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The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. A drama and its characters

A group of believers in a new religion (not to be confused with the Ahmadiyya community discriminated against in Pakistan) are persecuted in various countries.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) which has already denounced the persecution of this group in Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey... reproduces this article of Bitter Winter, adding some titles in the text.

by Massimo Introvigne and [Karolina Maria Kotkowska](#)



March 2024, the leader of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) meets with scholars at the AROPL headquarters. On the right, Human Rights Without Frontiers' Willy Fautré.

[Bitter Winter](#) (04.04.2024) - The date was May 24, 2023. At the usually quiet border of Kapikule between Türkiye and Bulgaria screams were heard, as the Turkish police was threatening and beating 104 women, men, and children standing in line to cross the Bulgarian frontier. They were not Turkish citizens. They had reached Türkiye fleeing different Muslim majority countries where they had been persecuted for their religious beliefs. They hoped to find salvation in the European Union, of which Bulgaria is a member state.

Gunshots were fired. People protested police brutality, some showing their bloody faces after the beatings. Happily, some reporters, alerted by the refugees' co-religionists in the West, were able to get there. The story spread throughout the world, reaching the United Nations in New York.

Who were these desperate people? Why was their life in danger? It took time even for the international human rights organizations that received their appeals for help to understand. The fact was, they were part of a religious organization called the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) has nothing to do with the Ahmaddiyya community in Pakistan

All human rights organizations throughout the world were familiar with the Ahmadiyya community, which is heavily discriminated against and persecuted in Pakistan. The similarity in the names caused some confusion. In fact, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light has nothing to do with the Ahmadiyya community. The latter is a Sunni-derivative religious movement, while the AROPL is a Shia-derivative group. Their theology and history are different.

Nor can the AROPL be considered a sect of Islam. Scholars of religion distinguish between the "emic" point of view of the devotees and the "etic" (not to be confused with "ethic") perspective of the outside scholarly observers. The emic point of view of the AROPL members is that they represent the true Islam, in fact the true universal religion. From the etic perspective of scholars, they are part of a new religion, as different from what is normally called Islam as Christianity is different from Judaism. There would be no Christianity without Judaism, yet Christianity is a different religion from Judaism. There would be no AROPL without Shia Islam, yet the AROPL is a different and autonomous religion.

In March 2024 we, together with other scholars from different countries, from Australia to Lithuania, were invited to a conference and field trip in the United Kingdom, where the AROPL has its universal headquarters, to listen to presentations by devotees and discuss with them. We then had a meeting with the leader of the religion. In this series, we present the history and beliefs of the AROPL and try to explain why it has been persecuted, not only in regions with a Muslim majority but even in such an unlikely country as Sweden.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (1999): History

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam. Twelver Shiites (which include more than 80% of present-day Shiites) believe that the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad, whose authority was denied and bloodily suppressed by the Sunnis, were the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali and his descendants who, with him, are honored as the Twelve Imams. They also believe that the Twelfth Imam, Mohammed ibn al-Hassan al-Askari, who "disappeared" as a child in the year 874, was not killed by the Sunnis as some secular historians claim but went into a state of "occultation" from which he will emerge in the end times. Many Muslims also expect that, when the appropriate time will come, the world will be ruled on behalf of God by an eschatological figure known as the Imam al-Mahdi, in short, the Mahdi. Some believe he will be preceded by yet another eschatological figure, the Yamani, just as Jesus was preceded by John the Baptist.

During the history of the Shia, several individuals claimed they had met the Twelfth Imam and had been appointed by him as his vicegerents or envoys, thus generating a

variety of new religious movements. Several claimants to the role of the Mahdi also appeared. Scholars assume that in times and places of political crisis and chaos new religions are more likely to emerge.

Ahmed al-Hassan, the prophesied Yamani and the persecution in Iraq

In 1999, in the chaotic post-Saddam Iraq, **Ahmed al-Hassan**, a civil engineer born in 1968 in Basra, claimed to have physically met the Twelfth Imam, who had entrusted him with the special mission to proclaim publicly that he, al-Hassan, was **the prophesied Yamani** and to call people to pledge allegiance to the **Imam al-Mahdi**.



An early and rare image of Ahmed al-Hassan.

