

**Paolo Affatato
Emmanuel Parvez**

Shahbaz Bhatti
The Eagle of Pakistan

Preface by
Cardinal Joseph Coutts

Translated by Mike Dean

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Index

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Preface</i> | 7 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 11 |
| CHAPTER I | |
| A name, a mission | 15 |
| Khushpur, “Pakistan’s Vatican” | 24 |
| The childhood of an angel | 34 |
| CHAPTER II | |
| Adolescence and youth: | |
| his socio-political commitment is born | 43 |
| Politics as a passion for humanity | 52 |
| Travelling companions | 62 |
| The fight against fanaticism | 71 |
| Women, the poor, the vulnerable: | |
| Shahbaz’s friends | 81 |
| CHAPTER III | |
| A “servant” minister | 95 |
| Political activity: a leader among the people | 105 |
| The blasphemy law and the Asia Bibi case | 116 |
| A predicted death | 125 |
| A dark day for Pakistan. | 136 |
| Impunity and justice. | 144 |

CHAPTER IV

| | |
|--|-----|
| Story of a soul | 151 |
| A martyr of our time | 158 |
| Relations with Islam | 165 |
| There is holiness in Pakistan | 169 |
| <i>Afterword</i> | |
| Shahbaz Bhatti, God's gift to Pakistan | 177 |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | 181 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 185 |
| A challenge to our times | 187 |

Preface

I met Clement Shahbaz Bhatti when he was in his early 20s. I was struck by that young man who was so serious and thoughtful, more than any other young man of his age. He felt the discrimination against Christians and the injustices done to the poor on his skin and saw it with his own eyes. He took charge of it and became the voice of the voiceless and an advocate against injustice. Supported and moved by solid faith, he became an activist and promoter of human rights. Seeing his sincerity and dedication, others convinced him to engage in politics. So it was not surprising to see him soon become Federal Minister for Minority Affairs. A man of forward-thinking vision, he pushed and worked for the abolition of discriminatory laws, particularly the often blatantly abused blasphemy law. He then began receiving death threats from those who opposed him. But he refused to give in. “I know the meaning of the cross,” he said to me one day and added, “I have done nothing wrong. Why should I flee abroad?”

Shahbaz Bhatti lived the Christian faith consistently in all aspects of life and is an example for the witness of faith in political life. For us Christians in Pakistan, Shahbaz Bhatti was not only a minister, but an honest and noble man who tried to create good relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, to build a society characterised

by equality and harmony between faiths. In his heart and mind he had, in fact, a very clear vision: he dreamt of a Pakistan permeated with peace and harmony. His sacrifice expresses the desire of an entire nation: that the citizens of Pakistan, of every creed, ethnicity, and social class, can enjoy equal rights and dignity.

“Never repay one wrong with another; instead, repay with a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9), the Apostle Peter exhorts. These words refer to those of Jesus: “Blessed are you when they insult you, persecute you and, lying, say all manner of evil against you for my sake. This is how they persecuted the prophets before you.” (Mt 5:11-12). The meekness of Christians makes them similar to Christ. Their fidelity to God, at the risk of life, shows the truth of human existence: man is made for communion with God and his fellow human beings. Man can share in the boundless love of the Lord Jesus, an unarmed God who accepted the cross in order to cast out the prince of darkness from life.

Pope Francis said: “In the cross we read God’s answer: there, violence was not answered with violence, death was not answered with the language of death. In the silence of the cross the roar of arms is silent and speaks the language of reconciliation, forgiveness, dialogue, peace”. (Vigil of Prayer for Peace, 7th September 2013).

Shahbaz Bhatti showed us that it is possible to believe and decide one’s life from the cross. Shahbaz lived to defend Christians, minorities and all the marginalized and oppressed of our country. From Sacred Scripture he drew sensitivity and compassion for the poorest. He never ceased to believe that it was possible to live peacefully to-

gether and he promoted interreligious dialogue with courage and generosity. In his life and in his witness resound the words of the Apostle Peter: “And blessed are you if you have to suffer for justice! Do not be afraid of them, nor be troubled, but proclaim the Lord Christ in your hearts, always ready to respond to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Pet 3:14-15).

