

# Up From Ashes

*Knights help restore a Minnesota church damaged by arson*

By Cecilia Engbert 7/17/2024



*The sacristy of St. Edward Church in Elmdale, Minn., is pictured the morning after being set on fire July 18, 2023. The church's sanctuary also was damaged. (OSV News photo/Dianne Towalski, The Central Minnesota Catholic)*

The day after the fire, Jeffrey Czech drove with a sinking heart to his home parish in Elmdale, Minnesota, to assess the damage. Later determined to be an act of arson, the fire had been discovered by the pastor of St. Edward Church as he locked up for the evening July 18, 2023. Czech, a former firefighter, feared the worst when he heard the news.

“There was a lot of damage, but I just took a deep breath,” said Czech, grand knight of St. Gregory the Great Council 12604 in Bowlus. “I thought, ‘We have our work cut out for us. This is going to take a lot of work to repair, yet this is manageable.’”

Thanks to the quick response of two local fire departments, the flames had been contained before they spread from the sacristy, where the fire was lit, into the sanctuary. But many parts of the church — including the high altar, two side altars and the pews sustained significant damage from heat, smoke and water. The sacristy needed major structural repairs, and numerous items, such as statues and Mass vessels, had to be repaired or replaced. All told, the damages came close to a daunting \$1 million.

But Czech was right; the restoration was manageable. The small parish community, comprising about 150 families, immediately stepped up to the challenge, offering money, skills and time to bring their church back to life. At the forefront were the Knights of Council 12604, working closely with Father Jimmy Joseph, who had been assigned pastor of St. Edward's only weeks before the fire.

Czech organized the Knights' contributions to the effort, including a spaghetti dinner fundraiser last winter that raised more than \$13,000 for the parish.

“This has been a very Knights-oriented goal. Helping with restorations, fundraising — we each have our own talents and trades,” said Czech, whose great-grandfather and grandfather helped build St. Edward's in the early 1900s. “It's been a privilege to be part of this.”

Jim Wensmann, a member of Council 12604, grew up going to St. Edward's with his 16 siblings, serving at Mass along with his brothers. Naturally, he was devastated when he received news of the fire. But he recognized it as opportunity to use his construction and carpentry skills to serve his parish.



*Workers are seen restoring the interior of St. Edward Church in Elmdale, Minn. The church's sacristy was destroyed and part of its sanctuary was damaged; and the rest of the building sustained damage from smoke and water. (OSV News photo/Dianne Towalski, The Central Minnesota Catholic)*



*From left, Jim Wensmann, Jeff Czech, John Kokett, and Jim Bartkowicz — all members of St. Gregory the Great Council 12604 in Bowlus, Minn. — stand in front of St. Edward's Church in Elmdale on June 29. The Knights were instrumental in restoring the church after the fire. (Photo by Kimm Anderson)*



*Bishop Patrick Neary of St. Cloud, Minn., celebrates Mass in the newly restored St. Edward's Church on June 29, the first Mass offered in the church since a fire last July and the official installation Mass of Father Jimmy Joseph, left, as pastor. (Photo by Kimm Anderson)*

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“I told Father Jimmy immediately that I would do that work right away if I could, and he let us do it,” said Wensmann, who owns a cabinet shop with his two sons. “Wherever I can help to keep the light of Christ alive in the Church is important to me; that’s why I’m a Knight.”

While certain jobs — such as restoring the damaged altars and pews — were left to an emergency restoration company, Wensmann led several projects in St. Edward’s, including hanging sheet rock, building a podium and chairs for the altar, and building a new frame for a damaged stained-glass window. Wensmann also led the repairs on the sacristy, which needed an almost complete reconstruction.

“There was a brick wall that needed to come down, and me and my brothers and Jeff helped with that,” Wensmann said. “We tore that wall down and demolished it and got rid of the rubble, and then we took the roof off the sacristy, where the fire was, and we rebuilt that.”

Knights assisted with removing statues and Stations of the Cross to be cleaned and repainted, and later reinstalled them. Neighboring councils also reached out, offering financial assistance and participating in the dinner fundraiser hosted by Council 12604.

“It really is a blessed day, especially for me to finally have the chance to install Father Jimmy Joseph as your pastor, but also to see this renovated beautiful church,” said Bishop Neary in his homily. “I’m grateful to (Father Jimmy) and to all of you who have given of your time and your resources to carry out the task of restoring this beautiful church. ... It’s surely hard work, but I know that it’s been a labor of love for all involved, and I’m honored to be able to witness its reopening and blessing.”

What began as a tragedy became an opportunity for the community to find new life in their parish, Wensmann said.

“It was hard to keep my emotions back at times during the Mass,” he said. “But it was beautiful — and it was nice to see whole families there, all their children together.

“Throughout the project, the Knights were really great. We all did quite a bit of work in St. Edward’s whenever we could. I’m glad we were able to get together and do that for our beautiful church.”

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*Thank you to all who have given their time, treasure and talent for the renovation of St. Edward's, Elmdale!*