

Day of agony, tears in Taraba

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•As 8 Madonna varsity students who died in auto crash are laid to rest •I watched helplessly as my friends burnt to ashes –
Survivor

By **Sylvanus Viashima**, Jalingo

The Taraba State Christian Centre, Jalingo, has been home to different emotions at various times, but nothing compares with the raw pain, sorrow and tears that enveloped the auditorium on February 21 during the burial service for eight students of Madonna University, Elele, Rivers State, who died in an accident on their way to Jalingo, the capital of Taraba State.



Grace Nwa



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On the fateful evening of February 11, parents and residents of Taraba got the shocking news, mostly via social media platforms that a bus conveying students of Madonna University, Elele, to Jalingo for the election holiday was involved in a fatal crash at the TTC/Special Science School Junction, Abakaliki, the capital of Ebonyi State.

The images that followed were heart-rending as some of the students were said to be burnt beyond recognition and others sustained varying degrees of injuries. On the night of February 20, the remains of the eight students arrived Jalingo for burial, accompanied by indelible marks of sorrow.

A member of one of the bereaved families told our correspondent that special arrangements were already put in place for her homecoming but the anticipated joy turned to sorrow.

“My niece is like the baby of the house. Sending her off to school so far away from home was actually intended to make her stronger and help her develop some level of independence. And so it is a special occasion for the family whenever she is coming home or returning to school.

“So, we had made arrangements for her homecoming and were following their movement. I went out to use the ATM and when I got back that night I noticed that the atmosphere in the house was unusually tense. I was afraid of asking what was going on because I was not sure I wanted to know. So, I went into my room only for me to go online and see that there was an accident involving their bus.

“That was the worst shock of my life. Because they said there were survivors, we naturally started praying that she would be among them. That hope was dashed when we got confirmation that she couldn’t make it.

“For me, I know it is the will of God and we cannot question Him but then it got me asking, what is really the meaning of life? Why should such promising lives be cut short? I don’t think our family will ever recover from this. Death is inevitable but, this hits differently.”

For most of the grieving families, the story is the same. Arrangements made for the homecoming of their darling children turned out to be arrangements for welcoming condolences.

Sadly, this is not the first time this is happening, involving students of Madonna University from Taraba State. On November 2, 2018, a bus conveying students of the same university from Taraba crashed in Abakaliki and three students were burnt to death. Barely four years later, another tragedy struck, involving students of the same school, all from Taraba State and also in Abakaliki.

Magdalene Luka, a graduate of Madonna University, a senior schoolmate to the late students, from Taraba State, was on the same journey in 2018 when the first accident happened. She shared her experience with our correspondent.

“Usually, we make arrangements for vehicles to convey all of us when we are either coming home or going to back to school. It’s usually fun that way and less stressful because we are all going to the same destination and the buses take us straight to school, saving us the stress from the parks. Most times, we would have all our belongings in one bus so that they are also not squeezed too much.

“On that fateful day in 2018, I was on the second bus when the first bus crashed and burst into flames. I can tell you it remains the worst experience of my life. I’m talking about friends, persons we started the journey together and had plans for when we arrived school. I watched helplessly as some of them were burnt to ashes. I still live with the trauma.

“This time, it was a friend who called me that night to inform me of the accident. I quickly picked the facts that students from Taraba were involved and it was in the same Ebonyi State. That was how the first encounter crystalized in my mind and I was living that experience all over again. I was like, this can’t be happening. Why is it always Taraba? Naturally, I pictured all our students from here and I started praying for each of them even as I was shivering seriously and almost going into shock.

“At the end of the day, the reality is here with us and I was at the CAN Secretariat and Magami Cemetery to pay my last respects. But this is hard to bear. These are students I knew very well and some of them even helped me to bring back some of my stuff after I graduated. In fact, when I finished my project work, it was one of the deceased that helped me to submit the final copy and I had to watch her remains buried forever.”

Madonna University is reputed for its strict discipline and high standards. Unlike some universities and other institutions of higher learning, Madonna operates a system that keeps a close check on activities and lifestyles of students, making it a top-choice institution of learning for parents who value discipline and can afford it.

Magdalene further said: “I listen to my friends talk about their university experiences and I feel there is something certainly different in a special way about Madonna. I don’t regret for a minute the opportunity to have gone to Madonna and I am eternally grateful to my parents for the rare privilege, despite the cost. For me, the discipline, insistence on decency and decorum, the strict adherence to worthwhile life principles remain my major takeaway from Madonna”.

Like the families of the first three victims in 2018, the families of 19-year-old Amamzala Donald, a 300 level Optometry student of Madonna University, Grace Ezra, Dorcas, Grace Maina, Faith Joel, Victor, Hope Edmund and Gladness Yamusa may think very little of the bright side of having a child at Madonna University.

Mr. Ezra M. Usman, the father of late Miss Grace Ezra, in an emotion-choked state of mind, wrote: “Grace Usman Ezra, I never knew sending you to Madonna University will lead to your untimely death. Eighteen of you left Madonna to Jalingo only to hear the news that your bus had accident and caught fire. Eight out of 18 came out from the bus. It is well with 10 of you and the rest that are alive. I pray for their speedy recovery and my God comfort us all that lost our children”.

Most of the parents and relatives were so overwhelmed with grief that they could hardly speak, and the words of the pastor urging them to accept death as an inevitable will of God hardly registered. They echoed “Amen” to his prayers that “afflictions shall not rise a second time” as he committed the bereaved to the loving and divine consolation of God. But that was it. Their grieving hearts still cannot even register the condolences. It is a nightmare they all wish to wake up from.

Favour Christopher went to both primary and secondary school with the late Amamzala Donald. She said that the loss of Donald has shown her just how transient life is. She still cannot believe that he is truly gone, despite witnessing his burial.

"I have known Donald right from my primary school days at New Era. We also went to Rhema Secondary School together although he was my senior. This is a very calm, brilliant and nice person. He was so full of dreams. At 19, he was already in 300 level and doing very well. We always kept in touch and I knew he had a bright future. That is why his death is particularly hard to bear. I don't usually attend burials but I had to come and watch him buried. This has shown me that death can take any of us at anytime, irrespective of age and our dreams," Favour lamented.

At the Magami Christian Cemetery, Jalingo, where the remains of the deceased were laid to rest, parents, relatives and mourners turned their backs and walked out of the gates of the cemetery with the sad reality that their children, brothers and sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces, friends and acquaintances have left them never to return.

All they now have to hold on to are the memories of shared moments, regrets of words unspoken, love not expressed, moments unshared, dreams cut short, irreparable vacuum that may never be filled and a deep sense of loss, sorrow, pain and overflowing grief.

It is the fervent prayer of all that such should not happen again. It is also the sincere prayers of the people that the injured who are mostly still recuperating from their injuries are quickly and completely healed.

The flames of the bus that charred the bodies of the Madonna Eight may have been put out, the wrecked bus discarded, but the devastation will live forever in the hearts of their family members and friends.