For al-Hassan's followers, the main evidence that he really received a mission from the Twelfth Imam is in his teachings and in the fact that his role and even his name can be found in Prophet Muhammad's last Will, a text whose very existence is denied by (most) Sunnis but is attested and discussed in several traditional Shiite sources. Both Sunni and Shia sources confirm the intent of the Prophet Muhammad to write a will on a night referred to as "the calamity of Thursday" that would be a safety from misguidance before he died the subsequent Monday. While other Muslims dispute its authenticity, for the AROPL Muhammad's will as preserved in Shiite sources is both genuine and all-important.

Since 2002, al-Hassan publicly denounced the Shia establishment in both Iran and Iraq led by scholars and Great Ayatollahs such as Khamenei and Sistani as morally and politically corrupt. For al-Hassan, these were "non-working scholars," leading the Muslims astray. As a result, al-Hassan and his disciples were severely persecuted. The Shia establishment pushed the Iraqi security forces to raid the homes, arrest and attack the followers of al-Hassan and accused them of being involved in riots, including (under the name "Soldiers of Heaven") in the so-called "Battle of Najaf" of 2007, with which al-Hassan himself denied any connection.

Many of al-Hassan's followers were innocently killed, arrested without just cause, and jailed without due process. The Shia militias and those representing the Shia establishment were looking for al-Hassan, wanting to kill him as a heretic. Al-Hassan was lastly seen and photographed in Iraq in 2007, after which he went into hiding. Reportedly, he visited several countries and lived for a time in Sudan, while his followers in Iraq and internationally divided into different conflicting factions.

The early teachings of al-Hassan were somewhat enigmatic and open to different interpretations by his disciples. Some, with basis in al-Hassan's own early texts, believed he was himself the Qaim, the "Riser from the Family of Muhammad," an eschatological figure mentioned in Islamic prophecies as the one who rises and restores justice in the world during the end times and is the first in a series of Mahdis (divinely appointed guides) who rule an end-times Divine Just State. On the other hand, there are followers who testify that from the beginning of his public ministry, al-Hassan declared himself to be the prophesied Yamani. **The Yamani, which means the "right-hand," is a major prophesied eschatological figure whose role is to pave the way for the Qaim/Riser. The Yamani can also be called "the first Mahdi" and the Qaim "the second Mahdi,"** but it is the Qaim who is the center of the new covenant with God.

Abdullah Hashem, a disciple of Ahmed al-Hassan, is the leader of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

After al-Hassan went into hiding in 2007, some of the Iraqi factions known as "the White Banners" or "the Office of Najaf" were infiltrated by the Iraqi government and started transmitting, including via a Facebook page, messages allegedly coming from him that were suspiciously different from his previous teachings. A split happened in the movement between those who maintained that the White Banners were still "authentic," and that al-Hassan was communicating with them, and those who denounced the post-2007 messages as forged. The latter believed that the White Banners had no genuine communication with al-Hassan. They were led by **Abdullah Hashem, an Egyptian-American disciple of al-Hassan.** Hashem claimed that the White Banners / Office of Najaf was controlled and manipulated by the Iraqi government, that al-Hassan was not with them, and that they had fabricated his voice and the Facebook page.



Abdullah Hashem, the leader of the AROPL.

In contrast with the White Banners, headquartered in Iraq, the group led by Hashem and currently **headquartered in the UK**, is **known as the "Black Banners."** This creates another possible confusion, as both the "White Banners" and the "Black Banners," i.e., the AROPL, recognize and venerate the figure of al-Hassan, although they interpret his role and mission differently. To complicate the situation even further, there are other minor groups claiming a relationship with the teachings of al-Hassan as well. The White Banners / Office of Najaf "excommunicated" Hashem in 2015 and again through a "Declaration of Disassociation" on April 18, 2023, which also targeted other groups. **The**