These words illuminate the meaning of his existence, which this book reconstructs with attention, accuracy and truth. For us Christians, the courage of hope is rooted in the power of the cross of Jesus. Shahbaz turned his gaze to the crucified Lord and, by His grace, lived the same faith and tenacious love of Christ. Under the cross he chose the humble and courageous way of encounter, forgiveness and peace.

The “martyr” Shahbaz Bhatti is not dead, but is and will remain alive in Christ. We will carry out his mission. His voice, the voice of truth, will never be reduced to silence. We will remember his life and his contribution to the history of Pakistan. This book is also meant to be this: a memorial and a source of inspiration for the present and the future. The work of Shahbaz Bhatti does not stop and many men and women of good will are willing to continue it in Pakistan. Every day our mission is to be witnesses of peace and love in a country wounded by violence. As Christians, our mission is love, as Shahbaz Bhatti testified, with words and deeds. And the love of Christ ensures that we do not lose hope.

Cardinal Joseph Coutts
Retired Archbishop of Karachi

Introduction

The figure of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Catholic Minister for Religious Minorities killed at the hands of terrorists in Pakistan in 2011, presents before the eyes of men and women of the third millennium a sublime example of what “life in Christ” means. His life experience, in the context of a land where Christians constitute only 2% of the 90% Muslim population, acquires even more strength and paradigmatic value. His faith was so profound and his imitation of Christ so radical, that it brought about changes in his priorities of choice, life style, and in relationships with others. Shahbaz Bhatti was a man who did not “waste” the talent of his existence but lived it fully, on a journey of authentic humanisation and constant confirmation of his special vocation and mission. The confirmation came precisely from life in Christ, lived according to the eyes and gaze of Christ; nourished by the Holy Spirit, given by Christ in the sacraments; within the Church, but always immersed in the secular and temporal structures of the world, such as work, society, relationships with others, interreligious dialogue, and politics.

Shahbaz was a young man with extraordinary dreams and a prophetic vision, who became a world-class leader in a very short time. He dreamed of a world where

the wolf and the lamb could eat together and drink from the same spring. He was a messenger of peace and harmony. He spoke bravely against discrimination and violence. He lived for what he believed in and died for his dreams. He was silenced by the hands of the wicked.

His unexpected, premature violent death has been spoken about everywhere. Men and women throughout the world, including Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, have been touched by the life of Shahbaz Bhatti, his ideas, his testament, and his deep desire to follow Jesus as a faithful disciple. Those who knew and loved him have cried out for his martyrdom, but have let themselves be carried away with joy by the memories collected in this book. In fact, this book provides a contribution to the memory of a sublime man through an analytical account of his humble life. Remembering today means bringing to life the legacy of Shahbaz Bhatti: this is good for Pakistan.

This book, the result of a shared idea of an Italian journalist passionate about Asia, and a Pakistani priest, Shahbaz's cousin, seeks to restore an important part of Bhatti's inner world, spirituality, thought and personality, and it is in this aspect that it finds its originality compared to other biographies published about him. Punctuated with a myriad of stories, declarations, and unpublished episodes which studded the minister's short life journey, the story retraces his childhood and youth (chapter I), the maturation of his socio-political commitment (chapter II), his tireless activity as federal minister (chapter III), and the crucial aspects of martyr witness (chapter IV).

Bhatti was a “son of Pakistan” who placed himself in the eyes of the universal community of the baptised as a man who went beyond confessional walls and borders, to tell everyone that life is communion with one’s neighbour and with God. The image of God, eloquent in every man and every woman, became a voice in the heart of Bhatti’s conscience, pushing him to pronounce an amen to life and then, with faith, to the supreme gift of existence: his was a desire for fullness and happiness, which was realised in conforming to Christ, and to the crucified Christ.

At the conclusion of an existence given without reservation, for Shahbaz Bhatti, we could well adapt the words of St. Paul, who said in his heart: “I no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me. This life, which I live in the flesh, I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20).

The hope is that this work of careful reconstruction of his inner life and his extraordinary spiritual charge can give an impulse to the process that, thanks to the union of a series of subjects, organisations, efforts and will, can lead to official recognition of the martyrdom of Shahbaz Bhatti.

We will not let this bright star vanish into oblivion and darkness.

