News



Police cordon off the area around Union Station following a shooting at the Kansas City Chiefs NFL football Super Bowl celebration in Kansas City, Missouri, Feb. 14. (AP/Reed Hoffmann)



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Kansas City, Mo. — February 15, 2024
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Outside Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, in midtown here, John Lopez tended the parking lot on Ash Wednesday morning, awaiting a flood of vehicles filled with gleeful Kansas City Chiefs fans on their way to the Super Bowl victory celebration taking place just a mile and a half north of the church.

The day, with a warm, springlike feel in the air fit for a parade, started typically for Lopez — a parishioner for six decades at the Redemptorist church who attended the first Chiefs championship at Super Bowl IV in 1970 — though during his regular morning prayers he added a few extra petitions.

"Let's allow all people to have a good time. No violence ... just have everybody come together as a community," he recalled praying.

Hours later, those prayers were dashed after gunshots outside Union Station, the championship rally epicenter, killed one woman and wounded 22 others, among them 11 children — turning a day of citywide jubilation that brought an estimated 1 million people downtown into the latest mass shooting in the United States.

According to local authorities, eight of those injured were in critical condition as of Thursday morning. The 11 children, nine of whom were shot, are all expected to recover, said an official with Children's Mercy Hospital. Lisa Lopez-Galvan, a local disc jockey and parishioner at Sacred Heart-Guadalupe Parish, died at the scene.



Catholics depart Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, in midtown Kansas City, Missouri, after 7 a.m. Mass on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 14. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Two suspects, both juveniles, remained in police custody Thursday afternoon, while a third person — an adult — was released and described as not involved in the incident, Kansas City police said at a press conference. Earlier in the day, police said an unspecified dispute between several people led to the shooting.

"Let's offer our prayers to the victims of today's shooting after the parade and rally and their loved ones," Kansas City-St. Joseph Bishop James Johnston said in a message on Facebook Wednesday night.

"On this first day of Lent, we turn to God for mercy and healing for our broken world."

Kansas City joins a sad list of US cities

Hours before the gunshots were fired, the biggest concern facing many Catholics in the area was how to balance the celebration of a Super Bowl victory parade with the solemnity that Ash Wednesday obliges. Add to that it was also Valentine's Day.

For many, the solution was as simple as attending Mass early in the morning before heading downtown. Some went to their home parish, while others made their way to churches closer to the parade route, like Our Lady of Perpetual Help.



Christine Reynoldson, left, and her mother, Gina Sanchez, attend the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl parade in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, on Feb. 14. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

"It's a very interesting feeling. But I also think wearing ashes on our forehead too is a symbol of our Christian faith and how we can be, and should be, a witness in the world," said Sarah Le, 27, who after the 7 a.m. Mass was heading to the parade with her sister, Jessica, and friends who are part of the City on the Hill young adult Catholic community.

The day started with Mass as well for 16-year-old Christine Reynoldson, who with her mother, Gina Sanchez, was perched for the parade at the corner of Grand Avenue and 19th Street.

"We went to Mass; we did that first," Reynoldson said. "Priorities."

Down the road, at St. Monica Catholic Church, at 16th and Paseo, just a mile east of the parade route, Pat Williams had no intention of attending the festivities, but still arrived at Mass decked out in her Chiefs gear, her own way of taking part in the celebrations.

"Well, the Mass comes first, before anything," she told NCR.

Along the parade route, ashes on foreheads could be spotted for those looking closely, though sightings were infrequent. The most notable case was Harrison Butker, the Chiefs' sublime kicker known as much for his golden foot as his Catholic faith, whose faded cross on his face was clearly visible as he waved atop one of the victory buses.



Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker stands atop an open-air bus during the Super Bowl victory parade on Feb. 14. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Up and down Grand Avenue, Catholics who spoke with NCR pondered this confluence of Ash Wednesday with a sports parade, and said that the start of Lent reminded them that, even amid the joy, larger issues and challenges loomed in the world.

"I think there's a lot of stuff going on today," said Eddie Gomez, a member of Church of the Ascension, in Overland Park, Kansas, and a producer with local TV station KMBC.

