Akash Bashir

The young Pakistani
witness to Christ

Texts

Pierluigi Cameroni

Matteo Penati

Photographs

Postulation archives

“Akash Bashir’ archives Lahore

Gabriel Cruz archives

Adobe Stock

Layout

Anna Mauri

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24020 Gorle (Bg)

www.velar.it

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Presentation

Akash Bashir’s life is surprisingly ordinary. A Salesian pupil, a young Catholic born to a humble family of deep and sincere faith. He attended one of our schools in Pakistan in the Christian district of Youhanabad in the city of Lahore.

Akash Bashir lived his life in the normal way that any other young man would, with his family, friends, school, work, sport, prayer. Certainly, in a country like Pakistan where the conservative Muslim faith prevails, it is no small thing to be a young Catholic. The faith here is not just a title or family tradition – it is one’s identity.

The simple but significant feature that made his life different, however, was ‘service’. Each moment of Akash’s life had been an act of service, and he died serving the community in his neighbourhood; he died serving, to the point of giving his very own life.

On 15 March 2015, while Mass was being celebrated in St John’s Parish, the group of security guards made up of young volunteers of whom Akash Bashir was a part, was faithfully guarding the entrance. Something unusual happened that day. Akash noticed someone with explosives under his clothing trying to enter the church. He held him back, spoke to him and blocked him, but realising that he would be unable to stop him he embraced him saying, “I will die, but I will not let you enter the church.” And so the young man and the suicide bomber both died. Our young man offered his life, and saved the lives of hundreds of people, boys, girls, mothers, teenagers and adults who at that moment were in the church praying.

Akash was 20 years old.

His act has left a deep impression, and naturally we cannot nor do we want to lose this memory of young Akash. His simple and normal life is undoubtedly a very meaningful and important example for the young Christians of Lahore, indeed all of Pakistan and the Salesian world.

His mother said, “Akash was part of my heart. But our happiness is greater than our sorrow, because he did not die of drug addiction or from an accident. He was a simple young man who died on the Lord’s way, saving the priest and parishioners. Akash is already our saint.”

Today’s young martyrs: “[...] for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (cf. Mk 8:35), Jesus said. Akash Bashir is a living example of this. He is an example of holiness for every Christian, an example for all young Christians around the world. It is possible to be holy today! And without a doubt this is the clearest charismatic sign of the Salesian system of education. Every student in our schools knows that to achieve holiness we have to find happiness through a deep love of God and the people who are dear to us; we have to care for and look after people we barely know; we need to be responsible in our ordinary duties, serving and praying.

But in a special way, Akash represents young Pakistani Christians; he represents religious minorities. Akash Bashir is the banner, sign and voice of so many Christians who are attacked, persecuted, humiliated and martyred in non-Christian and non-Catholic countries. Akash is the voice of so many courageous young people who manage to give their lives for the faith despite the difficulties of life, poverty, religious extremism, indifference, social inequality, discrimination. The life and martyrdom of this young Pakistani, who was just 20 years old, makes us recognise the power of God’s Holy Spirit who is alive and present in the least expected places, among the lowly, the persecuted, the young, God’s little ones.

Akash Bashir, a Past Pupil of Don Bosco from Pakistan, is a witness to our Preventive System, an example for the young and a blessing for religious minorities.

His Cause for Beatification, which began on 15 March 2022 in Lahore on the seventh anniversary of his death, is a sign of hope for us and an example of youthful holiness to the point of martyrdom.

**Fr Ángel Fernández Artime**

Rector Major of the Salesians

15 March 2015: “I will die but I will not let you enter!”

15 March 2015 was the Fourth Sunday of Lent (“Laetare” Sunday) and in the Catholic parish church of St John’s, located in the Christian district of Youhanabad (Lahore, Pakistan), between 1200 and 1500 faithful from the local Catholic community had gathered for Mass being celebrated by Fr Francis Gulzar. At 11.09 a.m., the first terrorist attack took place at the Anglican community who had gathered at Christ Church, belonging to the Church of Pakistan, less than 500 metres from the Catholic church. A second explosion happened at 11.10 a.m., right in front of the entrance to the courtyard of St John’s Catholic Church where Akash Bashir was offering his service as a volunteer security guard. St John’s Catholic Church is located inside a courtyard surrounded by a perimeter wall, and can be accessed through a gate facing the street. None of the security volunteers carried weapons, since armed defence was the task of the police. Yousaf, Shahbaz Gill and Sikandar were the three volunteers that morning offering their service together with Akash. This is how they reconstructed the attack:

