



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on July 16, 2020

## Florida Schizophrenic Sets Fire to Florida Church

Saturday morning, as parishioners at Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Ocala, Florida, prepared for morning Mass, a mentally unstable man drove his minivan through the front door of the church. He then got out of his vehicle and spread gasoline around the foyer before setting it on fire. He then backed his van out and drove away.

The man — Stephen Anthony Shields, 24, of Dunnellon, Florida — was arrested following a vehicular chase by sheriff's deputies. Shields — who reportedly has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and has had not been taking his medications — readily admitted to his crime, stating that he understood the consequences of his actions.

He also stated that he considered the fire at the church to be “awesome” because he awoke Saturday morning with a “mission” to destroy the church. To carry out the “mission,” Shields stopped along the way and purchased gasoline at a local station.

He told officers that he has strong objections to the Catholic church and quoted passages from the book of Revelation, along with other portions of the Bible.

Queen of Peace is one of the few Catholic parishes in central Florida that offers the Traditional Latin Mass. The parish is served by the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter. Father Patrick J. O'Doherty and other priests of the Fraternity of St. Peter travel each week to the church from Sarasota, where they also serve at Christ the King Catholic Church.

The Catholic Diocese of Orlando issued a [statement](#) Saturday saying that Masses would resume in a nearby parish hall as ordinarily scheduled. That statement went on to say:

We praise God that no one was injured. We join in prayer for Father O'Doherty, the parishioners of Queen of Peace Catholic Church, our first responders and the gentleman who caused this damage. May we come to know the Peace of the Lord.

Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods also issued a statement Saturday, saying:

Our freedom of worship granted in the Constitution is a freedom that we all hold dear. My deputies and I are sworn to protect that right and will always ensure our citizens can worship in peace. I'm proud of my deputies for capturing this man so quickly and we appreciate the assistance from all of the state and federal agencies that worked alongside of us during this investigation.

While it is true that law enforcement is “sworn to protect” freedom of worship, and it is good to see a sheriff that recognizes that truth, it is not true that “freedom of worship [is] granted in the Constitution.” Rights come from God. Governments either recognize or fail to recognize those rights, but they do not “grant” them. What government giveth, government can taketh away. Sadly, since many





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make the same mistake Sheriff Woods makes, God-given rights are often restricted by government, as can be seen in the heavy-handed response to COVID-19. Churches were closed and parishioners and ministers were fined and even arrested in churches that refused to give up the same God-given right that Sheriff Woods correctly said law-enforcement officers are sworn to protect.

In this case, the attack against freedom of worship came from a mentally disturbed man in need of help. His “mission” was born in his sickened mind, but the possible influence of the anti-God and anti-church agenda so prevalent today cannot be dismissed. Given that his schizophrenia likely created a susceptibility to that influence, he is all the more pitiable.

This is not the first time Shields has been arrested for violence against others. In 2019, he was arrested for swinging a crowbar at a woman he said he wanted to kill. In that episode, he said he chose a crowbar because he did not want to “dirty his blades,” according to a report from the online Ocala-News at the time.

It is not immediately known why Shields was released following that incident. What is known is that Shields is not an anomaly: His case is sadly familiar, if not par for the course. In cities all across America, men and women who — because of their various mental disorders are a danger to themselves and others — routinely fall between the cracks. They are diagnosed, written prescriptions, and sent on their way without any real mechanism for either healthcare professionals or authorities to follow up with them. If they run out of medications or simply decide to stop taking them, many of them begin to fall fast.

In the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown, person-to-person healthcare (including mental healthcare) has been difficult to obtain. One is left to wonder how many like Stephen Shields are out there, spiraling into the darkness and approaching free fall.

Shields has been charged with attempted murder, arson, burglary, and evading arrest. Jail time will not likely help him. Proper medical and psychiatric treatment, not incarceration, is what is needed. Given the charitable outreach of the Catholic Church — with its own social services arm at the diocese level, hospitals, clinics, counseling services, and other charities — the very church he attacked would likely have gone out of its way to provide him that help.

This attack came the [same weekend as another fire](#) — also suspected of being deliberately set — destroyed a large portion of the San Gabriel Mission Catholic Church near Los Angeles. That church — 249 years old — was nearly gutted by a fire in the early hours of Saturday. It is not yet known who may have set the fire, if it was arson, but it is known that the priest who built that church in 1771, St. Junipero Serra, has recently drawn the ire of militant leftists. A statue of him was recently pulled down in a riot in Los Angeles. Other Catholic churches were vandalized over the weekend as well, with statues of the Virgin Mary damaged by paint and fire.

Image: [Screenshot of the ocalaqueenofpeace.com website](#)



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