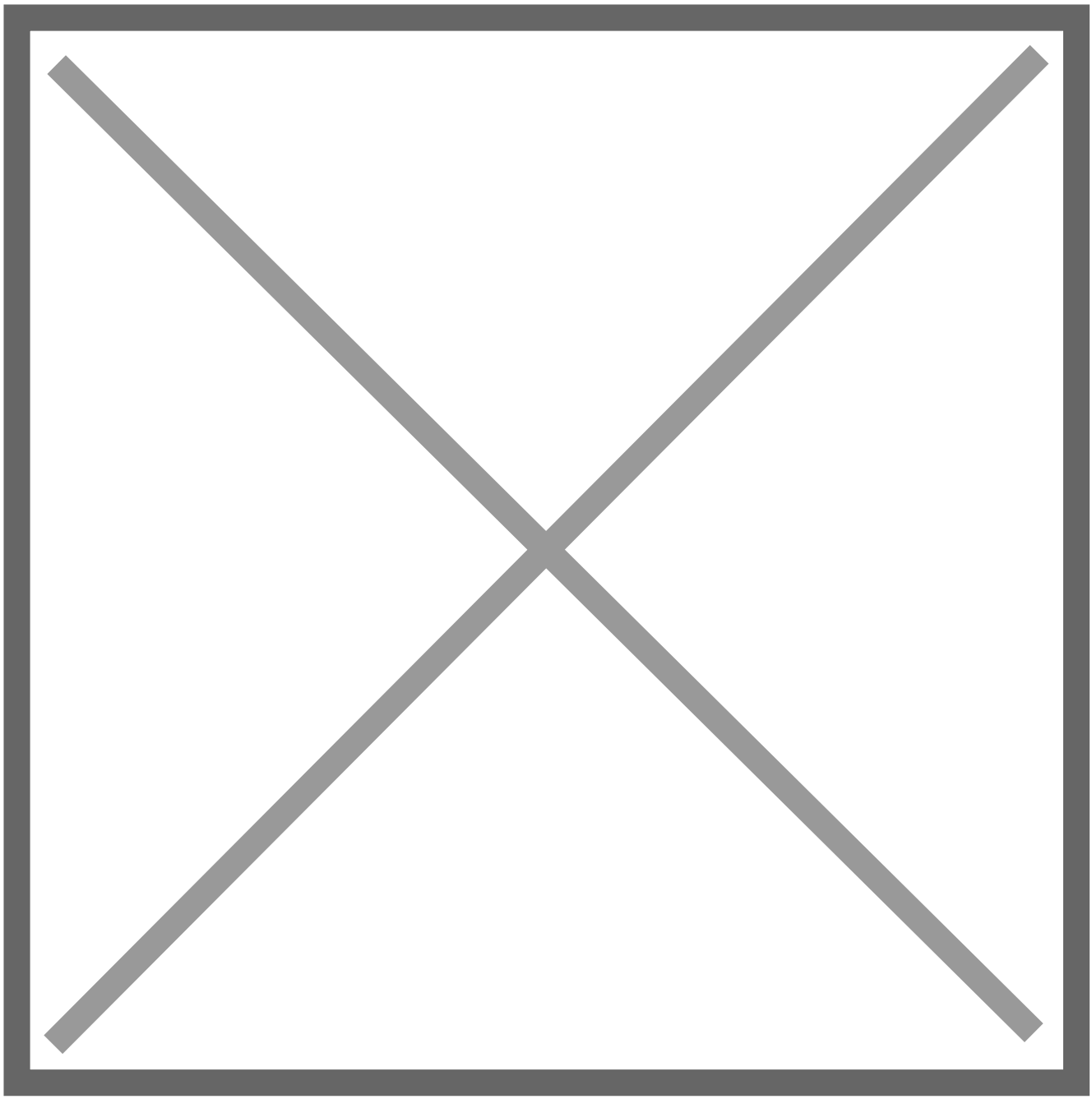
News



Parishioners of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Seneca, Kan., embrace before a special Mass concelebrated by Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City on April 3, 2025, after the pastor, Fr. Raj "Arul" Carasala, was killed outside his own rectory earlier that day. (OSV News/The Leaven/Jay Soldner)

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Five minutes.

That's how much time passed between Todd Leonard's last meeting with Fr. Arul Carasala and the moment Leonard found the priest fatally wounded outside his own rectory in Seneca on April 3, 2025.

A former principal of the parish school for 24 years, Leonard regularly met with Carasala, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish. As he walked back to the school that day, he thought he heard three gunshots. Uncertain, he returned to the rectory by another route.
The shock he experienced remains etched in his memory.

"I think over time that it's not something that you're going to forget," Leonard said. "But you just have to remember the positives about Fr. Arul and all the positive things he did for the school and the church."

Carasala was ordained for the Diocese of Cuddapah in his native country of India in 1994 and arrived in the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas in 2004. He became a U.S. citizen in 2011, serving in the parishes of Nemaha-Marshall County for over 20

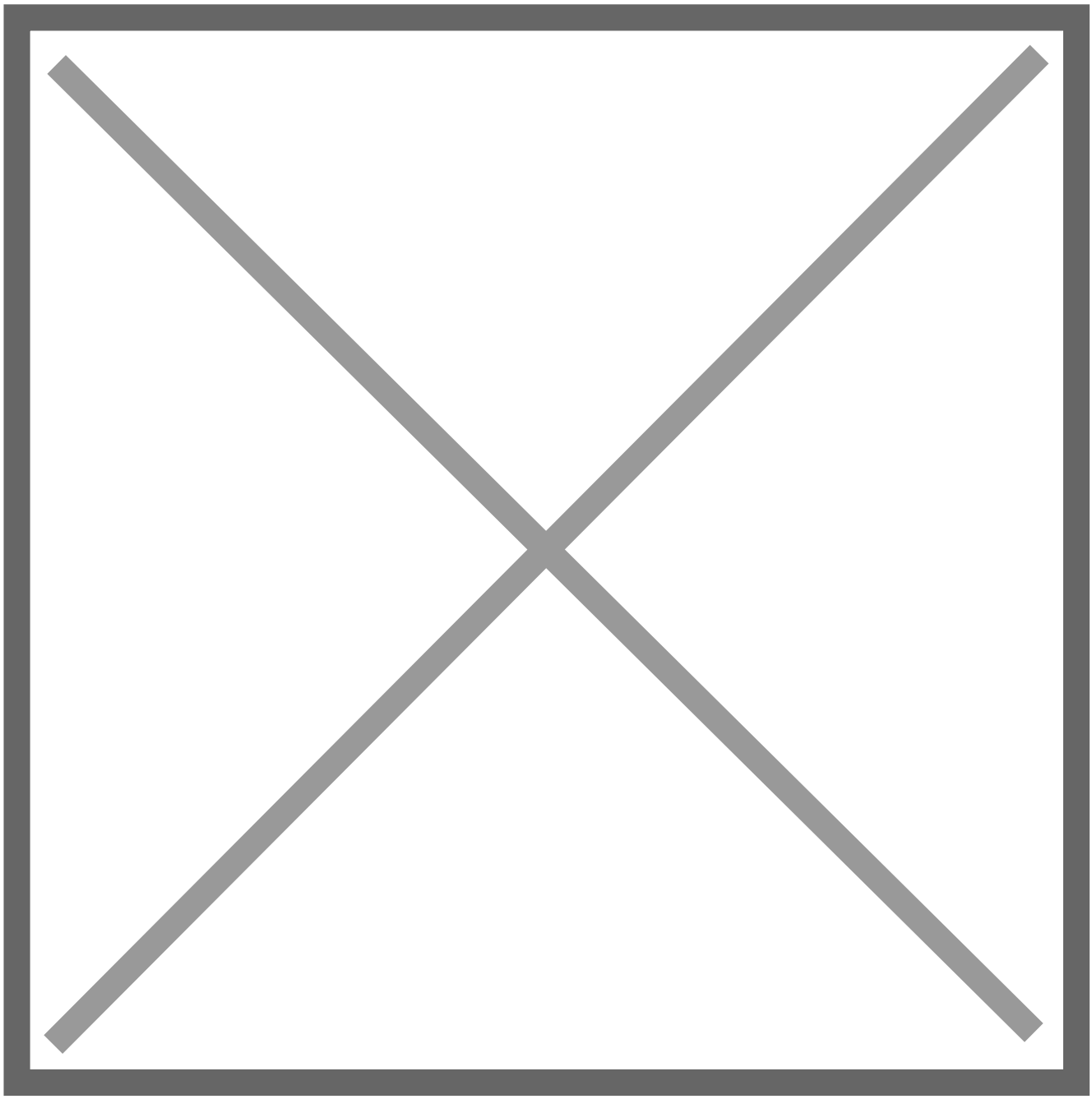
years.