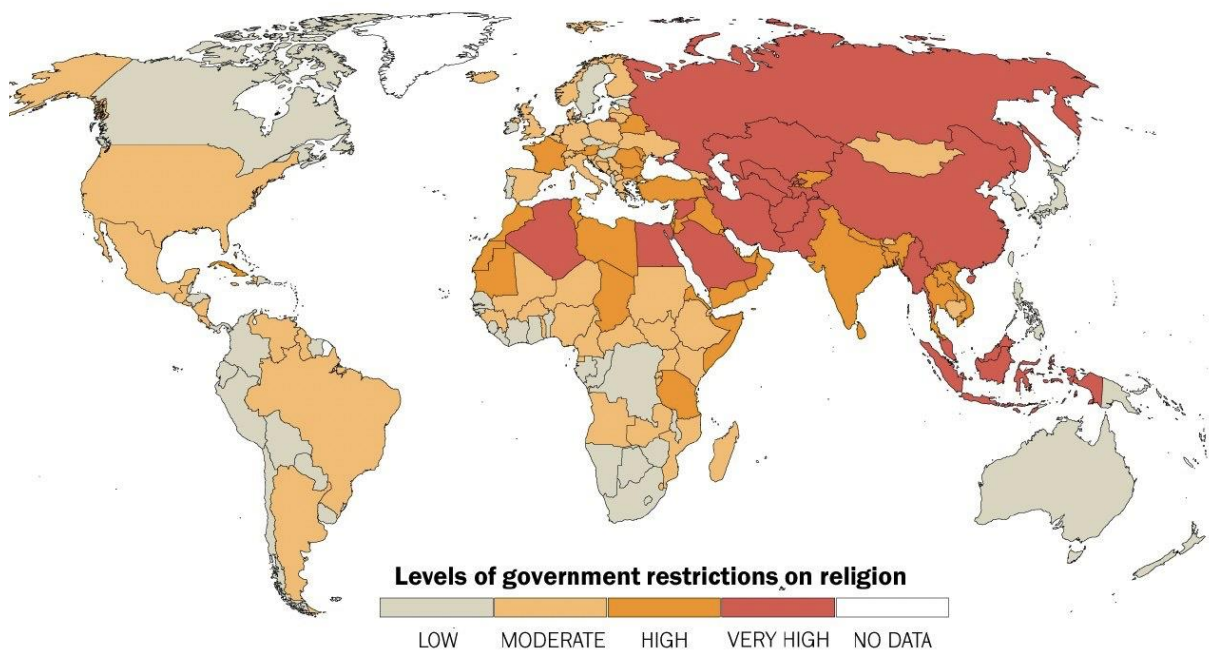
Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light is distinguished by the fact that it has the largest international following, while the White Banners are mostly Iraqis.

It is also important, when one hears of riots, political statements, and other problems in Iraq that involve “followers of Ahmed al-Hassan” to understand from whose group they originate. Unfortunately, Wikipedia and other generalist (and easily manipulated) sources do not help in this respect. This series, however, will helpfully clarify who is who, and shed some light on the unique beliefs of the AROPL.

Pew Global survey shows rising religious restrictions

Government restrictions on religion around the world

Levels of government restrictions on religion in each country and territory studied as of 2021



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.
“Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

[Providence](#) (19.03.2024) - On March 5, 2024, the Pew Research Center [released](#) its fourteenth annual survey on the status of [religious freedom](#) worldwide. Due to the amount of work involved in collecting the data and creating the report—which covers 198 countries and territories—the period it covers is the world in 2021. The survey finds that

overall religious freedom in the world has continued to decline, paralleling the global deterioration of democracy and human rights in general.

Pew seeks to measure both government restrictions on religion (the GRI Index) and social hostilities based on religion (the SHI Index)—summarizing what government does to people and what people do to each other. Its general finding is that government restrictions have continued to climb, reaching a new peak in 2021, whereas social hostilities show a slight decline.

Amongst its findings for that year were that “governments harassed religious groups” in 183 countries (92% of the countries analyzed) — up from 178 countries in 2020.” This is the largest number that Pew has found since it began its religious freedom surveys. It adds that “This type of restriction was widespread across all five regions we analyzed....For example, at least one case of government harassment was reported in each of the 20 countries in the Middle East-North Africa region. The same was true for 43 of 45 countries in Europe (96%), 33 of 35 countries in the Americas (94%), 44 of 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (92%) and 43 of 50 countries in the Asia-Pacific region (86%).”

Pew gives a global median score of 3.0 for government restrictions, up from 2.8 in 2020, This was also “the highest global median score since we began tracking restrictions in 2007.”

