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A sign greeting visitors to Fort Calhoun, Neb., asks for "Prayers for Our Church & Our Community," Monday, Dec. 11, 2023, one day after a Catholic priest was fatally stabbed in the rectory where he lived next to the church he served. (AP Photo/Josh Funk)

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Fort Calhoun, Neb. — December 12, 2023

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The fatal stabbing of a Catholic priest inside the church rectory where he lived has rocked the eastern Nebraska community of Fort Calhoun, a one-stoplight town where people tend not to worry if they forget to lock their doors at night.

Fr. Stephen Gutzsell, who served at St. John the Baptist church, was attacked during what authorities called a break-in early Dec. 10. The 65-year-old died despite being rushed to an Omaha hospital. Authorities with the Washington County Sheriff's Office arrested a man, who was still in the church rectory when they arrived six minutes after the priest called 911.

"It's a crazy world I guess. Anything can happen to anybody," said longtime Fort Calhoun resident Stephen Green, who said he did not know Gutzsell personally, but has attended Lenten fish fries at the church and sent his kids to vacation Bible school there.

By Dec. 11, the church nestled in a neighborhood a block away from the elementary school was clear of crime scene tape as it prepared to host a wake for one of its members, but the yellow plastic continued to encircle the rectory — the modest home next to the church.

A stack of church bulletins sat unused just outside the sanctuary — with a note from Gutzsell about how he had planned to preach about St. John the Baptist's namesake on Dec. 10. On the way into town, the lighted sign along the highway welcoming visitors to Fort Calhoun asked for "prayers for our church and our community."

Gutzsell was attacked just one day after the Christmas in Calhoun celebration, where many of the town's residents celebrated with a full day of events including a Boy Scout pancake breakfast at St. John the Baptist. The small congregation of more than 250 families is an active one known for its fish fries during Lent and its vacation Bible school programs every summer.

Fort Calhoun hosts only about 1,000 residents, located about 16 miles (26 kilometers) north of Omaha. The town is best known for being home to Fort Atkinson, the first U.S. military post west of the Missouri River, where volunteers dress up in clothes from the period as part of a living history program. It is about 75 miles (120 kilometers) south of Sioux City, Iowa, where authorities say the suspect in Gutzsell's death was from.

But the priest's stabbing was the second killing to happen this year in the small town.

"You know, there's no murders forever and ever, and then all of a sudden, bam!" said Kevin Schultz, one of two pastors at the Cherry Hill church and ice cream shop on the main highway just a few blocks away from St. John the Baptist.

A day following the attack with little new details released, residents were left to speculate about Gutsell's killing. Prosecutors said they expect to file formal homicide and weapons charges on Dec. 12 against Kierre L. Williams, 43, who was arrested inside the rectory. He does not have a lawyer yet and likely won't appear in court until Dec. 13.

"It seems like there's more to the story," Schultz said.

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Court records in Iowa show Williams is facing a misdemeanor assault charge; he is accused of punching someone at a soup kitchen in Sioux City after getting in an argument in July. The criminal charge against him in that case lists him as homeless.

Green, who has lived in Fort Calhoun since he was 5 years old, said he has always known the town to be safe and he remembers riding his bike all over town when he was young. But he said the killing of Gutsell — and the August killing of 71-year-old Linda Childers — are eye opening.

In August, Childers was found dead in her rural home in Fort Calhoun in what authorities believe was a home invasion by a man she did not know. In that case, William P. Collins has been charged with first-degree murder and other counts.

"It shouldn't happen in a small town like this," said Andy Faucher, who owns the Longhorn Bar and Grill where people gathered to eat and talk about what happened. Faucher said the fact that this latest killing involved a priest only "intensifies the scariness of the situation."

On the evening of Dec. 10, the congregation held a vigil at St. John the Baptist to remember Gutsell, who served at several different parishes across the Archdiocese of Omaha during his 39 years as a priest. In addition to leading St. John the Baptist

in Fort Calhoun, Gutgsell helped at St. Francis Borgia in Blair, where the archbishop held a special service after the stabbing Dec. 10 and met with members of the congregation.

"We continue to pray that the Lord of mercy and love will welcome Father Gutgsell into his Heavenly kingdom," Archbishop of Omaha George J. Lucas said in a statement. "May Our Blessed Mother intercede for us all as we grieve his death."

The Archdiocese said Gutgsell was a native of Kansas City, Missouri, who graduated from the University of St. Thomas in 1980 and attended the St. Paul Seminary in Minnesota before joining the priesthood in 1984.

Funeral arrangements for Gutgsell are pending.

Kelly Tegels told KETV that she had just seen Gutgsell at Mass on the night of Dec. 9, so his death did not feel real yet.

"It's going to be hard," Tegels said at the vigil. "I'm bringing flowers tonight because he always had this altar decorated with flowers, and I know he would appreciate it."