News

Vandalized facade of the historic grotto at the National Sanctuary of our Sorrowful Mother.

Broken glass and objects are seen on the ground Feb. 28, 2024, outside the historic Grotto, the National Sanctuary of Our Sorrowful Mother, in Portland, Ore., after it sustained major damage in a vandalism attack. The 62-acre shrine, constructed in 1924, is operated by the Order of Friar Servants of Mary. (OSV News/Chris Blanchard, executive director, The Grotto)

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A historic place of prayer in Portland, Oregon, sustained significant damage to one of its buildings, while a priest narrowly escaped harm, in a Feb. 28 vandalism attack.

Security cameras, religious objects and windows were smashed in the monastery of The Grotto, the National Sanctuary of Our Sorrowful Mother, a 54-acre shrine operated by the Order of Friar Servants of Mary.

In an email to OSV News, shrine executive director Chris Blanchard said "an unidentified man broke into The Grotto Monastery, a private residence for the Servite Friars who minister at The Grotto," at approximately 6 a.m. that day.

"The intruder vandalized several rooms, including the monastery chapel, and damaged or destroyed several sacred items," said Blanchard in his email. "Police responded immediately to the incident and arrested the intruder shortly after. We are thankful that no one was injured, including the intruder."

According to local media reports, the suspect -- named by the Portland Police Bureau as 57-year-old Paul Joseph Yauger -- entered the grounds of the property early that morning and shattered security cameras, triggering a police response.

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Blanchard told local media that responding officers were initially unable to locate the intruder on the extensive and heavily wooded property and departed. Less than an hour later, the suspect forced his way into the monastery and, using a stick, pushed in the door to the room of Servite Father Leo Hambur as the priest was calling emergency services.

"I thought it was a gun," Hambur told media. "I was so scared at the time."

The suspect "looked at me, and he said, 'Who are you?'" Hambur recalled. "Then he moved out through another door, and he picked up (a pair of) scissors."

The priest then fled the monastery while the suspect locked himself inside. Police returned and arrested Yauger, who was being held in the Multnomah County Detention Center on five charges of burglary, trespassing, criminal mischief and unlawful use of a weapon. Three of the charges are felonies.

An adjacent convent in which four women religious live was not damaged.

Yauger was in court March 1 after refusing to appear for a scheduled hearing the prior day.

According to one local media outlet, a police spokesperson said Yauger was experiencing a mental health crisis at the time of the attack, and was "yelling and confrontational."

Blanchard told media he could only guess the total amount of damage, adding, "The real damage is to the sanctity of this place."

The Grotto was established in 1923 by Servite Father Ambrose Mayer, the order's first pastor in Oregon. Mayer founded the shrine as a tribute to Mary, the mother of Jesus, following a childhood promise he had made when his own mother recovered after almost dying in childbirth. Pope Pius XI gave his apostolic blessing to the project, and Mayer used the entirety of his savings for the $3,000 deposit on the property, then owned by the Union Pacific Railroad Company. The Grotto's iconic cave features a stone altar and a replica of Michelangelo's Pieta.

At the shrine's dedication in May 1924, Archbishop Alexander Christie prayed the place would be "a sanctuary of peace for all peoples of the earth, and surely in this day a sanctuary is needed. Torn with differences, strife, and grief, the world needs sanctuary where the human spirit can seek peace and consolation."

The shrine now features extensive gardens, a conference center, daily Mass and recitations of the rosary, self-guided pilgrimages and retreats, and a Christmas lights festival.