

Indian Catholics cheer their new saint

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VATICAN CITY

Thousands of Indian Catholics cheered waving their national flag in St. Peter's Square on Sunday as Pope Benedict XVI canonized Saint Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception and called for an end to anti-Christian violence.

"As the Christian faithful of India give thanks to God for their first native daughter to be presented for public veneration, I wish to assure them of my prayers during this difficult time," Pope Benedict said. He referred explicitly to the violence against Christians in Orissa and other states.

"I urge the perpetrators of violence to renounce these acts and join with their brothers and sisters to work together in building a civilization of love," he continued, addressing 35,000 people at the Oct. 12 ceremony.

Among them were thousands from the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the three Catholic rites in India, to which Saint Alphonsa belonged. About 300 nuns of her Franciscan Clarist congregation attended as did official delegations from the Indian Government and her home state, Kerala, along with more than 200 bishops, 20 cardinals and a choir of Indian nuns.

Also present in the square was Jinil, the 11-year-old Catholic boy whose cure through then-Blessed Alphonsa's intercession was accepted by the Vatican as a miracle. His twisted legs were healed in 1999 after his parents took him to her shrine.

As the canonization rite began, Archbishop Angelo Amato, new prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, stepped forward and asked Pope Benedict to canonize four new saints.

The other three were Italian Father Gaetano Errico (1791-1860); Maria Bernarda Butler (1848-1924), Swiss founder of a Religious order for which she established missions in South America; and Narcisa De Jesus Martillo Moran (1832-1869), a lay catechist from Ecuador.

Archbishop Amato read a brief biography of each, describing Saint Alphonsa as the "great little daughter of India."

After the Sistine Choir sang the Litany of the Saints, Pope Benedict declared the four saints, decreeing that their names be inscribed in the Book of Saints and "honored throughout the Church."

Saint Alphonsa is the first saint of full Indian descent. Saint Gonsalo Garcia (1556-1597), the first and only other Indian saint, had a Portuguese father. She had a special affection for children, and soon after her thinly attended funeral, schoolchildren received favors through her intercession. Her tomb turned into a center of pilgrimage.

In the homily, Pope Benedict recalled Saint Alphonsa's life as one of "extreme physical and spiritual suffering."

The nun suffered from serious illnesses that confined her to bed for long periods of time with great pain. However, those who remember her say she never complained and always maintained a positive attitude.

"This exceptional woman ... was convinced that her cross was the very means of reaching the heavenly banquet prepared for her by the Father," the pope stated. "By accepting the invitation to the wedding feast, and by adorning herself with the garment of God's grace through prayer and penance, she conformed her life to Christ's and now delights in the 'rich fare and choice wines' of the heavenly kingdom."

Recalling Saint Alphonsa's own words, "I consider a day without suffering as a day lost," the pope concluded with a prayer that reminded believers to imitate her in shouldering their cross so as to join her one day in paradise.

"(Her) heroic virtues of patience, fortitude and perseverance in the midst of deep suffering remind us that God always provides the strength we need to overcome every trial," the pope stated before the ceremony ended.

He invited people "to pray for reconciliation and peace for some situations that that are causing alarm and great suffering," specifically citing the civil war situation in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and "the violence against Christians in Iraq and India."

Bishop Simon Stock of Jagdalpur, one of 30 bishops who flew from India for the event, told UCA News, "Sister Alphonsa was a suffering saint, and we should all learn from her how to make our sufferings sanctified."

Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins, who until recently headed the congregation for sainthood causes, described her canonization as historic for the Church in India and called her a model of Christ "well suited to the present time."

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