

Pastoral Letter on Devasahayam Pillai

Dear Fathers, Brothers, Sisters and my dear faithful,

Thy kingdom come!

The canonization of Blessed Lazarus, popularly known as Devasahayam Pillai who was a Catholic for just seven years will be held at the Vatican on 15 May 2022. Pillai who had lived in the 18th century was a lay person who is believed to have attained Martyrdom upholding his faith. Pillai was an official in the court of the king of the erstwhile Travancore, the present Kerala State. He was born in a Hindu family and was introduced to Christianity by Dutch naval officer Captain De Lannoy during latter's stint as commander of the Travancore army under the king Marthanda Varma Pillai is believed to have been killed by the king for upholding the new faith. It is believed that he underwent brutal torture in the custody before getting executed.

Pillai was born on 23 April 1712 as Neelakanda Pillai, at Nattalam of Vilavancode taluk in the present district of kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu. His parents were Vasudevan Nambuthiri and Devaki Ammal. Pillai started his career with Travancore State as a soldier and later as an official of Neelakadaswamy temple at Padmanabhapuram. It was during his third job as a palace official he befriended De Lannoy and later became a Christian. Devasahayam was declared Blessed on 2 December 2012, at Kottar. His mortal remains are entombed near the altar inside St. Xavier's Church, Kottar, Nagarcoil.

Devasahayam Pillai will be the first lay Catholic in India to be publically recognized as a saint. He will be the sixth Indian born to be declared saint in the Catholic Church. He is also the first Indian lay martyr to be canonized. On the day of his baptism Devasahayam dedicated himself solemnly to Christ: "No one forced me to come; I came by my own free will. I know my heart; He is my God. I have decided to follow him and will do so my whole life". His life was no longer the same; Devasahayam dedicated himself to the proclamation of the Gospel for four years. For accepting Christian faith, he was threatened, beaten, mistreated, imprisoned and tortured uninterruptedly for three years. He bore all the sufferings joyfully and for the love of his Lord Jesus. Despite his sufferings Devasahayam remained firm in his faith. His wife, Bhargavi Ammal too became Catholic and she took the name Gnanapoo Ammal (Theresa).

Devasahayam became very popular among people for his compassion for the people and truthfulness in character. As a result lots of people started to visit him wherever he was put in prison and the authorities decided to eliminate him secretly. So he was taken to a hill called *Kattadimalai* and shot dead and the body was thrown as food for wild animals. The people heard about his killing and discovered his mortal remains, collected

them and buried them in front of the main altar of St. Francis Xavier Church, the present Cathedral of the diocese of Kottar. Ever since his death, the people have regarded him as a saint, frequenting the places connected to the martyr. Following the martyrdom of Devasahayam, wherever the martyr had been taken in chains, a large number of people accepted the gospel of Christ and became Christians. The life, ministry and the death of martyr Devasahayam played a pivotal role in accepting the lordship of Christ by many people of the interior villages.

As we consider the spirituality of Devasahayam Pillai, one is able to learn his zeal for evangelization. In a short span of seven years of being Christian (1745-1752) he showed a great zeal to live his faith and spread the gospel values. He had a passion for evangelization. His exemplary spiritual devotion and the genuine spirit of catechism brought his wife and many others to Christian faith. He found ways and means to spread the Christian faith. The conviction of his Christian identity as a missionary – to be with him and to be sent out (Mk.3:15) – was deeply inter-woven in his mission as a Christian. He spent hours in prayer to make his mission successful. He was fully immersed in the mission of spreading good news. He preached in season and out of season (2 Tim.4:2). He felt a quest to preach the gospel from the spirit of St. Paul; “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel”(1 Cor.9:16).

In our times, the spirit filled enthusiasm of Devasahayam Pillai is a great model for our ministry of evangelization. As it was at his time, so too today evangelization is a challenge. He was ready to undergo trials, temptation, and torture for the sake of the gospel (2Cor.4:8-10, 2Tim.2:9, Acts.22:22). In one sense he personified the missionary zeal of St. Paul (Philip.1:21). Devasahayam Pillai considered the torture and persecution as moments of witness to Christ. He sided with the poor and the people of low status in the society. He was convinced of the equality of all people. He broke the caste laws and mingled freely with the people of the low castes and became one among them. He is a great model for us even today. We shall resolve to follow his footsteps in our prayer life, evangelization and the love for the poor and the marginalized, and above all to accept ‘suffering’ for the sake of Christ.

Blessed Devasahayam Pillai, Pray for us.



Yours devotedly in Christ Jesus

† Ephrem Nariculam
Bishop, Diocese of Chanda

St. Devasahaym Pillai

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| Original Name | : | Neelakanda Pillai |
| Baptismal Name | : | Lazarus (God has helped) |
| Born | : | 23 April 1712 |
| Baptism | : | 1745 |
| Native Place | : | Nattalam, Kanyakumari Dt. T.N |
| Died | : | 14 January 1752 |
| Age | : | 39 |
| Servant of God | : | 1993 |
| Beatification | : | 2 December 2012 (Nagarcoil) |
| Canonization | : | 15 May 2022 (Vatican, Rome) |
| Feast | : | 14 January |