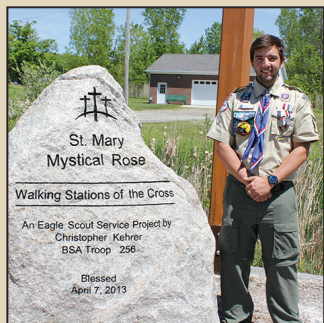
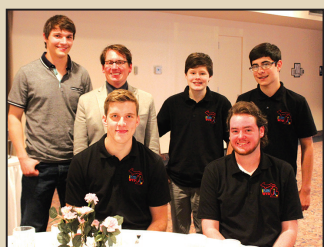




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*"At the end of our name in Pakistan is 'Masih,' which means 'Messiah,' or 'Christ. Their names start or end with Muhammad, but ours end with Masih. You are Christian, you belong to Christ. That is the meaning of Masih."*

*Fr. Shafique Masih, administrator of St. Jude Parish, Detroit*

## Identified with Christ



Photos courtesy of Fr. Shafique Masih

Fr. Shafique Masih, left, greets a poor Christian man following a devastating attack in August 2009 on his parish in Gojra, Pakistan, that killed nine people and burned 160 homes to the ground. Fr. Masih, a Pakistani native who came to Michigan in 2011 and is administrator of St. Jude Parish in Detroit, spent decades working for peace amidst the constant threat of violence in his homeland.

### St. Jude priest shares sufferings, redemption in Pakistan

**MIKE STECHSCHULTE**  
*The Michigan Catholic*

**DETROIT** — It was 1993, and Fr. Shafique Masih was about to become a priest in the tumultuous diocese of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

That alone was enough to put his life in danger.

"You know the story of what's going on in Pakistan," Fr. Masih, administrator of St. Jude Parish in Detroit and vicar of the Archdiocese of Detroit's Renaissance Vicariate, said during a recent interview with *The Michigan Catholic*. "Especially the minorities, we are suffering a lot. The Christians are suffering."

In an attack on his life, Fr. Masih was shot and his friend killed in the 2 percent minority Christian country, where believers in Christ are regarded by many as "kafirs" — or "nonbelievers" — and treated without rights as third-class

citizens.

"It was a miracle in my life (that I survived), I will say that," Fr. Masih said. "There are so many sufferings we are going through, but 1993 changed my vision: what they are doing, we should not do the same thing. We should be able to work for peace."

Before Fr. Masih came to Detroit in 2011, he spent nearly two decades doing just that in his native land, working for interreligious dialogue and taking up a mission of peace on behalf of his friends and neighbors, both Muslim and Christian. But suffering was never far off, and a devastating attack on his own parish in August 2009 left nine people burned to death and 160 homes destroyed in the village of Korian and city of Gorja



Fr. Masih

in central Pakistan.

The "Gojra Massacre," as it came to be known, was carried out by the hands of Islamic militants after, according to reports, a group of children were unwittingly playing with newspapers on which verses of the Qur'an were printed. Fr. Masih says religion was a pretext for the attack, which "started with a dispute about business" but "took the form of a religious dispute" as cover. It drew international condemnation, including from many Muslims, and a statement from Pope Benedict XVI describing the attacks as "senseless."

"I was not present there the day it happened. I was in Scotland, but I flew back at once to be with my people," Fr. Masih said. "The blasphemy laws, if anybody speaks

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Historically, synods a turning point in life of archdiocese

**MIKE STECHSCHULTE**  
*The Michigan Catholic*

**DETROIT** — When Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron opens a synod of the Archdiocese of Detroit in the fall of 2016, it will be the 11th time such a gathering has taken place since the diocese was founded in 1833.

The 2016 synod, which the archbishop has said will focus on making missionary evangelism "part of the DNA" of the archdiocese, will be the first since Cardinal John Dearden convoked a synod in 1969 following the Second Vatican Council.

That synod, which was called in 1966 and completed in 1969, was largely a response to the council's call for greater lay leadership in parish and diocesan life, and resulted in several reforms that have persisted in the Archdiocese of Detroit to the present day. Among them was the creation of advisory bodies to assist the archbishop — such as the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council and Presbyteral Council — and the creation of several diocesan offices and structures.

The 1969 synod also brought about greater lay participation in the form of parish, vicariate and diocesan councils, put in place various financial oversights and reporting requirements and encouraged an atmosphere of greater ecumenism and dialogue with non-Catholic and non-Christian faiths.

"I think a diocesan synod does two things," archdiocesan chancellor Michael Trueman wrote in a 2012 memo to chancery staff. "One, it brings a cross-section of the faithful of the diocese together to consider important matters affecting the entire diocese, which in doing so provides a forum by which a vision can be formed, or at least presented, and strategically executed.

"And two, it provides a 'buy-in' for the legislation that follows," wrote Trueman, who added that although the bishop alone has authority to promulgate changes, the synod process allows the faithful

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## Identified

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*Fr. Masih: In Pakistan, 'the priest is everything for the community'*

against the Prophet Muhammad or against Islam is a straight death sentence, no court or anything. Anybody can come and kill you even."

Although judicial executions for violations of the government's blasphemy laws are rare, those accused often become targets of public violence. Although dozens were arrested in connection with the Gojra massacre, few if any were convicted.

Appointed by the Pakistani government to oversee the rebuilding of homes with help from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Fr. Masih increasingly found himself the target of personal threats for his efforts to defend the rights of his parishioners.

