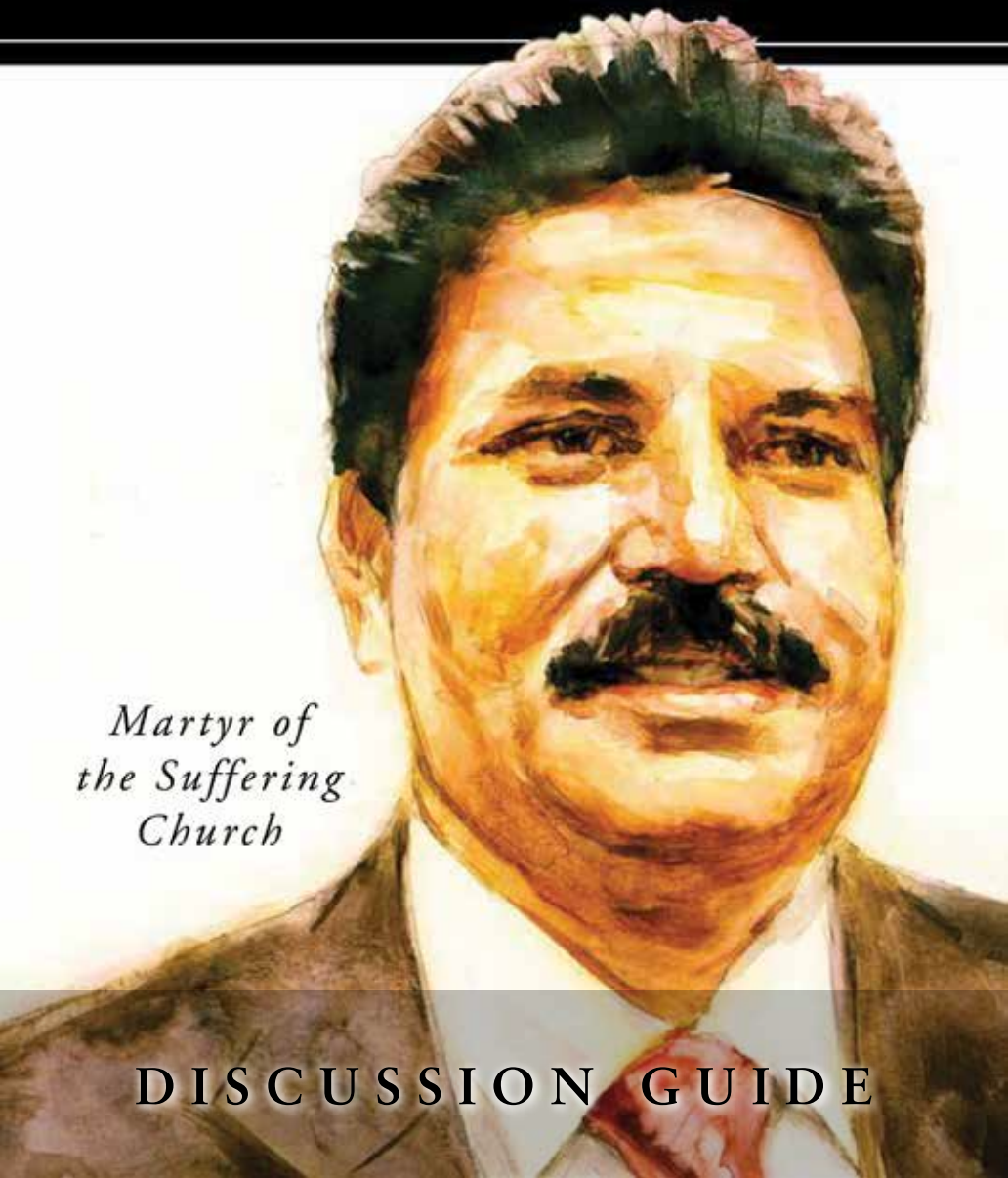


JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

SHAHBAZ BHATTI

*Martyr of
the Suffering
Church*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



About the Book

When Shahbaz Bhatti, the lone Christian in Pakistan's cabinet and a determined campaigner for the rights of Christians and members of other faiths, was killed, his Taliban-affiliated assassins probably hoped it would be the end of his influence. Instead, Bhatti's stature has only grown after death, and today he looms as a martyr and patron saint for persecuted Christians everywhere. His riveting life, from devoted altar boy in an overwhelming Muslim nation to human rights campaigner, from politician and government minister to martyr, is one of the great Christian dramas of our time, and as long as Christians are at risk anywhere in the world, Shahbaz Bhatti will be a source of inspiration and hope.

This book traces the evolution of a martyr, from his roots in a traditionally Catholic village in the Punjab region of Pakistan through his awakening as an activist and political leader. It also explores the possibility that Bhatti may one day be declared a saint of the Catholic Church. It's a story that deserves to be told, everywhere and always, until it's part of the common heritage of Christianity and all humanity.

