposed to situations of poverty, and victims of war and persecution.”
- The high-end estimate for the number of Christians killed every year for reasons linked to their faith comes from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, which puts the total at roughly 100,000. Others, including Thomas Schirrmacher, a spokesman for the World Council of Churches, believe the total is much lower, perhaps 7,000 to 8,000. That works out to a range between one new Christian martyr every five minutes and one every hour.

As disturbing as those numbers are, they only really come alive when one attaches names, voices, and faces to them, as a reminder that underneath every broad trend is the real-

ity of an individual life. The following are simply three almost randomly chosen examples.

Sr. Meena Lalita Barwa is a Catholic nun who was serving in Kandhamal, India, in the summer of 2008 when she and a local priest, Fr. Thomas Chellen, were dragged into the streets by frenzied Hindu radicals shouting, “Kill Christians!” They attempted to force Chellen to rape Barwa, and when he refused they beat him severely. They stopped only because they thought he was dead, but miraculously he survived.

Barwa, the niece of Archbishop John Barwa of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, was raped by at least one man—she can’t remember the number as she lost consciousness during the attack—and later was paraded partially naked through the streets of the village while the mob continued to howl.

Today Barwa, who comes from India’s long-marginalized indigenous tribal peoples, is working on a law degree to fight for justice for other victims, and she takes comfort in a spiritual explanation of her ordeal. “Because Jesus Christ wasn’t a woman, there were certain kinds of suffering he couldn’t experience in his own body in order to save the world,” she says. “I like to think I helped to complete his sacrifice.”

Chioma Dike is a Nigerian Catholic and a mother of five who lost her husband and three children in a Boko Haram bomb blast at St. Theresa’s Church in Madalla, about an hour outside the capital city of Abuja, on Christmas Day 2011.

Remarkably, she says she has no hatred for those who tore her family apart. “I’m not angry,” she said in an August 2015 interview. “I pray for God to forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing.”

Bishop Misael Vacca Ramirez of the diocese of Duitama-Sogamoso, Colombia, was kidnapped in 2004 and held for three days by one of his country’s left-wing guerrilla movements.

A bloody civil war in Colombia has dragged on for almost sixty years, leaving an estimated 220,000 dead and more than 90,000 “disappeared.” Vacca knew he could be killed, too, joining two other bishops and eighty-five Colombian priests who have died as a result of the violence.

Speaking at his modest family home in Bogotá in the summer of 2015, Vacca began to tell his story and then abruptly stopped, seized by tears. He explained that he was thinking of all those people who died instead of making it out alive, often forgotten and alone. “So many victims,” he said. “So much pain.”

For far too long such chapters in anti-Christian violence were hidden by a vast wall of silence. As French intellectual Régis Debray, a veteran leftist who fought alongside Che Guevara, pointed out, anti-Christian persecution falls into the ideological “blind spot” of the West, with the victims being too religious to interest the left and too foreign and third-world to excite the right.

After the rise of ISIS and the explicit recognition of anti-Christian “genocide” in the Middle East by most major world powers, including the United States State Department, such denial is more difficult to sustain, but it remains the case that the vast scale of Christian martyrdom in our time, and its truly global character, still has not excited anything like the public outrage and political mobilization the situation merits.

For example, as of early 2017 the vast majority of Christian victims of ISIS were receiving no assistance from public agencies such as the UN and USAID because they refuse to enter the massive refugee and IDP camps funded by those same bodies out of fear of further exposure to Islamic radicals, so victims are entirely dependent on the church. Yet public agencies decline to turn over a portion of their bud-

get for humanitarian relief to the institutional church to ensure it reaches needy Christians, largely over hang-ups about church-state separation. The net result is that the US government has officially recognized Christians in Iraq and Syria as the victims of genocide yet is investing essentially zero in meaningful relief efforts to help them stay alive.

Whenever discussing this global war on Christians, two caveats always have to be read into the record to avoid misunderstanding.

First, it's not as if Christian suffering is any more dramatic or noble than the suffering of anyone else. Christians are hardly the only group facing violent persecution today, and if a defense of religious freedom is to mean anything, it must be applied across the board for everyone. It must be a universal cause rather than one driven exclusively by narrow confessional self-interest.