Paolo Affatato
Emmanuel Parvez

Chapter I

A name, a mission

Shahbaz means “eagle.” And like an eagle, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic from Pakistan, was a person with a keen eye, a man with a far-sighted and prophetic vision. He had the ability to fly to unreachable heights: family, friends and teachers had already noticed this from childhood and adolescence. In Christian symbolism, the eagle is associated with St. John the Evangelist who, as described in the Book of Revelation, contemplated the true light of the Word, in the same way as an eagle, which according to the myth traditionally associated with it, could stare directly at the light of the sun. Shahbaz Clement Bhatti was a man who contemplated God in his daily actions, in the ordinariness of a life immersed in Pakistani society and its temporal structures, but always with his heart rooted in the word of God and with his gaze turned to heaven.

A *contempl-active* man [which means “contemplative and active”], to use a definition dear to Bishop Tonino Bello,¹ Shahbaz, the eagle, flew high with his mind, his

¹ T. BELLO, *Cirenei della gioia* (Pyrenees of Joy), San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1995.

heart, and his spirit. With his mind he imagined and worked hard to make his nation, Pakistan, a land of peace, freedom, harmony, coexistence, and respect for dignity and human rights. He kept the weakest and most vulnerable, the poor and the marginalised, and the oppressed and the disinherited in his heart. With his spirit, nourished by the grace of God, hovering high in the sky and feeding his dreams which could become reality, Shahbaz had not only matured a perspective of his own existence but also an uncommon vision of the world and history, permeated entirely by the faith that animated him. He saw his own life as a gift received from God, an evangelical talent to be made fruitful. He saw his time as a fruitful time, in which he could promote significant changes for the common good of the country. He saw the history of Pakistan as a history marked by the providence of God, from the time of the arrival of the Gospel on the Indian subcontinent, to the mid-nineteenth century, up to independence, and the development and growth of the nation.

In ancient thought, in many cultures and civilizations, a name is a mystical and powerful attribute. Association with a name is a sign of dignity and a personal mission. For the Jews, a name expressed the very essence of a person, his nature, his strength, his activity. In the Bible a name acts as if it had a force of its own: it can stand by itself as a synonym of the person themselves. A name is an essential part of every person and becomes an integral part of their identity. In the name of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti the whole story of his life is summarised. His

parents, Jacob and Marta, called him by that name and, in the course of his life, that name took on a very precise meaning, took shape, and characterised his way of feeling, thinking and acting.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God says to Israel: “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name: you are mine.” (Isa. 43:1). “In the life of Shahbaz Bhatti there was great awareness of this call and of total belonging to God,” notes Fr. Emmanuel Parvez. “By calling *by name*, God expresses the fact that for him every creature is important and precious. Before God you are unique, not one of many. God knows all His children one by one and each promises something beautiful, something great. In the name with which God calls each person lies the unmistakable and inalienable dignity of the human being. Recognizing the literal meaning of a name, one discovers the mystery of one’s nature and beauty and at the same time God’s plan for one’s own existence. This is how it was for Clement Shahbaz Bhatti.” Fr. Emmanuel Parvez, Catholic parish priest in the diocese of Faisalabad, Bhatti’s cousin, was born in the same village as him, Khushpur. He spent his childhood, youth and adult years with Shahbaz, accompanying and comforting him – while one was already an established politician, the other was a parish priest and teacher – as a friend and confidant, in a dense dialogue of a human and spiritual nature.

He was Clement Shahbaz Bhatti. Everyone called him Shahbaz, a name that in Urdu, as in Persian, indicates the eagle, the king of birds, a noble and majestic crea-

ture. That name, quite widespread in South Asia, appealed his father, Jacob, who had, in the early years of his son's life, already glimpsed and sensed its existential and spiritual parable.

But his first name was Clement. He was born on 9th September 1968 into a Catholic family. "My father, a retired teacher, and my mother, a housewife, brought me up according to Christian values and the teachings of the Bible, which influenced my childhood," he tells about himself.² He was the youngest of six children: Jaqueline, the only girl; then Paul, Peter, Gerard and Alexander, and finally Clement. In the Bhatti family great attention and importance was given to biblical names but, with Jacob Bhatti having an innate predilection for the name Shahbaz - precisely because of its meaning of moral and spiritual elevation - the child was given a double name. Clement, as his first name indicates, was a benign, kind, discreet person, full of clemency and mercy. He was a boy with an indulgent and generous character. His first name comes from the Latin *clemens*, which means merciful, mild, moderate, pitiful, and kind. There are no more appropriate adjectives to describe the personality of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, as all those who knew him, associated with him, and loved him confirm.

