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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Closed schools, prayer and Christians protesting about Bhatti's murder, tomorrow the funeral

Faisalabad (Agenzia Fides) – The Christian community in Pakistan, convulsed by grief after the murder of Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, is reacting to the event with spontaneous demonstrations of peaceful protest, with vigils of prayer and with the announcement of three days of public mourning from Friday, 4 to Sunday, 6 March.
The Catholic community and all Christians in the Diocese of Faisalabad, where Bhatti was born, organised today, 3 March, a public procession of prayer and solidarity on the streets of the city, showing their sorrow for the loss of Minister. A candlelight vigil with "prayers and spiritual songs" is also being held this evening in Islamabad. These initiatives are "a testimony of faith to gather together around the memory of this martyr, to remember his message, asking God for the strength to go on in this state of suffering, as an exiled people," a local priest told Fides.
Tomorrow morning, 4 March, proclaimed a "day of fasting and prayer", Bhatti's body will be brought to the church of Our Lady of Fatima in Islamabad, where Archbishop Anthony Rufin, the local Archbishop, will celebrate a memorial Mass in the presence of the Bishop managing the Affairs of the Nunciature, Bishop Josè Luis Dias-Marilbanca Sanchez, since the new Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Edgar Peña Parra, has not yet been installed in the office.
Later the Christian community will unite, together with all people of good will, on the evening of Friday, 4 March in Kushphur (which means "City of Joy"), the Catholic village in the Diocese of Faisalabad for the celebration of the funeral. The funeral Mass will be presided over by Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, and concelebrated by the Bishops of Punjab. A large number of civil authorities, Christian, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders and human rights activists are expected to attend.
Yesterday, after news spread of the murder, spontaneous demonstrations were held in all major cities of Pakistan: Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Multan and Quetta. Christian groups took to the streets protesting the "absence and inaction of the State" in a murder which, according to a Fides' local sources is "clearly motivated by religious hatred."
In a joint statement, sent to Fides, the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches of Pakistan remember Bhatti as "a statesman committed to inter-religious harmony", saying that his assassination underlines "the issue of protection for religious minorities, of their life and their freedom." The Christian Churches urge the Government to "raise the problem" and to "take concrete steps to halt extremism in Pakistan." If the country becomes "a killing field of democratic and liberal people who exercise freedom of conscience and expression", it will legitimise the criminals who are trying to take over the country. The Churches condemn the use of religion as an "instrument of threat and suffering for the people" and announce three days of mourning in which all Christian schools and institutions will remain closed. Christian communities of all faiths will carry out moments of prayer and fasting. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 3/3/2011)

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