— 55 countries (28% of the total) had “high” or “very high” levels of government restrictions — slightly down from 57 countries (29%), a level reached in 2020, 2019 and 2012.

— 43 countries (22% of all studied) had “high” or “very high” levels of social hostilities, up from 40 countries (20%) in 2020.

On social hostilities: “The global median level of social hostilities involving religion – including violence and harassment by private individuals, organizations or groups – fell from 1.8 in 2020 to 1.6 in 2021 on the Social Hostilities Index, a 10-point scale composed of 13 indicators. 43 countries (22% of all studied) had “high” or “very high” levels of social hostilities in 2021, up from 40 countries (20%) in 2020 but still closer to the low point (18%) than to the high point (33%) previously recorded over the course of the study. In total religious groups were harassed in a total of 190 countries.” This is 96% of all the countries and territories surveyed.

Religious groups were harassed in 190 countries in 2021

Number of countries and territories where religious groups were harassed, by year

	2007	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21
Christians	107	110	102	108	128	144	143	145	153	155	160
Muslims	96	109	99	100	125	142	140	139	147	145	141
Jews	51	71	77	81	74	87	87	88	89	94	91
Others*	33	39	38	43	50	57	50	56	68	62	64
Folk religions**	24	26	34	21	32	41	38	37	32	33	40
Hindus	21	16	9	14	18	23	23	19	21	21	24
Buddhists	10	13	12	10	7	17	19	24	25	21	28
Religiously unaffiliated	N/A	3	5	4	14	14	23	18	22	27	27
Any of above	152	166	164	160	169	187	187	185	190	189	190

* Includes Sikhs, members of ancient faiths such as Zoroastrianism, members of newer faiths such as Baha'i, and other religious groups.

** Includes, for example, followers of African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian Aboriginal religions.

Note: This measure looks at the number of countries in which groups were harassed, either by the government or individuals/social groups. It does not assess the severity of the harassment. Numbers do not add to totals because multiple religious groups can be harassed in a country. The "Others" figure for the year ending in December 2012 and the "Any of the above" figure for the year ending in December 2011 have been updated to correct minor errors in previous reports.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

"Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Christians were the most widely harassed group, in a total of 160 countries, followed by Muslims in 141 countries. All larger religious groups are harassed somewhere, and the level has increased substantially over 14 years, in several cases almost doubling.

Governmental and social restrictions often vary in different ways, but four countries – Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan and Syria – had "very high" levels of *both* government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion.

(As an aside, there are some countries and areas, such as North Korea that Pew does not score because they lack data. One is Greenland, part of Denmark. As one of the few people, I surmise, who has reviewed religious freedom in Greenland, may I be allowed an indulgence. There was a troubling issue in 2021 in an otherwise very free setting.

