

Country Focus: Pakistan

Religious Minorities  
That Christians, and other religious minorities especially in Asian countries, may be able to practice their faith in full freedom.

This month we consider those who struggle to practice their faith freely in their societies because they are from minority religions.



Pakistan is located in Asia between India and Afghanistan. In 1956, it was created as an Islamic state separate from India which was mostly Hindu. This separation led to war and many conflicts with India over a disputed area called Kashmir. Due to this conflict, migration of Muslims and Hindus to their new religious borders took place. Eventually, Pakistan became almost entirely a Muslim society while India was mostly Hindu..

Pakistan has been under military rule for many years and it has been difficult to maintain stable leadership.

It is difficult to be a religious minority in Pakistan. Christians, Hindus and others face many challenges to practice their faith freely. There are even certain laws in Pakistan, called anti-blasphemy laws, that can be used to arrest non-Muslims. Christians and others are trying to protect and practice their faith despite this situation.



Promoting Knowledge of Faith

God's Word for Mission

*"It is for freedom, that Christ set us free" (Galatians 5:1).*

*"Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).*

*"Every person has the right to religious freedom. ... (It) has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person.... This right... is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right" (Vatican II, Declaration of Religious Liberty, #2).*

Education for Community Life

A Saint for Mission: St. Joseph Vaz



Joseph Vaz was born in Goa, India in 1651 to a Portuguese family. As he became a priest he heard stories of the persecution that Catholics on the nearby island of Ceylon, today's Sri Lanka, were suffering. During the occupation by Dutch Calvinists at that time, a fierce campaign was launched to wipe away every trace of the Catholic Faith. They expelled priests from Ceylon under the pain of death, closed churches and even killed anyone who tried to resist.

Joseph felt called to serve these persecuted faithful by making his way to Ceylon disguised as a beggar and often ministered secretly at night. When he arrived in the city of Kandy, he was arrested, but his service to the sick and dying during a small pox epidemic won him greater freedom of action. It was also thought that his prayers for an end to drought brought needed rain and convinced the King that he was a man of God.

It is said that Joseph converted 30,000 to the Christian faith and restored the Church's clergy and the Church's presence in Ceylon. Vaz is considered an excellent example of Catholicism in Asia, often forged in persecution and focused on service to the poor. He attempted to find the right balance between spreading the faith and showing respect to the great religious traditions already in Ceylon. Joseph died in 1711 from illness at the age of 59. St. Joseph Vaz was canonized a saint on January 13, 2015. His feast day is January 16th. *He is called the "Apostle of Sri Lanka".*

## Participation in Society



Muslims form human chain around Christians to protect them at Mass

The Catholic Church teaches that it is a fundamental right for all to be free to participate in the economic, political and religious life of a society. Therefore, it is wrong for anyone or group to prevent certain citizens from getting a job, attending school or worshiping in their chosen religion/church.

It is a teaching of our Catholic Church that all people are assured at least a minimum level of participation in their community and religious institutions.

Indeed, all are urged to “seek together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable” (USCCB).

In the country of Pakistan, most people are Muslim. There are, however, a growing number of Christians participating in their own worship services. This has been met, in some communities, with violence from Muslims directed towards Christians resulting in burned churches and parishioner deaths.

However, in a small village near Gojra, Pakistan, the Muslim community is helping their Christian neighbors build a church. The bricks of the new church are not only held together by cement, but also by the love that exists between Muslims and Christians. The right of all peoples to participate in their own religions is upheld by these villagers.

## Pakistani Muslims build Christian Church



Pakistani Muslim helping to build a church

Watch Pakistani Muslims help build a church for their Christian neighbors. Pakistan is traditionally anti-Christian, so this is an example of love and unity. [Click Here](#) for this inspiring video.

1. According to this story, what can overcome all the divisions and differences in our world today?
2. What does this story say to us about the importance of learning from mistakes of others, especially in Gojra?
3. What do the actions of Muslims in this story say about their commitment to the social justice principle of participation and the common good?
4. How can you help protect the rights of others to worship in their own faiths in your community?

## Mission Petitions

- ✚ Let us pray that all religious minorities may be free to practice their faith without fear or persecution.
- ✚ Let us pray for Pakistan, and all of Asia, that there would be greater religious tolerance and freedom.
- ✚ Let us pray for a peaceful sharing among people of different religions and beliefs. May we find common ground and service.
- ✚ Let us pray that this new year will lead to greater respect for human dignity and greater effort to build a more peaceful world together.

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of this new year, of your loving presence among us. Help us to love one another as you have loved us. We offer you the joys and challenges of this day for your glory. Send us your Holy Spirit to free us from anything that would keep us from you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen