# Saint Anthony’s Church Kochchikade: A National Shrine to the People’s Saint

Posted on

In the center of a busy three-way street stands a church dedicated to Anthony of Padua, the saint of miracles. The 19th-century church with an entrance flanked by Romanesque towers is the antithesis of a crowded locality. Yet over the years, it has integrated into its congested and shop-filled locality with alleyways of housings. It overlooks a melting pot of diversity in the heart of Colombo. Inside this church, devotees from all over Sri Lanka seek solace from life’s ills. At Saint Anthony’s Church, Kochchikade hearts unite in obeisance to a twelfth-century saint who has looked down for two centuries on people who seek relief at his feet.

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Garland offerings to the miraculous St Anthony’s is a common practice among

believers.

Their eyes sought the heavens. Outstretched hands of a multitude sought the divine ears. Praying hands and eyes closed in meditation. There was a purpose to their presence. A journey of redemption through one man’s favor. At the famed church dedicated to Anthony of Padua in Kochchikade Colombo, one sees the depth of human emotions and the profundity of visceral human vulnerability. The church is a veritable theatre of explicit worship, with people bravely making a tough call to go the “extra mile” on bended knees to the altar. Offering lit candles, some even life-sized, is essential to people’s worship. The cynosure of all eyes and hands is a miniature statue of miracles, the first statue of the church. It’s routine to see people streaming into its presence, their hands on the glass separating the 200 years old figure, with hopeful eyes appealing at its countenance – with the belief that the miraculous powers to heal their woes rest inside that same enclosure. Below the glittering miniature statue of the saint stands a short stump everyone touches, where they would stay to earnestly feel it in prayer for a while. Others were tying white fabric strips around it, committing to the ribbon vow. Everywhere one turns, there is a sincere expression of people’s devotion to Anthony, and the church has given due place to the man’s years of service to God in preaching and praying for people’s desires to come true during his earthly life.

As if one weren’t enough, a choice of saints was waiting to be sought elsewhere.

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The church was raised from a crucifix to a national shrine through tempestuous times with the Colombo Harbor and the sea in the background. Catholics in Sri Lanka in the 18th century were enduring Dutch persecution, preventing priests from exercising public ministry. Still, many foreign priests risked their lives to serve in Sri Lanka. It was also a difficult time for the people in the area. An advancing sea was threatening to erode the land, and in this midst had arrived Goanese priest Anthony Kochchiyar to administer to the spiritual needs of the people in the locality. Like so many others, he worked in disguise by running a grocery store during the day that became a sanctuary for worship at dusk. The people called it “Kochchiyar’s Kade” (meaning Kochchiyar’s shop), which evolved into Kochchikade.

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The people turned to Father Anthony for prayer against the advancing waves. Pray he did after planting a crucifix at the site where the church stands today. The first miracle witnessed by a multitude took place when the advancing waves receded, and in that place was built the first sanctuary to honor the priest’s patron saint. After the initial mud structure, the first modest church was built in 1806. The first image of the saint was placed at the altar in 1822. It is one of the most captivating images bearing a quaintness and placidity worthy of veneration. Incidentally, this image has stood at this spot since its arrival, where once stood a cross that stopped the seas. Because the first miracle attributed to the saint happened on this very mark centuries ago, praying at this image is a must for every visitor, ruled by a belief that their prayers would be answered. So they gaze into the image seeking favor. The simple sanctuary to St. Anthony has evolved over the years to feed the needs of the times, with expansions in the 1830s and 1930s.

According to Father Lalith Perera, the church’s Administrator, the reason is its reputation as a church of miracles. He says numerous lives have been changed, even those of non-believers who have received favors and seen miracles. Father Lalith has great love and devotion for the saint and feels blessed in his presence. And so it is to Anthony that people turn in financial distress, in disease and for restoration of health, for business success, for employment, for relationships, for happy marriages, for housing needs, for education, for partners, for fertility, to find lost goods and even to secure a visa for travel. Such is the devotion that people would donate part of the gains from a property sale to the church as promised or bring their newborn in thanksgiving for the blessing of parenthood. So diverse are people’s needs amid a desperate hunger for solace that they believe Anthony is the saint for all reasons and seasons.