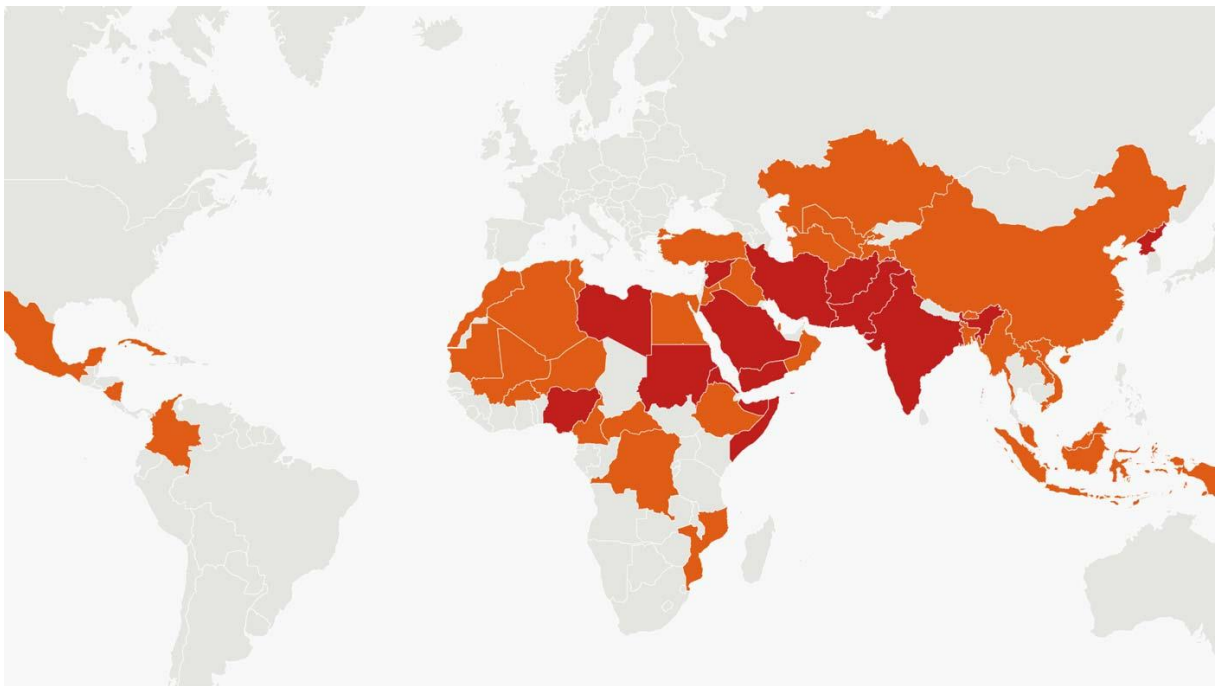
Probably out of concern about Islamic radicalism, Denmark initiated a draft law requiring religious groups to provide Danish translations of their sermons and messages. But the official language of Greenland is Greenlandic. Hence the law would have required a Greenlander preaching to Greenlanders in Greenlandic to provide the government with a Danish translation, a burden for small and scattered congregations. This illustrates that several restrictions on religious freedom arise not from governmental animus but from bureaucratic blunder.)

These recorded trends in government repression of religion are alarming. But, even though the survey also gives examples and illustrations of the problems it documents, it is still dry reading. Some of this is to deliberately emphasize the methodical nature of the study, Hence, it needs to be supplemented with a greater human element in order to show the widespread suffering that lies behind these figures.

A record 365 million Christians persecuted worldwide, says Open Doors

The evangelical NGO "Open Doors" publishes its annual Watch List that ranks the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution. North Korea is still No. 1.

[Matthieu Lasserre](#)



[La Croix Int'l](#) (18.01.2024) - Once again, [North Korea](#) is the most dangerous place in world to be a Christian, according the latest annual report issued by Open Doors, the non-denominational NGO founded in 1955 to offer support to those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

But in its 2024 Watch List, a yearly ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most sever persecution, Open Doors notes that [Nigeria](#) alone accounted for 82% of Christians who were killed last year killed because of their faith. The report -- which

covers the twelve-month period between 1 October 2022 and 30 September 2023 -- was unveiled on January 16.

Of the 4,998 Christians who died because of their religious affiliation during that period, Open Doors said 4,118 were in the massive West African country. That's a significantly higher figure than in other nations such as Congo (261), India (160), Uganda (55), Myanmar (34), or neighboring Burkina Faso (31).

Nigeria also ranks third in the number of "targeted" churches, meaning those that were destroyed or closed by authorities. Africa's most populous country also leads in the unfortunate ranking of the number of Christians who were kidnapped last year (3,300 out of 3,906).

"These abductions target both forcibly converted young married girls and church leaders because it allows for substantial ransoms," said Illia Djadi, the Open Doors analyst for West Africa.

"When pastors are released, they are so traumatized that they keep a low profile afterward," she said during a press conference to present the Watch List.

200 deaths on Christmas Day

This insecurity was tragically highlighted on Christmas Day when nearly 200 Christians were massacred in Plateau State in the central Nigeria. The attack, which led to the burning of eight churches, forced thousands of people to flee the region, according to sources on the ground that Open Doors interviewed. According to the NGO's officials, several survivors reported the perpetrators shouted "Allah Akhbar" during the attack.

"The Sahel jihadist groups are recruiting new members from the Fulani ethnic group, who are Muslim and nomadic, and are suffering from poverty due to the disappearance of herds caused by climate change," continued Djadi. "Christians are not the only targets, but they are a preferred target for these groups."

And with instability in countries in the Sahel region, these terrorist groups are proliferating and moving further south. Nevertheless, the number of Christians killed for their faith in Nigeria has decreased this year.