In fact there's nothing confessional about the cause of defending vulnerable Christians at all. Just as one did not have to be Jewish in the 1960s and 1970s to be concerned about dissident Jews in the Soviet Union or black in the 1980s to be outraged by the apartheid system in South Africa, one hardly needs to be Christian today to recognize this as the transcendent human rights cause of the day.

Second, concern for anti-Christian persecution does not imply any position whatsoever in what Westerners typically call the "culture wars" and should not be swept up into the left vs. right dynamic of Western politics. To say that an illiterate Dalit woman, meaning a member of the "underclass" under the ancient caste system, should not be hacked to death simply because of her religious beliefs, is worlds apart from American debates over the contraception mandates imposed by the Affordable Care Act as part of health-care reform or the right of public officials, such as former

Kentucky County Clerk Kim Davis, to exercise conscientious objection from gay marriage laws. Whether one sees a slippery slope beginning with the latter and leading to the former or not, they remain distinct.

Both liberals and conservatives in Western affairs need to recognize anti-Christian persecution for what it truly is—a human rights issue, not a political one, and its victims should not be doubly victimized by either being ignored or artificially lionized to score rhetorical points in debates to which they're completely extraneous.

Shahbaz Bhatti as Patron Saint

The context of the global war on Christians relates to the individual saga of Shahbaz Bhatti because it establishes three basic points.

- Anti-Christian persecution is the most compelling Christian drama of our time, one in which any Christian anywhere ought to feel a stake.
- It's also the most underreported and underappreciated human rights scourge of our time, a transcendent social cause waiting to catch fire in the hearts and minds of all people of goodwill, regardless of their religious beliefs.
- While statistics and overviews provide necessary support for that cause, the individual stories of the new martyrs will best capture the imagination.

That is the true power of Bhatti's life—he puts a riveting and deeply attractive face on this vast company of martyrdom, making him potentially the ideal patron saint for the cause.

There can be no doubt of Bhatti's deep Catholic piety. In a video recorded shortly before his death, he said, "I know Jesus Christ who sacrificed his life for others. I understand well the meaning of the cross. I am ready to give my life for my people." After he was assassinated, his brother Paul recounted cleaning out Shahbaz's spartan apartment, where the only three items on a small bedside table were the Bible, a rosary, and a picture of the Virgin Mary.

In death as in life, Bhatti stood with followers of other religions committed to defending human rights and the rule of law. In the Pakistani mind, his memory is inevitably linked to that of Taseer, a Muslim, making both of them "secular saints" among moderates and believers in democracy, well ahead of any formal declaration by a religious body. Bhatti's story thus encapsulates the truth that striving to defend Christians from persecution does not require hostility to any other religious group; instead, it's an enterprise best carried out in collaboration with those groups.

Bhatti defended the rights of Hindus, Sikhs, and others with equal vigor, not to mention Muslims. Paul Bhatti said that point was brought home for him at his brother's funeral: "I saw this sea of people, gripped by uncontrollable emotion," he said. "My brother was a symbol not just for Christians but for other minorities, and even for very many Muslims."

None of this is to say that Bhatti's legacy is without question marks. He moved in the complex, often fallen world of politics, and he had his critics. Some saw him as a showboat fundamentally interested in his own celebrity, while some of his fellow Christians thought he had been co-opted by the prestige of a cabinet post toward the end and was no longer sufficiently vigorous in criticizing the government he served. All of that, and much more, will no doubt be examined

in painstaking detail in the church's official sainthood process, before reaching a definitive judgment about whether he truly lived a life of "heroic virtue."

What can be said with certainty is that few contemporary biographies better illustrate the broader realities of the situation facing Christians all around the world in the early twenty-first century than that of Shahbaz Bhatti, which makes his story all the more worth telling.

CHAPTER ONE

Roots

Though it's an overused phrase, one could almost say that Shahbaz Bhatti was “born for some sort of Catholic greatness.” He entered the world on September 9, 1968, in the village of Khushpur in Pakistan's Punjab region, a settlement founded in 1899 by Capuchin priests, which has been described by Linda Walbridge in her 2012 book *The Christians of Pakistan* as “more like a missionary colony than a real village.”