But it's not only about his nature. Fr. Emmanuel remarks: "The name refers to his own patron saint and protector: he who can indicate the possibilities, the gifts, the

² S. BHATTI, *Christians in Pakistan. Where Hope is Tested*, Marcianum Press, Venice 2008.

charisms that are enclosed in the treasure chest that is inside each person. They are, in some way, those precise characteristics that express the reflected image of God, present in every person. Only by referring to the figure of the saint whose name we bear can we recognise and meet our own authentic image, that truth of ourselves which is born of the creative hand of God. The action of God on human beings is evident in the saints. They are like prisms that reflect the very life of God and are his epiphany: manifestations of how his grace transforms human beings, conforming them to God himself, in his image and likeness. Furthermore, the saint whose name we bear is a companion throughout our lives. They are like angels who protect, who indicate the way, who inspire steps towards goodness, who accompany and lead towards holiness.” And so, the life of Clement Bhatti in Pakistan is inextricably linked to that of St. Clement I, pope and martyr, who governed the church of Rome - after St. Peter, Linus and Anacletus - for nine years, under the emperors Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. Clement wrote a famous letter to the Corinthians to strengthen peace and harmony among them, for which he is celebrated as one of the apostolic fathers. Little is known of his last years. According to a fourth-century tradition, he was drowned using a neck anchor in the Crimea, his place of exile, by order of Nerva. Although there is no historical certainty, St. Clement is honoured as a martyr³

³ Documents from the fourth century tell how, during Trajan's empire (98-117), Clement was sentenced to exile in the Crimea and to forced labour in the mines. There, his missionary activity among the

and his name recurs in Roman martyrology. The story and life of St. Clement were well known to Shahbaz's parents, who frequently read biographies of the saints. Having the name of a martyr represented, then, a sign and premonition for the life of Clement Shahbaz Bhatti from the humble village of Khushpur: a man who carried out his mission *to the full*, without seeking but also without fearing martyrdom.

Even *Bhatti*, the family name, has a well-defined meaning that recounts a truth and a story. In the case of Pakistani Christians, it is the identifier of a clan that characterises its origins and also its faith. When a *Bhatti* is mentioned in Pakistan, he is immediately attributed with recognisable evidence of his origins as a member of the Christian community. Even his surname, then, shows *de facto* that he precisely belongs to the community of the Christian faithful: it itself becomes a mark that says he belongs to Christ, one that Clement felt right down to the depths of his soul.

The origin of the Bhatti family in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the regions of Punjab and Rajasthan, is etymologically linked to the Sanskrit *bha'tta*, which means "lord". Since the twelfth century, the *bhatti* tribe has been one of the largest and most widespread in the Indian Pun-

soldiers and fellow prisoners met with such success that the Romans tied him to an anchor and threw him into the Black Sea. Some time later, chronicles tell, the waters receded, revealing a tomb built by angels, who had recovered the saint's body and buried him. The martyr's tomb was taken to Rome, where the famous Basilica of Saint Clement was erected in his honour.

jab population (well before the region was irreparably divided by the border between India and Pakistan, established only with the *partition* of 1947). That name is an expression of loyalty, strength, and pride, all characteristics associated culturally and traditionally with the members of the tribe. Characteristics that are still found today, as an ancestral heritage and an indelible sign, in the temperament, mentality and deepest identity of a Bhatti.

On the other hand, in Urdu, the Pakistani national language, *bhatti* takes on another meaning and indicates a kiln or, by literal translation, a worker who works in a kiln where clay bricks are produced. This linguistic indication intersects perfectly with the life of Christians in Pakistan: especially in the Punjab region, the phenomenon of masses of poor people required to work in factories in conditions of slavery is known, where they extract clay from the subsoil, mix bricks and bake them in kilns, for the benefit of the construction industry⁴. Entire families find themselves in conditions of authentic legalised slavery, often due to the need to pay off a contracted debt, in the pay of landowners and feudal lords who manage the workforce with maximum exploitation, and force the workers - including children, women and the elderly - in subhuman conditions. Punjab Christians, of-

