

Media Release 09.09.2020

Asia Bibi, in a video interview with ACN, has called on Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to protect the minorities

In a moving video interview which she gave to the international Catholic pastoral charity and pontifical foundation *Aid to the Church in Need* (ACN), Asia Bibi has made a heartfelt appeal to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan on behalf of the religious minorities in the country, recalling in particular the terrible plight of the many underage Pakistani girls abducted, forcibly converted and forcibly married.

This Pakistani Christian wife and mother, who has become a symbol of the suffering inflicted by anti-Christian persecution in the world, was speaking from her current home in Canada to Alessandro Monteduro, the director of ACN's Italian national office. In their conversation he also mentions two other young Christian girls, Huma Younus and Maira Shahbaz, both who are victims of such abuse, whose cases are being fought with help from ACN.

Asia Bibi responds by saying, "I know that these girls are being persecuted and I appeal to the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan, Please help our young girls, because none of them should have to suffer like this!"

Another particularly delicate issue, and one that has recently gained attention again in the media, is that relating to Pakistan's so-called anti-blasphemy laws. As ACN's own regular report on *Religious Freedom Worldwide* explains, these so-called "Blasphemy laws" which were incorporated in 1986 into Pakistan's Penal Code (articles 295B, 295C, 298A, 298B, 298C) in practice represent an enormous restriction on freedom of religion and expression. Defiling of the Koran and making derogatory remarks against Mohammed are crimes punishable with life imprisonment and the death penalty respectively. However, in practice these laws are frequently used in daily life as a means of persecuting the religious minorities. Asia Bibi herself, a mother of five children, was imprisoned on death row, falsely accused of this offence, for almost 10 years, from 2009 until October 2018, when her sentence was finally quashed on appeal by Pakistan's Supreme Court.

"At the moment of the founding of Pakistan and its separation from India, our founder Ali Jinnah, in his opening proclamation, guaranteed freedom of religion and thought to all citizens," said Asia Bibi during the interview. "But today there are some groups who are using the existing laws, and so I appeal to the Prime Minister of Pakistan – especially for the victims of the blasphemy laws and the girls who have been forcibly converted – to safeguard and protect the minorities, who are also Pakistani citizens. And as a victim myself, I am speaking from my own experience. I suffered terribly and lived through so many difficulties, but now I am free and I hope that these laws can be changed in such a way as to prevent any abuse of them."

Also during the interview, which is published in full on ACN Italy's YouTube channel, Asia Bibi speaks about Pope Francis. "I have two sets of rosary beads given me by the Holy Father," she says. "One was left behind in Pakistan and the other I still have with me and with it I pray the Rosary every day for the gift of faith and for those who are persecuted in Pakistan. I thank the Holy Father Francis, and also

Pope Benedict who interceded for me as well, and I thank ACN and all the other people who prayed for me.”

Alessandro Monteduro, speaking on behalf of ACN, invited Asia Bibi and her family to come to Rome, an invitation she was delighted to accept. “I have a deep desire to come to Rome and, if possible, to meet with the Holy Father,” she replied, adding, “I pray for Pope Francis, that he may sustain us in our faith.”

Asia Bibi concluded with some words of thanks to the benefactors of ACN: “I am grateful to ACN and to all your benefactors, in Italy and all over the world, for supporting people like me who are persecuted on account of their faith.”

MEDIA INQUIRIES:

Teresa Hodal, Communications

Aid to the Church in Need

E: media@aidtochurch.org

P: (02) 9167 9517 (Direct)