Parishioners of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Seneca, Kansas, embrace before a special Mass c

Parishioners of Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Seneca, Kansas, embrace before a special Mass concelebrated by Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, on April 3, 2025. Earlier that day the parish's pastor, Father Raj "Arul" Carasala, 57, was shot and killed in front of the parish rectory. (OSV News/Jay Soldner, The Leaven)

by NCR Staff

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Seneca, Kansas — April 6, 2025
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The man charged in the shooting death of a Catholic priest in rural Kansas previously wrote letters that appeared in the local newspaper, including one in which he said, "maybe if we just follow Donald Trump's example we'll 'make the Church great again,' " a Topeka, Kansas, television station reported.

The alleged gunman, 66-year-old Gary Hermesch from Tulsa, Oklahoma, is accused of killing Father Arul Carasala on April 3. Hermesch appeared before a judge on April 4 after being charged with first-degree murder by the Nemaha County District Attorney.

KSNT television station reported that Hermesch has written letters-to-the-editor published in The Courier-Tribune, a newspaper covering Nemaha County, Kansas. The letters contained opinions about Catholicism and the Vatican, but did not mention Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Father Carasala or the town of Seneca.

Sheriff Richard Vernon of Nemaha County, Kan., talks with Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of

Sheriff Richard Vernon of Nemaha County, Kansas, speaks with Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, outside of the church in Seneca, Kansas, where a

priest was killed earlier in the day, April 3, 2025. (OSV News/Jay Soldner, The Leaven)

“Let’s not sweat the small stuff, though, maybe if we just follow Donald Trump's example we’ll 'make the Church great again,'" an August 2021 letter signed by Gary Hermesch said. "So why are things headed south like a runaway freight train? Simple. The faith is not being taught. Now is that equality and tolerance of other religions, or what?"

The Courier-Tribune shared the letters with KSNT.

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Officers responded to the church on April 3 to reports of gunshots, according to a report from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. Deputies with the Nemaha County Sheriff’s Office and officers with the Seneca Police Department found the priest outside the rectory with gunshot wounds, KSNT reported. First responders took Father Carasala to a nearby hospital where he died.

Father Raj "Arul" Carasala, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Seneca, Kansas, who was fa

Father Raj "Arul" Carasala, was remembered as a "beloved priest, leader and friend." (OSV News/courtesy Archdiocese of Kansas City)

On April 3, hundreds gathered at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Seneca, Kansas, on the evening of April 3 to mourn the tragic death of Father Carasala, 57, according to The Leaven newspaper via OSV News.

The community, about 120 miles northwest of Kansas City, Missouri, attended a prayer vigil led by Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, with eight priests from the region concelebrating Mass.

In brief remarks, Father Joel Haug, pastor of three parishes, told those gathered, "These are the moments we really need to be there for each other." Of Father Carasala, Haug said, "He loves you all. He will continue to love you."

Naumann reflected on Father Carasala's dedication to the church and its congregation, highlighting the beauty of the community's presence in the church.

"There really are no words for an occasion like this," he said, adding, "It takes a lot to be a priest today. It requires heroic love."