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Devotees climb on a glass-covered carriage carrying the image of Jesus Nazareno during its annual procession in Manila, Philippines, Thursday, Jan. 9, 2025.

(AP/Basilio Sepe)

Associated Press

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Teresa Cerojano

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Joel Calupitan

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Manila, Philippines — January 9, 2025

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Some 1.8 million mostly barefoot Catholic worshippers marched Thursday in an annual procession in the Philippines that venerates a centuries-old black statue of Jesus. Some said they prayed for good health for their families, an end to tensions in the South China Sea, and for incoming U.S. President Donald Trump to be kinder to Filipino immigrants.

The procession marks the feast of Jesus Nazareno and is a major annual Catholic event in Asia. The image was previously called the Black Nazarene, but church officials appealed for a change, saying the former name was not founded in history and evoked a racial slur.

The procession in Manila began before dawn, with organizers estimating the early crowd at around 250,000. Their number swelled later in the day as devotees made their way to the Minor Basilica and National Shrine of Jesus Nazareno, also known as Quiapo Church.

Police said the crowd reached 1.8 million in the afternoon and the number was still expected to increase. Last year, at least 2 million devotees joined the 15-hour procession, with some estimates of the crowd as high as over 6 million.

Reverend Father Robert Arellano, a spokesperson of Quiapo Church, said this year's procession is slower compared to last year because of an increase in the number of participants and some jostling devotees climbing the glass-covered carriage housing the image.

Shouts of "Viva, viva," rang out as the image passes by, with devotees clutching at ropes pulling the carriage and raising white towels in jubilation. The procession typically draws massive numbers of largely poor Catholics who pray for the sick and a better life.

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Gaspar Espinocilla, a 56-year-old Manila city employee and a devotee of Jesus Nazareno for the last 20 years, said he is praying for his family, including his sister who has ovarian cancer. He is also praying for an end to tensions in the West Philippines Sea, a part of the South China Sea claimed by the Philippines, where China has been harassing Filipino fishermen and coast guard vessels.

“I hope China will ease up on us, they cannot seize everything as theirs,” said Gaspar, who was wearing a maroon T-shirt printed with face of Jesus Nazareno. “It is ours, not theirs.”

Renato Reyes, a garbage scavenger who has been a Jesus Nazareno devotee for more than three decades, said he prays for a better life for his family, for the Philippines to be free from calamities, as well as for wars overseas to end. He also said he will include in his prayers Filipinos who may be affected by Trump’s planned mass deportation of illegal immigrants.

“I hope they will not implement that because our countrymen are there just to earn a living for their families,” he added.

Officials said some 14,000 police and plainclothes officers were deployed, along with soldiers, fire fighters, prison staff and volunteers. Many nearby roads were closed and cell phone signals were blocked.

More than a dozen devotees were seen being carried away on stretchers. The Philippine Red Cross said that 467 people were given first aid or other medical assistance for mostly minor complaints like dizziness, difficulty breathing and nausea. At least 15 patients had to be brought to hospital.

The statue of Jesus carrying the cross was brought to the Philippines from Mexico on a galleon in 1606 by Spanish missionaries. The ship that carried it caught fire, but the charred statue survived, according to some accounts. Church historians, however, said the statue’s color owes to the fact that it was carved out of mesquite wood, which darkens as it ages.

Many devotees believe the statue’s endurance, from fires and earthquakes through the centuries and intense bombings during World War II, is a testament to its miraculous power.