Tradition says the founder of the village was a Capuchin named Fr. Felix, which explains the name. *Felix* is the Latin word for “happy,” and in the local Urdu language, *Khushpur* means “the land of happy,” or in this case “the land of Father Felix.” To this day, every year in October there's a procession through the streets of Khushpur that draws Catholics from all over the country, featuring live biblical scenes enacted on street corners. Among Pakistani Catholics, the village is sometimes known as “little Italy” because of its overtly Catholic ethos. Khushpur is one of fifty-three such villages founded throughout Pakistan by religious congregations, mostly before the partition from India in 1947. It also boasts

the lone National Catechist Training Centre in Pakistan, with catechists from all across the country coming to the village to study.

Walbridge describes walking through the Khushpur cemetery and coming across the headstone of an American woman named Regina Elsa Wilam, who was born in 1954 and died in 1995. According to one of the nuns at the convent school in the village, Wilam had been excited by stories narrated by Capuchins over the years about their mission work in Pakistan, and in her will asked that her remains be transferred to Khushpur and buried there as a sort of eternal statement of solidarity with the local Catholic community.

The church's imprint on Khushpur is also reflected in the long list of Catholic notables the village has produced over the years, including the late Bishop Rufin Anthony who led the Islamabad-Rawalpindi Diocese; noted writer and scholar Allama Paul Ernest; and the politician Simon Jacob Gill, a former member of the National Assembly.

Perhaps most harrowingly similar to Bhatti's own story is that of another native son of Khushpur, Bishop John Joseph, whose life and death was always a source of inspiration for Bhatti. Born in Khushpur in 1932, Joseph was ordained in 1960, and during Vatican II he studied for his theology doctorate at St. Thomas University in Rome. He became an auxiliary bishop of Faisalabad in 1981 and took over as diocesan bishop in 1984.

Joseph became an outspoken critic of Muslim mistreatment of Christians, leading two nationwide protests against the country's blasphemy laws and at one point launching a hunger strike. He anguished over the situation to such an extent that on May 6, 1998, after a Christian man named Ayub Masih had been executed over trumped-up blasphemy charges for alleged insults to Islam, Joseph shot himself to

death in a courthouse compound in protest—the very spot where Masih had been killed.

Almost twenty years later, some Pakistani Christians remain convinced that Joseph's death wasn't a suicide, suspecting a cover-up for an assassination, although the country's bishops at one point stated that he died by his own hand.

Once upon a time, the Catholic ethos in villages such as Khsushpur and nearby Francisabad was so pervasive that priests not only presided at weddings, they essentially brokered the marriages. Father John Rooney, in his book on the roots of Pakistani Christianity, *Into Deserts*, described the scene: "When the first young men in Maryabad . . . needed to be married, they asked the priest to find suitable young women. A bunch of marriageable girls was then sent from an orphanage. . . . The young folks met and made their choices. The girls then went to the convent to await their wedding day."

Local lore in these Catholic villages tells what often happened. The boys would line up on one side of the parish meeting hall and the girls on the other, and the priest would help pair them with one another. Parish records in the villages often show several weddings being celebrated on the same day, the fruit of these arranged meet-and-match sessions organized by the church.

Although church practices had begun to loosen up by 1968 as part of the post-Vatican II period in Catholic life, Bhatti was brought up in a pervasively Catholic environment. His father, Jacob, a former army officer and teacher, took early retirement in order to devote himself virtually full time to service as the president of his parish council, and his mother, a homemaker, took pains to ensure that Bhatti and his five brothers and a sister were brought up in the faith—as if the fact that three of the children were named

Paul, Peter, and Clement wasn't enough of a clue. Jacob Bhatti died of a heart attack shortly before Shahbaz was killed, reportedly not long after receiving a menacing phone call from the Pakistani Taliban. Shahbaz's mother and siblings were still alive at the time of his death when he was forty-two.

