

A Vow Fulfilled: The National Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka

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An ancient church altar and statues at the Tewatte Basilica museum

In the peaceful grounds of the Tewatte Basilica, devotees almost in unison with nature entreat Our Lady of Lanka to intercede in their prayers for themselves and Sri Lanka.

Words Keshini de Silva **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham



The sanctum where the Holy Eucharist is placed in a replica of the Ark of the

Covenant

A grand dome shone turquoise under the warm morning sun, the cross above it surrounded by the aura of salvation. The National Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka emerges into view amidst a thick flank of evergreens.

The church façade is unlike any other in Sri Lanka; the main focus being the copper crucifix. A heavenly sense wraps one walking towards the basilica, nature grows quiet and blocks out the worldly sounds. The rock walls of the quaint structure are lined with murals illustrating the historic milestones of Catholicism in Sri Lanka. This includes the arrival of the Portuguese, Sri Lanka's Catholic ruler King Mugalan of the Kotte Kingdom and the sermon delivered by St Joseph Vaz in Kandy, who was canonized in 2015.

An overwhelming sense of divinity impresses upon the worshipper kneeling within the nave of the church. Rays of sunlight seep in to add a divine glow on the altar while the soft murmur of prayers fills the air. The sanctum where the Holy Eucharist is placed, takes the form of the Ark of the Covenant, its features as described by the Old Testament of the Bible. Above the sanctum, is the statue of "Our Lady of Lanka", crafted under the guidance of then Archbishop of Colombo Cardinal Thomas Cooray to represent the sentiments of the Sri Lankan worshipper. Hence the base of the statue is decorated with Na (Ceylon ironwood) flowers.

The National Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka was established as a fulfilment of a vow. In 1942 Archbishop Jean Marie Masson knelt at the Grotto at the Our Lady of Lourdes chapel in Tewatte and beseeched Mother Mary to intercede on behalf of Sri Lanka and protect the country from the perils of World War II. When the Island has been saved, the Cardinal vowed to build a Basilica in Mother Mary's name. This chapel, grotto and a well with healing waters continue to exist today just opposite the Tewatte Basilica. At the end of WWII, Sri Lanka was left largely unharmed, and thus the Catholic church led by the most reverend Cardinal Thomas Cooray fulfilled the vow in 1974. During ground work for construction, in 1948, Pope Pius XII recognised Our Lady of Lanka, as the principal patroness of the Island.

The first statue of Our Lady of Lanka is a smaller version of the one above the altar. It is displayed on the right side of the nave. Mother Mary and the Infant Jesus in her hand are adorned with gold crowns designed with local motifs in mind. Here the Infant Jesus holds the gold Holy Rosary, which according to the Tewatte Basilica Chronical by Most Reverend Oswald Gomis, Former Archbishop of Colombo, was

gifted by Pope Paul VI.

The annual Feast of Our Lady of Lanka is held on February 4, which also coincides with the Independence Day of the Island. The festive High Mass is usually held on the following Sunday. This year the feast will be celebrated on Sunday February 5, 2017.

Cardinal Thomas Cooray, a 'Servant of God' being considered for canonization as a Saint, was integral in the establishment of the church. His crypt lies in the Blessed Sacrament Chamber below the altar. The cardinal further worked tirelessly to ensure sanitation and access to water for devotees who pilgrimaged to the Basilica. Thus the small reservoir near the Grotto of Our Lady at the Basilica grounds has been named Cardinal Cooray Wewa.



Our Lady of Lourdes chapel, the old Tewatte church

These waters are essential to cater to the thousands that gather during the feast and other significant events, including the special Sick Day service held in August.

Spread across the vast estate of the basilica is the stages of the 'Way of the Cross'.

During the Lenten Season, in an act of remembrance, Catholics throng here to partake in Christ's journey of pain for man's salvation.

Amidst the sanctified grounds there is also a museum, a unique Kandyan-styled structure which displays the relics of Catholicism's centuries long history in the Island. Timber statues of Jesus, Mary and the Saints are displayed each uniquely drawing inspiration from the arts of many countries. Old Vestments or Liturgical Garments and tapestries showcase the colourful influence of the religion.

Visiting the National Basilica will warrant more than a quick stop. Long hours can be spent praying within its many sacred places. Although during the feast days and special Eucharistic Celebrations the church is teeming with the prayers of worshippers, on other days the church echoes a peaceful silence. Families journey here from afar. After leaving their intentions at the feet of the Holy Mother, they picnic on the quiet grounds.

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