

The Lifeline

Real reason Catholic priest was killed, burnt in Niger

• How he escaped 2 previous attempts on his life

From John Adams, Minna

It is said that there is a time to be born and a time to die. And in between is a privilege to live, to the glory of God and to the service of humanity. This certainly rings true for the late Reverend Isaac Achi of the Kafin-Koro Deanery of the Catholic Diocese of Minna, Niger State, and reverend father in charge of St. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Kafin-Koro.

"The Lord have mercy on me" was his last word on earth as his life was finally cut short in a gruesome manner by gunmen whose identity and actual mission is yet unknown.

While official statements from the police and the state government said the gunmen were suspected to be bandits, a family source believed that the way and manner the Catholic priest was killed suggested that they were just after his life and not to kidnap him for ransom.

The attack, early Sunday morning, on the late priest was the third attempt on his life in almost two decades of priesthood and dedication to the service of God.

On December 25, 2011, suicide bombers in a mini-bus loaded with explosives drove to his parish, St. Theresa Catholic Church, Madella, in Suleja Local Government Area of the state, killing at least 40 worshippers. Fr. Achi was at the pulpit at the time of the blast.

Two years later, in 2013, there was another attempt on the life of the priest when some gunmen kidnapped him but he regained his freedom after unconfirmed reports said ransom was paid for his release after one week in captivity.

However, exactly 10 years after, Achi did not survive a third attempt on his life, as it was time to go and be with the Lord.

For three hours, Fr. Achi and his colleague, Rev. Fr. Collins Ume, who had just returned that night from a trip, struggled with the assailants who surrounded their house without any help.

According to Fr. Collins, who was in and out of coma, recuperating from gunshot wounds, the gunmen battled for over three hours to gain access into their apartments, to no avail, before they (Achi and himself) were shot through the window.

Both of them struggled to one of the rooms to hide while the gunmen intensified their efforts to gain entrance, but after severe bleeding from the gunshot injury, Fr. Achi turned to Fr. Collins and told him that it was time for confession.

According to Fr. Collins, whose eventual escape from the fire that razed the entire parish house remains a miracle, Fr. Achi looked up and said "Lord, have mercy on me" and died before the fire got to him.

It was gathered that the decision by the gunmen to set the building on fire after



• Razed residence of Achi



• Sympathizers at Achi's residence

fruitless efforts to gain entry may have been informed by their realization that the priest was fully prepared for self-defense.

After setting the parish on fire, the gunmen were said to have waited until the entire building was consumed to make sure that nobody escaped, but what our correspondent could not ascertain at the time of this report was how Fr. Collins got out of the inferno without being burnt or killed by the gunmen.

That was why the family of Fr. Achi believe that the gunmen were not bandits but assassins after the life of their beloved son who sacrificed his all to the work of God.

"Nobody can tell us that these were bandits because their mission was not to kidnap but to kill only Achi, if not, why didn't they kill or take away his colleague? Their target was Reverend Achi," one of his close relations told our correspondent.

A pointer to this was the fact that the late priest had been very critical in his sermon in recent time in the church against the growing security challenges in the country, especially in his domain, Kafin-Koro and its environs, which have been under siege from gunmen.

Kafin-Koro, a hitherto peaceful farming community, has played host to over 2,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to the activities of bandits within villages under it, and this has been a source of concern to the people and the government.

The last attack on Kafin-Koro was in November 2022 when gunmen numbering about 60 on motorcycles raided the town in broad daylight, shooting into the air. One person was killed and another sustained gunshot injuries in the attack.

According to a reliable source in the community, the rising level of insecurity

in the area could be traced to the influx of artisan miners in the surrounding villages from neighboring states of recent.

"These illegal miners have taken over all the villages within Kafin-Koro. Every day you see strange faces that we have never seen before in these villages and nobody is asking them question."

"We strongly believed that this is the major cause of the security challenges facing Kafin-Koro and the adjoining villages at the moment," a source said.

Although he admitted that there were some security challenges occasioned by the activities of cattle rustlers and kidnappers before now, the situation has deteriorated with the influx of these miners from the far north states of Zamfara, Kebbi and Katsina.

Meanwhile, the death of Fr. Achi, who began serving the church at a tender age as an altar boy in the 1980s, shook the entire Catholic community in the state to its roots with a solemn church services throughout the state.

Kafin-Koro and its environs where the easygoing reverend father grew up were thrown into mourning on Sunday, with all activities brought to a halt.

Due to the religious harmony in Kafin-Koro community, Muslim faithful were not left out of the mourning of Achi, who was loved by all, both the old and young.

The immediate past chairman of Paikoro LGA, Mr. Yohana Yakubu, a brother to the late reverend father and a schoolmate at Day Secondary School, Kafin-Koro, described his death as not only a loss to the Catholic community but also the entire Kafin-Koro.

"We are devastated by the death of Reverend Achi; they finally killed him after several attempts on his life. God will bring the perpetrators to justice. It is a great loss to me as a brother; he will for ever be remembered for his dedication to the service God and humanity," he said.

Some of his church laity who could not hold back their tears described the murder of the priest as a wicked act, saying that though they succeeded in killing him, they did not kill his message.

Also, the Niger State government, reacting to the killing of the priest, described it as an act of cowardice and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice in no distance time.

The government, in a statement signed by the Commissioner for Internal Security and Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Emmanuel Umar, condemning the killing of the priest, said the act was perpetrated by individuals who had no regard for values nor respect for life.

The commissioner, in a statement, pointed out that "the government has received a security briefing about the attack on the residential compound of a parish