⁴ The brick industry is thriving in Pakistan and accounts for around 3 per cent of the national GDP. According to estimates by the International Labour Organisation, there are between eight and ten thousand kilns scattered throughout the country and there are approximately 1.5 million workers in the sector. In the province of Punjab alone, 5,000 kilns are active, known as the “kingdom of forced labour”, a system governed by an iron and inflexible law.

ten belonging to the poorest sections of the population and relegated to the lowest places of the ancient caste system, typical of the social stratification of the subcontinent, end up being the privileged victims of a mechanism that often keeps them segregated. The heavy debt to be paid, in fact, imposes on all family members exhausting shifts of work for a starvation wage, without any distinction of age, sex or health conditions. It is a condition far removed from any fundamental right, while people are considered as goods or in a purely instrumental way, without any dignity.

It is a twofold discrimination that affects religious minorities - Christian and Hindu - and the poorest sections of the Pakistani population. They are “slaves of debt.” This mechanism, that condemns them to abuse, harassment, and maltreatment, to an entire existence subject to unscrupulous masters, is inexorable. It starts with a loan or an advance from employers. In order to repay the sum due, many years are required without rights, without certainties, without pay, and being constrained to live in dilapidated homes. In many cases, the worker fails to repay the incurred debt, which is not extinguished by death but which spills over to subsequent generations, creating generations of slaves⁵.

⁵ The system is also perpetuated with the practice of *peshgi*, or an advance on the wages that the worker receives from the employer. But debt accumulates creating a system of accepted and legalised slavery. Pakistan ranks sixth in the index compiled by *Global Slavery*, which registered 2.3 million slaves in the country, 1.13 per cent of the entire Pakistani population. In Italy, a campaign of solidarity intervention has been launched by organisations such as Focsiv, Iscos and

In a paradigmatic case which reached international news channels, the *bhatti*, the kiln, tragically became a crematorium. The story of Shama and Shahzad Masih is well-known. This married couple (she Catholic, and he a Protestant) worked in a brick factory in the Punjab. The two were brutally tortured and burned alive in a kiln in Kot Radha Kishan on 4th November 2014. They had been falsely accused of committing the crime of blasphemy, and a crowd of militants carried out this terrible lynching. The story has once again shed light on the condition of thousands of disinherited, oppressed people reduced to living in inhuman conditions in the slave system of brick production. Among these, a substantial number are Christian families, who lead a life marked by poverty, exploitation and misery.

All of this exists in the name Bhatti: a burden of immense suffering, human dignity of millions of people trampled on, the trial and the laborious redemption of generations of the oppressed. For Clement Shahbaz, the family name always constituted a powerful warning that determined and guided his vocation and mission: never again a single person without dignity, never again rights trampled on with impunity, no more injustice, marginalisation or discrimination. In those poor slaves, Clement Shahbaz recognised the condition of humiliation, segregation and harassment of the tortured and crucified Christ. In each of their faces, scarred by pain and

the Catholic newspaper *Avvenire*, as can be read in Italian at the link: <https://www.avvenire.it/mondo/Pagine/documenti-e-scuola-mille-famiglie-ripartono-in-pakistan>

streaked with tears, he reread the prophet Isaiah and his fourth song of the Servant of Yahweh, dedicated to the man of sorrows, to the suffering servant, to the man deprived of beauty, splendour, and dignity. And then he put his whole self, his commitment and his possibilities, even his personal economic resources to contribute to their salvation and liberation.

Mindful of the gift and commitment of Shahbaz, that same mission today continues to be carried out by Fr. Emmanuel Parvez who, in the Faisalabad area, redeems the Christian peasant families from slavery by paying off their debts, finding land for them to cultivate, building a house, bringing their children back to school, and giving them back the dignity of free citizens, of children loved by God.⁶

Khushpur, “Pakistan’s Vatican”

Fields of rice, sugar cane, cotton, and tobacco stretch as far as the eye can see. Carts pulled by mules or horses travel on dirt roads and country paths, carrying seeds and agricultural products to the markets of urban centres. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in the immense plains of the Pakistani Punjab, the “land of the five rivers” where there is no lack of water so crops are abundant and lush⁷.

