

# Pope, others mourn bishop who committed suicide

FAISALABAD, Pakistan (CNS)—Some 25,000 mourners attended the funeral of Bishop John Joseph of Faisalabad amid messages of sympathy from Pope John Paul II and other prominent religious and political leaders.

The mourners, led by 300 priests and religious, attended the May 10 service at the Faisalabad cathedral, where the late bishop's body was buried near the Marian grotto built by him, said Father Bashir Francis, the Faisalabad Diocese's vicar general. He spoke to UCA News, an Asian church news agency based in Thailand.

Earlier, reading Pope John Paul's condolences in Bishop Joseph's native village of Khush Pur, the apostolic nuncio to Pakistan, Archbishop Renzo Fratini, said the pope hopes "the struggle for justice and people's rights will bear fruit."

Bishop Joseph, 65, the first native Punjab priest and bishop, shot himself to death May 6 outside the court building in Sahiwal, about 300 miles south of Islamabad.

The bishop, who chaired the Pakistani bishops' justice and peace commission, killed himself at the site where Ayub Masih, a Christian convicted of blasphemy, was sentenced to death April 27. The site is also where Ayub — the name Masih is used to identify people as Christians — had been shot at while awaiting a court hearing Nov. 6.

In Rome, more than 120 Catholics, including bishops and priests at the Synod of Bishops for Asia, took part in a memorial Mass for Bishop Joseph May 8. Archbishop Armando Trindade of Lahore, president of the Pakistani bishops' conference, presided at the Mass. With him were Bishop Joseph Coutts of Hyderabad and Bishop Anthony Lobo of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, the other two Pakistani bishops at the synod.



CNS/Reuters

Pakistani Christians gather to pay last respects to Bishop John Joseph in the village of Khush Pur in Pakistan May 8. The Catholic bishop shot himself outside a courthouse in protest of a death sentence handed down to a Christian man under Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

In a May 7 statement, the three Pakistani bishops called Bishop Joseph's suicide "a sudden and cruel extinction of a bright and shining light. He was prepared to offer his life for the abolition of the (blasphemy) laws repeatedly misused against innocent minorities."

Bishop Coutts, who succeeded Bishop Joseph in April as chairman of the Pakistani bishops' commission for interreligious dialogue, said the Pakistani members of the synod were "still trying to recover from this bombshell, this bolt from out of the blue."

For 12 years, he said, the bishops and human rights organizations had been

struggling to get the blasphemy laws dropped or amended, but nothing changed.

Some participants at the synod acted on an appeal by a fellow synod attendee from Pakistan. The appeal sought an end to the persecution of Christians in Pakistan, and especially the repeal of blasphemy laws that have been used to condemn several Pakistani Christians to death, reported UCA News.

The appeal urged recipients to "write letters of protest either to the Pakistan Embassy in your country or directly to the prime minister and president of Pakistan."

Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, said it was clear that the bishop's suicide was a "protest death."

It quoted an unidentified priest as saying that Bishop Joseph "dedicated his mind and heart to fighting the blasphemy laws, and it killed him."

The blasphemy laws, Sections 295-B and -C of the Pakistan Penal Code, were introduced in 1986 under the late president, Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq.

Section 295-B makes insulting the Koran, Islam's holy book, punishable with

life imprisonment, while Section 295-C stipulates death or life imprisonment for defaming the Prophet Mohammed, founder of Islam. The country's national court of Shariah, Islamic law, has interpreted Section 295-C as requiring a mandatory death sentence for those convicted of blasphemy against the prophet.

Ayub is the fourth Pakistani Christian to be sentenced to death for blasphemy. The three others were later acquitted by the Lahore High Court, but are living abroad due to threats. Five Christians accused of blasphemy have been killed while trials were pending or in process, three of them while in custody.

Judge Arif Iqbal Bhatti, one of the two Lahore High Court judges who acquitted two of the Christians, was murdered last October.

The day before killing himself, Bishop Joseph wrote that the laws must be repealed "without worrying about the sacrifices we shall have to offer; dedicated persons do not count the cost."

In his statement to human rights activists, the 65-year-old prelate described the blasphemy laws as "the greatest block in the good and harmonious relations between Muslims and the religious minorities in Pakistan."

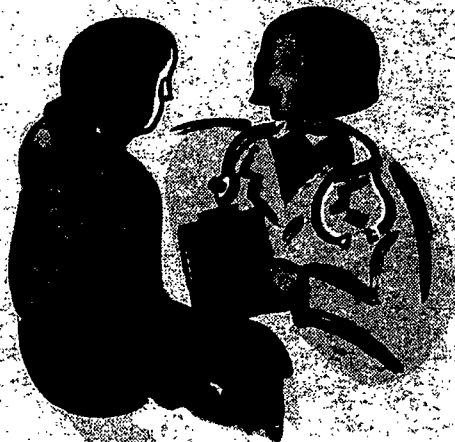
"In order to achieve national harmony, let us give a mighty push to this immense boulder, before it crushes all of us," he wrote.

Reacting to the news of Bishop Joseph's death, Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick, chairman of the U.S. bishops' International Policy Committee, expressed shock and dismay.

In a message of support and condolence to the people of the bishop's diocese, his colleagues and relatives May 7, Archbishop McCarrick said, "May they be strengthened to carry on his work through nonviolent and peaceful efforts to achieve a more just and equitable Pakistani society, in which religious liberty and other basic human rights are fully respected."

The Asia Partnership for Human Development, an international alliance of Catholic agencies, expressed to the Pakistani bishops' conference its hope that Bishop Joseph's "great sacrifice" would enhance efforts to make Pakistan "a safer place for all persons irrespective of caste or religion."

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## Vatican official urges more U.S. openness to immigrants

NEW YORK (CNS) — Cardinal Giovanni Cheli, president of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, called on the United States and the U.S. Catholic Church May 8 to provide a warm welcome to immigrants.

The church supports both the right of people to live in their own country under conditions of equality and to emigrate when "the conditions of life in their coun-

try violate their human dignity and that of their family," he said in a New York address.

Cardinal Cheli said a state could "regulate migration flows" to take account of its internal difficulties. But he said the right of migrants to maintain their family life and of endangered refugees to receive protection "cannot in any way be subjected to restrictions."



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