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Recognize martyrs around the world by canonizing one of their own

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Once again, Christians found themselves on the firing line last Sunday, with 19 people killed in Nigeria and one in Kenya in attacks on three churches. Those atrocities, alas, have rated no more than a blip on the global radar screen, largely because such things have become chillingly familiar.

The consensus estimate is that about 150,000 Christians are today killed around the world every year, either out of hatred for the faith or for works of charity inspired by the faith. That translates into one victim every three and a half minutes. In effect, we are witnessing the rise of an entire new generation of Christian martyrs.

Every time something like this happens, the Vatican, to its credit, is usually quick to speak out. Again this time, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, denounced the "horrible and despicable acts" in Kenya and Nigeria and urged the populations to resist a "vicious circle of homicidal hatred."

Yet more and more, an unavoidable question looms: Isn't there something the Vatican could do beyond issuing statements?

I write this week to float a proposal in the form of a papal gesture that could shine a powerful spotlight on the harrowing realities of 21st-century martyrdom. As it happens, it's a step that doesn't require any great leap forward in the Vatican's political or diplomatic imagination. Instead, it's utterly in the wheelhouse of traditional Catholic devotion and spiritual practice.

Here's the idea: Beatify Shahbaz Bhatti, and do it now.

Morally, of course, the significance of no one martyr's death surpasses another's, but in terms of shock value and media interest, Bhatti's assassination March 2, 2011, has an undeniable pride of place. Just 42 when he was killed, Bhatti had been the lone Catholic in Pakistan's Cabinet as Minister of Minority Affairs. A veteran activist on behalf of religious minorities in his overwhelming Muslim society, including outspoken opposition to the country's notorious blasphemy laws, Bhatti had become a global symbol of tolerance, and his death, therefore, a dramatic reminder of the violent face of intolerance.

To emphasize how important this is, Pope Benedict XVI could take the unusual, though not unprecedented, step of setting aside the five-year waiting period to begin a sainthood cause, something already done for Mother Teresa and John Paul II. Because Bhatti is a martyr, there's no miracle required for beatification. The rite could therefore be celebrated as early as next year either in Rome or in Lahore, where Bhatti was born, assuming a church inquest bears out what seems from a distance like a slam-dunk case.

There's already momentum in this direction. On March 31, 2011, the Catholic bishops of Pakistan wrote to Benedict XVI to say they had unanimously approved a petition that Bhatti's name be enrolled "in the martyrology of the universal church."

Of his Bhatti's Catholic piety, there can be no doubt. In an interview shortly before his death, as the danger he faced was mounting, 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."

I met Bhatti's brother, Paul, in Rome this week. Paul is a medical doctor who was practicing in Italy at the time of the assassination. (He has since returned to Pakistan to take up his brother's Cabinet post and his cause.) He recounted cleaning out his brother's Spartan apartment shortly after he was killed, where the only three items on a small bedside table were the Bible, a rosary and a picture of the Virgin Mary.

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Nor can Bhatti be styled as a parochial patron for Christians alone, because he defended the rights of Hindus, Sikhs and others with equal vigor, not to mention Muslims. Paul Bhatti said that point was brought home 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."

There's also little serious doubt that his death was, indeed, martyrdom. The assassination was likely triggered by Bhatti's defense of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death under the blasphemy laws. There was a brief-lived attempt by some investigators to shift blame to "internal Christian squabbles," but most independent observers believe the killing was carried out by a Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban.

To be sure, Shahbaz moved in the complex world of politics, and there's legitimate debate about his political line. Some Pakistani Christians felt he had been co-opted by the government and was not aggressive enough in defending their rights. Yet the Vatican has always insisted that beatifying someone does not mean endorsing every choice he or she ever made; instead, it means that despite human failures, the light of faith somehow shone through his or her life.

Assuming the pope takes part and that large crowds show up, a beatification ceremony often becomes a

big media event. This would be a natural opportunity not only to tell Bhatti's story, but also to generate a global examination of conscience about all the other new Christian martyrs he represents.

Bhatti deserves the honor; persecuted Christians around the world need the patron; and the cause of defending Christians (and others) in harm's way because of their faith could certainly use the platform.

Hence, memo to Benedict XVI: With regard to Shahbaz Bhatti, *Santo Subito!*

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I published an article Wednesday about the current discussion in Italy regarding the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation, involving scandals around a handful of its members who play prominent roles in Italian politics. The article gave the impression that Roberto Formigoni, the conservative governor of the Italian region of Lombardy and a member of the Memores Domini movement linked to Communion and Liberation, is under investigation by Italian authorities for bribery and corruption. That is not true; while Formigoni's name has been linked to an expanding corruption probe in media reports, he has not been formally charged with any wrongdoing.

I regret the error.

For the record, I have attended the annual Communion and Liberation meeting in Rimini in the past, and find much to admire in the group's passionate conviction that Christian faith cannot be a purely private affair, but must have consequences in all of life -- not just politics, of course, but also art, culture, science and so on. I'm also well aware of the injustice of tarring an entire group for the failures, real or perceived, of some of its members. I intended my story to be more about the dynamics of a scandal than about the inner reality of Communion and Liberation or the teachings of its founder, Fr. Luigi Guissani. The teachings, naturally, deserve to be considered on their own terms.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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