⁶ See the article *Un uomo fatto Vangelo* (A Man Made Gospel), published in Italian in “L’Osservatore Romano” of 13th July 2019

⁷ Pakistan’s Punjab province covers 205,345 km² and is home to more than 110 million inhabitants, more than half of the total popu-

Since 1870, at the time of the British colonial government, the civil authorities of the Punjab (which included the province later split between the modern states of Pakistan and India), decided to increase the cultivated land by building dams, dykes and canals, so as to satisfy the demand for agricultural products in European markets. An extensive irrigation system of channels was built in areas that today include the districts of Faisalabad and Toba Tek Singh. In 1880, a new city was founded in this area, which took the name of Lyallpur. Its urban layout was based on the Union Jack, the British flag, with eight roads radiating from a large clock tower situated at the city centre. From 1904, Lyallpur became a district of eastern Punjab, which included the local administrations of Lyallpur, Samundri and Toba Tek Singh, where both Muslim and Sikh populations migrated. The settlement of population in the district, which maintained an essentially agricultural social and economic character, grew rapidly, and as early as 1916 the Lyallpur wheat market established itself as one of the most important in the region. The textile and food processing

lation of Pakistan (205 million, according to 2018 estimates). It is administratively divided into the four districts of Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Lahore and Multan, which have cities of the same name as capitals. Essentially, it is an agricultural region, thanks to the irrigation guaranteed by the waters of its five rivers (the Indus and its tributaries Jhelum, Beas, Chenab, Ravi and Sutlej). *Punjab* derives from the Persian *pang* (five) and *ab* (river). The territory produces wheat, sugar cane, cotton, tobacco, and fruit trees are grown. Industry has developed mainly in branches related to agriculture (fertilisers, agricultural machines, textile plants, sugar factories). In Punjab there is also the federal enclave constituted by the capital of Pakistan, Islamabad.

industries developed from the 1930s onwards. In 1977, the name of the city and district was changed to Faisalabad⁸ (“city of Faisal”), in honour of the late King Faysal of Saudi Arabia, a highly regarded person in Pakistan.⁹

In this expanse of fields that stretch as far as the eye can see, 40 kilometres from the capital Faisalabad, stands the village of Khushpur, the birthplace of Shahbaz Bhatti. Its name means “village of happiness” (in Urdu *khush*, happiness; *pur*, land), and there could be no more appropriate appellation to describe the serene, hard-working and peaceful life of the locals¹⁰. The village has a unique and special connotation: its population is almost entirely made up of Catholics. It is a real rarity in a nation like

⁸ Faisalabad, with its 3.2 million inhabitants, is today, according to the 2017 census, the third most populous city in Pakistan (after Karachi and Lahore). It is a thriving economic and commercial centre and contributes 5 per cent to Pakistan’s annual GDP.

⁹ Faysal ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Āl Sa‘ūd, (Riyad, 14th April 1906 - Riyad, 25th March 1975), was King of Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975. As a sovereign, he sought to implement a policy of modernisation and reform. Among the main foreign policy themes were pan-Islamism, anti-communism and Palestinian nationalism. During his years in government, he helped to strengthen the political and strategic alliance between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, including by funding research to equip Pakistan with nuclear weapons. He is still a respected and beloved personality in Pakistan. The impressive Faysal Mosque in Islamabad is dedicated to King Faysal, who supported and financed the project. It is the largest mosque in Pakistan and South Asia, and one of the largest in the world.

¹⁰ Khushpur is a village located in the Samundri subdistrict, within the wider Faisalabad district. The British administration identified it as “Chak 51”. Chak is a term in the Punjabi language that indicates a settlement of population settled in a contiguous territory. The chak system was essentially used to collect the taxes of the British Raj era.

Pakistan, where the Muslim population constitutes about 96% of the 210 million inhabitants and Christians are, more or less, around 4 million, almost 2% of the population. The Christian religion is, then, the trademark of this small agricultural settlement of about 5,000 inhabitants, made mostly of simple single-storey brick houses connected by dirt roads.

