

Suspect in Mass interruption charged with hate crime

A 25-year-old Edmonton man has been charged with a hate crime after a suspect disrupted Mass at Santa Maria Goretti church and briefly posted an obscenity-laden video online.

The suspect is charged with mischief to religious property – a hate crime under the Criminal Code – and mischief. Police have also banned him from Santa Maria Goretti church, the heart of the city's Italian Catholic community, and he will be banned from all Archdiocese of Edmonton property.

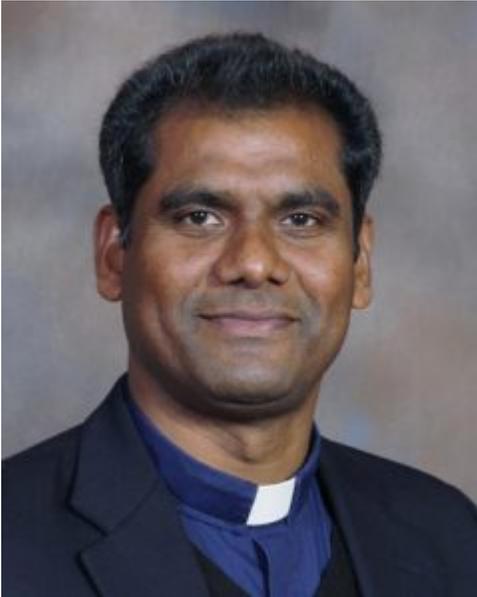
Edmonton police and the Archdiocese of Edmonton are not naming the suspect.

EPS spokesperson Cheryl Voordenhout said the hate crime charge reflects the seriousness of the incident.

She noted that hate crimes are not unusual – they can be laid for graffiti or throwing a rock into a window, for example – but in this case the circumstances at Santa Maria Goretti church are rare.

On Dec. 13, three men attended the 11 a.m. Mass registering under false names. Shortly after Holy Communion, the suspect went to the ambo – or podium – uninvited just as the pastor, Rev. George Puramadathil, was clearing the sacred vessels from the altar. At first the man spoke in Italian.

Father Puramadathil said he thought the suspect was a community or youth group member, or a man asking for help. The suspect then switched to speaking English. Parishioners who attended that day say the man's speech was incoherent at first, but then they realized the nature of what he was saying.



Rev. George Puramadathil

“As this person continued his rant, we began to understand the profanities, the extremely, extremely vulgar language that he was using,” said Carmela Marino, chair of the Santa Maria Goretti parish council.

“I waited, let him finish,” Father Puramadathil recalled. “Then he took a bottle of wine, then opened it. Then I approached him and said ‘You cannot do this. This is a church and we’re celebrating Mass, so please leave’.”

The congregation had celebrated a baptism of a child during the Mass, Marino said.

“He came down from the altar and right there, in front of the first pew, he dropped his pants, exposed himself, front and back, right in front of the family with two babies.”

The suspect ran out a side door, but the exit led to a parking lot. He scaled a locked gate and ran away.

“We were in a kind of frozen situation. Nobody moved. Nobody yelled. Nothing,” said Father Puramadathil, who consoled the congregation and offered them a blessing.

Marino recalled a traumatic scene with parishioners in shock, many calling the police. She said the suspect’s family is known to Santa Maria Goretti parish.

“It’s just so sad. It’s horrible and it’s sad because this young man is part of a family and his grandparents and parents contributed to building this church and maintaining it.”

The suspect filmed himself. The video was uploaded online, and has since been

taken down.

On Dec. 20, the Sunday after the incident, Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith celebrated Mass at Santa Maria Goretti church, offering consolation and support and blessing the ambo, sanctuary and the congregation itself. An Edmonton police sergeant was also present.

“Restoration and healing are needed, and so we turn to our loving God. God undoes by His blessing the harm done by evil acts,” Archbishop Smith told the congregation. “As I do, let us together implore God from our hearts for the grace of purification.”

Archbishop Smith said the incident was both a criminal act, and a sacrilege.

“It took place at the ambo, which is reserved and blessed for the proclamation of the Word of God. The vile action was therefore a sacrilege against what we hold to be a sacred object, as well as against the sanctuary, in which the ambo is situated,” he said.

“In addition, the obscenities directed towards you were a violation of your Christian dignity, and a denigration of our Catholic identity that we all hold dear. The offence was an outrage.”



Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith meets with parishioners after the Dec. 20 Mass. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Santa Maria Goretti parishioners say they were grateful for Archbishop Smith’s

support.

“I tell you, there are just no words that can express what the Archbishop’s presence meant to us and means to us,” Marino said. “We needed to be reminded that in our struggles, that there is a very large faith community here and a lot of people that we can go to, our leaders.

“This is our safe haven. This is our sacred ground. When I talk about it, I’m still angry.”

Archbishop Smith met with the Santa Maria Goretti parish council. Marino said the parish has reviewed its security. More volunteers and ushers are now at the back of the church, but the doors will remain unlocked during Mass.

“We don’t want to lock the doors. The doors are closed but they’re not locked, especially in the winter we don’t want people driving here and then having to drive home,” Marino said.

The Dec. 13 incident at Santa Maria Goretti church came just days after Muslim women were targeted in two separate incidents outside an Edmonton shopping mall.

Police report there were 37 hate-related charges laid in Edmonton this year.

Nationally, hate crimes abated slightly in 2018, with a 13-per-cent drop in police-reported incidents, according to Statistics Canada. Religion is a significant motivator, with 36 per cent of 2018 hate crimes directed at religious targets.

The latest hate crime statistics from Statistics Canada show Jews are the most targeted group in the country, Muslims saw a dramatic 50-per-cent decrease in hate crime incidents in 2018, after hitting a record high of 349 attacks in 2017. Catholics were hit by haters just two per cent of the time, despite constituting 38 per cent of Canada’s population.