

PERSECUTION: JUST LIKE IT WAS IN THE EARLY CHURCH



Courageous: Fr Andrew

AS we approached Lahore Cathedral, there before us were 60 armed men keeping guard.

The cathedral's rector, Father Andrew Nisari, explained that a few days earlier, a mob running into thousands of people had rampaged through the city centre, setting light to tyres and shouting obscenities against the West.

The unrest centred round the cathedral complex and as Father Andrew prepared for the 4pm Mass, he began to think it might be his last.

As chaos reigned, he wondered if he should cancel the Mass. "Somehow, 50 brave people made it to the cathedral. We sang psalms in the church. It was different to anything I have ever experienced. We thought that we were in the middle of persecution – just like it was in the early Church.

"Under that kind of danger, we got so much courage to celebrate the Mass. God gave me courage to celebrate the Mass. I said that even if they come while we are celebrating the Mass, I would not be afraid. I said there was no better way to die than while at Mass."

Finally, deliverance came – armed forces dispersed the mob using tear gas and by evening a semblance of calm had returned.

The first Sunday after the attack, the Archbishop of Lahore, the Most Rev Lawrence Saldanha, celebrated Mass in the cathedral and before a large congregation described "the miracle that God has worked" in saving the sacred building from destruction.

He praised ACN for standing by the Church in

need in Pakistan: "We are grateful to our friends from ACN – I would like to thank them because they are a huge source of strength to Churches like ours who are facing persecution.

"Let us thank them for their concern, for their prayers and for the help that they are giving so that we can carry out our mission in a sea of Islam."



Desecrated: Parish priest Dr Samson with the remains of the tabernacle at Sangla's Catholic Church, ransacked by fundamentalists. See back page for story.

Pakistan

Total population: 160 million
Christian population:
At least 2 1/4 million
Catholic population: 1.1 million
Religions: Islam (95%); Christianity (At least 1.3%); Hinduism (1.7%); Others (2%)

Pakistan was carved out of British India in 1947. The first President, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, conceived Pakistan as a home for Muslims but one in which "you are free to go to your churches, your temples [as well as] your mosques." A process of Islamisation followed and now non-Muslims such as Christians are forced to live a ghetto-like existence.

Meantime, in the town of Sukkur...

"I know I am not safe but I have no fear. I feel strengthened in my faith because Jesus promised that he would be with us, yes, right to the end of time."

Such were the words of Sister Nargis. Around her were the remains of St Mary's Catholic Church, reduced to a charred shell by a mob which descended on the building in their thousands.



Defiant in faith: Mass at Sukkur

Either keep quiet or leave

STEPHEN, a seminarian from Karachi, described how his whole family was suddenly woken by the strains of "Allah Akbar".

It was 5am and the call to prayer had begun at the mosque next to their house.

It turned out that the mosque authorities had shifted the loudspeakers round so they faced the Christian quarter of the village.

"We felt really intimidated by it. The noise was so loud. We complained and were told: 'Either keep quiet or leave.'"

They were determined to stay and for the 20-year-old it has only increased his sense of vocation. "We want to save our people," he said. "We are quite prepared to sacrifice ourselves for that."

Stephen is one of hundreds of men studying at six seminaries up and down the country.

These are men whose training receives generous support from ACN benefactors.

Twenty-five times she called the police only for her pleas to be ignored. In the end she and the seven young aspirant novices under her charge – and an elderly Sister – had to flee the scene of devastation by slipping out of a back gate into a waiting car. It was a Muslim neighbour who gave them sanctuary.



Sr Nargis and her bishop with burnt Bibles

Now the huge task of restoring hope must begin. But the Christians in this town of Sukkur are defiant in faith.

On the Sundays since the attacks, the congregation has doubled to 1,000.

St Mary's Church is to be rebuilt and ACN will help to extend the building to make room for the growing congregation.



The hope of the Church: Seminarians

SUPPORTING SISTERS IN THEIR TEACHING MISSION

SISTER TERESA belongs to an order of nuns which is unique to Pakistan. The Franciscan Tertiaries of Lahore are dedicated to education.

Sister Teresa is one of hundreds turning to religious life because of its commitment to schools.

She recalled: "There was no high school in my village so I went to a hostel which was run by nuns. They were so kind and helpful to us. They really helped me with my studies – especially English.

Hence her role as a teacher, helping youngsters like five-year-old Faisal, pictured here with Sr Teresa.



Dedicated: Sr Teresa with Faisal

Schools like Sr Teresa's have recently been returned to the Church after being de-nationalised. Now is the time to support the Sisters as they seek to raise standards of education to give children the chance the generation before never had.

Illiteracy still stands at 60 percent. Up to 85 percent of Christians live in villages, acting as slave labour in fields owned by exploitative land-lords.

Basic education – the main focus of the Sisters – gives young people the chance to gain employment skills and break the prejudice of employers biased in favour of job applicants who are Muslims.



RESPONSE FORM

Aid to the Church in Need

PO Box 6245

Blacktown DC NSW 2148

Ph/Fax No: (02) 9679-1929

e-mail: info@aidtochurch.org Web: www.aidtochurch.org

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I/We enclose \$..... to support the Church in Pakistan.

