

## Imam Joins Dominican Friar in Fight Against Christian Persecution in Pakistan

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In taking interreligious dialogue to the next level, they make a unique pair: Imam Syed Muhammad Abdul Khabir Azad, who heads the second largest mosque in Pakistan, with room for 100,000 worshippers—the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore—and Father James Channan, OP, the director of Lahore’s Peace Center. Side-by-side, they are actively fighting the discrimination and persecution of Christians in Pakistan.

Example: when suicide bombers attacked the Youhanabad Christian neighborhood in Lahore—one of the largest Christian communities in South East Asia—and killed 22 people, the imam visited the neighborhood to declare his solidarity, before organizing a massive rally in front of the Badshahi mosque to signal opposition to terrorism, while calling for peace and harmony among different faiths.

As Father Channan is active organizing Christian-Muslim dialogue throughout the country, the imam focuses on rural Islamic clerics, who are often the instigators of religious violence. In 2004, Imam Abdul Khabir Azad even organized an interfaith conference inside the Badshahi mosque—it was the first time Christians had been invited to speak in the mosque in its 350-year history.

One of the biggest issues facing Christians in Pakistan is the country’s blasphemy law. The imam and the friar are jointly pushing for reform of the law, so that abuse of the law—to settle personal scores or gain business advantages, with more Muslims than Christians ending up as victims—will be vigorously prosecuted.

All too often, alleged Christian offenses against the Quran or the Prophet Mohammed trigger mob violence. In one of the worst recent incidents a couple was burned alive in a brick kiln, after the wife was accused of desecrating the Muslim holy book. Both Father Channan and the imam condemned the murders as “barbaric.”

### **“My Mission”**

It is dangerous to speak out against such abuses, but Imam Khabir Azad does so regularly. “I have received threats for the work that I am doing, but I am not going to give up. It is the need of the hour, and it is my mission,” he told international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need. The imam takes inspiration from Jesus as the “Prince of Peace,” which he referred to as his favorite image of Christ.

Father Channan calls evangelization and interreligious dialogue the “two tracks on which the train of Catholicism runs.” Unlike the goal of evangelization, the aim of interreligious dialogue, the friar explained, is not to convert non-Christians, but to work with those of other faiths for the common good and for the promotion of peaceful co-existence and respect for all faiths. Father Channan, the former Vice-Provincial for the Dominican order in Pakistan, believes that this process can bring about a “conversion of heart” so that Muslims come to recognize Christians as worthy fellow citizens.

Father Channan has served as Consultor for both the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (1985-1995) and the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims (1999-2004). Father Channan, whom the Pakistani government calls on regularly for advice in religious matters, travels widely as a lecturer on interreligious dialogue.

The friar has seen many Islamic leaders in Pakistan move from a stance of refusing to even share a meal with Christians to one of real friendship—the kind of bond exemplified by the unique relationship of Imam Abdul Khabir Azad and Father Channan.

*By Harold Fickett of Aid to the Church in Need.*