– Yousaf: “When the first explosion happened it was at *Christ Church*. I was standing outside with Akash. He was with me. So, as soon as I heard the explosion, I told my friends to close the gate. Meanwhile, the bomber came towards us and fired twice at me with his pistol. Then he tried to get inside. I shouted and asked Sikandar to close the gate”;

– Shahbaz Gill: “When I heard Yousaf from outside saying to close the gate while the shooter was running, we ran to the gate. While we were running, the bomber was already at the gate, standing right in front of us [...] and while he was trying to get in... and was facing us, he aimed his pistol at us. But God wanted the shots to miss. Neither Sikandar nor I had anything we could have used as protection”;

– Sikandar: “While we were about to close the gate, the bomber had one foot inside and the other outside. When he entered, I slammed the gate with all my force and energy and hit him with it; he began falling backwards... and in the meantime Akash had blocked him.”

– Shahbaz Gill: “While he was falling and Akash was grabbing him, the man said: ‘I am a bomber, let me go.’ Akash then replied: ‘I will die but I will not let you enter’ ... These were his last words”;

– Sikandar: “After the explosion I lost an eye and had ball bearings in my legs, 12 in one and 4 in the other. I had some in my stomach and could not hear from one ear”;

– Yousaf: “I was seriously wounded and only regained consciousness three days later.”

“He was dressed all in white”

From hospital reports that day, there were 70 injured (59 at Christ Church and in the market place that was busy just outside the building, 11 at St John’s Catholic Church). Of these, 4 would die in the following days due to the injuries they had sustained, and would be added to the victims who had died as a result of the explosions: 17 from the Anglican community and 4 from the Catholic community. Among them was Akash Bashir.

In the explosion that killed him, Akash had lost most of his right arm and the lower part of his body. Without his sacrifice, there would have been dozens if not hundreds of victims.

Reuters Agency – then taken up also by the BBC – quoted an eyewitness, Amir Masih: “I was sitting down in a shop near the church when an explosion shook the whole area. I ran to the spot and saw a security guard struggling with a man trying to enter the church. After his attack failed, he blew himself up.”

Akash’s mother, Naz Bano, recalls the day as follows:

“Akash spoke with his friends about it and for three months insisted that he wanted to guard [protect] the church. He was ready to sacrifice his life if God were to give him the opportunity to protect others.

He died during Lent. I was washing clothes at home when my son left to go to church that Sunday. He was dressed all in white. Some time later I heard two shots outside, then our street was rocked by the explosions. I recall the women speaking about death threats received at the [Anglican] Church of Christ. The students said they had received threatening letters and shrouds in the mail.

 The roads were filled with people. Hearing the second explosion, I ran towards the Catholic church with my younger son. I looked for Akash among the boys standing near the entrance to the church. His right arm had been almost ripped off. I could not believe my eyes.

The policemen on duty were watching a *World Cup* *cricket match*. Akash had to check visitors at a barrier some distance from the church, but he had insisted on standing at the door to the church. His final words to the terrorist were ‘I will die but I will not let you enter the church.’”

The Gospel for that Fourth Sunday of Lent proclaimed Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “For all who do evil hate the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God” (Jn 3:20-21). Akash sealed these words as a young Christian with his blood. He fought, his body against the other body, with the power of death, hatred and violence and made light and truth triumph. He washed his white garment with the blood of the Lamb and made it shine. (cf. Rev 7:14).

Akash: son of a courageous and upright family

The Pakistan province currently known as Khyber Pakhtunklwa, borders Afghanistan to the north and west. And it is in the western areas that you will find what was known as FATA, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas from 1970 until 2018. Given the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, this area – the FATA – saw, on the one hand, many Afghan refugees pouring in seeking shelter, but on the other hand became an important area of support and reorganisation for Mujaheddin fighters about to enter Afghanistan. With the attack on the US in 2001, and the subsequent collapse of the Taliban regime in Kabul, it became a safe area for many Afghan Taliban seeking refuge. This is explained because to the west of Peshawar, capital of the Khyber Pakhtunklwa province, there is the Khyber Pass, the most northern and important of the passes that connect Islamabad (capital of Pakistan) and Kabul (capital of Afghanistan) passing through Peshawar itself.

