



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - Bishops write to Pope: "Shahbaz Bhatti is a martyr and patron of religious freedom"**

Multan (Agenzia Fides) – The Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan, meeting for their Assembly from March 20 to 25 in Multan, decided to formally make a request to the Holy See to proclaim murdered Catholic Minister Shahbaz Bhatti “martyr and patron of religious freedom”. As reported to Fides at the end of the Assembly, the request was presented at the meeting by the Bishop of Multan, Bishop Andrew Francis, the delegate for Interreligious Dialogue, and was approved unanimously by the Bishops, who made tribute to Bhatti, recognising his work on behalf of religious minorities and Christians. They recalled his authentic testimony of faith, down to giving his life for his mission. In the second week of April, the Bishops and the Catholic faithful will gather in Islamabad to commemorate Bhatti, 40 days after his death.

The Assembly of Bishops are concerned by the recent alarming news of the two Christians killed in Hyderabad and the incident of the burning of the Koran in the United States (see Fides 23/03/2011), which also had an impact in Pakistan. For this reason, and noting the difficulties of Christians in Pakistan, the Bishops drafted a joint Pastoral Letter will be read and distributed throughout all churches on 3 April. In the text, received by Fides, the Bishops encourage Christians to “keep the flame of hope alive”, despite the current suffering, fears and difficulties, referring to the Gospel of Luke, chap. 12: “Fear not, little flock.” The faithful of Pakistan, says the text, may be inspired by the “communities of early Christians”, to draw spirit, to strengthen their faith, to have the strength and hope that come from the Holy Spirit to renew their enthusiasm for charity. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 26/3/2011)