by Catholic News Service

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More than 28 years after a 19-year-old nun was found dead in a convent well, a court in India's Kerala state convicted a priest and a woman religious of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of murdering her.

The special court of the Central Bureau of Investigation, a federal agency, convicted Fr. Thomas Kottoor and the nun, identified as Sr. Sephy, Dec. 22, ucanews.com reported.

Both were sentenced to life in prison during sentencing Dec. 23. They also were fined $7,100 for their role in the murder. The priest received an additional $1,420 fine on a trespassing count.

The court found the pair guilty of murdering St. Joseph Sister Abhaya, destroying evidence, and conspiracy, among other charges.

The CBI had charged another priest, Fr. Jose Poothrakayal, in connection with the death, but he was acquitted in 2018.

A police official said Kottoor, now 69, and Sephy, now 55, were taken into custody after the court's decision was announced.

Sr. Abhaya's body was found in a well at the St. Pius X Convent in Kottayam district of Kerala state March 27, 1992.

Investigations by church leaders and local and state police initially determined Abhaya's death was a suicide, ending a criminal review of the incident.

However, the case was handed over to the federal CBI in March 1993 following presentations from several people, including human rights activist Jomon Puthenpurackal. An investigation eventually was reopened, leading to the trials.

"I am pleased about the court verdict. At last, the truth has triumphed," Puthenpurackal told reporters after the verdict.

"I have been waiting for this day. It is not my victory alone, but it is of all people who fought it together. It has also proved that money and influence will not always help," he said.

Puthenpurackal repeatedly accused the church of using money and political influence to cover up the case because of priests' involvement.

Prosecutors said Abhaya discovered Kottoor, Poothrakayal and Sephy in a "compromising position" in the kitchen of the convent, where she lived while a student at a Catholic-run college. The priests were teachers at the college.

In a panic, prosecutors said, Kottoor allegedly strangled Abhaya while Sephy allegedly hit her with an axe. The three defendants were accused of dumping Abhaya's body into the well, prosecutors said.

Syro-Malabar Catholic Church leaders did not immediately respond to the verdict.

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