The Spiritual Light of St Lucia’s Cathedral

Posted on

The charismatic church nave leading up to the holy altar

St Lucia’s Cathedral in Kotahena continues to shine its light as a beacon set on a hill.

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The side altar with the statue of the Sacred Heart and tabernacle

Kottanchina during the 19th century was a verdant jungle. Today, Kotahena is a bustling township, where many Catholic families have lived all their lives. It is crowded with residences and businesses, a transformed landscape far from the kottan groves that covered the area in the years gone by. However, one thing has

remained constant throughout in the urban Kotahena – St Lucia’s Cathedral.

Stepping into this holy structure was a spiritual experience. The emphasis on the imposing entrance, the arches and majestic wooden door takes you to an interior of awe-inspiring silence. The magnificence of this Cathedral is a solemn declaration of the status of the Catholic Church, reflecting the supremacy that it retained throughout history. Dignified in all its ornamentation, the Cathedral is a blend of European Renaissance and opulent Baroque architecture.

The grandeur of the Cathedral of St Lucia is in contrast to its humble beginnings. Set up as a small hut in 18th century during Dutch colonisation, it was later administered by Oratorian missionaries and has been described as the chapel of St Lucy in old documents. The Cathedral that stands today had taken 30 years to complete. Although construction was completed in 1902, the Cathedral was blessed and opened for worship on December 12, 1887, the day before the feast of St Lucia. It was the first time the sacred feast was celebrated in the island.

The centre aisle along the nave has wooden pews on either side that were once owned by certain families in the area, and their names were even engraved on the benches. The two aisles on either side separated by large columns have larger than life statues of saints of the Catholic Church along with confessionals and the Stations of the Cross. The semi-circle vault over the centre nave, has been made of bricks, a marvel preserved amidst the moods of nature.

Standing within one feels the dignity and glory of the sanctuary. The apse or half-dome ceiling, is impressive. As light came down streaming through the windows in the apse over the sanctuary, we could not resist but raise our eyes in wonderment. Four paintings of the Gospel writers, looked down upon the hallowed altar from where the message of salvation is proclaimed.

> Cathedral of St Lucia is the seat of the Archbishop of Colombo and His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith will be celebrating trilingual High Mass on Christmas Eve (11.45pm) at the Cathedral.

The Eucharist Tabernacle at the sanctum is made of marble and has a large crucifix. The altar table of Burma teak installed in 1893 is a marvellous centrepiece of carvings. On one side of the main altar is the heavily carved ‘cathedra’ – the

‘Bishop’s Throne’ used for special occasions. It was used by Pope John Paul II when he visited the Cathedral in 1995.

The light and colours of the stained glass windows were a reflection of ethereal beauty. Images of apostles Peter and Paul in nine foot windows, above which the circular stained glass window depicting the Assumption of Mary into heaven were like the light of heaven streaming through the church. More stained glass windows in the northern and southern transepts include paintings of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, the Holy Family and the eight foot pictures of St Anne as well as St Anthony.

Time stands still – the church gable with statues of St Joseph, Mother Mary and St

Anthony

We were transfixed, yet were momentarily brought back to reality by the church bells ringing at midday calling believers to recite the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ and the ‘Angelus prayer’. And so our journey to see the bells of the Cathedral began. As we reached the upper deck along a stairway at the entrance to the church, we couldn’t stop admiring the pipe organ in the choir loft, which had been donated in 1934 by a French priest.

The gigantic bells befitting the enormity of the Cathedral have their own names. Anthony Thomas, the biggest bell caught our attention. It weighs 4,300lbs. Its majesty is displayed in the intricate engravings of floral wreaths, the crucifixion, the images of the Sacred Heart, Mary, Joseph and the 12 apostles. This being no ordinary bell, is rung only on special occasions, and needs the strength of at least six men. The remaining three bells are equally elaborate. Their majestic sounds have expressed joy, sorrow and solemnity throughout the Cathedral’s history.

Our journey would have ended if not for an upper deck that had the motor of the Cathedral clock. This amazing and complex process has two iron rods that are connected to a device situated 20 feet away from the dial. The clock is wound by different weights. When in working order, the clock has to be wound every 40 hours by hand.

Even in the present day, St Lucia’s Cathedral is a sanctuary of spiritual guidance as it has been for over a century.