

Arrest made in Florida church burning

A Florida man has been arrested after he reportedly admitted to crashing a minivan into a Catholic Church and then setting it on fire.

Stephen Anthony Shields, 24, of Dunnellon, Fla. has been charged with attempted murder, arson, burglary, and evading arrest, after he was apprehended by police July 11.

The Marion County Sheriff's Office reported Saturday morning that deputies were called at about 7:30 a.m. local time to Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Ocala, which was set aflame while parishioners inside prepared for morning Mass.

According to a statement from the sheriff's office, Shields poured gasoline in the church's foyer and ignited it, after crashing his minivan through the parish's front door. Shields then drove away in the minivan, leading officers on a short chase before he was stopped.

According to local media, Shields told police he has been diagnosed with schizophrenia but is not currently taking prescribed medication. He said that he awoke on Saturday morning with a "mission," and that he purchased the gas at a nearby gas station, according to Ocala-News.

Shields also quoted Scripture, especially the Book of Revelation, to officers, and telling them his objections to the Catholic Church, Ocala-News reported. He reportedly told officers that he understood the consequences of his action, nevertheless saying the arson was "awesome" and referring to himself as "king."

In 2019, Shields was arrested after swinging a crowbar at a woman and saying he wanted to kill her. Shields said he wanted to kill the woman with his crowbar so he wouldn't "dirty his blades," according to Ocala-News.

In a July 11 statement, Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods said: "Our freedom of worship granted in the Constitution is a freedom that we all hold dear. My deputies and I are sworn to protect that right and will always ensure our citizens can worship in peace. I'm proud of my deputies for capturing this man so quickly and we appreciate the assistance from all of the state and federal agencies that worked alongside of us during this investigation."

The Diocese of Orlando told CNA that Masses would resume in a nearby parish hall as ordinarily scheduled.

"We praise God that no one was injured. We join in prayer for Father O'Doherty, the parishioners of Queen of Peace Catholic Church, our first responders and the gentleman who caused this damage. May we come to know the Peace of the Lord," the Orlando diocese told CNA.

In addition to its other liturgies, the parish is one of few in central Florida to offer the extraordinary form of the Mass, otherwise known as the Traditional Latin Mass, which is celebrated weekly by a priest of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter who drives to Ocala from a church in Sarasota.

The fire came at almost the same time that outside of Los Angeles, a mission church founded by St. Junipero Serra caught fire and was structurally destroyed.