

Teens allegedly vandalize Church

By DAVID KREWSON

NORTH MIDDLETOWN — A "spontaneous, although reprehensible and mindless act" could lead to serious charges for six teens, according to police.

Police Monday night arrested four teenage girls, three of them were charged for going on a rampage on Bray Avenue and neighboring streets earlier that day and Sunday night spray painting graffiti of racist, satanic and anti-Semitic sayings on a church building, fences and cars.

Police Chief John Pollinger said that two 14-year-old boys have been arrested for toppling a 6-foot statue of the Virgin Mary, beheading the statue and leaving the head at Roosevelt Park. The statue had been placed underneath an archway fence behind St. Catherine's Roman Catholic Church, Shore Acres Avenue.

"We placed into custody, interviewed and took statements from four teenage girls Monday night in connection with the acts of graffiti that occurred on Sunday night and early Monday morning," Pollinger said.

Police arrested two 15-year-old girls and one 16-year-old girl suspected of spray painting racist and anti-Semitic graffiti on cars, fences and a church building.

Vandals stole a statue of a religious icon off a private property, painted a swastika on the church's Fellowship Bingo Hall on Shore Acres Avenue, drew a pentagram on a truck, painted offensive remarks about individuals on their properties and threatened blacks and denigrated Jews and God in graffiti.

According to Pollinger, one of the vehicles which had offensive words spray painted on its cab was parked on church property and belonged to a private organization.

As to motive, Pollinger said that according to the boys' statements, there was no hatred to the Catholic church, Catholic religion and "was a spontaneous, although reprehensible and mindless act."

Pollinger said the teenagers are facing a "number of charges."

The three girls have been charged with burglary of a van that is owned by a local painter.

Allegedly, the girls stole gallons of paint, spray paint, brushes and rollers from inside the van.

He said the teens are charged with burglary and theft of the paint and painting utensils as well as criminal mischief for damaging the property in the area.

Pollinger said that in total, five cars, two fences, the Tonya Keller Recreation Center, Bray Avenue and a church building were vandalized.

He said the trail markings were first discovered by a maintenance worker at St. Catherine's Church where the largest collection of symbols and and offensive remarks were made.

Pollinger said from there the graffiti trail continued for numerous blocks with police finding more graffiti every few minutes as they scouted out the area.

He noted that the graffiti trail ended at Ideal Beach where the religious icon was found behind a small beach hut. Police also discovered a gold swastika which recreation officials told them had been painted there last Thursday night. The recreation center is located about three blocks from Ideal Beach.

Pollinger said, "It is a bias incident."

However, he said "It is yet to be determined whether it was a bias crime."

Pollinger said police are working in conjunction with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office to determine whether it was a bias crime.

"We will look through the evidence and then determine what charges will be ultimately filed," Pollinger said.

He added that all of the teenagers have been released to the custody of their parents.

"Everyone was offended by the nature of the words and symbols," Pollinger said.

He noted that there is a distinction between a bias incident and a bias crime.

Pollinger related that an example of a bias crime occurred on September 11, 2001 at a Route 35 gasoline station where an attendant of Pakistani descent was assaulted on that tragic day because of his ethnic nationality.

Pollinger said this particular bias crime of the gasoline station attendant was committed by the perpetrator because the attendant was from Pakistan.

He cited an example of a bias incident which occurred in the township last year when an African American woman's home was burglarized with slurs against her which, he said was a "neighborhood dispute."

Pollinger said what authorities have to determine in this case was whether the offensive graffiti "caused fear to a particular person."

He noted that one of the boys arrested is a parishioner himself at St. Catherine's Church.

Pollinger said, the boy's statement to police harbors no grudge against his own church or religion.

The Monmouth County Human Relations Commission based in Freehold commented Tuesday.

In a statement the organization said "The Monmouth



BIAS INCIDENT? Six teens are accused of Church, Shore Acres Avenue, and the surrounding Virgin Mary.

County Human Relations Commission was both saddened and angry to learn of the desecration at St. Catherine's Church and the surrounding neighborhood."

Linda Zucaro, chairperson, of the organization commended Police Chief John Pollinger and the Middletown Police Department for their "prompt and decisive action" arresting the suspected offenders.

"We are sad to think what impulses possessed them to act out such examples of disrespect and even hatred of their neighbors," she added. "The decapitation of a sacred statue and the spray painting of racial and ethnic epithets have no place in a county whose population displays a wonderful diversity of faith and national origin."

Kathleen Toomey, church secretary to the Rev. Daniel Hesko said, "We just don't know why they did this."

"I don't know how young people can have so much hate and anger in them it is just unbelievable."

Toomey said she was glad that they were apprehended and I hope they will be dealt with and they have to know their are consequences to their actions.

One longtime parishioner said, "what they wrote was terrible. Where were their parents? There was no parental supervision," she said.

The parishioner, who wished to be unidentified said that the teenagers should come to the church and apologize.

Rev. Hesko could not be reached for comment by Courier press time.

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