The main ethnic group in the area is the Pashtun, a population proud of its independence and made up of numerous tribes and clans that mainly live in non-urban areas. Also for this reason the literacy rate was and is among the lowest in Pakistan and, over the years, educational progress has been rather slow. On a religious level - as in all of Pakistan - Muslim believers predominate by far.

This is the province that Akash Bashir’s family lived in. Emanuel Bashir, Akash’s father, belonged to the Christian minority and grew up in a very devout family.

On 9 November 1990, Emanuel Bashir married Naz Bano, after their engagement on 18 December in the previous year. She was a Christian girl originally from Shahdara, a town on the northern edge of Lahore. The two had 5 children: a girl, Komash (the oldest, born 1 September 1991), and 4 boys: Waqas (born 28 March 1993), Akash (born 22 June 1994), Arsalan (born 13 September 1995) and Ramish (born 13 April 1996). They were all born in the family home at Risalpur, a city 45 km east of Peshawar, and also thanks to the help of the father’s sisters: one was a nurse and another a midwife.

The year when Akash was born, the usual tough and unbearable summer climate was particularly harsh: the little fellow, a very weak newborn, struggled to survive. Unfavourable climate, family poverty and poor nutrition likely had a negative influence on his development: he only learned to walk and talk when he was four, carrying a stuttering problem until pre-adolescence; these were all difficulties which helped to strengthen his character.

His father owned a bus which he drove between Mardan-Nowshera – where Risalpur was – and it was also used as a school bus: there are schools and other educational institutes in Risalpur run by the Pakistan Armed Forces, and they are considered the best in the area; for this reason, many people from both the wealthy classes of the province and the more humble ones go there to study. The parents of the latter enrol their children there to try to ensure a better future for them at the cost of enormous sacrifices and economic hardship. During the summer months, Mr Bashir alternated his work between driving the bus and being a guard at the city hospital.

The Bashirs also sent their children to schools in the district: Komash to Presentation Convent High School, and the 4 boys to St Joseph Boys’ High School.

Akash was baptised in Risalpur (10 April 2005), made his First Communion (5 March 2006) and was confirmed (11 May 2008) in St John’s Church. Baptism and First Communion were administered by Fr Thomas Raffarty of the St Joseph of Mill Hill Missionary Society; Confirmation was administered by Bishop Anthony Lobo, the Bishop of Islamabad-Rawalpindi.

Akash had wanted to serve his country in the army, probably influenced by the mood in Risalpur where the Pakistan Air Force Academy was located. Scholastic and financial insecurity, however, were an insurmountable obstacle on the way to realising this desire.

Their closeness to Afghanistan and an increase in the number of terrorist attacks led to Akash’s parents’ decision, in 2007, to sell the bus and shift to the western areas of Pakistan: to the Punjab and more precisely to Lahore, to Youhanabad, close to Akash’s mother’s family. Here Akash’s father found work as a painter and in 2008 the whole family reunited in Lahore.

Akash: a young man
with a Salesian heart

“Yuhanabad is one of the largest Christian communities in Pakistan. The foundations of this locality were laid in 1963 [...] by Father Henry, a Catholic priest, for the poor Christians of Lahore and particularly the villages of Kasur City that were destroyed by floods every year. He worked hard to build up institutions and for the spiritual development of the faithful”: this is what we read in a letter sent by Fr Francis Gulzar, the Vicar General of the Lahore Archdiocese and parish priest of St John’s Catholic Church in Youhanabad, to the city’s Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw OFM.

Akash attended school here for a year at St Dominic High School, beginning in 25 September 2008. He then left the school because of his lack of inclination for study, and enrolled in the RCCM – Community Boys Middle School – then finally, in September 2010, at Don Bosco Technical and Youth Center, founded in 2000 to take in students who had been rejected traditional schools. The Salesians in Youhanabad ran a boarding school for children and older youth, a primary school, a technical school, workshops for young women and evening classes. The Salesians founded their first mission in Pakistan at Quetta in 1998 and the following year another at Lahore.