Indeed he seems to be the answer for all ills, as Father Lalith affirms that Christians and non-Christians in great faith continue to seek the church and the saint. The church bears testament to his words with a ceaseless flow of people holding life-sized candles, making vows or thanking for favors granted, kneeling at sanctuaries in prayer, applying holy oil or feeling glass cases enshrining saintly images, their

hopes burning brightly as the candles in the troughs. With no theological basis for such overt rituals, Father Lalith pointed out that they are practices founded by people, which have become essential to venerating the saint, but at the fore of every act remains Christ the Savior.

The theatrics of piety is best viewed every Tuesday, the day dedicated to Anthony of Padua when more than 15,000 people visit the church, which exceeds 20,000 every first Tuesday of the month.

In June, the church prepares to welcome thousands as the month of celebration in Kochchikade begins. The Saint Anthony of Padua feast celebrated on the 13th, gathers many faiths from all over Sri Lanka. It’s a grand celebration and a fitting tribute to a saint of miracles. The preparation for the feast begins on June 3rd with the hoisting of a flag. In the days when there were only a few priests to administer to the needs of several churches, a flag was hoisted to inform people that the priest was in the church. For some unknown reason hoisting a flag has become a tradition in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka associated with a church’s feast.

Kochchikade in June transforms into a magical atmosphere, where the streets leading to the church are festooned with lights and flag poles.

As a sign of shared ownership of a famous saint, everyone with a deep devotion to Anthony wants to show their affinity, from businesses to housing colonies, hoist individual flag poles in preparation for the feast. The culmination of the entire feast is the street procession that takes place on the 13th evening after nine consecutive days of novenas to the saint.

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Masses on the feast day start as early as four in the morning and continue throughout the day. The road and byroads leading to the church are crammed. One would never see this phenomenon in any other church, with thousands streaming into it to celebrate their revered saint. The day’s highlight is the smattering of

roadside booths serving food to passersby, repaying the saint’s generosity towards his followers. One can sense the festive atmosphere in the air that day, and the days after that, remaining through June. More than 100,000 people are expected at the feast this year after nearly four years of interruptions. But not even the 2019 Easter Sunday explosion lulled the place and diminished people’s love for Anthony, pointed out Father Lalith.

Interestingly, the church has maintained close ties with the Sri Lankan Navy owing to its adjacency to the Colombo Harbor, and it is fondly known as the church of the Navy. And so, in tribute to their affiliation, Navy personnel secure the chariot and navigate it through crowded streets. So crowded is the procession route that one has to weave through throngs to get to a spot for a glimpse of the chariot.

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Thousands of garlands are thrown along the road at the foot of the image. Once in a while, a gold chain in gratitude for favors received makes a landing too. Amid the grand celebrations, what is unmissable is the people’s piety. If not for their abiding belief in a man who lived so long ago in a faraway country, why would people in their thousands endure the chaos to get a glimpse of the man they believe holds the key to their problems? When Anthony of Padua chose a life of service, he would never have expected such a sea of devotion tied to great expectations hundreds of years later. In life, Anthony was a great enabler. In death, he continues his legacy at Kochchikade with great assurance.



Saint Anthony’s Church shines a light of hope in the dark.



Father Lalith Perera, Church Administrator.



Visions of devotion.



Worshippers of all faiths seek the blessings of the divine saint during solace times.



The historical image – the first statue of the Saint brought to the church 200 years ago.




The crucifix and the entombed image of Jesus just behind the altar table.



Reclining image of Anthony at the side sanctuary dedicated to the saint.



The Blessed Sacrament sanctuary



Waiting for a miracle – lighting candles to seek and to thank the Saint of miracles



Saint Anthony’s Church Kochchikade, like the Saint, is a light of hope to all.