I enclose a cheque/money order payable to Aid to the Church in Need

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Expiry date:/.....

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A beautiful Rosary from the Holy Land will be sent out free of charge to all those who give a donation and tick this box.

Simple in design and yet profound in its symbolic significance, this rosary is made by Christian families who have carefully crafted olive wood grown in the Holy Land. Many Christians in Bethlehem live by making these rosaries.



Confident of your support we have purchased thousands of rosaries from them. The Christians in Bethlehem ask you to join them in prayer for peace in the Holy Land. The rosary is your invitation to pray for the suffering Church. Full length of rosary: 33cm (13 1/2")

**"Christ has saved me"
-Yusif's story**

LIFE for Yusif Said will never be the same again – but his example of faith and forgiveness is an inspiration for every oppressed Christian in Pakistan.

The former buffalo trader from Mosquito Colony, Sangla Hill, was falsely accused of burning pages of the Koran by a man with a personal vendetta against him.

The incident was sparked by a card game which Yusif won. Furious, his opponent whipped up a campaign against the entire Christian community in Sangla Hill.

Two churches were burned along with two priests' houses, two schools and a hostel in an attack carried out by thousands of militants.

Desperate for the safety of his wife, Teresa, and seven young children, Yusif handed himself over to the authorities for prosecution.

At various points, Yusif was tortured: "I was beaten and forced to put a rope through my legs and hang from the ceiling for hours at a time."

Eventually, after huge pressure from the international community, he was freed. But even though his innocence was proven, he has been forced to live in a safe-house for fear of almost-certain assassination by a mob still mad with fury.

I spoke to him a day after he was released from custody. I was told that his problems would virtually be at an end if he converted to Islam. Yusif said: "I would rather be beaten to death than change my faith. It is Christ's love that has saved me.

Central to the crisis for Yusif – and indeed the entire Christian community – are Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws.

Under article 295-B, people found guilty of defiling the Koran can receive a sentence of life imprisonment and those in breach of 295-C – insulting the Prophet Mohammed – are punishable by death.

In a country where courts are susceptible to bribes and threats of violence from extremist mobs, the risk of Christians being accused of breaking the Blasphemy Laws is very severe.

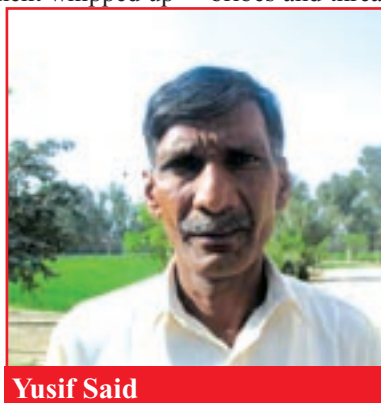
Since the laws were passed there have been about 900 reported Blasphemy cases.

But what this doesn't take account of is the psychological pressure placed on entire communities – especially Christians – who live in daily fear of being accused.

Despite all this, there is hope. Church-run Justice and Peace Commissions have advocacy departments which intervene in Blasphemy cases and work ceaselessly to secure people's freedom.

It is they that did most to secure Yusif Said's release.

Another key challenge which the J&P Commissions tackle is the terrifying scale of oppression against women. They seek justice for women who have been sexually abused and who find it virtually impossible to fight rape cases because of the Hadod Law, with its bias towards men.



Yusif Said



Aid to the Church in Need

PO Box 6245 Blacktown DC NSW 2148 Tel/Fax 02 9679-1929

Email: info@aidtochurch.org Web: www.aidtochurch.org

Reports and Photographs by John Pontifex Edited by Terry Murphy (2006)

Crisis and faith in Pakistan

John Pontifex from Aid to the Church in Need reports back from an Islamic country in turmoil.

CHRISTIANS in Pakistan have been enduring one of the worst periods of persecution in the country's 60-year history.



Mass in the desert in Sindh Province

Within barely a month, two churches were burnt, several others came under attack, crosses were scrawled on the ground and stamped on and dogs were kicked to within inches of their life after having crucifixes put on their collars.

Meantime in schools and convents, nuns and school children were terrified by posters which appeared in the street outside emblazoned with the words "Massacre the non-believers".

The situation became so inflamed that the Most Rev Lawrence Saldanha, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan, was summoned to an emergency meeting with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to discuss the security crisis facing the Church.

And yet, the inside story of life in Pakistan reveals that Christians have beaten back feelings of fear and frustration to express a faith which is all the more

resolute and clear. The violence was sparked by Muslim outrage at the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

Militant Muslims turned their fire on the local Christian community as well as Western businesses and other buildings.

The Christians were judged to be guilty by association-sharing, as they do, a religious and cultural heritage with the developed world.

Far from being a one-off, the daily crisis formed part of a wider cycle of oppression suffered by non-Muslims.

The bishops are developing initiatives to pursue dialogue with Muslim leaders. ACN is committed to helping the faithful through this crisis. And there is so much to do for a Catholic population which has grown to 1.1 million – which is slightly more than the number of practising Catholics in Australia.

As one man told ACN: "If Christ was prepared to suffer on the cross, why shouldn't we be?"