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Firefighters arrived at St. Jane Frances de Chantal Church in Bethesda, Md., around 2 a.m. July 10, 2022, and extinguished multiple fires set inside the church, which also was vandalized. (CNS photo/courtesy Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service via Catholic Standard)

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Bethesda, Md. â?? July 11, 2022

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A Catholic church in the Washington suburb of Bethesda was one of three houses of worship along the same road to be victimized by vandalism the weekend of July 9-10.

Firefighters responded at around 2 a.m. July 10 to multiple fires set inside St. Jane Frances de Chantal Church, which also was vandalized. Twenty-four hours earlier, firefighters responded to multiple fires set outside North Bethesda United Methodist Church a few blocks away.

Pete Piringer of the Montgomery County Fire & Rescue Service said in a statement that firefighters found a "significant active fire" inside St. Jane Frances de Chantal, which is in the Archdiocese of Washington.

Piringer added after firefighters extinguished the blaze, investigators determined the fire was arson, with multiple areas set on fire or attempted to be set on fire there.

In a tweet, Piringer noted investigators also found damaged headstones and broken wood pieces scattered near Wildwood Baptist Church, a few blocks beyond the Methodist church.

Piringer said an open investigation was underway involving the two fires and noted the similar circumstances, locations and apparent times of the vandalism. No motives or suspects were immediately announced by investigators.

The fires and vandalism at St. Jane Frances de Chantal caused Sunday Masses to be shifted to the school gymnasium. Two vans and cleanup crews could be seen outside the church that afternoon.

"Last night our church was vandalized. Statues were thrown down, books shredded, the Stations of the Cross pulled off the walls, the tabernacle desecrated. It is a horrific event for us as a church," Fr. Samuel Giese, the pastor, said at the noon Mass.

"The individual or individuals also attempted to burn the church. They set fire to a number of pews, but apparently the fire detection system kicked in, the fire

companies came, and the fire was put out," the priest said. "There's an investigation, and it is still going on."

Giese added that there was quite a bit of water "and other mess in the church that will need to be cleaned up, some pews removed, and things like that. So it's obviously a distressing moment for us here at the church."

"However, what is important to remember especially now is that we are the church," he said. "We are the living stones. We are the body of Christ. And as long as our faith is strong and we are faithful, then we are fine, we are absolutely fine."

Giese then read a passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which St. Paul noted that no hardship or distress or persecution "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"And that is true for us here today," the pastor said. "No vandalism, no fire, no mess in the church can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. And I want you to keep that in your hearts today. We are strong because God is with us."

Giese said, "We pray for those who persecute us. That's the measure of our Christian faith."

Parishioner Vince Thomas Jr. -- a parishioner since 1976 and a cantor -- said the vandalism at the church left him "stunned," he told the Catholic Standard, Washington's archdiocesan newspaper.

He asked, "Why would you burn a church down, what would that accomplish?"

Parishioner Peter Williamson, noted that during the Easter season, a protester supporting abortion "rights" was outside the church, and parishioners brought him juice and an Easter handout every week. "We respond to hatred with love," he said.

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At the 5 p.m. Mass at the school gym July 10, Fr. Andrew Clyne, who began serving as a new parochial vicar at St. Jane Frances de Chantal Parish that week, noted in his homily, "One doesn't expect to wake up the first Sunday at a new parish, picking up the Son of God (in the Eucharist) from the floor (of the church) before the sun has risen."

He said the person or persons who committed the vandalism "didn't know the One who was there loved them. This person doesn't know they are loved. Our task, the mission we have laid out in the Gospel, is to manifest this love in the world. ... That's the only thing that will transform the world, to bring the light of Christ to it."

Clyne also encouraged parishioners to pray for whoever committed the vandalism at the church, "so they will know the love they don't know, and the peace they are missing."

Across the Potomac River, in the Diocese of Arlington in Northern Virginia, at St. John Neumann Church in Reston early June 26, "people reported they'd seen smoke coming from mulch outside the church, then later it was discovered there was graffiti vandalism on the church," as well as on the sign in front of the church, said Billy Atwell, the diocese's chief communications officer.

"The parish immediately contacted law enforcement," and officers were reviewing camera footage to assess what happened, Atwell said. "Any type of vandalism is unfortunate ... but when it's done because of a group's religious beliefs, it takes on a whole new tone that's particularly concerning."

He said all the churches in the diocese have been on alert, and all parishes "have good security protocols in place to help report and work with law enforcement any time something like this happens."

Also on July 10, in the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas, the Church of the Ascension in Overland Park fell victim to "an overt act of hatred and incivility" at 1 a.m. local time, an archdiocesan statement said.

Parish buildings, including a statue of Mary, were extensively defaced with red spray paint, and law enforcement was notified.

"This attack and others targeting Catholic churches in Kansas and across the country are not only vulgar but un-American," said Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City. "The intention is clearly meant to intimidate and threaten the church's pro-life beliefs and position of support for the Value Them Both amendment. We will not be deterred."

The amendment, which is expected to be on the ballot in November, would add a new section to the Kansas Constitution's Bill of Rights stating there is no

constitutional right to abortion and reserving the right of the people "to regulate abortion through the elected members of the Legislature."

In June, a coalition of pro-life leaders asked the U.S. Department of Justice to vigorously investigate increasing attacks on churches, pregnancy centers and pro-life organizations over the abortion issue.

Those institutions have been on alert since the publication in Early May of a leaked draft of the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling that overturned the nearly 50-year-old *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion on demand in the United States.

The alert has only been heightened with the high court's official ruling June 24 overturning *Roe*.

Last fall, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reported at least 104 incidents of vandalism against Catholic properties have occurred across 29 states since May 2020.

Incidents include arson; statues beheaded or with limbs cut, smashed, and painted; gravestones defaced with swastikas and anti-Catholic language and American flags next to those gravestones burned; and other destruction and vandalism.

[Zimmermann is editor of the Catholic Standard newspaper of the Archdiocese of Washington.]