

Man arrested after trying to walk into cathedral with flammables

NEW YORK — A man who tried to walk through St. Patrick's Cathedral in midtown Manhattan close to 8 p.m. local time April 17 had gas cans, lighter fluid and igniters and claimed he was just cutting through the cathedral to get to Madison Avenue where he had left his car, which he said had run out of gas.

The 37-year-old man from New Jersey, who was not identified, was apprehended by police "without incident."

This took place just two days after the horrific fire that devastated Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence and Counterterrorism John Miller of the New York Police Department in a statement to reporters said that the security staff at St. Patrick's asked the man where he was going and told him he couldn't "proceed into the cathedral carrying (those) things."

As the man turned around, "some gasoline apparently spill(ed) out onto the floor," Miller said, which then prompted cathedral security to report the situation to officials from the counterterrorism bureau who were standing outside the cathedral, Miller told reporters around midnight.

He said officers followed the man, caught up to him, and after questioning him about his reason for being at the cathedral, they arrested him. The suspect was known to police, Miller said. There was no damage to the cathedral.

"His basic story was he was cutting through the cathedral to get to Madison Avenue. That his car had run out of gas," Miller said. Police said the man had a minivan he parked on the Fifth Avenue outside the cathedral. "We took a look at the vehicle. It was not out of gas and at that point he was taken into custody."

Miller told reporters the man's story was "inconsistent," and it was "hard to say exactly what his intentions were" in bringing flammables to the church.

“But the ... circumstances of an individual walking into an iconic location like St. Patrick’s Cathedral carrying over four gallons of gasoline, two bottles of lighter fluid and lighters is something that we would have great concern over,” he said.

The 140-year-old cathedral recently underwent an extensive restoration, which included the installation of a new sprinkler system in the attic as part of fire prevention protocols at the cathedral.

Following the Notre Dame fire, officials at U.S. cathedrals and shrines spoke to Catholic News Service about their state-of-the-art fire prevention, detection and suppression techniques. They also emphasized that even with these methods in place, fire firefighters and church staff remain vigilant.

As demonstrated by the April 17 incident with the man bringing flammables to St. Patrick’s Cathedral, security also is integral to fire prevention, even though, as police said, his intentions were unclear.

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Beth Griffin contributed to this story.

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