

# Arson destroys Bonners Ferry Catholic church

BONNERS FERRY – Arson destroyed St. Ann’s Catholic Church in Bonners Ferry early Thursday and firefighters continued battling the blaze nearly 12 hours later.

Investigators believe the arson may be related to vandalism that occurred to St. Ann’s and at least one other Bonners Ferry church earlier this year, said Bonners Ferry Police Chief Vic Watson.

Watson said Thursday’s fire was set in at least three places in the church’s basement. A “person of interest” was arrested early this morning on an unrelated charge. Watson declined to detail what led to the person’s arrest. He estimated the loss at more than \$1 million.

“This is a terrible crime. . . . A church really grounds people to their community, it grounds people to their religion,” Watson said. “We hope they keep their faith strong.”

A statue of Jesus in an alcove in the basement was vandalized before the fire was set, Father Carlos Perez said. He said the parish had spent \$300,000 on church renovations in recent years and had just finished remodeling the basement where the fire was set. Perez was particularly sad about losing the Blessed Sacrament, or tabernacle, and the garments he dons for Mass.

A new roof was put on the 1960s-era church 10 years ago and church leaders recently had decided to buy a security system, but they hadn’t installed the cameras yet.

The parish consists of 153 active families. It’s a generous community, Perez said, but also poor, which will make rebuilding a challenge.

“Everyone pray for me and the community,” Perez said. “We will put everything in God’s hands. He takes care of us.”

Firefighters continued to fight the blaze just before noon Thursday, as smoke poured from the attic. Crews tore down the south wall and roof of the church. Walls around the main sanctuary collapsed about 12:15 p.m.

“We have been heartened by the prayers and support of the community and of Catholics and others around the the state reaching out to the people of St. Ann’s in this hour of need,” said Bishop Peter F. Christensen of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Boise in a written statement. “Catholics have worshiped at St. Ann’s for more than 120 years. We are cooperating with authorities regarding the cause of the blaze. Join me in praying for the people of St. Ann’s and all those affected by this fire.”

Despite the destruction, the church will hold a Mass in its pavilion, next to the church, at 6:30 Thursday night.

Perez, a native of Colombia who has led the church for eight years, said he heard an explosion about 1 a.m. Watson said the explosion could have been smoke fumes that ignited. Perez said he looked out at the church from the rectory where he lives and saw flames through the stained glass windows.

The fire is under investigation by the Idaho Fire Marshall's Office, the Boundary County Sheriff's Office reported in a news release. The church, 6712 El Paso St., was engulfed in flames by the time emergency crews arrived about 1 a.m., the sheriff's office said.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives also will investigate the fire, Watson said, adding that there's not enough evidence to call this a hate crime but that is part of the investigation.

Mick Mellett, the director of Bonners Ferry Funeral Home and a local firefighter, was called to the church about 1:15 a.m. He has attended the church since 1978.

"It's devastating that the church has burned," he said. "It's a total loss."

Tom Bondy, a parishioner, said he wants to see the church rebuilt.

"It's just incredibly sad that someone would come in and do this," he said. "Just senseless stupidity."

The fire happened less than two months after St. Ann's and Trinity Lutheran Church were vandalized.

Pastor Andy Hinderlie of Trinity Lutheran said that he noticed vandalism in his church on the morning of Feb. 23 when he saw that a Christmas tree that had been cut to resemble a cross had been turned upside down.

A framed picture of Jesus was broken and his face was gauged. A cross on a baptismal font was broken off. A calligraphy sign quoted a Bible verse was sliced.

"Almost all the crosses that could be were turned upside down," Hinderlie said. "What we felt was more concern for the person who did it."

Hinderlie said his church has offered to let St. Ann's use its facilities while it rebuilds and that an association of local churches was working to provide assistance to the Catholic Church.

*Staff writer Jonathan Brunt contributed to this report.*