

## Press Release – Shahbaz Bhatti 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Virtual Event

On Tuesday, March 2, 2021, International Christian Voice (Canada), in partnership with the Religious Freedom Institute (USA) and the Institute for Global Engagement (USA), hosted the Shahbaz Bhatti 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Virtual Event. The event was held to honour the life and legacy of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan’s first Christian cabinet minister and world-renowned champion of religious freedom, who was assassinated on March 2, 2011 for his courageous opposition of Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy law.

The event included the participation of Shahbaz Bhatti’s family members as well as religious and political leaders from around the world. More than forty video tributes were submitted – of which a select few were presented during the program – followed by a panel discussion on steps that can be taken to improve the state of religious minorities in Pakistan, as per Shahbaz Bhatti’s vision.

The welcome address was given by the President of the Religious Freedom Institute, Dr. Thomas F. Farr, a leading authority on international religious freedom and former State Department director. Dr. Farr praised Shahbaz Bhatti as “a witness to hope, a witness to love, and a witness to the sacred cause of religious freedom”.



Mr. Jeremy Barker, Director of the Religious Freedom Institute’s Middle East Action Team, was the facilitator of the program. He first invited Fr. Dcn. Andrew Bennett, Director of the Cardus Religious Freedom Institute, Canada, and Canada’s former Ambassador for Religious Freedom, to say a commemorative prayer.



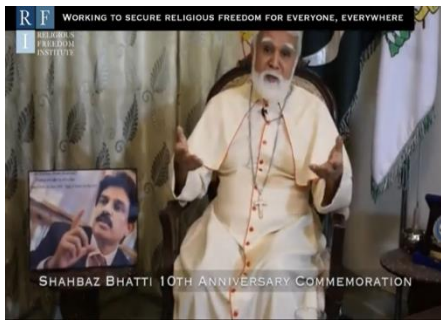
Mr. Peter Bhatti, Chairman of International Christian Voice and brother of Shahbaz Bhatti, followed the prayer with a greeting to the special guests and to all those who were viewing the livestream from around the world. He highlighted his family’s commitment to carrying forward Shahbaz Bhatti’s legacy, insisting that “giving up would allow our enemies to claim victory” which for him was “not an option”.

Mrs. Ruby Sahota, Canadian Member of Parliament, brought greetings from the Prime Minister of Canada, Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, who honoured Shahbaz Bhatti as a courageous man who “took an unwavering stance against injustices” and said that “he will never be forgotten”.



Mr. David Bhatti, nephew of Shahbaz Bhatti, delivered a tribute to his uncle in which he recalled his memories of cherished time family time and of the importance of carrying his uncle’s legacy and mission forward for “the most vulnerable among us who continue to suffer”.

His message was followed by a tribute delivered by Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who spent ten years in a Pakistani prison under false charges of blasphemy before being acquitted and fleeing to Canada. Ms. Bibi said that Shahbaz Bhatti was her “last hope” while she was in prison and that, although she is now free, her “eyes and heart still shed tears for Shahbaz Bhatti”. She also called on the current Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, to do more to protect Pakistan’s religious minorities who are constantly being persecuted for their faith.



Select video tributes were then presented from Cardinal Joseph Coutts, former Archbishop of Karachi; Mr. Jason Kenney, Premier of Alberta, Canada; Rt. Hon. Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury; Ms. Gayle Manchin, Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom; and Frank Wolf, former U.S. Congressman.

The tributes portion of the event was followed by a panel discussion which was moderated by Mr. Rehman Chishti, MP (UK), and included panelists Mr. Peter Bhatti; Ms. Farahnaz Ispahani, former Pakistani MNA; Mr. Knox Thames, former State Department special advisor on religious minorities, and Mr. Jan Figel, former EU special envoy for FoRB.



The discussion focused on short-term, medium-term, and long-term solutions on which the international community can work together to bring reform to Pakistan’s blasphemy law, which all panelists agreed was the biggest source of the oppression of that country’s religious minorities. The discussion also focused on the need to bring

reforms to Pakistan’s crumbling education system and for stronger safeguards for women and girls who suffer from apostasy laws. The key takeaway was that in order to bring change on the ground and in Pakistan’s institutions, there must be a concerted global effort through which pressure can be placed on Pakistani authorities to act; failure to act should result in trade negotiations and, ultimately, targeted sanctions.

Mr. Chishti closed the panel discussion by quoting the words spoken by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan’s founding father, to the nation’s first constituent assembly in which he said, “you are free to go to your mosques, your temples, or any other place of worship – that has nothing to do with the business of that state”. It was on this hopeful message and vision that the event ended, with a renewed sense of urgency and commitment to carry on the work of Shahbaz Bhatti to see a Pakistan, and a world, in which all human beings, everywhere, are afforded their most basic and sacred human right.

