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India's Catholics celebrate first woman saint

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VATICAN CITY/BHARANANGANAM, India (Reuters) - Pope Benedict created India's first woman saint on Sunday and appealed for an end to anti-Christian violence there that has claimed dozens of lives since August.

Church bells rang and firecrackers went off as India's faithful followed the Vatican ceremony on television from Kerala, where Sister Alphonsa had lived as a nun until her death more than six decades ago.

"As the Christian faithful of India give thanks to God for their first native daughter to be presented for public veneration, I wish to assure them of my prayers during this difficult time," Pope Benedict said in Rome.

Alphonsa is credited with curing illness and disease after her death in 1946, with the Vatican approving the reported miracle cure of Genil Joseph, a congenitally deformed child, in 1999. Alphonsa was beatified in 1986.

The canonisation comes at a time when Christians, who make up just over 2 percent of India's billion-plus population, have come under fresh attack amid long-running tensions over religious conversions.

The murder of a Hindu leader in eastern Orissa state in August sparked some of the worst anti-Christian riots in decades, killing about 35 people and damaging dozens of churches.

"I urge the perpetrators of violence to renounce these acts and join with their brothers and sisters to work together in building a civilisation of love," said the pope, who also made three people from other countries saints.

"EVIL WIDESPREAD"

Thousands of Christians packed into a small church and a school auditorium in the Kerala town of Bharananganam, where Alphonsa lived, to watch the canonisation ceremony.

Special masses were also held in Catholic churches across Kerala, where Saint Thomas, one of the 12 apostles, is believed to have arrived in 52 AD, bringing Christianity to India, a secular country with a dominant Hindu population.

"At a time when evil is so widespread, it is good to have something like this to keep our spirits up," said Sister Grace Kalriparambil, 77, who knew Alphonsa.

Alphonsa is India's second saint after Gonsalo Garcia, of Portuguese parentage, who was canonised in 1862. Albanian-born Mother Teresa, who served the poor and destitute in Kolkata, was beatified in 2003, a first step to canonisation.

The pontiff noted that Alphonsa, who deliberately disfigured herself at a young age to ward off suitors and enter the convent, had led a life of "extreme physical and spiritual suffering".

Catholics in India hoped Sister Alphonsa's sainthood would bring them strength.

"The elevation of Sister Alphonsa will help Christians to face the attacks across other parts of the country," said Father Joseph Kunnathuparampil.

Alphonsa, who died at the age of 36, was beatified in 1986 during former Pope John Paul II's visit to India, which has seen increased intolerance in the

past two decades with a revival of Hindu nationalism.

Her tomb became a pilgrimage site and she was credited with several miracles, particularly curing illness and disease.

Roman Catholics account for 70 percent of India's Christian minority.

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