

SPEECH: NEW YORK ENCOUNTER, JANUARY 19, 2013, Dr Paul Jacob Bhatti

Respected ladies and gentlemen, it is a huge privilege for me to recall the witness of my brother Shahbaz Clement Bhatti, who dedicated 28 years of his life to protect Religious Minorities, combating any kind of violence with peaceful means, cherishing the idea of interfaith Harmony in Pakistan and in the world.

It is my great honor to be with you, which gives me the opportunity to share about my ongoing struggle in Pakistan, to follow the vision and mission of my brother.

Ladies and gentleman, your interest and concern to participate in this meeting is of great encouragement for me, which gives a clear message that we all want peace, equality, justice and an end to violence in this world. There are so many precious lives that have been lost for this purpose and I honor all those who laid down their lives to bring peace, justice, and equality in this world.

My younger brother, Shahbaz Bhatti, fought tirelessly to protect oppressed and marginalized communities in my country of Pakistan.

At this point I would like to share briefly some basic information about Pakistan. It is the 6th largest country of the world for population and the 2nd most populated Islamic country after Indonesia. Almost 95% belongs to Muslims and 5% to other religious minorities; among these 2% are Christians, 2% Hindus, and 1% other religious minorities like Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist, etc.

Pakistan achieved independence in 1947, after a century of British domain. The founder of Pakistan Quid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, being a minority member in India, had great concern for religious minorities rights and was convinced that the only way forward to flourish is living together with diversity. He

declared that in the State of Pakistan there would not be any discrimination among peoples of diverse faiths and every citizen of this State would be free to express his or her faith and follow their place of worship without any fear.

But sadly, Pakistan has gradually become a State where extremism, sectarian violence, fanaticism, and terrorism have badly affected our freedoms of expression and faith. Some enemies of humanity have imposed their radical philosophy in our society, making Pakistan a State of violence and intolerance.

Shahbaz had a strong belief on Jinnah's Pakistan where everybody is free to express his or her faith.

My brother was a true follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was the youngest child. We were 5 brothers and one sister growing up with pure and strong Christian traditions under the guidance of our parents who believed, followed, and lived their lives according to the teaching of the Gospels.

I feel that Shahbaz was a miracle of God who lived his life according to pure Christian values. He stood against the persecution of religious minorities and innocent victims who were falsely accused by different laws. He was convinced that being a true follower of our Lord Jesus, it was his duty to protect the oppressed and marginalized.

As a politician and a minister, he had a significant number of achievements.

Five percent quota (of religious minorities) in all government jobs.

The allocation of four seats in the Senate for minorities.

Full recognition of minorities by the celebration of August 11th as Minorities Day.

The establishment of special prayer rooms in prisons for minorities.

The introduction of education and skills training scholarships for the poor.

Freedom to celebrate religious festivals as expressed among all the diverse

religious communities.

The promotion of interfaith harmony amongst different faith communities in Pakistan, leading to their integration throughout society.

The establishment of hot lines with the provision to get immediate information about any human rights abuse of minorities.

Remembering the start of his political career, I would like to share one of his first struggles. When he was 15 years old in school, he stood up against this proposal of law which was going to introduce a different ID card for religious minorities than that of the majorities. This was a clear discrimination between people of different faiths. He shared this with me and showed great concern and was disturbed with this issue. At the time, I was a student in Italy and had come back to Pakistan for a very short visit. He was so young with meager resources that I advised him to concentrate on his studies and let somebody else worry about that, but he didn't accept this. The next morning, in a small city I saw the walls were covered with posters where he had protested against this kind of decision and soon after that, along with his colleagues and friends, he went in front of Parliament where he held a protest for hours. He also went to some political leaders in power, showing his great concern about the matter of the ID. Surprisingly, he achieved a victory that allowed these cards to no longer be introduced.

He was always the first person to contact whenever there was any kind of injustice, violence, and discrimination in our society. He openly supported and protested in the public against these acts of violence without considering threats for his own life that often occurred.