"In Pakistan, the priest is everything for the community," he said. "Our communities belong to a very poor class, so the priest is looked at as a social worker, a politician, a voice for his people. As a leader, you have to speak on their behalf, and that's what I was doing."

Before long, however, Fr. Masih's bishop decided it was too dangerous for him to remain in Pakistan, and with the help of Bishop Donald Hanchon in Detroit, Fr. Masih made his way to Michigan in August 2011.

### 'When you have nothing, you appreciate everything'

Fr. Masih said despite trying to live in peace, Pakistani Christians are viewed with intense suspicion by the local Taliban, especially when it comes to international events.

"We (the Christians) are the people of this soil, we are the sons and daughters, but if anything happens in the USA or from the West, they think the Christians are doing it against Islam," said Fr. Masih, with an obvious emotion in his voice. "So we become the victims. They attack us, they attack our houses. We are the target, the minority."

The situation deteriorated so badly in 1998, Fr. Masih's ordaining bishop, Faisalabad Bishop John Joseph, committed suicide to protest the cruel and unfair treatment of Christians in their homeland, including a man condemned to death on trumped-up blasphemy charges, an event that still affects the priest to this day.

Because of their shared sufferings, Catholics and Protestants are close in Pakistan, Fr. Masih said. A daily reminder is the name he and most Christians share.

"At the end of our name in Pakistan is 'Masih,' which means 'Messiah,' or 'Christ,'" said Fr. Masih, whose full name is Shafique Hadyat Masih. "Your name is Joseph, but it's Joseph Masih, or Sahir Masih. Masih is our ID in Pakistan. Their names start or end with Muhammad, but ours end with Masih. You are Christian, you belong to Christ. That is the meaning of Masih."

Fr. Masih said the Christian community in Pakistan has a strong faith, but despite having many Muslim friends, attracting converts is virtually impossible.



Photos courtesy of Fr. Shafique Masih

Fr. Shafique Masih leads a delegation of clergy, police and government officials in surveying the destruction of homes in Gojra, Pakistan, in 2009. Fr. Masih led reconstruction efforts and interreligious dialogue for peace after the attack on his parish left nine people burned to death and 160 homes destroyed.

Fr. Shafique Masih, right, received a warm welcome from his former parishioners in Gojra, Pakistan, when he visited his native country in May. During the visit, Fr. Masih was able to meet and forgive an assailant who shot him 22 years ago.



"(Conversion) is very, very difficult," he said. "Because even sometimes when they convert, it is kept very secret because the Muslims will not tolerate it."

Despite the constant fear, though, conversions from Christianity to Islam are just as rare, Fr. Masih said.

"We received Christianity from the missionaries. They came with the seed and gave us the real faith," said Fr. Masih, whose family converted from Hinduism in the late 1800s. "In our culture, if you are Christian, you are strong in faith. It's the hardships and sufferings that make for a strong, committed Christian in Pakistan."

"A lot of times, our Muslim friends will say, 'Why don't you convert to Islam?'" he continued. "Pakistan is 98 percent Muslim; you are with them day and night. But we believe the Holy Spirit always guides us how to be more faithful to your call and your commitment. Praise the Lord, this is a great blessing. If you become a Muslim, they can give a lot of land and this and that, a lot of temptation, but the poor always appreciate the faith. When you have nothing, you ap-

preciate everything."

### A chance to forgive

After four years away from home, Fr. Masih returned to Pakistan for two weeks in early May to visit family and friends at his former parish, Sacred Heart, in Gojra. Seeing so many familiar faces was spiritually gratifying, he said, but it was a chance encounter with a man he hadn't seen in 22 years — and likely never wanted to see again — that provided the greatest gift.

He wasn't expecting the opportunity to forgive the man who shot him in 1993, but that's how grace works sometimes.

"When I went back home, I was in my former parish having a meeting, and this person happened to be there," said Fr. Masih. "I faced him face to face after 22 years."

Fighting through anger, compassion and speechlessness, the priest admitted he could "barely control" his emotions.

"It was so difficult what to do with this fellow. I was so impatient, but I was praying to the Lord, 'Give me courage. Give me what to

tell him.' I wanted to grab him and tell him what he had done to me 22 years ago, but I prayed to God, 'Give me the courage,'" he said.

Fr. Masih said the man didn't say much, but the Lord answered his prayer.

"I was able to heal myself and talk to him. I didn't say any hard word; I just said hello to him. Whether he felt something, I don't know, but I felt that God really gave me the courage and patience to see the circumstances and be able to overcome," he said. "I just told him, 'I forgive you,' but he was not able to say anything."

Fr. Masih believes the man converted to Christianity — which would be a miracle in itself, although he doesn't know the circumstances or details — but he called the opportunity for forgiveness "amazing."

"I had already forgiven him, but I had not seen him in 22 years," he said. "I will say it was a miracle that I was able to come out of my feelings about the situation and witness that if Jesus loves us, why shouldn't we love our enemies? That was a wonderful experience I had."

There's a tendency toward anger and bitterness on the part of victims, Fr. Masih said — he didn't tell his nephews out of concern for how they might have reacted — but despite that, the priest still feels a higher calling and duty as a Christian, even if the odds are still stacked against his brothers and sisters in Pakistan.

"Our culture is a revenge culture," he said. "We're ready to fight. But being a priest, being a believer, I should be different. I was able to witness that I was able to do it, to forgive him."

He knows that's the only way to lasting peace.

"When I was leaving, I said (to my parishioners at St. Jude), we need your prayers," Fr. Masih said. "Please pray for them because I know many families are still suffering. Prayers can save us."