Akash attended the school until 24 February 2011, failing to pass the promotion exam. In fact, he was a very simple lad, including intellectually. His father remembers him as an obedient child, a humble worker from a poor family who also lived in poverty; a patient individual, and a young man with a strong faith. It was his parents who educated Akash to a devout, simple and upright life. He was irreproachable and hardworking, respectful and polite. Friendly and cheerful, he “always spoke with a smiling face” and was always willing to help. This is also how he is remembered by those who knew him outside the family circle, such as Mrs Maryam Adrees, who was his teacher in 8th Class and also a neighbour:

“He was a simple, compassionate and innocent boy. He was very respectful to everyone. Akash [...] cared about things that happened to others. [...]. He was truly compassionate; he always respected elders and little children. Any work he was given he did with all his heart and soul. He never committed injustice against anyone. [...]. He was a righteous man; when he noticed someone being mistreated, he would respond by trying to do something about it. Akash wanted to live his life serving his family and society. Akash Bashir was accustomed to helping poor and needy people. He treated them well. Akash helped people with the things that he had.”

Akash was committed in tangible ways, starting from faith to make peace, coexistence, justice and mercy grow, and thus extend the Kingdom of God in the world. In silence and anonymity he lived the Gospel to the full, living the present well with dedication and generosity.

His brief but profound experience of the Salesian spirit and the Preventive System that animates it had an intimate and profound effect on young Akash’s education. It would lead him to a great knowledge of and strengthened friendship with Christ and with Our Lady, whose statue can be found in a grotto in the courtyard of the parish church at Youhanabad, St John’s Catholic Church: Akash would pause for a moment there in prayer before beginning his service. He dedicated particular moments to devotion to Mary, shared with the community in the prayer of the Rosary in the parish and with pilgrimages to Mariabad, a city 80 kilometers northwest of Lahore reachable in 5 hours by public transport, to venerate the Blessed Virgin. “Founded by Belgian Capuchins at the end of the 19th century, the small village of Mariamabad [literally city of Mary”] is found in the Pakistan province of Punjab. The site [...] comprises the village itself – some 300 houses – and its large religious complex involving a church, a mango orchard and a grotto surmounted by a statue of the Virgin Mary. From the 1950s this Catholic village became a centre for pilgrimages. Growing in intensity from the 1990s, every year thousands of pilgrims came here from large distances on foot or by bicycle to celebrate the Virgin Mary’s nativity. Known as ziarat-e-maqadas Mariam, this simultaneously exhausting and playful ritual is arguably the largest Christian gathering in the country, culminating in a three-day festival held around the Marian shrine.” In addition to the days around 8 September, Lent is also a period of pilgrimage to the shrine. Muslims also go on pilgrimage to Mariabad because Myriam is also recognised and respected by them as the mother of Isa (Jesus, the great prophet).

Mr Naveed – an optician where Akash used to go with his grandmother to repair her glasses – a Muslim, remembers Akash’s attention to the poor and needy: “He had an excellent rapport with the poor and needy: every time he saw a poor person he felt sad; if he had nothing to offer or donate, he prayed for them. Although he was sometimes hungry, he used to give his food to others.”

The Salesians also taught him that the important thing was not to stop in the face of personal adversity, but to persevere with humility on the path of life and faith, and to look even more enthusiastically at life and at the service of others.

“I would save many people by sacrificing my life”

Akash then attended – the only male in the group – a six-month sewing and tailoring course at Manufacture April College, where he worked as a machine operator in the company's Nishat factory in Lahore.; during that time he got to know Mrs Farah Giyan Khush-Hall who remembers: “It was a Muslim institute. Every morning they read verses of the Koran. We were around 25-30 Christians. Only Akash was courageous enough. He spoke to them and asked for us to be able to pray our prayers separately.” He was not ashamed to witness to his faith and go against the current.

With his salary from his first five months on the job, he bought himself a mobile phone so that he could listen to Christian hymns. This is how his father remembers him: “He got up early in the morning. He prayed regularly and was happy to listen to Christian hymns.” Meanwhile, from 5 to 8 November 2014 he took part in a course for Bible leaders organised by the Catholic Bible Commission Pakistan at Sadhoke. Akash was part of a Bible study group. He sought the Lord, treasured his Word, and sought to respond to it with his own life, to grow in virtue and make his heart strong.

Fr Francis Gulzar described Akash Bashir in these words:

“As parish priest I saw in Akash a very simple, obedient, prayerful and lively lad. He was very involved in parish activities. He volunteered for everything and in every way possible. Whether in the hot summers of Lahore or the frigid days of winter, Akash used to attend Holy Mass and was most often seen standing at the main gate of the church carrying out his security duties.

