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Man dies after setting himself on fire in St. Peter's Square

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — An unidentified 51-year-old man died Sunday, three days after setting himself on fire in St. Peter's Square.

Italian news reports said the man, who had third-degree burns on almost 50 percent of his body, died at Rome's Sant'Eugenio Hospital.

At about 8:30 a.m. Dec. 19, the man entered St. Peter's Square carrying a bottle of gasoline. At the end of the colonnade near Piazza Pio XII, he doused himself with the fuel and lit himself aflame.

A Jesuit priest on his way to work at the Vatican was the first passerby to come to the man's aid, according to a written statement from Italian police distributed by the Vatican.

The priest tried to smother the flames with his cloak and jacket. Two Italian police agents on duty at the square went to the scene and used a blanket and fire extinguisher to put out the fire.

The man was taken to the Santo Spirito Hospital near the Vatican -- the hospital where Italian media reported he worked as a janitor -- then was transferred to the burn unit at Sant'Eugenio with severe burns on his upper body. The two police agents were treated and released for "respiratory problems and burns to the hands," the statement said.

The statement said a piece of paper was found nearby that had the phone number of the man's daughter. It added that the motive for the man's actions was unknown.

The case was in the hands of the Italian authorities because security and law enforcement in St. Peter's

Square are the responsibility of the Italian police.

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