"I was a regular churchgoer and was deeply inspired by Christ's teachings, sacrifice and crucifixion," Bhatti told Monsignor Dino Pistolato of Venice, Italy, in a 2005 interview when Pistolato was part of a delegation from the Patriarchate of Venice that traveled to Pakistan to help in earthquake relief efforts.

Friends say Bhatti was committed to individual daily prayer, and that Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd," was a favorite. His attachment to the psalm highlights an important dimension of inculturation of the church in Pakistan, especially among those from the Punjabi community. The psalms were translated at an early stage into Punjabi, and they are often sung in the form of lively folk songs, making them an important part of popular Catholic religiosity.

While still in his early teens, Bhatti also established a youth group at his parish, devoted especially to Bible study. He said it was a means of "sharing in some tangible and meaningful way the warmth of Christ's love." The group would come together to read the Bible and to pray, and non-Catholic Christian students were invited to join them. In what would become a hallmark of Bhatti's approach, those spiritual aims were combined with direct humanitarian service, in this case trying to raise donations to help poor students in the group continue their studies.

Clan membership is all important in rural Pakistan, and the Bhatti clan is one of roughly five that have long held leadership positions in Khsushpur, in part because its mem-

bers are among the landowning *zamindar* elite, as opposed to the landless *kammi* underclass. The Bhattis owned four acres of land, which are now farmed by Shahbaz's brother Sikander. As a result it was natural for his father to serve as the de facto head of the local Catholic community, and equally natural for the young Bhatti also feel destined to lead.

By nature an activist, Bhatti's budding religious sense was never an abstraction but quickly translated itself into concrete action. He became an altar boy in his local parish, volunteering to serve an early daily morning Mass. Quickly his responsibilities expanded, as local priests began taking him along when they went to visit and say Mass in other rural villages. Bhatti would recall that the experience of assisting the priests on those trips gave him an early crash course in the realities of Christian life in Pakistan, including the grinding poverty and chronic mistreatment many Christians endured. Later Bhatti said:

The appalling state of Christians in Pakistan made my heart weep. . . . I remember, it was on Good Friday just before Easter when I was 13 years old, I heard a sermon on how Jesus sacrificed, gave us redemption and salvation in this world. This was a moment when I thought to reflect on Jesus' love for us, but also to respond to his love by demonstrating love for our fellow men and women, which led me to manifest Christ's love and sacrifice in my life by serving Christians, especially the poor, persecuted and victimized in this Islamic country.

Given that the Bhattis were a relatively high-status, middle-class family, the indignities faced by many of his fellow Catholics was something of a revelation for Bhatti. Many Pakistani Catholics are descendants of converts from the *Chuhra* caste of sweepers who converted to Christianity in

the nineteenth century when the Punjab was under British rule. Sweepers were usually considered to be on the lowest level of South Asian society, since they dealt with filth and pollution on a daily basis. Conversion, it was hoped, would bring change in this social status, though for many Pakistani Christians the low social standing endures.

Though some Pakistani Catholics have had important positions and have been influential in national life, the vast majority of Catholics are poor, manual laborers who work on farms, operate looms for carpet making, or operate brick kilns. Kiln workers live as virtual slaves since they are bonded to repay virtually unpayable debts. Weavers are often no better off, with many working in sweatshop conditions from ages as young as four. Illiteracy is also quite high among indigenous Pakistani Christians, both Catholic and Protestant.

The Birth of an Activist

In other circumstances, watching the flowering of a devout and talented young Catholic man from a large Catholic family naturally would have beckoned thoughts of a future as a Catholic priest, perhaps one day a bishop or even a cardinal. From the beginning, however, it seemed clear that Bhatti's vocation probably lay somewhere else, in the contentious arena of political activism.

Bhatti's older brother Paul, a medical doctor who studied in Padova in Italy and Leuven in Belgium and then worked in Italy, would later return to Pakistan to take up his brother's legacy. He recalls that in 1982, when Shahbaz was just fourteen, he led a protest against a proposal to require Christians in Pakistan to carry special identity cards, which the Christians read as a way of helping authorities and radicals to identify them and discriminate against them. The

determined, teenaged Bhatti traveled to Islamabad to lead a hunger strike on the steps of the parliament building, and the proposal was eventually withdrawn.

