

Abia: How 5 died tragically in the house of God



By Ugochukwu Alaribe

Sunday, November 24, 2024, would remain a day that may never be forgotten by the Catholic faithful in Aba, Abia State.

It was a day the Catholic faithful all over the world celebrated the 'Christ the King Sunday', as a feast to mark Jesus Christ's sovereign rule over all creation. The feast procession: titled: 'Christ the King Sunday', is celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church on the last Sunday of the liturgical year.

Sunday Vanguard gathered that the procession, organised by the Catholic Diocese of Aba, saw the parishes within the city throng the Christ the King Cathedral, CKC, premises along Asa Road.

However, tragedy struck as over 3,000 faithful were said to be struggling to exit or enter the cathedral through the main gate.

The security men at the cathedral were alleged to have shut the gate against those struggling to exit or enter the premises.

In the ensuing stampede, two women collapsed and were confirmed dead at the hospital.

Sunday Vanguard learnt that the two dead women who are members of the Holy Cross Parish, Aba, suffered from suffocation because of the overflowing crowd.

Two children reportedly died at the hospital while many others who were injured following the stampede were still receiving medical attention at the hospitals, as of the time of filing this report.

A man, simply identified as Mr Peter, lost his wife and 9-year-old daughter to the incident. While his daughter has been buried, he is planning with his in-laws to bury his wife.

Recurring slump cases

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A Catholic faithful, Modestus Kalu, stated that the Catholic Diocese of Aba has been experiencing issues of people slumping during procession, but that was the first time people died.

He urged the church to devise a way to decongest the population of attending members to avert future occurrences.

He also urged the Bishop of Aba Catholic Diocese to direct all parishes to carry out processions in their own parishes rather coming to the CKC known for recording massive crowds.

He said: "The crowd overflowed. The environment and atmosphere were extremely unfriendly.

Many people have serious health conditions. The Catholic Church, as one of the most advanced churches, should have known better and prepared for such happenings.

"Nobody should mock the church over this incident, but nobody also deserves to die such an avoidable death. I pray to God to grant their soul eternal rest and give their family the fortitude to bear this loss."

Unhealthy individuals

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Another eye witness also stated that the parish priest at Queen of the Most Holy Rosary Catholic Church, Nwala street off Faulks road, Aba, had warned unhealthy individuals not to join in the procession.

She said: “Our parish priest made it clear to us that there is nothing special about going to CK for the procession except seeing the Bishop physically. No one forced anyone to attend anything.

“The crowd was too much, but nobody should claim that there is no breathing space because we stayed in an open environment and not inside a suffocating hall. There was enough room for oxygen for everyone. Death can happen anytime, anywhere.”

30 cases of collapse

Another member, David Onyeka, said aside from the recorded deaths, he also heard over 30 people collapsed during the procession.

He said: “What I don’t understand and I have been wondering is: what is the spiritual importance of that procession? What impact does that procession add to the people? Is it for fun or what?”

Multiple exit gates in CKC

Sunday Vanguard investigations revealed that there are over four exit gates in the cathedral.

A faithful, who preferred anonymity, said he wondered why the authorities of the CKC could not direct the security men to open the exit gates to enable easy access or exit into and out of the cathedral.

Blocked roads, riotous crowd

In a similar development, shop owners along Asa road where the CKC is located have narrated their ugly experiences during the feast procession.

They alleged that due to the procession, the roads were blocked and sachet water was thrown at passersby.

One of the shop owners, identified as Mrs Bertha Agina, told Sunday Vanguard that car sellers opposite the CKC had to stand beside their cars to chase some unruly faithful who threw sachet water and other objects around.

Agina said: “This 2024 Catholic feast procession was different from what we used to witness in the past years. There was a huge crowd of people and most of them were unruly, blocking roads and throwing sachet water and other objects around. Can you believe that car sellers had to stand by their cars chasing people away to ensure that there was no damage? The Catholic church should do something to reduce the huge crowd in the subsequent feast procession.”

We lost faithful to overcrowding – Bishop

Reacting to the incident, Bishop of the Catholic Church, Aba Diocese, Professor Augustine Echema, who confirmed the injury and death of some faithful during the feast procession, attributed the incident to overcrowding due to the mass attendance of the event.

Bishop Echema, in a statement he signed, sympathised with the families of the dead and injured victims, assuring that the church would support the affected families.

In the statement titled: 'A tragic Christ the king feast procession', the clergyman promised to do everything possible to forestall such tragedy, disclosing that investigations were ongoing to ascertain the true narrative, identity of the victims and cause of the incident.

He stated: "It is with deep regret and sadness that the annual joy celebration of our diocesan feast day which occurs every 34th Sunday of the church year, ended in a most tragic way. Some of our devout and gallant catholics who trooped out as usual to join the annual Eucharist procession in a joyful mood ,met their death as a result of overcrowding during the procession.

"May their souls and the souls of the departed through the mercy of God,rest in peace. Investigations are ongoing to ascertain the true narrative, identity of the victims and cause of the awful episode."

However, residents have expressed dissatisfaction with the Bishop's statement, saying his inability to specify the number of dead and injured victims was concerning.

A resident of Aba, Kelechi Onukwube, said: "It would have been better if the Catholic church had specified the number of injured and dead victims in such a tragic incident. Merely posting a statement sympathizing with the families and assuring it won't happen again,is not enough. Nothing can compensate for the injured and dead victims but the right things should be done. Let it not be that the leadership of the church is hiding something."

Sympathy

Governor Alex Otti of Abia State and the lawmaker representing Aba North state constituency in the state House of Assembly, Uzodike Aaron, have expressed sympathy with the families of the victims of the Catholic feast procession.

Otti assured that his administration would collaborate with the Church to avert such incidents in the future.

In a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Mr Ferdinand Ekeoma, Otti commended the leadership of the church and the government team for their proactive actions in providing medical care to the victims.