By 2 p.m., those realities crashed into Kansas City, becoming the latest U.S. city to join the list of those marred by a mass shooting, one that occurred even with upward of 850 law enforcement officials present for the celebration.

In 2023, Kansas City witnessed its deadliest year, with 182 homicides, 170 involving a firearm. That broke a record set in 2020, when 179 people were killed, 159 with a firearm. In 2022, 169 people died, 155 by firearm.

Missouri ranks in the bottom-five states for lax gun laws, and it sports one of the nation's highest rates of gun deaths, per rankings compiled by the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

In 2017, Missouri added a constitutional right to carry a firearm in public without a permit. In 2021, the Republican-led state legislature passed the Second Amendment Preservation Act, which fines local law officials for enforcing federal gun laws. That act was deemed unconstitutional by a federal court last March, though remains in place while the decision is appealed.



Kansas City Chiefs fans assemble outside Union Station in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, on the morning of the Super Bowl victory rally and parade on Feb. 14. Hours later, it would be the scene of a mass shooting that resulted in one death and 22 people injured. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson, who has championed gun rights during his five-year tenure in Jefferson City, was inside Union Station with his wife when the shootings broke out. Both were unharmed. In comments Thursday to a Kansas City radio station, Parson blamed the shooting on "just a bunch of criminals, thugs out there."

The mass shooting in Kansas City happened on the sixth anniversary of the mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, where a former student killed 14 students and three staff members, and injured 17 others.

'Things will never be the same'

Nearly 24 hours after the parade shooting, the prayers of the faithful at the noon Mass Thursday at Our Lady of Sorrows remembered the victims and their families.

"We pray for healing and peace in our city," read Fr. Leonard Gicheru, pastor at St. Monica and Our Lady of Sorrows, the latter just blocks south of Union Station and across the street from Children's Mercy Hospital where the child victims of the shooting were brought to be treated.

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While he was among the crowd at Union Station for the Chiefs victory rallies in 2020 and 2023, Gicheru didn't attend this year's celebration due to Ash Wednesday. Though he still wore a black Chiefs hoodie as he prepared the altar for Mass that Feb. 14 morning.

Gicheru had returned to the rectory following noon Mass at Our Lady of Sorrows that day when he learned of the shootings from a notification on his phone. The sirens he heard outside confirmed the tragedy unfolding.

"Very shocking," he told NCR. "I didn't know what to make of it, because I didn't know the magnitude of it."

The priest called the death of Lopez-Galvan, a mother of two and beloved member of the community, "heartbreaking."

John Gianino, a neurosurgeon at University Health, where other victims of the shooting were brought, was in the pews at the Our Lady of Sorrows midday Mass on Feb. 15, praying for the victims, their caregivers and all of Kansas City. He called the shooting "embarrassing for us as a city."

"Frankly, it's just upsetting to know that this happened in our town that we love so much," he said.



Fans of the Kansas City Chiefs line Grand Avenue in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, for the Super Bowl parade on Feb. 14. Hours later, gunfire at the celebration rally at Union Station would kill one person and injure 22 others. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Because he was at work on Wednesday, Gianino did not attend the parade. While he did not treat any of the victims, he said his colleagues should be proud of their quick response and care in the face of the hospital's first mass casualty event.

He said his Catholic faith has helped as he attempts to process the tragedy that unfolded.

"We know that our ultimate goal in life is not here on earth. And we understand that there's evil in the world, and that's something that we have to overcome," Gianino said.

That two of the suspects are juveniles was "painful" and "terrifying" for Gicheru, who grew up in Kenya.

The pain of gun violence is not foreign to the St. Monica community, where a grief support group has helped parishioners cope with loved ones they've lost to violence. Along with consoling victims, the priest said the Catholic Church has a role to play in educating about the sanctity of life and preaching the need for peace.

"Unfortunately, in our society we live in, these kinds of things happen and then after a month there's something else and we forget and people move on," Gicheru said. "But their families are going to be impacted the rest of their lives with this. I mean, things will never be the same."

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