The “colonies”, meaning these entirely Christian villages, were started by Belgian Capuchin missionaries who, at the end of the 1800s, brought the Gospel to this area of the Indian subcontinent. The first to be baptised needed to develop a sense of mutual solidarity and strengthen their Christian identity, remaining united in a community with an overwhelming Muslim majority. So, the missionaries began to buy land and transfer evangelised families to it, with the aim of protecting and strengthening their faith, allowing them to have a fruitful experience of community life and apostolic solidarity¹¹. Even today in Pakistan, more than a hundred years later, the so-called “colonies” are mono-religious ghettos that gather together the majority of the Christian faithful. Although now other reasons have been added to the original ones,

¹¹ There are 34 villages in Pakistan that have this origin: settlements cared for and built by the missionaries, for the “untouchables” who had converted to the Christian faith. For a valid overview of the origin of Christianity in Pakistan, see the article *Le origini del Pakistan e il ruolo che hanno avuto i cristiani e le altre minoranze* (*The Origins of Pakistan and the Role Played by Christians and Other Minorities*), published by Bishop Anthony Lobo in the magazine “Oasis” in 2005, available in Italian at the link: <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/origine-cristiani-pakistan>

linked to discrimination and the fear of suffering violence and persecution. Central to this is the need for security and protection that Christian families feel in Pakistan: they prefer to have fellow believers alongside them, especially if they have teenage daughters who can become easy prey for Muslim men. Kidnappings for the purpose of marriage and forced conversion to Islam are, in fact, a tragically widespread reality. In the prevailing mindset, which has strengthened over the years, especially among the less educated, members of religious minorities remain “inferior beings.” It is a legacy of the old caste system: the Christian and Hindu communities that remained in Pakistan after the partition from India in 1947 belonged to the lower social groups. That stigma is still felt today, and non-Muslims are often considered second-class citizens. This is also because various changes to the constitution, approved in the 70 years following independence, have in some cases institutionalised discrimination.

But Khushpur really seems like a happy island. Located on the Punjab plain, between Lahore and Multan, the village was founded in 1901 by Belgian Capuchin missionaries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, they bought a vast forest territory in order to gather together the Christian families which were then dispersed in the surrounding area. The founder, Fr. Felix Fink Henricus, was a Belgian Franciscan missionary who had come to Lahore from Antwerp in 1889. A friar with an active, industrious and far-sighted personality, he was the meritorious founder of several other villages such as Mariamabad (the “village of Mary” in the district of Sheikhpura), and Fran-

cisabad (the “village of Francis” in the district of Jhang). *Felix* is the Latin word meaning happy. The village was given the name of Khushpur in honour of Father Felix.

The priest was one of 147 missionaries of the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor of Belgian nationality who travelled and worked tirelessly in the Indian subcontinent, between 1888 and 2011, leaving indelible traces of the spread of the Gospel and of the establishment of Christian communities. Pakistan today owes much to their evangelising passion and their gratuitous commitment to human development. The story of that extraordinary missionary adventure that brought the religious followers of the saint of Assisi from the old continent to South Asia is linked to that evangelising impulse that went through the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century. After the establishment of the diocese of Lahore, then in India, decided by Pope Leo XIII on 1st September 1886, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (today Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples), acknowledged that the Capuchin fathers were already working in that region and noted that “because of the long distances and various difficult situations, this diocese needs more apostolic men for ministry,” entrusted the care of the diocese of Lahore to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin of the Belgian province, with the hope that “it can always be fulfilled for the benefit of the salvation of souls and the propagation of the faith.”¹²

¹² Decree *Datum Romae ex ex aedibus S. Congr. de Propag. Fide* XV Novembris An. 1888. LS Johannes Cardinal Simeoni, Praefectus.

In 2018, after more than 132 years of service to the local church, studded with the foundation of countless churches, schools, missions, and villages, especially in Punjab, Leopold Hugo Evens, the last Belgian monk and missionary remaining in the “land of the pure,” took his leave and left Pakistan, where the legacy of the Franciscans is more alive than ever. Evens carried out his pastoral service for 48 years (1970-2018), with “zeal and passion for the proclamation of the Gospel,” said Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw, leading the archdiocese of Lahore in the farewell. The Capuchin friars in Lahore, today have custody of Mariam Siddeeqa, a well-established local religious province connected to Belgium, but now autonomous, governed by Pakistani friars and thriving with new vocations to consecrated life and the priesthood. “We are grateful for the service rendered by the Belgian Capuchin friars, who have worked hard in this land to keep the Punjab church alive since 1886,” remarked Lawrence John Saldanha, emeritus archbishop of Lahore, calling them “the builders of the local church,” and gratefully remembering their contribution also for the training of seminarians and nuns.

