News



Family members who lost their loved ones during the 2019 Easter bomb attacks carry the bloodstained statue of the risen Christ in the Easter profession March 31 at St. Sebastian's Church in Katuwapitiya, a Negombo suburb in Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)



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Negombo, Sri Lanka — May 16, 2024

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Thousands of Sri Lankan Catholics attended the fifth annual memorial service, April 21, of the 2019 Easter bombing, where the church initiated the process of declaring the victims as "heroes of faith," with the hope of canonizations eventually to follow. The participants at St. Sebastian's Church's ceremonies in Negombo included the victims' family members and Catholic nuns who engaged in their healing.

Though "we are sure they are already saints in heaven," families still await justice from the government, lamented Dominican Sr. Sirima Opanayake, the principal of the Ave Maria Branch School in the church vicinity. Seven of her students were killed in the explosion.

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Around 8:45 a.m. on Easter Sunday in 2019, a series of bomb explosions in three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka killed at least 270 people, including over 50 children. More than 500 were wounded.

The largest casualty was at St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya, a Negombo suburb. As many as 116, mostly Sri Lankan Catholics, attending the morning Mass were killed. St. Anthony's Shrine, Kochchikade in Colombo, the national capital, reported 55 deaths.



Some Dominican Sisters serving the parish joined the Easter procession on March 31. (Thomas Scaria)

As many as 47 foreigners were killed in blasts in three luxury hotels in Colombo.

On the fifth anniversary, bishops from the country's 12 dioceses and hundreds of priests joined a rally starting from the Colombo shrine to the Negombo church, 24 miles north.

The family members carried placards with the victims' photos and the bloodstained statue of the risen Christ in the procession.



Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith leads a rally April 21 from St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo to St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo to mark the fifth anniversary of the Easter bomb attacks. (Courtesy of Sr. Sirima Opanayake)

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, archbishop of Colombo and the head of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, who led the memorial services in Negombo, announced the start of the canonization process for the victims.

"The first step is to address them as 'heroes of faith' and eventually as saints as a group," the cardinal said at the service. He has initiated the process of collecting signatures and approvals from Catholics of Sri Lanka to go with a petition to submit to the Vatican to officially declare them as heroes of faith.

Fr. Jude Khrishanth Fernando, the archdiocesan media spokesperson, told GSR that several parishes have already completed this process and submitted the signatures.

Sr. Manoranji Murthy of the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, who worked as a counselor to victims' families, said she is happy about the canonization process of the victims, especially the school children.

"I was really touched by the agony of Niranjalee, who lost her two daughters and husband in the Easter attack," she said when GSR met her in her convent on Easter, March 31.



The spot of explosion during Easter celebrations in St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya, Sri Lanka, maintained as it is (Thomas Scaria)

Murthy, however, lamented that the world has denied the victims justice, as no culprit has been convicted.

"I don't know who is playing games and who is to be blamed," said the nun in her 30s, who seemed upset as she was getting ready for the Easter meal with her sisters.

The attacks were linked to ISIS and were carried out by nine suicide bombers attached to a little-known Sri Lankan Islamic militant group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath (National Monotheism Organization).

On April 7, the Divine Mercy Sunday, GSR visited a mass graveyard in Negombo and found several relatives engaged in cleaning tombs to prepare for the fifth anniversary memorial. Most families preferred to not talk about their loss and grief.

"Ask my daughter if you have any questions," said Raveen Peiris, who was cutting grass with a machine, pointing to the cross on a tomb with his daughter.



Raveen Peiris, whose daughter died in the 2019 Easter bomb attacks, cleans her tomb to prepare for the fifth memorial service. (Thomas Scaria)

Sushanth (single name), who lost his wife and three daughters, appeared distracted and was uninterested in speaking to the media, as he and another person collected grass in a nylon sack.

"They are still in trauma, at least when they are in this graveyard," said Kumari Fernando, who broke her silence. She said the other family members are in anguish over the delay in getting justice.

Kumari, in her 40s, did not lose anyone to the bombing, but her two children lost their eardrums. "Even I had hearing issues till recently and [am] now getting better," she said, recalling that she was sitting in the sixth row from the place of explosion in the Negombo church.

She said the church's move to declare the victims as "heroes of faith" will console the families, but their "silence" will continue until they get justice.



Kumari Fernando, who was wounded in the 2019 Easter bombing in Sri Lanka, at the graveyard on April 7, Divine Mercy Sunday (Thomas Scaria)

"There is a volcano raging in their hearts, although they never resort to violence or reciprocation," observed the woman, who thanked the cardinal for preventing such reactions from Christians in the island nation.

Fernando said the nuns have really helped them overcome the initial trauma and continued to support the victims' families for about two years. She thanked Good Shepherd Sr. Dnalika Perera for supporting her to accept the reality gracefully.

She said the families in Negombo found hope when they saw the statue of the risen Christ had survived the explosion, just 10 feet away.

On this Easter Sunday, they were in the forefront carrying the bloodstained statue in a procession through the streets of Katuwapitiya.

A band of school children playing "Ave Maria" led the procession.



The Easter procession by the family members and parishioners with the statue of the risen Christ ends at St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya, Sri Lanka, March 31. (Thomas Scaria)

Opanayake agreed that ongoing emotional support to the victims' families has decreased, as everyone tends to forget the incident, relegating it as a dark episode.

"But how can people like Sushanth cope up with the reality when his entire family is perished in the suicide attack suddenly?" she asked.

She said the April 21 memorial service has brought some "consoling moments and empathy" for them.

Murthy said people such as Niranjalee now find comfort in having their own people to intercede for them in heaven.



A mass graveyard on St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya, Sri Lanka, with photos displayed on the crosses of the victims of the 2019 Easter bombing (Thomas Scaria)

Fr. Manjula Niroshan Fernando, St. Sebastian's Church parish priest since the bombing, said the affected families are "upset and they are losing their trust" in the government.

"Many are still struggling with their trauma and frustrations, and at times, we feel helpless to address them," the priest, who coordinates rehabilitation programs in the parish, told GSR.

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However, he expressed happiness that the parish "has produced 116 heroes of the faith, who will intercede for us."

At the memorial, the cardinal observed that when the victims are declared "heroes of faith, the international community will come to recognize them," he said

"We have lost trust in the system, and therefore, now we are going to appeal to the Lord for justice."