

Sheriffs arrest man after altar destroyed at Subiaco Abbey

written by Malea Hargett |



STORY UPDATED 4:51 p.m. Jan. 6

A man was arrested Jan. 5 after he destroyed the marble top of the altar at St. Benedict Church at Subiaco Abbey, stealing two small brass reliquaries embedded in the altar.

Abbot Elijah Owens, OSB, said a reliquary with relics of Sts. Boniface, Tiberius and Benedict was found in the suspect's truck, along with a hammer and sledgehammer "with marble dust still on them."

Several witnesses said they saw a "strange man" on the campus between 3-4 p.m. The man was previously seen at Sunday Masses Jan. 1.

Abbot Owens wrote on the abbey's website, countrymonks.org, "He had apparently then moved to the tabernacle, removed the cross on top, removed the tabernacle veil and then was interrupted. Thankfully, the Blessed Sacrament and the tabernacle were not damaged."

According to the abbey, "The sheriff reported that the man had wanted to break into the tabernacle but had looked up at the statue of Mary and decided he couldn't do that to her."

The Logan County Sheriff's Office was called and investigated, interviewing witnesses.

In a Jan. 6 press release, the sheriff said, "Each relic box contained three relics from saints from over 1,500 years ago. Both boxes were missing. The altar itself had a very large hole in the middle of the slab that went all of the way through the altar, and the altar had large cracks and chips. This is an act of desecration to the altar."

The abbey reported about 24 hours after the theft that the other reliquary with relics of Sts. Tiberius, Marcellus and Justina was recovered.

Abbot Owens said the two reliquaries were placed in the mensa stones in 1959 when the abbey church was consecrated by Bishop Albert Fletcher. The altar, designed by Daprato Studios of Chicago and Pietrasanta, Italy, is constructed of Italian Botticino marble with a trim of red Alicante marble from Spain. The marble altar top, or mensa, is a single piece of 5-by-10-foot marble, weighing two tons.

The abbey placed its boys' boarding and day school for seventh to 12th grades in lockdown for the rest of the day Jan. 5 "out of an abundance of caution," the abbot wrote.

The abbot said the man was arrested after deputies initially left and the man returned to the church.

"One of our monks spoke to the gentleman, and it became clear he was the one who had done the damage. He was arrested, his vehicle towed and further investigations are ongoing," the abbot wrote.

Logan County Sheriff's Office said Jerrid Farnam, 31, from the Subiaco area, was expected to be charged with theft, first-degree criminal mischief, residential burglary, breaking or entering and public intoxication. He was being held at the county detention center.

The sheriff added, "Due to the nature of the destruction and the difficulty in estimating the cost of the items destroyed and stolen and that an altar was desecrated, the charges may change."

The sheriff added, "The deputies also discovered that the suspect had entered a nearby vacant house and an item was missing from that house. That item was found in the suspect's truck."

Because of the altar's desecration, Abbot Owens, monks and 20 guests prayed the Public Prayer after the Desecration of a Church Jan. 6, processing from the refectory to the church chanting Psalm 130. The abbot blessed and sprinkled holy water around the church and celebrated Mass for the community.

The abbot said, "In accordance with the prescriptions, the altar of the church was stripped bare and all customary signs of joy and gladness have been put away. Due to the extensive

damage to the main altar, the monks will use a portable altar until necessary provisions are made for the repairs.”

Abbot Owens told *Arkansas Catholic*, “This has certainly been a traumatic time for many of the monks who normally live lives of contemplation, prayer and peace. Still, as we have done since 1878 through two devastating fires, two world wars and pandemics, we monks continued our daily chanted prayers for our diocese, the Church and the world. We also prayed for the local parish church of St. Benedict since they also use the Abbey Church for their own worship. Like the monks, they too were deeply affected because this was their home church as well. We most especially prayed for the young man who perpetrated this crime. Thankfully, there was no loss of life and no desecration of the tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament. St. Benedict calls us monks in chapter 53 of his Rule to welcome all as Christ. In spite of acts like this, we monks will continue to do so.”