News

A balding white man with round glasses wears a clerical collar and looks into the camera

Fr. Stephen Gutgsell, pastoral administrator of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Fort Calhoun, Neb., has died after being attacked in the rectory of his parish in the early morning before he was to celebrate Mass for the Second Sunday of Advent. He is pictured in an undated photo. (OSV News/Archdiocese of Omaha)

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A Nebraska priest has died after being attacked in the rectory of his parish in the early morning before he was to celebrate Mass for the Second Sunday of Advent.

Fr. Stephen Gutgsell was found "suffering from injuries sustained during an assault" Dec. 10 at the rectory of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, where he served as pastoral administrator.

According to a Dec. 10 press release from the Washington County Sheriff Mike Robinson, the county's 911 emergency dispatch received an emergency call Dec. 10 at approximately 5:05 a.m. reporting an attempted break-in at the rectory. According to the statement, deputies arrived within six minutes and found a Black male inside the residence with the injured priest.

Gutgsell was transported to the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, Nebraska, where he succumbed to his injuries.

The suspect was taken into custody and transferred to the Washington County correctional facility, according to Robinson.

"This is an ongoing investigation, and the name of the suspect or the manner of death will not be released," Robinson said. "No further information will be released at this time. There may be an updated press release later today."

In 2007, Gutgsell pleaded guilty to embezzling at least $125,000 from St. Patrick Church in Omaha. He was sentenced to five years' probation and ordered to pay back the funds. After completing a residential treatment program, the Archdiocese of Omaha then assigned him to assist with Blessed Sacrament Parish, now part of St. Philip Neri Parish, in Omaha, with the pastor of St. Philip Neri placed in charge of parish finances.

In June, Gutgsell's brother, Fr. Michael Gutgsell -- who served as chancellor of the Archdiocese of Omaha from 1994 to 2003, and as pastor of several parishes thereafter -- pleaded guilty to stealing $155,000 from Fr. Ted Richling, an elderly priest for whom he served as power of attorney. He was placed on two years' probation. Michael Gutgsell was also charged with stealing more than $96,000 from St. Joseph Parish in Springfield, Nebraska, of which he had been pastor. Those charges were dropped in return for repaying the funds.

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Robinson told local media that he did not believe Stephen Gutgsell's death was related to the priest's prior offense.

In a statement posted to its website, the Archdiocese of Omaha said it is "praying for Father Stephen Gutgsell" and that with the investigation in progress "there are no further details at this time.

"Please join Archbishop George Lucas in prayer for the repose of Father Gutgsell, for his family and for the St. John the Baptist parish community in this tragic time.”

According to the archdiocesan website, Gutgsell served as both St. John the Baptist's pastoral administrator and chaplain of the Madonna Rehabilitation Hospitals in Omaha, Nebraska, which provide care for brain and spinal cord injuries as well as complex medical conditions.

Stephen Gutgsell's final message in the bulletin to his flock concerned the patron saint of their parish, noting the Second Sunday of Advent -- the Mass he was supposed to celebrate that day -- could be called "St. John the Baptist Sunday" with its theme "Prepare the way of the Lord."

The priest noted the prophet who told others about "Jesus as Lamb of God" himself was "a great man whose life was cut short by the spite of [a] non-queen and the drunken promise of a non-king" after the dance of a young woman "who was not a princess."

"John is 'the Voice of one crying out ... Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.' As the Fathers of the Church described him, he is the Voice who announces the coming of the Word, who was God from the beginning and has now become Flesh in order to dwell among us," the priest wrote. "As Christmas draws near, the voice of John the Baptist is meant to remind us of what we all should be preparing to receive in the Advent Season. God bless you and your Family in this Wonderful Season of Grace."