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Fire

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Sacred Heart is located across the street from the First United Methodist Church, where 27 stained-glass windows were broken by rocks last December. A man was arrested in that incident. Church officials estimated the damage to the windows at \$150,000 to \$200,000.

First United was struck again on Feb. 3, when a large pulpit Bible was stolen from the church's sanctuary.

The Jewish Community Center at 1745 Peachtree St. was burglarized and defaced with swastikas last May 14. After that incident, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson issued a statement saying, "The city of Atlanta will do everything possible to see the perpetrators of the criminal act are brought to justice."

The fire at Sacred Heart occurred two days after the completion of a year-long renovation of the interior of the church, and two days before the church's lay leadership is to hold a meeting to draw up plans for the renovation of the outside of the church.

The fire came on the day scheduled for celebrating the patronal feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, after which the church is named.

Father Morris said he and three other priests who were asleep in the rectory that adjoins the church were alerted to the fire by "some local people who the church had helped out with emergency clothing and food."

"They came and banged on the door and rang the doorbell and alerted the priest on duty," he said.

Father Morris said the fire was first spotted by two patrolling policemen, who thought it was in one of the several nearby hotels.

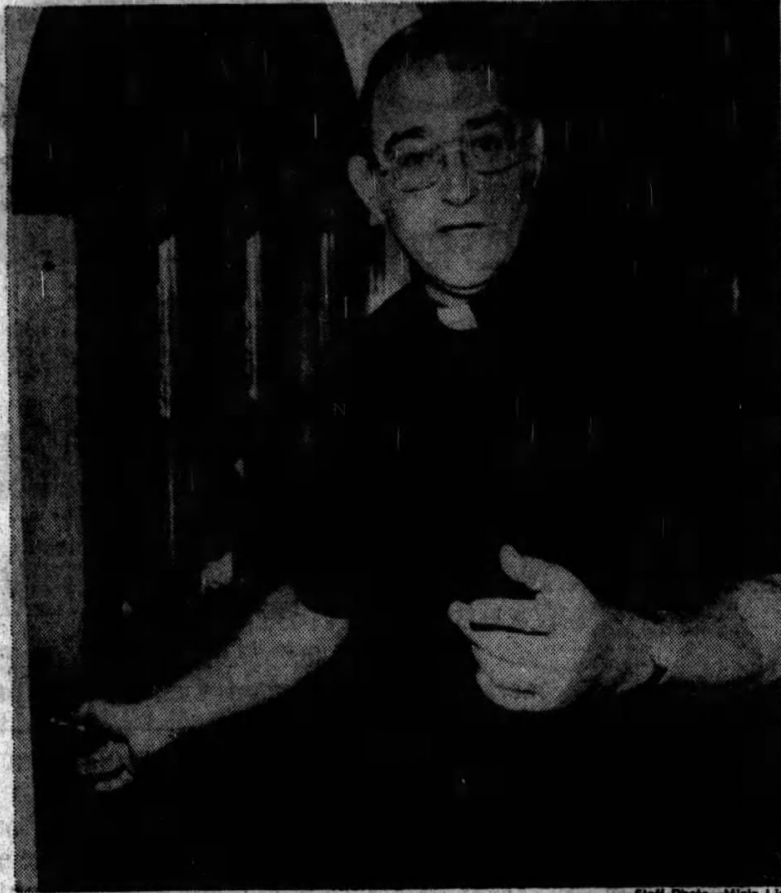
"They deserve all the credit in the world" for spotting the fire, Father Morris said. "Four or five more minutes, the firemen said, and the whole church would have been lost."

The fire was centered in a basement area on the south side of the church. The area included classrooms, a meeting area and a kitchen.

Father Morris said that firemen were 20 minutes into the fight to control the fire when he and the other priests finally got outside. "Next I checked the cars," Father Morris said, "and that's when I saw the tires had been slashed."

Father Morris said the damage would cost an estimated \$200,000 to \$250,000.

"I wasn't shocked" by the fire, he



Staff Photo—Minnie Linn

Father Michael Morris Inspects Damage To Sacred Heart Church

said, "but I was sick and puzzled."

"It's a safe assessment that it was set purposely," Father Morris said. He said he had no idea who had set the fire or why.

Mrs. Faye Murphy, religious educational coordinator for the church, could only speculate that whoever set the fire "hated God."

"I just hope they don't come back to finish the job," Mrs. Murphy said.

The Atlanta Fire Bureau received the first call on the blaze at 3:33 a.m. The blaze was declared under control at 4:40 p.m. Elements of four companies, including three engines and three ladders, fought the fire.

Sacred Heart is the the second-oldest Catholic church in Atlanta. It was moved to its present location in 1898. Because of its French Romanesque architecture, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in

1976. It is due to celebrate its centennial in 1880.

Four masses were scheduled for Sunday. Because smoke still lingered in the building, and a heavy layer of soot covered everything in the church and the adjoining sacristy and sanctuary, services were held in a meeting room in the rectory and in a courtyard between the rectory and church.

Father Morris said he was able to offer mass to all his parishioners. The church has a registered membership of 3,000. In addition, many of those who attend services each Sunday are out-of-towners staying at nearby hotels.

"My biggest worry is the three weddings (scheduled for) next Saturday," Father Morris said. He said the church is insured and that he was scheduled to meet with insurance investigators Monday.