“I saw then how a strong faith could change things that seemed difficult, if not impossible, to change,” Paul Bhatti said in a 2012 interview in Rome, where he was attending a Catholic Action conference to be honored for continuing his brother’s work.

When Bhatti went away to college, his activist streak continued to flourish. He established an organization for Christian students to unite them and defend their rights, saying of that chapter in his life, “They felt alone, but we stood beside them.”

“At that time, I was beaten by the Islamists,” Bhatti said in 2005. “They asked me not to create a Christian organization, otherwise I would be killed. But I said, ‘No, I am not disturbing you, I am only forming this association for my Christian brothers and sisters.’ They replied, ‘No, we cannot allow you.’ After that day, they tortured me many times and threatened to kill me if I continued.”

The organization Bhatti founded in 1985 while studying for a master’s degree in political science and public administration at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, was called the Christian Liberation Front. Despite its ominous-sounding name, it was devoted to finding nonviolent means to carry forward the struggle for Christian emancipation. Fundamentally, the group’s agenda, beyond simple mutual self-support, was to restore the rights of Pakistan’s religious minorities and to promote tolerance.

Bhatti created the Christian Liberation Front in collaboration with Bishop Rufin Anthony, who at the time was a seminary professor. The two met when Bhatti was still attending school in Khushpur, and they kept in touch over the

years. Anthony would later say of Bhatti, “He was always ready to work for the nation,” calling him “steadfast” and “such an inspiration to all who profess the Christian faith.” Their partnership was indicative of another characteristic trait of Bhatti’s career—while he would call his own shots and do things his own way, he always preferred to move in concert with the official leadership of the church rather than being at odds with them.

The push for Christian rights, needless to say, wasn’t exactly welcomed by everyone in Lahore, especially at a time when Islamic radical movements in the country were being encouraged and promoted under President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who ruled from 1977 until 1988. The group experienced violent blowback from the very beginning.

Bhatti said, “Once, after I got beaten up, I complained to a professor, who replied, ‘I cannot do anything.’ Again we held a meeting of Christian students at college, and again I was beaten. There was a college notice board, where every organization posted its notices. So on the next day, I posted one which read: ‘I can die for my Jesus, but I cannot stop uniting my Christian brothers and sisters, especially the students.’”

In another feature of Bhatti’s career that would later become the stuff of legend, that act of defiance led a swell of students to join his crusade, which he described as defending “oppressed Christians from the shackles of persecution, discrimination and prejudice that prevail in the majority of Muslim society.” The group provided free tuition and books to poor Christian students and promoted the idea of getting a college education in the country’s Christian communities, where such ideas had long been regarded as fanciful and unattainable.

During his university studies, Bhatti became close friends with a fellow Christian named Khalil Tahir Sindhu, who today serves as Punjab’s minister for human rights. The two

lived together as roommates for almost seven years in a hostel in Faisalabad, named for Pope John Paul II. Both were budding politicians in the making, even running against one another twice for a student government position known as prefect. Sindhu laughingly recalls that Bhatti prevailed once and he won once, leaving them even. However, they shared the same basic political outlook: “Politics was our main area of interest, and minority rights was our pet topic,” Sindhu recalled in a 2015 interview. “We would often discuss the blasphemy law, which particularly endangers minorities.”

Father Tomás King, a Columban missionary in Pakistan, has written that it was also during Bhatti’s university years, in his early twenties, when he decided not to marry in order to devote himself unreservedly to the struggle for minority rights and peace and justice. As King notes, in a society that puts such a premium on family, “it was a very countercultural choice to make,” and probably suggests that although Bhatti had discerned the priesthood was not the right path for his life, there was nevertheless a strong priestly dimension to his own sense of vocation.