About the Author

John L. Allen Jr. is the editor of *Crux*, specializing in coverage of the Vatican and the Catholic Church. He has written nine books on the Vatican and Catholic affairs and is a popular speaker on Catholicism both in the United States and internationally. He is a senior Vatican analyst for CNN and was a correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* for sixteen years.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. Imagine being a Catholic in Pakistan, where fewer than two percent of the population is Christian in an overwhelmingly Muslim nation. What do you imagine this might be like?
2. What are the hallmarks of the “radicalization” of many Muslims in Pakistan? How has this reality affected life in this nation? Where else do we see similar realities?
3. Were you aware that anti-Christian violence and persecution is, as Allen describes it, “the most dramatic human rights situation, bar none, of the early twenty-first century” and that Christians are by far the most persecuted religious body today?
4. The above statements are references to situations that are significantly more severe than what many people imagine upon suggesting anti-Christian attitudes are present in the United States society or government. How is this so?
5. Are you familiar with any of the people and incidents that Allen provides as examples of anti-Christian violence? Why are these stories not more widely known? How might we increase awareness of this issue?

Chapter One

1. Take a moment to read and reflect on Bhatti's favorite prayer, Psalm 23. Why do you suppose this appealed to him? How would a regular commitment to praying this psalm influence a person's spirituality and self-understanding?
2. How did Bhatti's experience on Good Friday when he was thirteen years old have on the trajectory of the rest his life? Have you had any comparable experience in your own life?
3. As a college student, Bhatti was already experiencing persecution and violence for his faith. Instead of sacrificing his faith, Bhatti began to embrace the possibility of martyrdom. Where does the willingness and strength to accept such a possibility come from?
4. "I defeated the fear of danger with the power of the Holy Spirit," Bhatti said when recalling his heroic actions during the major flood in Punjab. Have you experienced this sort of attitude toward fear or danger? Has any circumstance ever called for you to take on this attitude? What might a prayer for such a gift of the Spirit look like today?
5. What does a quick internet research reveal about the status of Pakistan's blasphemy laws today?

Chapter Two

1. What are the earliest roots of Christianity in Pakistan?
2. How does “father of the nation” Muhammed Ali Jinnah’s vision for Pakistan differ from the reality of Pakistan since the late 1970s?
3. Are you familiar with the story of Asia Bibi? At the time John Allen wrote this book, her story was not yet finished. What does some quick internet research tell you about how her story has played out in recent years?
4. What makes blasphemy laws, like those of Pakistan, “ripe for abuse”?
5. What might it be like to live as a Christian in a nation where events like going to Mass or dropping your kids off at a Church-sponsored school could be lethally dangerous?

Chapter Three

1. Why was the All-Pakistan Minorities Convention so threatening to the radicalized Muslims of the nation?
2. Why did concern for the rights and dignity of women take an important place in Bhatti's work?
3. How would you describe Bhatti's spirituality, and how did it impact and interact with the way he lived?
4. In what ways does Bhatti's thinking and spirituality remind you of the great St. Teresa of Calcutta?
5. What activities made Bhatti one of the leading human rights figures of the first decade of the twenty-first century?

Chapter Four

1. What set of circumstances pushed Bhatti to accept the government position? Why did he believe Pakistan “stood at a crossroad”?
2. What message did Bhatti send in choosing the issue and problem to which he dedicated his time after entering government service?
3. In your opinion, were the criticisms that Bhatti received from some Christians merited? Why or why not?
4. Are you familiar with the Sant’Egidio Community with which Bhatti became connected? It is an impressive organization, far better known in Europe than in the U.S. Consider learning more about the community if you are unfamiliar with it.
5. What are your reactions to the story of Asia Bibi?

Chapter Five

1. What is your reaction to the account of Bhatti's assassination? How is the story similar to accounts of other martyrdoms you are familiar with? How is it different?
2. At the time of this book's publication, five years after Bhatti's assassination, Allen notes that no one had yet been convicted of the crime. As you are reading this book now, has anything changed?
3. It is clear that Bhatti was vividly aware of the possibility (even the likelihood) that he would be assassinated. What does this tell us about his convictions, his personality, and his faith?
4. Bhatti's words are worth reflecting on and praying over: "I want to live for Christ, and I want to die for him. . . . Jesus is my strength. He has given me a power and wisdom and motivation to serve suffering humanity. I follow the principles of my conscience, and I am ready to die and sacrifice my life for the principles I believe." Consider praying these words aloud by yourself or together with your reading group or prayer group.
5. In Pope Benedict XVI's public comments a few days after Bhatti's killing, the Holy Father prayed that his sacrifice would "arouse in people's consciences the courage and commitment to defend the religious freedom of all men and, in this way, to promote their equal dignity." How might you, your family, or your parish community respond to this call in a practical and effective way?

Chapter Six

1. In what way was Shahbaz Bhatti a martyr who was killed “*in odium fidei*”? In what way was he killed “*in odium caritatis*”? “*In odium virtuosi et veritatis*”?
2. Have you or anyone you know ever suffered because of someone else’s hatred for the Christian faith? Because of their hatred for charity or for virtue or for truth? How do Christians suffer in these ways today?
3. Do you think Shahbaz Bhatti “wanted martyrdom too much”? Why or why not?
4. Why is it significant that Shahbaz Bhatti was a layperson?
5. Are you familiar with the story of Akash Bashir, which Allen mentions briefly? Consider exploring this story more deeply through internet research.