

Arrest made in arson fire at historic Indiana church

NEW CASTLE, Ind. - Five weeks after fire destroyed historic St. Anne Church in New Castle during the early morning hours of Holy Saturday, Henry County authorities arrested William L. Abbott, 33, of New Castle on felony charges of arson, burglary and theft.

County prosecutor Kit Crane said Abbott was arrested May 10 and charged with three felony counts of arson for endangering the lives of others, setting fire to a house of worship and causing a loss greater than \$5,000.

New Castle firefighter Jack Thurman injured his back while battling the April 7 blaze that gutted the 83-year-old brick church and county landmark.

Abbott, a convicted felon with an extensive criminal history, is being held at the Henry County Jail.

Crane said bond was set at \$340,000, which he hopes is enough to secure Abbott's attendance at trial if bond is posted.

The probable cause affidavit said investigators determined the fire was caused by "open flame ignition to available materials."

The affidavit added, "The main body of the fire originated within the northern end of the basement meeting room, and that there were three other separate areas of burning within the sacristy, north hall and server's room."

The affidavit also noted that Abbott's fingerprints were identified on a full bottle of

altar wine taken from a locked cabinet in the church and discarded in a dumpster. A silver goblet and several gold canisters were among sacred church property recovered there.

Not-guilty pleas were entered on Abbott's behalf May 11. His trial is set to begin Sept. 11.

Abbott, according to news reports, denied starting the fire, but admitted he entered the church through an unlocked basement window with two men hours before fire gutted the church. He has refused to identify the other men.

Monsignor Joseph F. Schaedel, vicar general for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, said he was pleased authorities were able to make an arrest.

"Anyone who would do such a thing definitely needs help," Monsignor Schaedel told *The Criterion*, Indianapolis' archdiocesan newspaper. "(The arrest) may prevent other similar crimes in other places."

Franciscan Sister Shirley Gerth, parish life coordinator of St. Anne Parish and St. Rose Parish in nearby Knightstown, said May 10 she is "relieved to know that progress has been made in the arson investigation."

Sister Shirley praised police and fire officials who investigated the arson and said she hopes the arrest will prevent any further harm in the community.

"I never expected (an arrest) to come quite this soon," she said. "I am certainly relieved and at peace. I truly, truly believe it is because of all the prayers that whole week (after the fire) that the parishioners came to pray at the prayer center," where Masses are being celebrated in the interim.

"We have continued to put a petition in at Mass asking the Holy Spirit to guide the investigative team," she said, "and I just truly believe that God answered those prayers."

Sister Shirley said seven children received first Communion in the basement worship space.

“One little boy said to his grandmother, as they were coming here for reconciliation, ‘Grandma, I wish we could have (first Communion) in church,’” Sister Shirley said. “So we talked a little bit about that at our Masses. It’s a part of the loss. ... I think it’s good to point out the other losses as a result of the loss of the church.”

“We talked about what was essential and what was nonessential. When it came to first holy Communion, of course, the essential is receiving the Lord no matter where we do that,” she added.