The priest died of his injuries within hours of the shooting, and his alleged shooter turned himself in almost immediately. Carasala's parishioners and Catholics across the archdiocese were left trying to make sense of his untimely death.

A year later, retired Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City celebrated a liturgy on Good Friday, April 3, the anniversary of Carasala's death.

It was a chance for parishioners of Sts. Peter and Paul to continue what they've done all year — remember, honor and heal.

"It's really hard to believe that it's been a year," Leonard told The Leaven, the Kansas City's archdiocesan news outlet.



Fr. Raj "Arul" Carasala, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Seneca, Kan., who was fatally shot in his rectory April 3, 2025, is pictured in a Sept. 20, 2020, photo. On the anniversary of the priest's death, now-retired Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City celebrated a liturgy on Good Friday, April 3, 2026. (OSV News/The Leaven/Kayla Hulsing)

For Michelle Haverkamp, the timeline is just as vivid.

Six days before Carasala's death, she signed a contract to become principal. After seven years as assistant principal, she had hesitated, but the pastor reassured her.

"He told me, 'Don't worry. I'll be here. I wouldn't leave you here your first year,'" she said.

He introduced her at an all-school assembly that same day. The following Tuesday, he stopped by her classroom.

"He said, 'Everything's going to be fine. You're going to do great,'" Haverkamp recalled. "That was the last conversation I had with him."

In the months that followed, Haverkamp and Leonard led a grieving school community through difficult firsts — first Communion, graduation and a new school year.

"We had a staff that was hurting and students that were sad," Haverkamp said.

Fr. Joel Haug, now pastor, led prayer services focused on healing, and seminarian Trey Niesen's presence helped steady the school.

"We talk openly about Fr. Arul," Haverkamp said. "Sometimes it brings tears, but then the kids remember the positive things, and we move forward."

Traditions continued. When eighth graders wondered who would share a graduation meal with them, Haug stepped in.

Now, a year later, Haverkamp sees renewal.

"I feel like our school community is in a great place right now," she said.

Reminders of Carasala remain in every classroom, where candles bearing his photo glow throughout the day.

For seventh grader Sophia Leonard, his memory is simple.

"He was always giving us high fives," she said. "He was always spreading joy and always smiling."

One lesson still stands out in her mind.

"He said you can't just go to church and light a candle. You have to go deeper in your faith."

That call has shaped the school's response.

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"We talk a lot about what a blessing it is to receive the Eucharist," Haverkamp said, noting that Mass, adoration and reconciliation have helped bring healing. "Jesus is present with us, and we're not alone."

Parishioners Jim and Myra Runnebaum remember the shock of that day — and their concern for the school's children.

"I was more concerned about the kids than I was about myself," Jim said.

Healing took time.

"It's not something you rush," he added.

The couple later helped lead the creation of a memorial in the church's narthex. A shadow box displays Carasala's vestments and personal items, including a chasuble still marked with wax from a candle used during adoration shortly before his death.

"It's been an honor to do it for him," Jim said.

"It's still been kind of hard," Myra added.

For many, the memories surface unexpectedly.

"I kind of got a little teary-eyed," said parishioner Bob Niehues of the first time he saw the shadow box.

Many speak of Carasala's continued presence.

"He's not gone," Jim said. "His spirit is in everything that happens here."

Ahead of the Easter Triduum, Haug said that with the anniversary of Carasala's death falling during that time it would be "an especially weighty moment of prayer and remembrance woven through the Passion of our Lord."

He said the past year has been marked by grief and grace.

"We as a parish are still grieving," he said. "His physical absence is felt. But I also believe that he gave his life for the church … and is accompanying this community."

The parish has honored Carasala through events like a memorial 5K, the "Rooted in Christ" event and a rosary and Mass on his birthday.

Amid the sorrow, Haug sees a deepening of faith.

"I've seen many people lean into their faith and start to find peace and healing," he said. "The most powerful legacy a priest can leave is helping people come to know the Lord more deeply. … I believe Fr. Arul's intercession is blessing this move of the Holy Spirit among the people of this community."