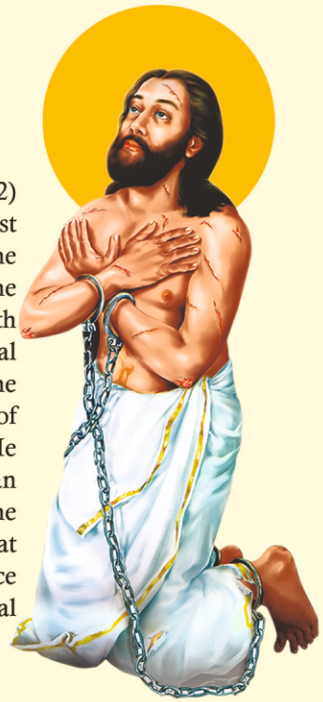
# SAINT DEVASAHAYAM

## First Lay Saint of India



Saint Devasahayam (1712 –1752) stands as one of the most remarkable witnesses to the Christian faith in India and in the Universal Church. Born in South India during a time of rigid social hierarchy and caste divisions, he became a courageous follower of Christ and ultimately a martyr. He is recognised as the first Indian layperson to be canonised by the Catholic Church, a distinction that gives his life a unique significance not only for India but for the global Christian community.

His message challenged the deeply rooted structures of caste and privilege in his society and led him to embrace a new way of life centred on faith, humility, and justice.

Saint Devasahayam's life speaks powerfully to the modern world. In a time marked by divisions based on race, class, and identity, his witness reminds us that true faith leads to equality, courage, and compassion. He is not only a saint of the past but a guide for the present, calling people of all nations to live with integrity, faith, and love.




## LIFE AND CONVERSION

Devasahayam was born with the original name Neelakandan on 23 April 1712, at Nattalam, a village belonging to Vayanad Kingdom in South India. His father, Vasudevan Namboodiri, was a priest at the Adikesava Perumal Temple in Thiruvattar town and his mother was Devahi Ammai. Being born in a thigh-caste Hindu family, Neelakandan grew up with education, discipline, and social standing. He married Bhargavi Ammal, who later became Catholic, taking the name Gnanapoo Ammal. His abilities led him to serve in the royal court of king Marthanda Varma. Gradually, he grew influential, had a section of Travancore armed forces under his command as well as took care of the royal treasury and building works of the kingdom.



His life, however, took a decisive turn after the Battle of Colachel in 1741, when the Dutch Captain Eustachius De Lannoy was captured and later appointed in the Travancore army. At that time, Neelakandan was going through a period of profound personal crisis, marked by significant material losses that affected both his life and social standing. In his distress, he performed numerous religious rituals, seeking relief and attempting to appease the deities, but found no consolation. He felt as though he was being punished by God, yet could not understand the reason for his suffering.

Through his friendship with Captain De Lannoy, Devasahayam was introduced to the Christian faith. Seeing his anguish, Captain De Lannoy comforted him and introduced him to the story of Job from the Scriptures. This encounter offered Neelakandan a new understanding of suffering, and he was deeply moved by Job's steadfast trust in God even in the midst of great trials.

After nine months of reflection, prayer, and inner struggle, he chose to be baptised at Vadakankulam, in the nearby Pandiya kingdom. Rev.Fr.Giovanni Battista Buttari baptised him on 14 May 1745 at the Holy Family Church at Vadakkankulam.



At baptism, he received the name Devasahayam, meaning "God is my help," a name that would later define his entire life Rev.Fr.Thommaso De Fonseca, parish priest of Saint Francis Xavier's Church, Kottar heard his first confession and administered his first Holy Communion. He joined De Lannoy at the Chapel at Udayagiri Fort for the Holy Mass.

Following his conversion, Devasahayam rejected the caste-based discrimination, associated freely with the poor and marginalised, and practised charity and prayer. His life became a visible testimony to the Gospel. He founded more than fifty small communities within the boundaries of the kingdom. Devasahayam's conversion to Christianity sparked outrage among the Hindu priests, feudal lords, and members of the royal household of Travancore. Leaving Hinduism was considered a grave offence, especially for someone of high caste. Charges were brought against him, resulting in his imprisonment for three years.