Part of the Bhatti legend dates to this university period in his life, when a strong flood in Punjab inundated several local villages. Bhatti and his friends collected donations from the university community and others in Lahore, and then set off to try to be of help. When they arrived, they saw one house in particular that had been cut off by rising floodwaters, leaving the occupants trapped. Although his friends tried to dissuade him, they would later report that Bhatti was determined to help and persuaded four friends to join. As soon as they set out, Bhatti had water up to his neck and struggled not to get stuck in the muck. The group started shivering against the cold and feared for their lives. Somehow they made it to the house and found a couple and their

two small children. Placing the children on their shoulders and propping up the couple, they made it back to land safely.

“During this experience, I felt the fear of danger,” Bhatti said years later. “But the spiritual strength, the blessing and the spiritual potential keep us going and defeat the fear of death. I defeated the fear of danger with the power of the Holy Spirit, with God’s blessing.” He would always say that he brought the same conviction in the triumph of spiritual power over human fear to the later stages of his career, including his campaigns against Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and in favor of minority rights.

It was around this time that Bhatti first came to know a man who would become a mentor and source of inspiration throughout his career: Group Captain Cecil Chaudhry, a fighter pilot and military hero in the country who had served with distinction in the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 and then as a squadron leader in the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971. He was awarded Pakistan’s Star of Courage, roughly equivalent to the US Silver Star, for a particularly dangerous mission he led in the 1965 conflict.

A Catholic from a distinguished family, Chaudhry entered the Pakistani Air Force Academy in 1958 and received a double degree in aeronautics and mechanical engineering. After his military career was over, he entered academic life, serving as the principal of two different Catholic institutions before retiring in 2011. He died in April 2012 after a battle with lung cancer and was posthumously awarded the country’s Pride of Performance Award by then-President Asif Ali Zadari.

Having felt he’d spent his entire life in service to the nation, Chaudhry chafed against what he saw as the second-class citizenship to which he and his fellow Christians in Pakistan were often consigned. A patriot, he was also alarmed

by what he saw as a growing tendency toward radicalization in the country and the splintering of Pakistani society along confessional, class, and ethnic lines. He became active in the Punjab Education Foundation, working for the betterment of educational opportunities available to minority children, including not only religious minorities but also children with disabilities. After his death, his daughter Michelle founded the Cecil & Iris Chaudhry Foundation to continue his work on behalf of minority rights in Pakistan. A street in Lahore that runs past a Catholic school he once led is now named in his honor.

Bhatti first met Chaudhry in 1992, when his Christian Liberation Front was leading the first national campaign against Pakistan's blasphemy laws and the group wanted a personality with obvious patriotic appeal to help make the case. By all accounts, Bhatti was deeply impressed by Chaudhry's life story, as well as the fact that the war hero didn't simply cash in on his celebrity when his military career ended but rather reinvented himself as an educator and minority rights advocate, willing to put his popularity on the line to lend support to sometimes unpopular causes. He was also struck by Chaudhry's willingness to speak out at times in contrast with the wishes of his former colleagues and friends in the Pakistani military, some of whom clearly had links to elements among the more radical currents in the country's Islamic milieu.

Ten years after he came into Chaudhry's orbit, Shahbaz Bhatti had become an exceptionally mature thirty-four-year-old. By that stage he already carried two decades of experience of Pakistani politics as a minority rights activist, with a wide network of friends and allies thinking along the same lines in terms of the urgent need to defend the concept of a pluralistic and democratic society. Beginning as a devout

young believer from a loving family and an idyllic Catholic environment in Khushpur, Bhatti's eyes had been opened early on to the realities of life for most impoverished and marginalized Christians in the country, and his instinctive activist streak, combined with his deep piety and his sense of destiny to lead, acquired from his father, positioned him as the ideal figure to do something big on a national scale.

That "something big" came in 2002 with the launch of the All-Pakistan Minorities Alliance, the group that would propel him to national prominence, make him a candidate for a federal minister's position within a government he had essentially shamed into action, and would eventually represent the cause for which he gave his life. To understand why the All-Pakistan Minorities Alliance is the point upon which Bhatti's story pivots, however, one needs to grasp a bit more about the situation facing religious minorities, especially Christians, in this overwhelmingly Muslim society that has become in some ways a safe harbor for Islamic terror groups. That's the subject of the next chapter.