Fr. Emmanuel Parvez is a native of the same village founded by Father Felix, a place where the imprint of the missionaries can still be recognised and whose spirit and evangelical witness can still be breathed. Today, the parish priest appreciates and praises the living faith of the inhabitants: “In Khushpur the seed of the Gospel planted a hundred years ago is bearing abundant fruit.

People's faith is solid. The village is full of vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and marriage. It has produced two bishops, John Joseph and Rufin Anthony, over 50 priests and over 100 nuns, alongside committed Christian lay people such as Shahbaz Bhatti and the theologian Paul Earnest. The village also boasts hundreds of catechists. This is why it is affectionately called the Vatican of Pakistan," Fr. Emmanuel notes, recalling that numerous Catholic institutes, schools and colleges are located in the village: the national centre for the formation of catechists; the women's high school run by the Dominican nuns, with an attached centre for the professional training of girls; the men's hostel and the adult education centre under the aegis of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; the female community of the Third Order of Saint Dominic; and, today, there is also the "Saint Anthony of Padova" training centre, built in the complex dedicated to Shahbaz Bhatti.

A favourable and rather homogeneous social environment from a religious point of view, has also allowed, over the years, the foundation of cooperative bodies for the excavation of wells, the canalisation of water, the purchase of tractors and other agricultural machinery, and the marketing of agricultural products. There are elementary and middle schools in the village, which are lacking in nearby villages. "This confirms the traditional commitment of Pakistani Christians to the education sector," Fr. Emmanuel notes. Talking of the flourishing pastoral life in the parish church of St. Fi-

delis, the only one in the village, he says: “There is a lively, attentive and joyful participation of men, women, the elderly, children, and whole families at worship, liturgies, pastoral and social activities.”

One of the qualifying moments during the year, which well expresses and manifests the spirit of the local Catholic community, is the feast of Christ the King, the Sunday on which the Catholic Church concludes the liturgical year. “In Khushpur,” says Fr. Emmanuel, “it is considered the most important celebration after Easter and Christmas. On that day the whole town is decorated and festively adorned. Preparations begin several days in advance. Verses of the Bible are displayed on the walls alongside posters and drawings illustrating biblical episodes. In honour of Christ the King, a solemn procession takes place along the 24 streets of the town, with the participation of students from five schools. Everywhere you see frescoes that depict the miracles of Jesus. People place altars in front of the houses, expressing their devotion, faith and love for the Saviour. The bishop and the priests walk in the streets carrying the Blessed Sacrament, while hymns are sung in honour of Christ Jesus.”

Shahbaz Bhatti had been no stranger to this spirit since he was a boy, and in particular to this celebration. Indeed, he was particularly attached to it. “He always involved young people in the preparation of this wonderful spiritual event,” recalls his cousin, “inviting them to celebrate the occasion together.” It is not surprising that the street where his family lived was de-

clared the best decorated for 15 years in a row. In this way Shahbaz showed his great devotion and his zeal for the Lord.”

The Catholic community of Khushpur continues to be the cradle of a Catholicism characterised, in full Franciscan spirit, by simplicity, meekness, purity of heart, and humility. It is no coincidence that it continues to generate vocations to consecrated life or lay Catholics seriously engaged in social work. There is a deep faith, deep-rooted and sincere, among the people of Khushpur. There is active participation in worship, the sacraments, community prayer, sharing the word of God, educational, charitable, and social activities. In a society mostly composed of simple people, sometimes uneducated, spiritual life is intense, rich and penetrating: always drawing from the source, which is Christ himself, it always nourishes and generates new children.

One of these was Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, who lived his childhood, his formative years, and his growth here. This privileged environment, a sort of oasis of the spirit and of Christian charity, was the crib in which a free, fruitful spirit was born and developed, always anchored in the Gospel of Christ. A spirit which was nourished by the word of God and, filled with the Holy Spirit, was animated by the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Clothed in humility, gentleness, mercy and minority, Clement Shahbaz Bhatti was a worthy descendant and disciple of those Franciscans who came to plant the seed of the Gospel over a century before.

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