News



A screenshot of a video on Twitter of a confrontation at Mass Oct. 24 at St. Frances Cabrini Church in Lakewood, Washington (NCR screenshot)



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The man who confronted a Catholic priest during the celebration of a Mass in a Washington state church in a video that went viral on social media has been arrested.

Authorities said the Oct. 24 incident during the 11 a.m. Mass at St. Frances Cabrini Church in Lakewood, Washington, occurred less than two weeks after the parish obtained a no-trespass order against the individual, who had allegedly threatened and been abusive toward staff in the church and the parish school.

"The church started having problems with a male parent of a child who attended school there. He was acting irrationally and creating disturbances," Lakewood Police Lt. Chris Lawler told NCR in reference to Lon D. Saling of Lakewood, who was arrested and charged with criminal trespass.

Saling is accused of violating the earlier no-trespass order, which the police department served him on Oct. 13. The order prohibited Saling from visiting or attending Mass at the church.

"He chose to disregard this order when he appeared at Mass yesterday," Fr. Paul Brunet, the pastor at St. Frances Cabrini, wrote in a letter to parishioners on Oct. 25.

Brunet wrote that the events leading up to the "unfortunate incident" at Mass began in September. The priest said that Saling's behavior "worsened" and became "less predictable" after an initial pastoral appointment.

"He has engaged in a course of abusive and threatening conduct, directed not just at me but towards the parish and school staff," said Brunet, who wrote that the parish and its school had "no other choice" but to request that Saling be served with the no-trespass notice.

Brunet also wrote that he and the parish staff "are concerned for [Saling's] well-being."

The minute-long video has had more than 635,000 views, as it was shared widely on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In the video, Brunet, wearing a green chasuble, is seen during a break in the eucharistic prayer pointing to someone in the pews, warning them that they were trespassing and that they needed to leave. Brunet then calls for someone to notify the church security guards.

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Before Brunet finishes taking his seat in the sanctuary, a tall white man wearing jeans and a blue T-shirt — identified in the pastor's letter as Saling — walks up from a front pew to the sanctuary, where he points at the priest and approaches his chair.

A second later, a male parishioner rushes to the sanctuary and Saling seemingly dares him to throw a punch. More than a dozen other men then quickly descend upon Saling, who shoves them as they struggle to restrain him near the altar, which was nearly toppled during the melee.

After about 30 seconds, the men drag and carry Saling out of the sanctuary. The camera briefly pans to horrified parishioners in the pews before the video ends. In his letter, Brunet asked parishioners not to circulate the video online "out of concern for the privacy of all involved."

Less than a month before the in-Mass disturbance, on Sept. 27, Saling applied for a petition for a sexual assault protection order against Brunet, according to documents filed in Washington State's Pierce County Superior Court.

In his petition, Saling alleged that he was concerned that his child, a student in the parish school, would be sexually assaulted because he believed the pastor "kept batting his eyes" at Saling during the Stations of Cross and would stare at Saling during Mass.

The court rejected Saling's petition for lack of evidence, as he did not list one specific incident or date of alleged nonconsensual sexual contact, according to court documents.

Lawler, the spokesman for the Lakewood Police Department, told NCR that no physical assaults related to the Oct. 24 incident have been reported to law enforcement. He said police took the suspect into custody and booked him into jail for the alleged trespass.

Saling has since bailed out of jail. The court has not yet set a date for his arraignment, Lawler said.

Meanwhile, Brunet wrote that St. Frances Cabrini Church and its school are "working closely" with the Lakewood Police Department, the Lakewood City Attorney and private security to maintain extra safety precautions.