## SUFFERING, MARTYRDOM, AND LEGACY



In 1749, Devasahayam was arrested on charges of sacrilege and stripped of his position in the Government. What followed was a prolonged period of suffering marked by excruciating physical torture, dehumanising humiliation, and relentlessly harrowing psychological pressure.



He was ignominiously dragged through villages, brutally beaten, and scathingly ridiculed in public. Despite these hardships, he remained steadfast in his faith. He refused to renounce Christ and instead continued to pray more fervently, forgive his persecutors, and encourage fellow believers.

His suffering was not only a personal trial but also a powerful witness. In a society divided by caste and status, he proclaimed through his life that all people are equal before God. His courage inspired many and strengthened the faith of the Christian community. He was kept at the prison at Kattadimalai, Aralvaimozhi by the end of 1751. On 14th January 1752 he was taken to a nearby hillock for execution. "O Jesus, do not abandon me! O Beloved Mother Mary, help me! Into Your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit " was the final prayer of Devasahayam.

There, while kneeling in prayer on a highrock, he was mercilessly shot dead. His final act was to surrender himself to God and forgiveness toward those who executed him. His death marked him as a martyr, and fervent devotion to him took root among the faithful almost instantly. His wife went to live in Vadakkankulam for fourteen years after his death, preaching and encouraging the local community in faith.



A significant phase in the recognition of Devasahayam's staunch faith unfolded in the twenty-first century through a series of important ecclesial milestones. He was declared Blessed on 2 December 2012 in the diocese of Kottar by the authority of Pope Benedict XVI, marking the Church's formal acknowledgment of his martyrdom. This was followed by the approval of the miracle for canonisation on 21 February 2020 by the Vatican. Subsequently, on 15 May 2022, he was canonised as Saint Devasahayam by Pope Francis in Rome, elevating his status in the universal Church and bringing global attention to Devasahayam Mount as a place of pilgrimage.

Saint Devasahayam was formally announced in Rome on 20 September 2025 as the Patron Saint of the Laity in India. On 14 January 2026, a national-level celebration was held at Devasahayam Mount, presided over by the Apostolic Nuncio to India, marking the expansion of his devotion from a diocesan level to the wider national significance and as one of the recent martyr Saints belonging to the Universal Church.



## Devasahayam Mount – A Living Pilgrimage Centre

The place of his martyrdom, Devasahayam Mount in Tamil Nadu, India, has become a major pilgrimage centre. What began as a simple martyrdom site has grown into the Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows and Saint Devasahayam, attracting thousands of pilgrims every year. People come from different regions and religions, seeking healing, peace, and spiritual renewal.

The shrine stands today, uniting devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows with the witness of Saint Devasahayam. It is a place where pilgrims encounter both the compassion of Mother Mary and the courage and witnessing life of a martyr. With growing recognition, the shrine is now developing toward becoming an International Shrine, serving the wider Church.

## Saint Devasahayam Spirituality Movement

Inspired by his life, the Devasahayam Spirituality Movement has been initiated to promote his message in the Church and society. This movement emphasizes:

- Faith in times of suffering
- Equality and human dignity
- Courage in witnessing to truth and faith
- Commitment to justice and unity

Under the leadership of Rev. Fr. Leon Henson as the present Director, the movement seeks to spread the spirituality of Saint Devasahayam across dioceses and countries, making his prophetic life message relevant to contemporary challenges and signs of the times.



## The Miraculous Intercession of Saint Devasahayam

Saint Devasahayam, the noble martyr who fearlessly shed his blood for the sake of the Gospel, stands today as a powerful witness to the living presence of Christ. His martyrdom was not merely an end, but the beginning of a profound spiritual legacy that continues to touch the lives of the faithful. Through his powerful intercessory power, the divine grace of God is made manifest in our midst: the deaf hear the melodies of life, the blind open their eyes to the beauty of creation, and the handicapped rise to walk with renewed strength.

Countless pilgrims who turn to him in prayer have witnessed these extraordinary wonders. Beyond physical restoration, many families have experienced a miraculous renewal of peace and unity, and those standing at the very edge of existence have rediscovered a deep and meaningful purpose. We invite all to journey to his shrine and seek the grace of this holy martyr. He who remained steadfast in his faith unto death remains an unwavering advocate, working miracles for all who seek his powerful intercession in their hour of need.

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