



**U.S. Department of Justice**

Office of the Associate Attorney General

---

*Associate Attorney General*

*Washington, D.C. 20530*

January 28, 2022

Mr. Brian Burch  
President  
CatholicVote  
Post Office Box 2709  
Chicago, IL 60609

Dear Mr. Burch:

Thank you for your letter of December 15, 2021. Two days after learning of this correspondence, the Attorney General ordered a 15-day review to ensure that all appropriate resources are being deployed to protect houses of worship. On December 21, the Department found a number for you online, attempted to contact you by phone, and left you a message. As we have yet to hear back, we write today to provide you with the information in response to your letter.

We share your concern with and commitment to preventing and addressing acts of vandalism, property destruction, and other incidents that target religious symbols, shrines, statues, or churches. The Department is taking numerous steps to address such violence, consistent with our commitment to combat unlawful acts of hate in all their forms. In your letter, you note specific incidents documented by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in which Catholic monuments and churches were attacked or vandalized in California, New York, Colorado, and Washington, D.C., in the last year, and you ask the Department to investigate these and other anti-Catholic incidents and to take appropriate action.

The Department is aware of the incidents that your letter describes. Combatting hate crimes is among the highest priorities of the Department, and where evidence reveals a violation of the federal criminal statutes, we are committed to taking appropriate action. Where an incident is not prosecutable under federal statutes and state or local action is more appropriate, we work with our state and local partners to investigate these incidents.

The Department is committed to the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes, including those that are religiously motivated. The Criminal Section of the Civil Rights Division and the United States Attorneys' Offices are responsible for enforcing federal hate crime statutes. Among these statutes is 18 U.S.C. § 247, which prohibits intentionally defacing, damaging or destroying religious property, or attempts to do so, because of the property's religious nature, where the crime is in or affecting interstate commerce. The statute also prohibits anyone from intentionally obstructing or attempting to obstruct, by force or threat of force, a person in the enjoyment of their religious beliefs, or attempts to do so, where the crime is in or affecting

interstate commerce. Finally, the statute prohibits anyone from intentionally defacing, damaging or destroying any religious property because of the race, color, or ethnic characteristics of any individual associated with the property.

The Department has successfully pursued and prosecuted a number of religiously motivated hate crimes in recent years. For example, the Department indicted a man for setting fire to a Catholic church in Ocala, Florida;<sup>1</sup> convicted a woman who threatened to bomb a Catholic preparatory school in Washington, D.C.;<sup>2</sup> convicted a man who threatened a shooting spree at a Catholic church in Oregon;<sup>3</sup> convicted a man who carried out a series of arsons at churches in Tennessee;<sup>4</sup> and convicted a man who opened fire on worshippers in a synagogue and set fire to a mosque in California because he wanted to kill Muslims and Jews, resulting in a life sentence.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to criminal prosecutions and investigations, the Department is committed to providing training and education to help protect houses of worship and faith communities. As part of that effort, the Department conducts outreach to educate the public of the resources available to prevent and combat hate crimes, including crimes targeting houses of worship. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for example, conducts hate crime trainings and civil rights outreach events, several of which specifically address safety issues at houses of worship. In October 2020, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security hosted a virtual Security & Safety Symposium for Faith-Based Communities, which was attended by approximately 2000 attendees across the country. The webinar focused on strengthening relationships between law enforcement and communities of faith and contained two main teaching blocks: *Enhancing Security in Houses of Worship* and *Practicing Safety Within Your Community*.

The Community Relations Service also regularly works with church leaders in its work providing facilitation, mediation, and consultation services, and responds to requests from religious leaders to facilitate forums to keep places of worship safe. CRS's Protecting Places of Worship forum is a half-day session that provides faith-based leaders and congregations with information about religious hate crimes, state and federal hate crimes laws, law enforcement threat assessments, and ways to protect places of worship from potential hate crimes and other threats of violence. CRS held three forums in 2021, including one forum held after a shooting at a church in Texas.

Finally, the Department's Office of Justice Programs has several grant programs that can be used to prevent and address hate crimes, including crimes targeting houses of worship. The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program is a formula grant program that is the leading federal source of criminal justice funding to states, territories, local governments, and tribes, and can be used for crime prevention efforts to increase patrols and deployments that bolster the security of at-risk nonprofit organizations, including churches and

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/usao-mdfl/pr/florida-man-charged-federal-hate-crime-setting-fire-church>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/california-woman-sentenced-15-months-threatening-bomb-catholic-prep-school>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/oregon-man-pleads-guilty-federal-hate-crime-threatening-shooting-spre-eugene-church>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/usao-mdtn/pr/nashville-man-pleads-guilty-civil-rights-violations-series-church-arsons>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/california-man-sentenced-life-followed-30-years-prison-federal-hate-crimes-related-2019-poway>

other places of worship. The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Program supports state, local, and tribal law enforcement and prosecution agencies and their partners in conducting outreach, educating practitioners and the public, enhancing victim reporting tools, and investigating and prosecuting hate crimes committed on the basis of a victim's protected characteristics, including religion.

We hope this information is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact the Department if we may be of assistance with this or any other matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink, appearing to read "Vanita Gupta", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Vanita Gupta  
Associate Attorney General