Even though Akash belonged to a less privileged family, he had a great heart, made friends with other young boys [...] and always sought to be of service to other groups involved in Church activities.”

Akash testifies to the fact that true youth consists in having a heart capable of love. Conversely, it is everything that separates the soul from others that causes our soul to grow old.

We read in the Amnesty International 2015-2016 Report concerning Pakistan: “Religious minorities continued to face discrimination, persecution and targeted attacks [...]. Religious minorities, both Muslim and non-Muslim, continued to face laws and practices that resulted in discrimination and persecution. [...]. Blasphemy laws remained in force, mostly in Punjab province; they applied to people of all religions but were disproportionately used against religious minorities. [...] In 2013, such accusations [of blasphemy] sparked a mob attack against residents of Lahore’s Joseph Colony” which is located in the northern area of Lahore: “a mob of more than 3,000 people set fire to more than 150 Christian homes in Lahore's Joseph Colony on March 9 in ‘revenge for blasphemy’ allegedly committed by a Christian two days earlier”. According to the reconstruction of events by the Christians, a young man, Sawan Masih, “allegedly had an altercation with a local Muslim barber, who then reported him”. On the one hand, the police were forced to arrest him in an attempt to calm the angry crowd, while on the other hand they did not take any action to defend the Christian population, justifying this choice as an attempt not to exasperate tempers. Sawan Masih, a health care worker and father of 3, was sentenced to capital punishment on 27 March 2014. It was not until 5 October 2020 that he was acquitted by the Lahore High Court, after spending 6 years on death row in a location in Pakistan far from the area where his family lived. In contrast, the 115 suspects in the neighbourhood’s arson attack were acquitted in January 2017.

In this climate, in which we also need to record the attack in September 2013 when two suicide bombers blew themselves up in the square in front of the Church of All Saints in Peshawar, killing more than 80 people, the various churches in the city of Lahore and the country formed a security service to protect the places of worship and the faithful who went there for prayer and liturgical celebrations. In December 2014 Akash volunteered, contrary to his mother's advice. She recounts the exchange she had with her son:

“Mum, why are you so afraid?”

“You don’t know why I am afraid? There are attacks everywhere.”

“If God gave me this opportunity, I would save so many people by sacrificing my life.

Would you not be happy?”

Akash made his youth a time of generous giving, of sincere offering, of sacrifices that cost but made it fruitful, making the seeds of truth and justice in his heart bear fruit.

In fact, in order to become a member of the parish security corps, it was not enough to have skills related to security tasks, nor was it enough to be totally free in making this choice: applicants were required to be reliable people and good Christians, credible examples of morality and discipline.

“Our brothers and sisters
shed their blood”

Akash was the youngest in this service and devoted himself with seriousness and precision to this task that required commitment and hours of training. His role was to guard the entrance to the parish courtyard and frisk worshippers at the front gate. On 15 March, as he did every Sunday, he went to St John’s Catholic Church to provide this service. He was the only member of his family at the parish on that day: his mother was alone at home; his father was outside the city, at Muri; Akash’s two brothers were working and the youngest, Ramish, was returning after doing some errands; his sister was at an aunt’s house.

After the explosion, the bodies of four people were left on the ground, dying: the man who had carried the explosives and who had been blocked by Akash at the entrance to the courtyard; a vegetable vendor stationed in front of the parish; a six-year-old girl called Amol who at the time of the explosion was playing in the parish courtyard. There was also the body of Akash Bashir, bleeding on the brown earth, very badly torn apart.

Like St Stephen, the first martyr, Akash died contemplating heaven, giving witness through his sacrifice joined with Christ the Redeemer’s that violence is conquered by love, death by life. Through his death this young servant of the Gospel teaches us that the glory of heaven, that lasts throughout life and also in eternal life, does not consist of wealth and power, but of love and self-giving.

“The Tehrik-i-Taliban Jamaat-ul-Ahrar takes responsibility for the suicide bombings in Lahore”, said Ehsanullah Ehsan, spokesperson for the Taliban faction, in a statement sent by email to journalists. “We promise that until an Islamic system is put in place in Pakistan, such attacks will continue.”

