

AOKPE: TENT OF MEETING WITH OUR LADY

A well thought out title for this year's twenty-third anniversary of Our Lady's Day of Grace. It was the title of the first Spiritual talk given by Very Rev. Fr. Andrew Ngbede, the Parish Priest of Holy Name Parish Ugbokolo; the Parish under which St. Patrick's Mission Host the Aokpe Pilgrimage Centre.

1st of August 2017:

The activities for the year's anniversary started with Mass at 6.00pm with four Priests and ten Rev. Sisters in attendance. Over six thousand pilgrims had arrived and were participating in various programs outlined for the day of Grace.

As outlined in this year's Anniversary Program, activities included: twelve hourly Masses, Penance/Confessions, Stations of the Cross, Eucharistic Adoration, Rosary and private devotions.

2nd of August:

Activities for the day commenced with morning Mass followed by Confessions/Penance and private devotions.

The first spiritual talk titled Aokpe; 'The Tent of Meeting with Our Lady', was delivered by Rev. Fr. Andrew Ngbede. Taking the talk from the Book of Exodus; he said "the Tent of Meeting in the days of Moses was considered to be a place of the Holy of holies – where people come to encounter their God; where people with faith come to experience the divine presence of God.

He said like in the days of Moses, our Mother Mary chose Aokpe as Her Tent of Meeting with mankind through the instrumentality of the then young Christiana Agbo in 1992 to present her message of salvation; calling for true Repentance, Penance/Reparation, Prayer and return to the way of spiritual purity worthy of the Kingdom of God.

By the evening of the second day, over ten thousand pilgrims had arrived. Over fifteen Priests had also arrived and offering penitential rites to pilgrims. The penance track was opened intermittently for those who so desired to do their penance. Program for the day was strictly followed to the later including Stations of the Cross and guided tour for first timers.

3rd of August 2017:

The program for the day included the twelve hourly Mass and a spiritual talk by Rev. Fr. Cosmas Okechukwu Ebebe. His talk was titled 'The Blessed Virgin Mary as the Spirit of the Most Holy Rosary': celebrating the Centenary of Fatima apparitions with pilgrims at the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mediatrix of Grace at Aokpe.'

The visionary also had time with the pilgrims. She spoke extensively on the virtues of Our Lady. She encouraged all to be like our Lady in our relationship with one another by being compassionate, loving, kind, cautious, thankful, gracious and noble. To be able to say sorry when we are wrong or right; to be charitable when we speak and to always be on time and orderly. She urged pilgrims to spend quality time with Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

A period was also set aside for thanksgiving and testimonies. Due to the huge number of pilgrims wishing to testify to the miracles and spiritual uplift they have received from Aokpe through the intercession of our Lady, only very testimonies were shared. As they testified, they also came with thanksgiving and donations include two cars, a cow, goats and other items. There were substantial cash donations from pilgrims including a One million Naira cash donation that came from the pilgrims from the Francophone Countries of Cote DI'voire, Cameroon and Benin Republic.

4th of August 2017 – Day of Grace:

On this anniversary day, the number of pilgrims who registered were over sixteen thousand. They travelled from a number of Diocese: Lafia, Gboko, Katsina Ala, Makurdi, Calabar, Orlu, Portharcourt, Enugu, Owerri, Idah and Otukpo. Others were from Jos, Lagos and Benin Archdioceses. There were pilgrims who are non-catholic of the Redeem Christian Church from Gombe in Adamawa state of Nigeria and some Muslim brethren.

There were over forty Priests, twenty Religious, one Deacon and six Seminarians

The Pontifical Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary was celebrated by His Lordship the Catholic Bishop of Otukpo Michael Apochi. He welcomed all pilgrims including Priests, Religious and those from other countries. He welcomed those of other religion and wished them better changes in their lives even if they don't become Christians.

In his homily, Bishop Apochi attributed the ills in the society to people including Priests, men and women of God not preaching the Truth of Jesus Christ. According to him, "Part of the confusion in the society today is because many of us, Priests, Men of God, Women of God and Prophets are no longer ministering according to the dictates of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Many of us are ministering after our own hearts. And if you follow anybody ministering after his own heart, they will not lead you to God."

He encouraged pilgrims to remain steadfast to their Faith and the teachings of the Catholic Church. He said the Faithful should not be deceived or be lead astray by the signs and wonders performed by these false prophets, men and women of God. He sighted Deuteronomy 13:1-4 and Isaiah 8:20.

On the Aokpe phenomenon, he challenged the Priests, Religious and the Laity to apply their knowledge of Theology to the Messages and happenings in Aokpe and write them down for the Church to work on. He said these and verifiable testimonies will help the Church take its stand on Aokpe.

In concluding his reflection, he said; "as the Bishop of Otukpo diocese, I have a spiritual prayer which I bring to all.

Blessed Mary Our Mother,
May the words and Cross of your Son Jesus Christ,
Planted in the soil of the Catholic Pilgrimage Centre in Aokpe,
And the hearts of people who come here on pilgrimage,
Be seen and known by the fruits that are visible, good and are available in
this centre and beyond.
We place every pilgrim in the sanctuary of your Holy Heart.
For we know that there, we will find Jesus who lives and reigns with the
Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit one God forever and ever. Amen."

At the end of the Eucharist celebration, the Bishop, Priest, Religious and all turned to the Grotto for the usual Rosary at Noon - a time promised by Our Lady to obtain Graces for all that ask for it with faith.

After the Rosary, the Bishop, the Visionary and others participated in cutting the Anniversary cake in front of the Grotto to the admiration of all.

The Bishop also had an audience with the pilgrims from the Francophone Countries and a photo session with them. He thereafter Blessed them.

This year's Anniversary may be said to be the one of the most attended of recent, as the Apparition Ground could not contain all the pilgrims. The St. Patrick's Primary school field all the way to Our Lady's Room up to the Apparition Ground was crowded with pilgrims. For the first time during the Stations of the Cross, pilgrims had to stand back to back in columns of four lines.

Starting from the Apparition Ground, the column of pilgrims wound through to the Aokpe Ugbokolo Road to the St. Patrick's Church and on to the Mediatrix Complex and back up to the Apparition Ground - a distance of approximately one kilometer. By the time the Cross Bearer came into the Apparition Ground, the last group in the column were still within the Apparition Ground.

To all who participated in this year's Day of Grace, we say Thank you for responding to Our Lady's call.

Ave Maria.