I remember another episode that after litigation between two people (one from the Christian community and the other from the majority), the litigation was covered up with religious fanaticism and people attacked the small community of marginalized and oppressed Christian people, killing them and burning their

houses. In this burning situation, everybody was quiet and afraid to speak out against this attack. He immediately reached out for several days without caring about his own life, supporting and helping the people who suffered and stood for their rights.

In the later part of his life, he was in imminent danger, receiving many threats. I called him from Italy and tried my best to convince him to stay with me and not return to Pakistan. His reply to me was "I have given my life in the hands of Jesus Christ and I cannot leave my people alone". He said, "how will you define a Shepherd who will leave his sheep alone when they are under attack?"

He further asked me, "do you think that in Italy there is no death? "
I was unable to convince him to leave Pakistan.

His last request and wish in the last period of his life was to see me in Pakistan working together with him, like when I was a missionary doctor in Pakistan for several years. Not taking it seriously, I just told him you are calling me from heaven to hell. To which he replied, "the way which leads to paradise lies here in Pakistan."

On the one hand, even though I knew and feared that the extremists might kill him, on the other hand I never accepted it would happen.

On the 2nd of March 2011, I was preparing for my duty at the hospital. I received the shocking news of his assassination, which has left me shattered, shocked and heartbroken. I was extremely angry at Pakistan and against this mindset, which killed and stole my beloved brother Shahbaz from me. It was unacceptable for me to have any kind of further link with Pakistan; I decided to attend the funeral ceremony of my brother and bring back the rest of my family to Italy.

But, when I reached there, I saw a sea of people crying and chanting slogans, as though they had lost the most precious thing of their lives, and he was the only voice for them. There was a big question mark in their eyes, “who will follow his vision and mission now?”

It was at this point that my heart convictions started changing and the priorities of my life became secondary, being strongly convinced that the Almighty God guided my decisions during this time.

The central committee of All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) an organization founded by Shahbaz, asked me to be their Chairman. The President of Pakistan, Zardari, offered me the same ministry assuring me his full support. President Zardari shared how it was for him after the assassination of his wife, Benazir Bhutto, offering a challenge that we should not step back, but we have to fight against this mindset, which is destroying the peace of our country and the peace of many people who cannot fight and speak for themselves.

I asked my mother her opinion regarding “what I should do now”? She expressed her strong concern that the mission and vision of Shahbaz must be continued and that Jesus will guide and help me if I decide to follow this mission.

I feel honored and privileged to follow the legacy of my younger brother, Shahbaz, to continue his mission to create a peaceful co-existence among people of diverse faith, traditions, and cultures in Pakistan, and empowering the poor and marginalized, bringing them back into the mainstream of society.

Now Pakistan is passing through a very delicate phase of its history where extremism, fanaticism, terrorism, and sectarian violence are at its highest peak. I feel strongly encouraged by so many people like you who showed and expressed their concern to support me to follow this vision and mission.

We need to create a better and peaceful world where human qualities and potentials are used to bring equality, justice, and human dignity. We must overcome these forces of violence with peaceful means. The promotion of interfaith harmony, education, and economic empowerment for the poor and marginalized communities is our main target of my struggle in Pakistan.

Since being the Chairman of APMA, SBMT, and the Minister of National Harmony, I have launched my campaign for these objectives.

In closing: Every time I would ask Shahbaz to be cautious, as his life was in grave danger, he would smile and say "I have put myself in Jesus' hands and He will protect me". Shahbaz Bhatti bore witness to Jesus Christ with his blood and remained faithful and unwavering to the principles he believed in.

One of his last public statements he made was: "The Taliban threaten me but I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ, who has given his own life for us. I know what is the meaning of the cross, and I am following the cross," which he followed all the way, to his last breath.

May we all take courage in our resolve to draw strength from God to move forward and be determined in our struggle among the poor and marginalized. That our lives, like Shahbaz life, will be a powerful witness of faith bringing hope and empowerment throughout society, strengthening religious harmony, social justice, and equality, whereby human dignity is respected and cherished.

Jesus said (Matthew Ch 5: 10-12)

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Blessed are you when people persecute you and falsely

say all kinds of evil against you because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Thank you