Instead, here are Pope Francis’ words at the conclusion of the Angelus that Sunday:

“Dear brothers and sisters,

With grief, with much sorrow, I have learned of today's terrorist attacks on two churches in the city [of] Lahore in Pakistan, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries. These are Christian churches. Christians are being persecuted. Our brothers and sisters shed their blood simply because they are Christians. As I assure you of my prayers for the victims and their families, I ask the Lord, the source of all good, for the gift of peace and concord for that country. May this persecution against Christians, which the world tries to conceal, end and may there be peace.”

On 18 March, Akash's body was buried after the funeral for the Catholic and Anglican dead from the two attacks, ecumenically celebrated in St John's Catholic Church in the presence of between 7,000 and 10,000 faithful, people of all ages from Lahore. As is the tradition in Pakistan when people die, the funeral events last for three days, and the deceased person is buried on the last of these days. After the terrorist attack, Akash’s body was brought to the Mayo hospital; then, once the death certificate had been issued, it was handed over to the family and taken to Christ Church for the day on 15 March. For the two days that followed – 16th and 17th – it was again brought to the hospital. On the 18th the funeral for the victims took place in Youhanabad: as well as Akash’s body, there were the bodies of other individuals, both Catholic and Anglican. Later the body was transferred to the Makhy cemetery in Youhanabad, where he was buried in a tomb built by Akash’s father, with a special stone brought from Nowshera, a city in Pakistan’s north.

Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw OFM, of Lahore, recalls that day as follows

“It was very difficult for me to officiate at his and the other six funerals. Government officials wanted them buried at night. We (the Anglican Protestant Bishop Irfan Jamil, the parish priest, Fr Francis Gulzar and I) were not in agreement with this even though the officials threatened us. Besides this, many obstacles were placed by the government, but [many] people attended the funeral.”

Arsalan, the next youngest Bashir brother, joined the St John’s Catholic Church Youhanabad volunteer security guards after Akash’s death. Arsalan tells us:

“Where security was concerned, [Akash] was very attentive [...]. He always wanted to talk about security. [...] He was committed to security day and night. [...]. He came to me once saying: ‘Arsalan, there is a need for young men in security [...]’. [I told him:] ‘You go, that’s your work and I don’t like it.’ After his death I joined the volunteer group because it was his wish to have me here.”

Through the sacrifice of his young life, Akash is testimony to the fact that with Jesus one can always look ahead. Jesus is the eternal Living One (cf. Rev 1:18). By clinging to Him, we live and pass unscathed through all the forms of death and violence that lurk along the way.

The blood of martyrs
is the seed of new Christians

In the final period of his life Akash had a dream that disturbed and frightened him, and which he did not speak about in the family, above all to protect his mother, who, as we have said, did not share her son’s choice to become a security guard at the parish. He simply said: “Mum, I had a dream I wanted to tell you about, but since I know that you get quickly frightened, it is better that I do not tell you about it.” He only told his friend called John. In the dream, Akash saw his own body lying on the ground, dead. Many people – friends, relatives and many others – went to visit his grave. However, among these, Akash said, he did not see his friend, who had not gone to the funeral. And in fact John did not go to the young man’s funeral: like many other parents his too, because of the fear generated by the many arrests made by the police, especially among young people, did not allow him to attend. One evening a few weeks later, John told Akash’s father about this dream; he then went to live in another place.

Akash’s death continues to offer Christians in Pakistan – and especially the youngest ones – a reason “to resist until the end”: at St John’s Catholic Church, “even after the attack and Akash’s death, more than 800 baptisms have been celebrated each year.”

Three years after the attack Fr Francis Gulzar was able to say: “After the suicide attack against our churches the number of faithful has increased. Now many more people come to church without fear and dread.”

Fr Francis Gulzar wrote:

“Truly, Akash put the Lord before himself – he did not hesitate, did not tremble, but courageously decided [...] to do what God had asked of him, that is, to save His people – to save His Church. [...]. Today, Akash is no longer physically with us but his presence can be felt, seen and admired through his great work. [...] He is present in every heart and mind of those who were saved [...]. I personally feel that he is like a guardian angel that is not visible; yet he is here to protect us.”

Akash’s life is a powerful testimony that reminds us of the first Christian communities, surrounded by philosophies, cultures and laws that persecuted them. The communities in the Acts of the Apostles and the early Christians were minorities, but with strong faith in God and unlimited courage.

