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Audience with the Members of the “Missione Shahbaz Bhatti” Association

At 11.00 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the “Missione Shahbaz Bhatti” Association.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer you a cordial welcome, and through you I send my greeting to all the Christians of Pakistan, especially those experiencing great hardship.

I thank Mr Paul Bhatti for his introduction, which paid homage to the memory of his dear brother Shahbaz. I am glad to know that Shahbaz Bhatti is loved and honoured by many in Pakistan today, and that his sacrifice is bearing rich fruits of hope. The words of Jesus apply also to him: “Unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (*Jn* 12:24). Fruit in dialogue, understanding and reconciliation; fruit in strength, courage and meekness.

One fruit of the sufferings endured by Christians is the growth of groups and associations – like your own – that build bridges of fraternity throughout the world, overcoming differences of language, culture and, at times, also of religion. Bridges of fraternity above all between the Churches and ecclesial communities themselves, as the Holy Spirit increasingly prompts them to walk together in service to peace and justice. But also bridges of fraternity and dialogue with other believers, for the sake of fostering relationships of respect and mutual trust.

Your appeal to solidarity has found a ready and generous response in Italy, especially in the Triveneto region, through the involvement of Church leaders and communities. For this, I am pleased and grateful. I encourage

you to persevere in this evangelical witness, which joins firmness to meekness, in order to assist victims of false accusations and to find concrete ways to combat poverty and modern forms of slavery.

It is my hope that, supported by the prayers and effective solidarity of many others, you can extend your activity to those areas of Pakistan where Christians and other minorities are mostly present and, sadly, also discriminated against and made a target of acts of injustice and violence. May your distinguishing feature always be that which shines forth in the witness given by Shahbaz Bhatti and so many other martyrs of our time, namely, a humble and courageous faith in the Lord Jesus and the capacity to bring love in place of hatred. This – we know – is not our own work, but that of the Holy Spirit, and so I ask the Virgin Mary to keep you ever open and docile to the Paraclete.

I thank you for the gift of this visit. I accompany you with my prayers and my blessing, which I ask you to share with all whom you encounter in your work in Pakistan. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.