"For the tenth consecutive year, Nigeria is the top country in terms of Christians killed," the Open Doors analyst affirmed. "Despite this, we have seen that thanks to security measures put in place for elections, this number has decreased. However, after the election period, we saw things resuming with renewed vigor. People on the ground feel abandoned by the West."

Moreover, with its 200 million inhabitants, a security crisis could constitute a new migration crisis for Europe.

Massive church closures in China

Besides Nigeria, the 2024 Watch List notes the explosion in the number of church closures worldwide, estimated at over 14,000. That's three times higher than the previous year. China alone is responsible for about 10,000 closures by authorities.

"The period covered by the report coincides with the lifting of health measures in the country," explained Guillaume Guennec, advocacy director for the Open Doors. "Everything reopened except unapproved churches that did not fit the Chinese government's sinicization logic of Christianity."

Overall, the NGO estimates that Christians face "very strong" persecution in 78 countries, up from 76 last year. More than 365 million Christians -- or one in seven -- face extreme persecution worldwide. This is a new record.

Open Doors say the top 10 countries where Christians are most persecuted are North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, and Afghanistan. It also warns that in the Middle East and North Africa "Christians are becoming less and less at home."

"It's worrying when you consider that previous data was collected while ISIS was in that territory," said Guennec, referring to the rise in blasphemy accusations in Iraq or a new exodus in Syria.

Open Doors has published the Watch List since 1993. The ranking uses a point system based on data collected in the field, "hammer" actions (beatings, murders, church destruction, etc.) and "vice" actions (oppression and restrictions on believers in their private, family, social, civil, or ecclesiastical life). While it is the work of an advocacy group, it is also an analytical tool that's used by various institutions and the media.

Missionaries and pastoral care workers killed in 2023

[Agenzia Fides](#) (01.01.2024) – According to information gathered by Agenzia Fides, 20 missionaries were killed in the world in 2023: 1 Bishop, 8 priests, 2 non-religious men, 1 seminarian, 1 novice and 7 laypersons.

Although the lists compiled by Fides are always open to updates and corrections, there were 2 more missionaries killed compared to the previous year. This year the highest number of missionaries killed is again registered in Africa, where 9 missionaries were killed: 5 priests, 2 religious men, 1 seminarian, 1 novice. In America, 6 missionaries were murdered: 1 Bishop, 3 priests, 2 lay women. In Asia, 4 lay men and women died, killed by violence. Finally, a layman was killed in Europe.

As it has been for some time, Fides uses the term "missionary" for all the baptized, aware that "in virtue of their Baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization" (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 120). Moreover, the annual list of Fides does not look only to Missionaries *ad gentes* in the strict sense but tries to record all baptized engaged in the life of the Church who died in a violent way, not only "in hatred of the faith". For this reason, we prefer not to use the term "martyrs", if not in its etymological meaning of "witness", in order not to enter into the question of the judgment that the Church might eventually deliver upon some of them, after careful consideration, for beatification or canonization.

One of the distinctive traits that most of the pastoral workers murdered in 2023 have in common is undoubtedly their normal life: that is, they did not carry out any sensational actions or out-of-the-ordinary deeds that could have attracted attention and put them in someone's crosshairs. Scrolling through the few notes on the circumstances of their violent deaths, we find priests who were on their way to celebrate Mass or to carry out pastoral activities in some distant community; armed assaults perpetrated along busy roads; assaults on rectories and convents where they were engaged in evangelization, charity, human promotion. They found themselves, through no fault of their own, victims of kidnappings, acts of terrorism, involved in shootings or violence of various kinds.

In this 'normal' life lived in contexts of economic and cultural poverty, moral and environmental degradation, where there is no respect for life and human rights, but often only oppression and violence is the norm, they were also united by another 'normality', that of living the faith by offering their simple evangelical witness as pastors, catechists, health workers, animators of the liturgy, of charity.... They could have gone elsewhere, moved to safer places, or desisted from their Christian commitments, perhaps reducing them, but they did not do so, even though they were aware of the situation and the dangers they faced every day. Naïve, in the eyes of the world. But the Church, and ultimately the world itself, moves forward thanks to them, who "are not flowers sprouting in a desert", and to the many who, like them, testify their gratitude for the love of Christ by translating it into daily acts of fraternity and hope.
