News



In September 2015, Bishop Moses Costa celebrates an evening Mass at a private home, at a festival celebrating the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)



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Catholics in Bangladesh are mourning the death of Archbishop Moses Costa, whose pastoral ministry and leadership gifts made him a beloved and revered figure throughout the country.

Costa, 69, the archbishop of Chittagong, Bangladesh's second-largest city, and the secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, died July 13 after a monthlong battle with COVID-19. Costa had been hospitalized in the capital of Dhaka on June 13 with severe respiratory problems and tested positive for the coronavirus the next day, Vatican News reported.

Costa seemed to rally and even tested negative for the virus on June 22. But the cleric's condition worsened again on July 8, and the next day Costa suffered a series of strokes from an apparent brain hemorrhage, officials said. He died at Square Hospital in Dhaka.

A statement on the archdiocese's website said Costa's death had left "all the faithful in a state of tremendous shock."

"The whole Christian community of Bangladesh especially the faithful of Chittagong Diocese is under deep sorrow and pain," the statement said, calling Costa's death an "irrecoverable loss for all of us."

Others mourning Costa's death included Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who, United News of Bangladesh reported, "expressed deep shock and sorrow at the death of Archbishop Moses Costa."

A member of the Holy Cross Congregation, Costa had served in a number of prominent roles in addition to the post with the Catholic bishops' conference. He had headed the Holy Cross Seminary and Holy Cross Scholasticate in Bangladesh, Vatican News reported, and had been rector of the National Major Seminary.

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A native of Dhaka, Costa was ordained in 1981, serving briefly as a parish priest. An interest in the subjects of theology, psychology and counseling took him to Rome,

where Costa earned his first licentiate in theology and spirituality from St. Thomas Aquinas University and another in psychology and counseling from Gregorian University.

Though Costa told NCR in an unpublished September 2015 interview that he never had any ambition to become a bishop, his leadership abilities were noted early: Pope John Paul II appointed Costa, not yet aged 46, as bishop of the Dinajpur Diocese in northern Bangladesh in 1996. Pope Benedict XVI appointed Costa to the first Chittagong post in 2011.

Another appointment followed in 2017, when Pope Francis named Costa an archbishop and elevated the Chittagong Diocese, with about 50,000 members, to an archdiocese.

The elevation was not surprising. Costa was the type of cleric, say those who knew him, who practiced what Francis has tried to instill in the Catholic hierarchy: a commitment to a church focusing on mercy and working with the poor, while also strengthening its spiritual moorings.

Fr. Terence Rodrigues, a parish priest on the staff of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Cathedral in Chittagong, told NCR in an unpublished 2015 interview that Costa's quiet, often understated approach blended well with the ethos Francis emphasized. "When he acts, we feel confirmed," Rodrigues said of Costa. "We have to be people-oriented."

Costa spoke of his congregants as family. "I've seen bishops who are very lonely," he said, noting that some clerics, either by design or habit, tend to isolate themselves. That was not Costa's model or ideal. "It is better to have people around, like a family."



Bishop Moses Costa helps oversee construction being done on the grounds of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary in Chittagong, Bangladesh, in September 2015. (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

The idea of family has special resonance in Bangladesh, and in Chittagong in particular. Located in southeast Bangladesh, the archdiocese is large — covering about a third of the country's land mass — and is the birthplace for Christianity in Bangladesh. Many Christians in the archdiocese trace ancestry back to Portuguese settlers who arrived in the 16th century.

In a country where the predominant religion is Islam and less than 1% is Christian, Catholic communities tend to be tightly knit. The idea of a community of faith is palpable, and it was not hard to miss: On the evening of the same day Costa had celebrated Mass with a group of Missionary of Charity sisters in the morning in September 2015, he celebrated another Mass at a private home, at a festival celebrating the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

Dozens attended the event — most of them women — and Costa spoke of Thérèse's deep faith despite a short life (she died at age 24) and a life lived amid poverty.

A day later, traveling on a bus to a meeting of young priests that was being held in the capital of Dhaka — a tiring journey that took about seven hours — Costa took the occasional phone call, rested, read and reflected a bit on the previous night's Mass.

Costa said that he used Thérèse as example of the importance of the everyday — that "we are called to do small things in our lives."



In this September 2015 photo, Bishop Moses Costa of Chittagong, Bangladesh, is seen with two Missionary of Charity sisters after he celebrated morning Mass. (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Those small things meant a lot, and Costa praised the sometimes-unheralded work of the sisters in the diocese, saying their ministry was a balm.

"There is no substitute for the sisters," he said, calling them respected figures in Bangladesh society. "In general, people will do anything for the sisters."

Costa noted sisters' contributions of spiritual formation, education and health, such as administering hospitals.

"Sisters can go to places, both among the menfolk and among women," he said. "People feel it — the influence of the Catholic Church and the sisters."

Holy Cross Sr. Pushpa Teresa Gomes, the congregation's Asia coordinator based in Dhaka and now a member of the Sisters of the Holy Cross leadership team, in 2015 praised Costa's "pastoral approach" and collegial work style, which included a commitment to a local pastoral team of women religious, clergy and laity that advised the bishop.

One of Costa's colleagues, Sr. Nisha Rita Gagra, a Salesian Missionary of Mary Immaculate, said at the time that Costa had a gift for motivating people.

"He has a fatherly heart, and he is a spiritual man," she said. "He thinks of the spirituality, and not just the materiality of issues."



Salesian Sr. Nisha Rita Gagra with Archbishop Moses Costa in 2015 (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Costa believed that the Catholic Church in Bangladesh, while mindful of its minority status in an overwhelmingly Muslim country, needed to work toward ending economic inequality — a particular problem in rural areas.

"The issues of justice, the common good, the sharing — these are values that the church should teach," he said, adding that particularly in rural areas, "there is a need for healing."

Costa believed the tradition of a secular state, which some see as under threat with the increasing prominence of a more conservative type of Islamic tradition, had worked to Bangladesh's advantage.

"It brings people together, this understanding that we are all human beings, and that we are all brothers and sisters." Costa regularly met with imams and other Muslims in Chittagong.

Costa said he believed Catholics in Bangladesh should be proud of the educational and health institutions that have contributed to the life of the greater good for all in the country.

"Our role is to build bridges among different people."

[Chris Herlinger, international correspondent for Global Sisters Report, interviewed Archbishop Moses Costa during a 2015 assignment to Bangladesh for GSR and NCR.]

This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.