News



St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo is one of the churches in the Archdiocese of Colombo in Sri Lanka where only boys can serve at Mass. Negombo is known as the "Rome of the East" because of its large Catholic population. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

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Catholic nuns in Sri Lanka are upset over a recent order from Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith banning girls from being altar servers.

The cardinal, the church leader of the island nation, issued the circular last October, saying serving at the altar is reserved for boys as it is "one of the main sources" for priesthood vocations.

Although the rule was only for parishes in the Archdiocese of Colombo where girls served at the altar, it sparked discussions on the role and dignity of women in the church.

"We are deeply saddened by the circular as it has once again underlined the church's patriarchal nature," said a nun on condition of anonymity.

Most nuns Global Sisters Report met were reluctant to speak on the record, saying they revered their cardinal and priests.

"We love our cardinal and are really proud of him as he stood by us like a pillar during the Easter bomb incidents and continues to fight for justice," another nun said.

According to many nuns, the cardinal's order goes against Pope Francis' teachings, who trusts and appreciates women and appoints some to key Vatican roles, including one who was appointed as the head of a Vatican department.

They also pointed out that neighboring countries such as India and Pakistan have altar boys and girls. They do not see girls at the altar as an obstacle to nurturing vocations to the priesthood.

Sister Sreenati (single name), a member of the Daughters of Providence for the Deaf and Dumb serving St. Anne's Church in Negombo, north of Colombo, said she could appreciate the cardinal's intention, but "our little angels may not understand why they have to be away from [the] altar."

Salvatorian Sr. Selvarani Fernandopulle, a social worker in Don Boscopura, a tsunami rehabilitation village, said vocations to women's congregations do not depend on girls serving at the altar.

"We get at least four candidates every year who are motivated by seeing our works among people rather than serving at the altar," she added.

Some parishes in the Archdiocese of Colombo that had altar girls until the cardinal's circular now allow them to read at Mass.

Jessica Peter, a Mass reader who has taught catechism for 25 years in a Catholic Church in Colombo, said she started as an altar girl.

"Readers have a significant role during the Mass. Women often carry the Bible to the altar ceremoniously and often read the first and second readings," she told GSR.

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She said they still sit with the altar boys throughout the Mass and never feel discriminated against.

Emidia Benedict, another female Mass reader, told GSR that she loves serving the church as a reader or altar servant.

Benedict, dressed in a Mass reader's long-sleeved dress similar to the cassock with pictures of the Eucharist, said everyone has a right and duty to serve the altar in various roles.

"I am extremely happy as a reader, and when I exercise this role each Sunday, I feel I am taking part in the ministry of spreading the Lord's message," said the woman in her late 20s.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Dayalini, who serves in the neighboring Diocese of Chilaw, said vocations for women's religious congregations are also important for the church.

She added that her parish has nine sub-stations and depends heavily on nuns and women for church services.

"We do almost 70 percent of pastoral [roles] in a parish, such as catechism teachers, prayer animators and Communion distributors," explained the nun who had served the Archdiocese of Colombo until recently.

Fr. Dilshan Perera, pastor of St. Anthony's Church Borella, two miles from the archbishop's house, said he understands the cardinal's concern as few young men in city parishes volunteer to become priests.

"The cardinal has every right to make decisions for his archdiocese, but implementing them has practical difficulties," he said. "We rarely get boys to serve as altar boys, but girls are always readily available."

Meanwhile, some laywomen in Negombo parishes under the Archdiocese of Colombo said they have had no altar girls thus far.

"We were quite comfortable with it until we heard about this circular, which has made us secondary citizens in the Christian life," lamented Shyami Sirivardana, a Negombo parishioner who reads at Mass occasionally.

She said most Massgoers in her parish are women active in all church activities. "Suddenly, it looks like their roles have been belittled," she added.

She expressed surprise that the circular came from someone who headed the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments from 2005 to 2009.

According to Code of Canon Law, any layperson can serve as a lector or acolyte. In 2021, Pope Francis amended the canon law to include women as candidates for installation as acolytes and lectors.

Fr. Jude Fernando, the Archdiocese of Colombo public relations officer, said the circular never intended to hurt girls or women in the church or belittle their roles.

"The cardinal is highly appreciative of the roles played by women in the church, especially the Catholic nuns in his archdiocese, and never intended to hurt them," the priest told GSR.

Fernando, however, clarified that allowing altar girls will distract boys, and they may not benefit from an orientation to the priesthood.

Editor's note: This story has been edited and republished with revisions and updates following communication with the reporter and sources.