The holiness of Akash’s life and his heroism have also been recognised by Protestant and Anglican Christians as well as the Muslims themselves. After his martyrdom, the Catholic community became more united, has grown in prayer, in vocations to priestly and religious life. Akash’s martyrdom has sent and brought many young Pakistanis (including Akash’s brother who became a volunteer security guard) to serve in their parishes, attend Mass, give value to life and family. Akash’s life and martyrdom have transformed the Catholic community in Pakistan.

The Archbishop of Lahore, Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw OFM, wrote in the Edict for the opening of Akash Bashirs’s Cause of martyrdom:

“Immediately after this tragic event, Fr Francis Gulzar, Fr Amjad Yousaf and the faithful prayed for Akash begging the Heavenly Father to making him worthy of being accepted among the martyrs. From then on, as Pastor of the diocese, each day I have visited the families of the victims and the people of Youhanabad to begin the process of healing and forgiveness by guiding them to come out of this traumatic experience. At the same time, I and Fr Francis Gulzar were planning to present the case for martyrdom to the Vatican.

For the Christians of Youhananbad, for the Church of God in Pakistan and for the entire Salesian Family, through his great faith Akash is precisely this: a beacon, an example to follow. Many go to his tomb to pray and ask his intercession. His courageous act still inspires Pakistani Catholics on their daily journey and gives them reason not to be discouraged in the face of so many challenges and persecutions that they must still face up to. The shining example of Akash Bashir, Salesian Past Pupil, continues to spread throughout the world. He embodied Jesus’ words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”(Jn15:13).

On 15 March 2022 the Christian community in Pakistan came together for an historic event: the official opening the the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonisation of the Servant of God, Akash Bashir, Past Pupil of Don Bosco, the first Pakistani citizen whose Cause for Beatification and Canonisation has been introduced. The Sacred Heart Cathedral in Lahore was not able to contain the crowd of faithful who had gathered for the opening ceremony of the diocesan phase, and for the solemn Eucharistic celebration.

15 March 2015 is now remembered not as a day of grief and suffering, but rather as a gift from God, the gift of Akash Bashir’s martyrdom, a twenty-year-old who showed the entire world the power of service and the incalculable value of the faith. 15 March is now a day of joy, unity, prayer, hope for the Christian minority in Pakistan.

Timeline of the life
of the Servant of God Akash Bashir

**22 June 1994:** born in Risalpur, the third of 5 children;

**10 April 2005:** receives the sacrament of Baptism at Risalpur;

**5 March 2006:** receives the sacrament of First Communion at Risalpur;

**11 May 2008:** receives the sacrament of Confirmation at Risalpur;

**2008-2009:** attends St Dominic High School in Lahore;

**2009:** enrols in the RCCM – Community Boys Middle School in Lahore;

**September 2010 – February 2011:** attends Don Bosco Technical and Youth Center;

**5-8 November 2014:** takes part in a Bible course organised by the Catholic Bible Commission Pakistan;

**15 December 2014:** joins the volunteers of the parish church security guard group at St John’s Catholic Church Youhanabad in Lahore;

**15 March 2015:** dies during a suicide attack at St John’s Catholic Church Youhanabad in Lahore; a few moments earlier another terrorist attack struck the Anglican Christ Church;

**16-18 March 2015:** Akash's funeral is held which, according to Pakistani tradition, lasts 3 days. The ecumenical celebration of his funeral and that of other victims of the double attack is presided over by the Archbishop of Lahore, Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw OFM;

**18 March 2015:** Akash Bashir’s body is buried in Makhy cemetery, Youhanabad;

**15 March 2022:** opening in Lahore of the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonisation of the Servant of God Akash Bashir.

Prayer for Akash Bashir’s cause of martyrdom

Almighty God,

your faithful servant Akash Bashir,

Past Pupil of Don Bosco,

witnessed to the Gospel with all his heart

especially to his family

and the parish community at Youhanabad.

You gave him a strong faith,

unfailing hope

and tireless zeal

in serving the Catholic community

and leading others to Jesus.

You made him a resplendent model for other young people

and for people of other religions,

a source of inspiration and disinterested assistance

in the service of others.

Help us to follow Jesus like him,

with tireless zeal, an undivided heart and loving-kindness.

We humbly beg you to glorify

this heroic son of yours, a witness to the faith,

and grant us the grace of receiving,

through his intercession,

the manifestation of your love.

Make our lives a continual praise to You,

who live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

For information, reports of graces received

and contributions, please contact:

The General Postulation • Salesian Headquarters

Via Marsala 42 - 00185 ROMA

postulatore@sdb.org