

Blessed Sacrament Desecrated in Mid-Mass Robbery

In one of the most dreadful attacks ever made upon the Blessed Sacrament in the history of the Archdiocese of Boston, two men stole sacred vessels from the altar of a church as a priest, saying Mass, led the congregation in The Our Father.

On Friday, June 10, 1994, David Cedeno, a 17-year-old Dominican, and an unidentified accomplice entered St. Mary's Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, while Father Robert Guessetto was celebrating the noon Mass. They entered the sanctuary, and in the presence of forty worshippers, stole two chalices and a communion paten, spilling the sacred species on the altar and the sanctuary floor. Thus, robbery was compounded by sacrilege.

In letters to Essex County District Attorney Kevin Burke and U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts Donald Stem, Daniel T. Flatley, President of the League's Massachusetts Chapter, called Cedeno's act "an outrageous and unprecedented crime" which struck "not only at the heart of St. Mary's Parish, but at the very norms of civilized behavior." Flatley said Cedeno and his accomplice "profaned and defiled that which Catholics hold most sacred, the Holy Eucharist. In doing so they not only assaulted the religious sensibilities of worshippers, but also violated their constitutional rights."

The League demanded that Cedeno and the other suspect be charged with violations of the constitutional rights statute under Massachusetts law, which prohibits interference by force with any constitutionally guaranteed right, 'including the free exercise of religion.'

In an historic move, the Catholic League became the first organization in America to call for a prosecution for

disrupting a church service under the new FACE act (Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act of 1994) signed into law by President Clinton on May 26th. Although primarily aimed at pro-lifers, FACE also contains a provision attaching serious penalties to interference with a religious service in a place of worship.

Dan Flatley told U.S. Attorney Stem that "the appalling character of Cedeno's offense, and the shocking injury sustained not only by St. Mary's Parish, but by all members of the Catholic community...demands that the perpetrators of this heinous crime be punished to the fullest extent of the law."

Acceding to the requests of the Catholic League, District Attorney Burke has agreed to seek a grand jury indictment of Cedeno for larceny, disturbing an assembly of worship, constitutional rights violations, and destruction of religious property. The last three charges are hate crimes under Massachusetts law. The District Attorney's Office has also informed the League that the case will be prosecuted by the chief of their civil rights division and will be tried not in the local Lawrence District Court, but in the Superior Court of Essex County.

The League is still awaiting a response from U.S. Attorney Stem on its call for a FACE prosecution.