

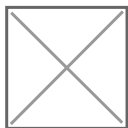
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Pilgrims pray around a statue of Mary on Apparition Hill in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, July 3, 2025. Authorities were investigating a string of early-morning vandalism and arson attacks at Medjugorje July 28, 2026. Police said several statues of the Virgin Mary were defaced with black spray paint and blasphemous graffiti. (OSV News/Reuters/Amel Emric)

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Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina — July 29, 2026

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Locals in Bosnia and Herzegovina's famed Marian shrine Medjugorje began cleaning a vandalized statue of the Virgin Mary and repairing a burned outdoor altar, as police detained a Polish suspect and calls grew to avoid online attacks against the troubled man.

The July 28 overnight attack took place at Apparition Hill, where millions of pilgrims have prayed since six young people reported alleged Marian apparitions there in 1981. Photos showed a statue of Mary defaced with black spray paint and offensive messages, including the words "devil in a skirt." Police said an outdoor altar connected with St. James Church was also set on fire.

Despite the damage, parish workers and volunteers quickly began cleaning and restoring the site, and the shrine remained open.

"The shrine remains open to all pilgrims. The prayer program is taking place regularly, and all spaces are being rapidly cleaned and prepared so that they can once again be a place of prayer and encounter with the Lord," the St. James parish office said in a statement.

As the local Catholic community responded with prayer and forgiveness, voices also emerged urging restraint in judging the suspect.

Jan Sobierajski, a Polish Catholic filmmaker who said he knew the man personally, described him as someone whose life had taken a difficult turn. The two had worked together on the docudrama "Powolany 2," or "Called 2," featuring personal stories of conversion and faith.

"He was in a completely different period of his life — both personally and spiritually," Sobierajski wrote in a Facebook post.

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Sobierajski said he was troubled by the speed with which people online condemned the suspect without knowing his background.

"Why am I writing this? Because in moments like this it is very easy to pass judgment," he wrote. "Just look at the internet — full of harsh comments, condemnation and publishing the image and data of a person who found himself in a dramatic moment of his life."

He said the man had faced serious personal difficulties, including losing his job, the breakdown of his marriage and other crises, and that he personally had encouraged him to seek help, which the man rejected. At the same time, the Catholic filmmaker stressed that such struggles do not excuse the alleged act.

"That, of course, does not justify what happened. The desecration remains something very painful," he wrote. "But before we condemn a person, it is worth remembering that behind his actions there may be a tragedy that is not visible at first glance."

Speaking to Radio Warszawa, Sobierajski said Christians should remember that while damaged religious objects can be restored, "we are fighting for something much greater — for this man's eternal life."

The parish echoed that approach, condemning the vandalism while urging prayer instead of anger.

"We pray for the conversion of the hearts of those who committed this act, that the Lord may touch them with His grace and lead them on the path of goodness," the parish said in a July 28 statement.

Medjugorje is one of the most visited Catholic pilgrimage sites in Europe, drawing pilgrims from around the world for prayer, confession and retreats. While the Vatican has not declared the reported apparitions supernatural, Pope Francis in 2024 approved public devotion and pilgrimages to the site.

The attack came shortly before Mladifest, Medjugorje's annual youth festival, which draws tens of thousands of young pilgrims.

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