

DEVASAHAYAM PILLAI DECLARED SAINT

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Holy day:Archbishop Thomas J. Netto unveiling a photo of the saint in Thiruvananthapuram on Sunday.Special Arrangement

Devasahayam Pillai, who embraced Christianity in the 18th century, on Sunday became the first Indian layman to be declared a saint by Pope Francis during an impressive canonisation ceremony here at the Vatican.

Devasahayam was recommended for the process of Beatification by the Vatican in 2004, at the request of the Kottar diocese, the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council and the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India.

Pope Francis, 85, canonised Blessed Devasahayam during a Canonisation Mass at St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

A miracle attributed to Devasahayam was recognised by Pope Francis in 2014, clearing the path to his canonisation in 2022.

It was the first canonisation ceremony at the Vatican in over two years. Pope Francis, who has been complaining of strained ligaments in his right knee for months, used a wheelchair to preside over the ceremony. Nine others, including four women, were also canonised along with Devasahayam. "Our calling is to serve the Gospel and our brothers and sisters, to offer our lives without expecting anything in return, or any worldly glory," the Pope said during the ceremony.

"Being disciples of Jesus and advancing on the path of holiness means first and foremost letting ourselves be transfigured by the power of God's love," he said.

Travancore kingdom

Devasahayam was born on April 23, 1712 as Neelakanta Pillai into a Hindu Nair family, at Nattalam in Kanyakumari district, which was part of the erstwhile Travancore kingdom.

He was an official in the court of Travancore's Maharaja Marthanda Varma when he was instructed into the Catholic faith by a Dutch naval commander in 1745. He took the name "Lazarus", or "Devasahayam" in Malayalam, which translates to "God is my help".

"While preaching, he particularly insisted on the equality of all people, despite caste differences. This aroused the hatred of the higher classes, and he was arrested in 1749. After enduring increasing hardships, he received the crown of martyrdom when he was shot on January 14, 1752," a note prepared by the Vatican earlier had said.

Sites linked with his life and death are in Kottar Diocese, in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu.

Devasahayam was declared Blessed on December 2, 2012, in Kottar, 300 years after his birth.

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