News
Spirituality



Women pilgrims raise their hands in prayer before a statue depicting the execution of one of the Uganda martyrs. Located at Namugongo, the site is a major center of Christian faith and reflection, especially during the June 3 annual feast day celebrations. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)



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Namugongo, Uganda — June 2, 2025

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At dawn, as mist clings to the red earth and incense mingles with the dust kicked up by weary pilgrims, a solemn hush falls over Uganda's most sacred Catholic site.

The Uganda Martyrs Shrine at Namugongo — where 22 young Catholic converts were executed in the late 19th century for refusing to renounce their faith — has become more than a place of remembrance. It is now a living sanctuary of intercession, where the prayers of millions are offered not in blood, but in whispered hopes, folded notes, and phone screens.

As Uganda prepared to commemorate Martyrs Day, June 3, the shrine witnessed a surge of prayer requests from across East Africa and beyond. Pilgrims, particularly Catholic sisters, are transforming the site into a center for collective spiritual petition, carrying the burdens of families, communities and entire nations.

"This ground feels like a wellspring for the soul," said Fr. Peter Paul Okuta, spiritual director of pilgrims from the Diocese of Lira, Uganda. He led 1,020 pilgrims on a 10-day, 220-mile journey to Namugongo. "People are not just honoring the martyrs anymore — they're entrusting their lives to them."

Located just outside Uganda's capital, Kampala, the shrine stands on the site where King Mwanga II ordered 13 Catholic converts burned alive in 1886. In total, 22 Catholic martyrs were canonized in 1964 by Pope Paul VI, turning their sacrifice into a powerful symbol of faith and endurance across Africa.

Related: Sisters join thousands on pilgrimage across East Africa to honor Uganda's martyrs

Each year, more than 2 million pilgrims arrive on foot, bicycle or bus. Many walk for days or weeks, carrying rosaries, wooden crosses and stacks of prayer requests — both personal and communal.

Carriers of hope

Sisters like Sr. Jackie Tendema of the Daughters of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus are serving as spiritual couriers. At the monument of St. Kizito, the youngest of the martyrs, she paused to lay down dozens of handwritten notes.

"I brought prayer requests from people who couldn't make the journey — families praying for peace in their homes, for children to pass exams or overcome addiction," she said. "I'm also praying for my own family and for strength in my vocation. I believe God already knows what's written on these papers."

To accommodate the rising number of prayer petitions, the shrine has set up a designated prayer tent near Martyrs' Lake. Pilgrims can write intentions in multiple languages — including English, Swahili, Luganda and even Braille — while volunteers and clergy read them during adoration and Mass.

"We receive thousands of requests each day during Martyrs Week," said Peter Okumu, a catechist from northern Uganda and longtime pilgrim.

> 'This place is more than a memorial. It's where Africa gathers in deep prayer, believing that the martyrs are still interceding alongside us.'
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Catholic sisters play a central role in this ministry. Many sleep in nearby convents or tents, praying at the shrine's Stations of the Cross or leading rosaries in local languages.

"I came to pray about serious issues affecting my family," said Sr. Francis Clare Elimu of the Little Sisters of St. Francis. "We're orphans, and people have taken over our land. I'm praying for justice and for peace in Uganda as elections approach in 2026."

"Many people who came with faith have seen their prayers answered," she added. "I believe I will, too."

Guardians of intercession

Sr. Mary Gorret Nasuna of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi said the sisters' mission at Namugongo goes beyond personal devotion.

"We are here to serve — to pray with the sick, collect prayer intentions, offer counseling. We're caretakers of this sacred space," she said.

Nasuna, who advocates against child marriage, said her prayers were focused on children's safety and justice. "I'm asking God, through the martyrs, to protect children from harm and to change the hearts of those who exploit them."

Sisters from across Africa — including Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Nigeria — have set up tents for prayer and spiritual support. Several congregations, such as the Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church and the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Reparatrix, are leading novenas and eucharistic adoration at the lake.

"In my tent yesterday, a woman brought a photo of her son who disappeared two years ago," one sister said. "Another man brought a photo of his wife in Kenya battling cancer. They both clutched the pictures to their chests and asked for prayers. Those images are now part of the intentions we offer to the martyrs."



Pilgrims crowd around the gated shrine at Namugongo, quietly offering personal intentions. The pilgrimage site remains a place of deep devotion, attracting Christians from across East Africa who come to honor the memory of the 22 Catholic martyrs canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1964. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

Faith, not superstition

Pilgrims often speak of answered prayers: healing from illness, jobs secured, family reconciliation.

Joyce Wamalwa, a mother of six from western Kenya, said her children found employment after she sent their names to Namugongo via a cousin two years ago.

"They had been struggling, and I believed someone had cursed them," she said. "But the martyrs intervened. My children are now working."

Elimu emphasized that the shrine is not a place for magical thinking, but for deep, faithful intercession.

"The martyrs died for their faith. They understand pain and injustice. When we bring our prayers here, we believe they present them to God on our behalf."

As night falls, candles flicker beside statues of the martyrs, and folded prayer slips rustle in the breeze. Some pilgrims sleep on mats, arms wrapped around the hopes they've carried for miles.

A handwritten message hung from a wooden cross by the lakeside: "Lord, forgive me. Please guide my path."

"This place is more than a memorial," said Tendema. "It's where Africa gathers in deep prayer, believing that the martyrs are still interceding alongside us."