 Reading time: 5 min.

On 25 February, we celebrated the feast of our Salesian protomartyrs, Bishop Aloysius Versiglia and Father Callistus Caravario. Martyrdom, since the time of the first Christian community, has always been a clear sign of our faith, similar to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our salvation. Currently, in our Salesian Congregation, we are dealing with the cause of martyrdom of Akash Bashir, a young Salesian former pupil from Pakistan, who gave his life for the salvation of his parish community at the age of 20. The diocesan investigation phase for the beatification process ended on 15 March, the anniversary of his martyrdom.

Pakistan is one of the most extremist Muslim countries in the world. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan emerged after World War II, with independence from India in 1947. However, Christians were already present in this region thanks to Dominican and Franciscan missionaries. Currently, Christians in Pakistan make up about 1.6% of the total population (Catholics and Anglicans), or about 4 million people. Religious minorities face daily discrimination, marginalisation, lack of equal opportunities in employment and education, and religious discrimination and sometimes persecution persist, making religious freedom a critical issue.

Despite the challenges, Christian communities in Pakistan demonstrate resilience and hope. Churches and Christian organisations play a key role in providing support and promoting interreligious unity, and the Salesians have contributed significantly with their presence.

Akash Bashir's life began in a small village near Afghanistan, in a family of five children, he being the third. Akash, born during the summer on 22 June 1994, faced extreme weather and survived with difficulty. Despite the difficulties of the adverse climate, family poverty and poor nutrition, these challenges helped shape his character.

Akash's dream of serving in the army was thwarted by educational and financial insecurity. The Bashir family decided to migrate eastwards, to the Punjab, to the city of Lahore, close to the border with India, specifically to the Christian district of Youhanabad, where the Salesians run a boarding school, a primary school and a technical school. In September 2010, Akash Bashir entered the Salesian Don Bosco Technical and Youth Centre.

In a difficult political-religious context, Akash volunteered as a security guard in Youhanabad Parish in December 2014. His role as a security guard at St John's Parish consisted of guarding the entrance to the courtyard and controlling the worshippers at the entrance gate, as the churches are protected by a wall with only one entrance door. On 15 March 2015, during the celebration of Mass, Akash

was on duty.

That day was the Fourth Sunday of Lent ("Laetare" Sunday) celebrated by 1200-1500 faithful attending the Mass, presided over by Father Francis Gulzar, the parish priest. At 11.09 a.m., a first terrorist attack hit the Anglican community less than 500 metres from the Catholic church. A minute later, at 11.10 a.m., a second detonation took place right at the entrance to the courtyard of the Catholic Parish, where Akash Bashir, as a volunteer security guard, was on duty.

His Eminence, Cardinal Ángel Fernández, the Rector Major of the Salesians, in the introduction to his biography describes Akash's martyrdom in these words:

"*On 15 March 2015, while Holy Mass was being celebrated in St John's parish, the group of security guards made up of young volunteers, of which Akash Bashir was a member, faithfully guarded the entrance. Something unusual happened that day. Akash noticed that a person with explosives under his clothes was trying to enter the church. He restrained him, spoke to him and tried to stop him from continuing, but realising that he could not hold him back he hugged him tightly saying, "I will die, but I will not let you enter the church." So the young man and the suicide bomber died together. Our young man offered his life saving thundreds of people, boys, girls, mothers, teenagers and grown men who were praying inside the church at that moment. Akash was 20 years old.*"

After the explosion, four people lay dying on the ground: the man with the explosives, a vegetable vendor, a six-year-old girl and Akash Bashir. His sacrifice prevented the death toll from being much higher. The Gospel proclaimed that day recalled Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3: 20-21). Akash sealed these words with his blood as a young Christian.

On 18 March, the Archbishop of Lahore presided over an ecumenical funeral celebration for Akash and the Anglican Christians, attended by 7,000-10,000 faithful. Afterwards, the body was transferred to the Youhanabad cemetery, where it was buried in a tomb built by Akash's father.

The life of Akash Bashir is a powerful testimony to the early Christian communities surrounded by philosophies, adverse cultures and persecution. The communities of the Acts of the Apostles were also minorities, but with strong faith and unlimited courage, similar to the Christians in Pakistan.

The shining example of Salesian Past Pupil Akash Bashir continues to inspire the world. He lived the words of Jesus: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

On 15 March 2022, the diocesan enquiry officially began, marking a significant step towards the possible beatification of the first Pakistani citizen. The conclusion of the diocesan enquiry on 15 March 2024 marks a fundamental milestone on the path to beatification and canonisation.

I finish by recalling again the words of His Eminence, Card. Ángel Fernández on Akash Bashir:

"*To be a saint today is possible! And it is undoubtedly the most obvious charismatic sign of the Salesian educational system. In a special way, Akash is the flag, the sign, the voice of so many Christians who are attacked, persecuted, humiliated and martyred in non-Catholic countries. Akash is the voice of so many courageous young people who manage to give their lives for the faith despite the difficulties of life, poverty, religious extremism, indifference, social inequality and discrimination. The life and martyrdom of this young Pakistani, only 20 years old, makes us recognise the power of God's Holy Spirit, alive, present in the least expected places, in the humble, in the persecuted, in the young, in God's little ones. His Cause for Beatification is for us a sign of hope and an example of youthful holiness unto martyrdom.*"

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vice-postulator of the cause of Akash Bashir