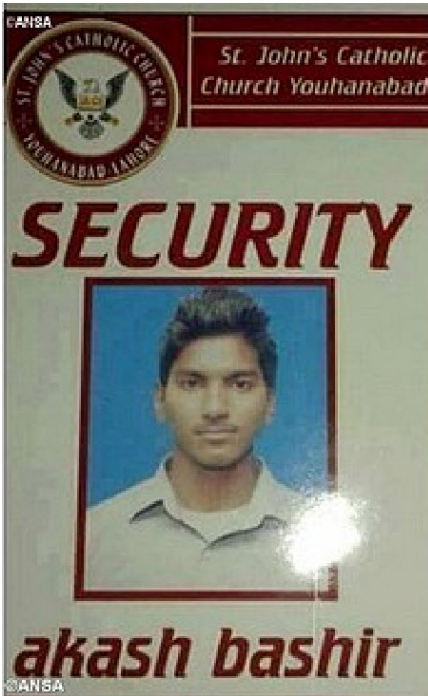


Today's Martyrs

Akash Bashir and Obaid Sardar Khokhar



Is it possible for us Christians in the West to fully understand what it is like for our brethren in the rest of the world? What would we think of our faith if we went to church to worship God knowing there was a good chance we might not return home? What if we walked into church past Boy Scouts manning barricades intended to stop the car bombers, as has happened in Nigeria, knowing that our sons and brothers might be killed or maimed while doing so? Such things happen every Sunday in many places around the globe.

The Islamist group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, an affiliate of the Pakistani Taliban, attacked two churches in Youhanabad, the poverty-ridden Lahore neighborhood which is the largest Christian ghetto in Pakistan, during Sunday services on March 15, 2015. Their tactics were simple: one team would attack Christ Church, while another would attack St. John's Church a few hundred feet away. Each team consisted of a man with an explosive vest who would gain entry to the church and self-detonate amongst the worshippers, while a supporting gunman with an automatic weapon

eliminated any opposition. They knew that each church had a volunteer security team composed of parishioners. What they did not know was the depth of commitment these parishioners held for their churches.

The first terrorist team approached Christ Church during Communion. A 32 year old parishioner named Obaid Sardar Khokhar realized what was happening; he grabbed the suicide bomber and began to drag him away from the church. The accomplice shot him down. His 3 year old daughter Angelina saw him fall and began to run to his side. His pregnant wife Ambreen managed to restrain and save her daughter before she too was shot dead. Other parishioners wrestled with the bomber until he set off his vest. He had failed in his attempt to cause mass casualties within the church.

Within moments the second attack began at St. John's Church. This bomber tried to pass through the gate into the churchyard and failed, so he began to scale the wall. Akash Bashir, a 19 year old volunteer security guard, grabbed him and tried to pull him down. The bomber showed Akash his vest, thinking that fear of death would cause him to let go, but he too failed. Akash refused to let go, pulled him down from the wall, and the attacker, realizing he would not gain entry to the church, then detonated his vest.

A total of 22 Christians and 6 Muslims were killed, including 2 Muslim policemen, and more than 80 were wounded. Had the killers gained entry to the churches the death toll could have reached into the hundreds. There were nearly 2,500 worshippers in the two buildings during the attacks.

Most accounts describe Akash Bashir as a 16 year old. Look at his church security photo id. He appears more like the 19 years of one account; perhaps he first volunteered for security work when he was 16. Look at his face. His father, Bashir Emmanuel, had said that he and his mother had opposed Akash's work with the church. Everyone, after all, knew of the October 6, 2013 arrest at the church of three men of Afghan or Pathan background with false ids, and everyone assumed they were on a terrorist reconnaissance mission. Akash had told his parents that he knew he was called to protect his church and that he was not afraid to die. Look at his eyes. They are of a confident young man who knows exactly who he is and what he is doing. He has no adolescent angst, no self-doubt. He knows he is a Christian and he is determined to serve the people he loves.

We can imagine that any photo of Obaid Sardar Khokhar would likely look similar, though perhaps tempered with the cares of marriage and fatherhood. Christians in Pakistan now say they will never forget these martyrs.

Unfortunately the story does not end there. Immediately following the attacks Christians rioted and burned alive two Muslims whom they suspected of being involved in the attacks. Other Muslims were terrorized and injured. Most Muslims now consider this unprecedented atrocity to be a greater crime than the murder of the 28 who died at the two churches. Police have indiscriminately arrested more than 200 Christians for the murders. Church leaders have apologized for the riots and pledged cooperation with the authorities, but have also bitterly complained about the numerous murderers of Christians who remain unprosecuted. Five days after these attacks a young Christian, Sunny Masih, was burned alive in a brick kiln in Sheikhpura. Then on April 10, 2015, 14 year old Nouman Masih was set afire in Lahore after he admitted to his attackers that he was a Christian; he died on April 14.

Violence cannot help the Christians of Pakistan: they are so outnumbered, and so the temptation to violence is totally irrational for them; such acts will only provoke more attacks against them. Consequently there is a sense among Christian leaders that events are unravelling. A Pakistani leader in Britain said after these attacks and riots that "This might well be the beginning of the end for Christianity in Pakistan". Well, probably not, but such comments and the lurid descriptions of the riots depict a population that is near the psychological breaking point after years – decades – of atrocities. One out of every two hundred Christians has already fled the country to Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, where they have been arrested by the hundreds and deported back 'home' at the request of a Pakistani government that claims it is defamed by their asylum requests. Others have tried to flee only to find that the government has been placing the names of large numbers of Christians on the no-fly list, to protect the nation from the embarrassment of tens of thousands of its citizens seeking refuge from persecution.

If we Christians in the West only understood what is happening to our brethren, we would pray unceasingly for them. If we only understood our brethren, we would be inspired to be more like them. Amen...amen.

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