

Murder in the cathedral

6th January 2024



- **Gunmen invade Ebonyi church on Christmas Eve, kill 3 worshippers**
- **How we survived mayhem, by parishioners**

From **Magnus Eze**, Enugu

While the nation and entire Christendom was in a jubilant mood on December 24, 2023, awaiting the birth of Jesus Christ, the unimaginable occurred at the Immaculate Conception Catholic Parish, Nkwegu in Abakaliki Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

The Catholic Church, which is a stone's throw from the Nigerian Army Cantonment, in Abakaliki, the state capital, is located on the ever-busy Abakaliki/Onueke/Afikpo Expressway. The parish is one of the largest churches in the state and was believed to have the best security network due to its nearness to the military cantonment and a police checkpoint.

But the Christmas Eve tragedy where gunmen attacked the church and shot at least three worshippers dead, exposed the porosity of the place.

Worshippers had filled the church to the brim waiting for the special service. As the Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. JohnPaul Eselu was conducting the Holy Mass, the unexpected occurred which abruptly ended the service. Gunmen invaded the church, killing three parishioners identified as Cyril Mbam, the choirmaster of the parish, Emmanuel Aloh and Ebuka Nwifuru.

Saturday Sun gathered that after Mbam was shot dead by the gunmen, Aloh and Nwifuru, who were security guards in the Catholic Church known as Men of Order and Discipline (MOD) attached to the parish, attempted to stop the assailants from escaping through the church gate and were shot in the process. The killings were the first in the history of the parish and the entire Ebonyi State.

How the merchants of death operated

– Priest

The Chancellor, Catholic Diocese of Abakaliki, Rev. Fr. Mathew Opoke, said that the priest in charge of the CIC parish, Rev Fr John Paul Eselu phoned him around 1:00am, narrating how the incident happened.

He said: “We got a distress call in the early hours of today, 25th December (1.15am) from the Parish Priest of Immaculate Conception Parish, Nkwegu, Rev Fr JohnPaul Eselu who reported that gunmen attacked and killed three people within the premises of the parish while the Holy Mass was going on.

“It was gathered that Mr Cyril Mbam was assassinated at the car park while the M.O.D. members namely, Mr Emmanuel Aloh and Ebuka Nwifuru met their death at their duty post at the gate, trying to prevent them from leaving the church premises without submitting their pass tally.

“It was then that they shot the M.O.D. members. While one died on the spot, the other died in the hospital shortly after. When their tricycle (Keke) could not move, they abandoned it together with a fully loaded AK49 rifle and some charms in the tricycle and took to their heels.

“The body of Mr Cyril Mbam was discovered at the car park after Mass and it was realised that the assassins made away with his phone and Toyota Corolla car. The military were alerted and they came and took the Keke, the gun and the charms. Other security agencies- the police and the DSS – are already aware.

“We came to the conclusion that it is a matter of assassination because the primary victim is the choirmaster. For him to have moved out of the church during consecration, means that he was called out of the church. We are saddened by this ugly incident that took place during such a joyful season.

“We sympathise with the families of the deceased and pray God to grant eternal rest to the dead. We plead with the security agencies to expedite action in unravelling the perpetrators of the dastardly act as we pray God to assist them to get at those behind the killings. We pray for a safer and saner society devoid of such ugly experiences. Amen.”

Urging members of the congregation and the entire Catholic community in the state to be security conscious, the cleric said: “Please, as you merry, beware of evil people, I will not like to hear any bad story about any of you. I pray the grace of God upon all for the full knowledge of Christ who is the reason for the season.”

How we survived attack, by parishioners

Some of the parishioners told *Saturday Sun* how they were able to survive the incident. One of them, Abel Onyibe said he was almost shot by the criminals.

“I was almost shot dead. When we heard gunshots and there was pandemonium everywhere in the church, I ran outside. When I ran outside, I heard another gunshot and immediately lay on the ground. While I was on the ground, a bullet passed and hit a palm tree. We have many palm trees in the church which you will see when you visit the church.

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“If that bullet had hit me, my brother, it would have been another story. I thank God who saved me and many other parishioners. It was really a sad thing in our parish. We lost three persons and one was the breadwinner of his family,” he stated.

Another parishioner, Nwangele Thomas claimed that he escaped through the bush when he heard gunshots.

He said: “I was actually outside when the gunmen invaded our church. When they released gunshots, I ran through the bush at the back of the church and hid myself.

“I followed the bush and got to my house when the gunshots continued. It was in the morning and that was on the 25th that I started hearing that three persons in our parish, including our choirmaster, were killed by the gunmen.”

Incident disrupts lawmaker’s Christmas largesse for constituents

The attack got the entire parishioners, people from Abakaliki Local Government and the entire state devastated, including the member representing Abakaliki/Izzi Federal Constituency in the House of Representatives, Chief Emmanuel Uguru.

Uguru was sending his Christmas gifts (money) to his constituents through Mbam who operated a POS business before the tragedy.

The devastated federal legislator was grieved that Mbam was murdered, lamenting that the incident had fouled the Yuletide for him and his constituents.

In a short message which he sent across to his constituents and was obtained by *Saturday Sun*, the lawmaker assured them that arrangements were on to sort out things and possibly reach out to those that had not got their gifts before Mbam was killed.

“My dear constituents, it is my utmost desire but with deep grief in my heart, to inform you that Mr. Obinna Mbam Cyril (the source through which I was sending Christmas gifts to my constituents via P.O.S) was shot dead last night by gunmen while in the church.

“As a result of his death, the whole arrangement went disarray and as it is, there is no means or possible way of reconciling the list which was already in use by him for disbursement.

“To this end, dear constituents, I urge you to be patient with me as I intensify efforts to find a means of reconciling the list as to know who has and who has not received the gift which we started sending out yesterday through him. We wish you a happy Christmas; even as we ask God in prayers to grant his soul eternal rest! -Amen,” Uguru stated.

Bishop bemoans killings

The Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese, Most Rev Peter Chukwu at a Christmas service at Saint Theresa Cathedral, Abakaliki, condemned the killings and said that it occurred at 11:30 pm on December 24.

The bishop, who described the incident as sad and disheartening, prayed for the repose of the souls of the victims.

He explained that the suspected killers invaded the church while a priest was celebrating a vigil mass service and killed and injured many others.

According to Nworie, such an unfortunate act had never happened in the church in the state. “This is the first time such an incident has happened in the church and in Ebonyi State in general.”

There have been security issues in Nkwegu axis of the state. In October last year, about four persons were killed when two rival cult groups clashed in the area which caused security concerns in the state capital.

People were indiscriminately arrested by security agents who raided various places, including drinking points and hotels. Most of the people arrested were made to pay a minimum of N20,000 each before they were released.

It could not be ascertained if there was a nexus between the mayhem in the CIC Parish on December 24 and the earlier cult killings in the axis.

Meanwhile, the state governor, Francis Nwifuru was said to have ordered security agents to go after the perpetrators of the killings in the church and vowed that those behind the dastardly act, will also be killed.