News



Sr. Mary Olive Masibo and Fr. Dennis Paddy Wandera make their way to the Uganda Martyrs Shrine Namugongo to honor the 22 Catholic Uganda martyrs who were murdered for refusing to denounce their faith. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)



Doreen Ajiambo

View Author Profile



Gerald Matembu

View Author Profile

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It's a chilly afternoon, and Sr. Mary Olive Masibo and dozens of other faithful have embarked on their 10-day walk of faith to the Uganda Martyrs Shrine Namugongo to honor the 22 Catholic and 23 Anglican martyrs killed between 1885 and 1887 on orders of the king of Buganda Kingdom, Kabaka Mwanga II, for converting to Christianity.

Masibo and other church leaders and congregants began their 250-mile pilgrimage on foot on June 25 in Sironko, a town in the eastern region of Uganda. They are making stopovers along the way for prayers, rest and exercise sessions. The faithful are expected to arrive at the shrine in the northeast of Kampala, the country's capital, on June 3 for the Martyrs' Day celebrations.

Masibo, a member of the Sisters of Mary of Kakamega, and hundreds of other religious sisters on the pilgrimage across the East African nation of more than 45 million people are using the event to pray for the country.

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Pilgrims pray to the martyrs at the Uganda Martyrs Shrine in Namugongo ahead of the Martyrs Day celebration on June 3. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

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Religious sisters attend Mass inside the chapel at the Uganda Martyrs Shrine in Namugongo ahead of the Martyrs Day celebration on June 3. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

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Religious sisters traveling from across Uganda start arriving at Uganda Martyrs Shrine in Namugongo ahead of the Martyrs Day commemoration on June 3. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

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  Pilgrims fill jerrycans with holy waters at the Uganda Martyrs Shrine at Namugongo. Many pilgrims who flock to Namugongo to celebrate Martyrs Day believe that the water from the nearby lake possesses holy powers. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

Uganda is experiencing increased human trafficking, teenage pregnancy and female genital mutilation, domestic violence, child and human sacrifice, corruption, poverty, and famine. The sisters have said the increasing cost of fuel and basic foodstuffs such as flour, cooking oil, bread, sugar and soap has negatively affected the livelihood of the citizens.

"I took this journey of faith to pray for myself and my country," said Masibo, who had already covered 145 miles on foot. "This country is going through a tough time, and many people are suffering because they cannot afford household items. We need spiritual intervention."



Thousands of pilgrims carrying crosses have started arriving at Namugongo Martyrs Shrine amidst pomp ahead of the Uganda Martyrs Day celebration on June 3. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

Ugandans have been celebrating Martyrs Day since the 1920s. when Mwanga II is believed to have murdered Christians for refusing to offer sacrifices to the tribal gods and participating in a civil war that encouraged killing their enemies. Mwanga II felt threatened that the Christian faith, which encouraged people to live an honest life, could bring down the wrath of the ancestors on his kingdom.

The religious sisters said the deaths of those martyred at Namugongo inspires them to commit to the Gospel and believe that everything is possible before God. The event attracts pilgrims from Uganda and neighboring countries including Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan.

On Oct. 18, 1964, the 22 Catholic Uganda martyrs were proclaimed saints by Pope Paul VI.

The sisters said the martyrs had become the source of strength amid the challenges and difficulties many Christians go through in their lives. The nuns said they use the event to pray to God to intervene in the challenges the country is facing and to recommit their faith to God.

Sr. Loyce Rose Nalunkuuma, who was on her way to Namugongo Martyrs' Shrine from Iganga, a town in the eastern region of Uganda, said she was praying during stopovers for God to intervene and end corruption in the country and sexual immorality among teenagers that leads to early pregnancy.



Sr. Loyce Rose Nalunkuuma joins other pilgrims traveling to Namugongo Martyrs Shrine from Iganga, a town in the eastern region of Uganda. The pilgrims are using the event to pray for the country ahead of the Uganda Martyrs Day celebration on June 3. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

Uganda is among the most corrupt countries in the world, with the latest Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International ranking it number 142 out of 180 in 2022. The country's Ministry of Health also shows that 25% of Ugandan teenagers become pregnant by age 19.

"There is a lot of sexual immorality in our country that is destroying the lives of our young people, especially girls," said Nalunkuuma, a member of the Little Sisters of St. Francis. "So the event is important as it allows us to look into ourselves, recognize our sinfulness and repent. I am also praying that corruption and embezzlement end in this country. Our leaders should focus on serving the poor rather than minding their well-being alone."

Sisters and priests have referred to the pilgrimage as a way to renew their faith and zeal in the service to the church.

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"This journey to the shrine is a spiritual journey and you need passion before you start it," said Masibo, noting that they had sacrificed to trek for several days to reach their destination despite having money to board a bus. "We are following our Lord Jesus Christ who died, but mostly the Uganda martyrs who gave us an example of faith in Uganda. If the martyrs died of fire, can't we also try to imitate by sacrificing to walk for days to the shrine?"

Fr. Dennis Paddy Wandera of Christ the King Catholic Church-Budadiri said the 250 miles he is trekking from Sironko to the shrine had rekindled his faith to continue trusting in Jesus Christ despite the daily challenges. He encouraged the more than 1 million pilgrims expected at the shrine to have hope and faith and pray for everything they want, trusting that God will finally answer their prayers.

"As Christians, we are making a pilgrimage because human life is a pilgrimage to heaven," Wandera said on his way to the shrine. "The greatest pilgrimage ever to be made in history is the journey of the people of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. Our Canaan is in heaven, and the martyrs are in heaven. We are walking in their footsteps, and we are preparing ourselves for our final destination, which is heaven."

He also prayed for the country: "As a priest, I pray for our country that they may know God's love and serve God in everything they do. We face many challenges as a nation, from human rights violations to poverty, but I pray peace and heavenly interventions prevail."



Thousands of pilgrims trek to Namugongo Martyrs Shrine ahead of the Uganda Martyrs Day celebration on June 3. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

Meanwhile, thousands of other pilgrims in Uganda and neighboring countries are walking to the shrine, hoping that the prayers and sacrifice will heal their various illnesses, help them get jobs, get married, solve their marital problems, and eradicate poverty in their families.

"I took this journey of faith to pray for my sick mother, who has been battling cancer for a year now. I believe that with the saints praying for me, too, she will be well," said Sarah Nandudu, a pilgrim from Sironko. "I walked for one week to cover 230 kilometers to get here. I know everything will be OK with God's grace."

Namuli Idah, another pilgrim from northern Uganda, said she had trekked for several days to get to the shrine with the hope that the saints would help intercede for her daughters to get married. She gave testimonies of sick people who had been brought to the shrine and said they had been healed of ulcers, cancer and other diseases.

"I expect God to bless my daughters. My children are suffering; they don't have stable marriages. When you pray to the martyrs, they answer prayers," she said.