

Faith Leaders Come Together To Restore Statues Vandalized Outside a Church



Shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary outside Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church. On her left are the replaced angel statues. Photo credit: Emilia Otte

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NEW YORK—On a Sunday morning in December of last year, before the sun came up, Father Wieslaw Strzadala, pastor of Our Lady of Consolation Church in Brooklyn, discovered something disturbing on his way to unlock the church. Two angel statues, part of an outdoor shrine to the Virgin Mary, were lying in pieces on the ground.

Strzadala cleaned up the fragments of wings, faces, and a banner that read “Gloria.” The first mass of the day was in less than two hours, and he didn’t want his parishioners to see the broken angels. He worried about how the parishioners, who were mainly Polish immigrants and their families, would respond to the destruction. He said that many “see the church as their own home.”

Two days later, the phone rang. It was the Bishop, who according to Strzadala was watching a press conference on TV. Brooklyn Borough President Adams and several community religious leaders had heard that the church had been the target of a hate crime. They decided to get together to help pay for the church’s destroyed statues.

Strzadala was both surprised and happy that these leaders were donating to help the parish. This wasn't the first time the statues outside the church had been broken, but in the past the church had been left on its own to repair the damage.

Yet while Strzadala said the money was helpful, the most important thing for him was seeing that the community viewed the vandalism as "a real crime."

[In New York](#), anti-religious hate crimes accounted for nearly 60 percent of all bias crimes in 2018, slightly up from 54 percent in 2017. Yet even as law enforcement officials around the country face an increase in intolerance, religious communities are coming together and pledging support for one another. All across the country, faith leaders are praying together. Worshipers are pooling resources to restore vandalized houses of worship. Interfaith groups are joining forces to convey a message to their congregations: We are not strangers, but neighbors.

In California's San Fernando Valley, Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs [marched together for the third year in a row](#) in October, only a few weeks after a synagogue was vandalized in a nearby area. In March, a Jewish group organized a [multi-faith gathering](#) outside the Makki Masjid mosque in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn, as part of a city-wide show of support for Muslims in the wake of massacres at two mosques in New Zealand. After a gunman killed 11 people at the [Tree of Life Synagogue](#) in Pittsburgh last year, members of a Presbyterian church held a prayer vigil, while Muslim-Americans collected over \$46,000 through the social media campaign #Muslims4Pittsburgh.

Matthew Weiner, the associate dean of religious life at Princeton University, said that hate crimes against mosques, churches and synagogues can open up new opportunities for dialogue, and even reconciliation, between different faith traditions. Receiving support from other faith communities in the wake of an attack "changes the way that you look at the world," he said.

Two days after the attack on the church angels, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams stood up in front of the 99th precinct police station. [A video](#) shows him saying, "We must stand up and use our voices that we are our brother's keeper."

He was flanked by Assemblyman Joseph Lentol and four community leaders who all pledged their support for the small Catholic parish in Williamsburg. A rabbi, the leader of a Muslim association, and the leader of a multicultural organization stood side by side at a press conference, along with Monseignor Kiernan Harrington of the archdiocese of Brooklyn.

"We are seeing the normalization of hate in our society and it cannot continue," Evan Bernstein, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, [was quoted as saying](#) at the press conference.

Harrington, the Brooklyn archdiocese's vicar for communications, encouraged leaders to donate to help people struggling with homelessness and addiction in New York. He told [Currents News](#) after the press conference that he had a message for the perpetrator: "We'll forgive you for breaking a statue, and we're here to help in whatever way we can."

The leaders pledged to donate different amounts, and together they collected over \$1,500. Strzadala remembers receiving a call from two of the men, asking to make an appointment to deliver him the check.

“Thanks be to God,” said Fr. Andrzej Wasko, another priest at the church. “All of us, we are believers---in different ways, but we believe. So it’s very good to cooperate, to be together, to honor each other.”

The money was helpful, Strzadala said, but even more important for him was seeing that the community viewed the vandalism as “a real crime.”



Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church, as viewed from the street. Photo credit: Emilia Otte.

Founded in 1909, the three-story brick building with two flags—one American, one Polish—flying out front, sits on the well-trafficked Metropolitan Avenue in Williamsburg, which has traditionally been home to a large Polish community. The church continues to be involved with local Polish celebrations and events.

But over the past eight years, the statues have been vandalized six times, including twice since Strzadala became pastor in 2016. Fr. Włodzimierz Las, the church’s previous pastor, said that each time the statues were vandalized, the parishioner who donated them paid to have them replaced.

Las said that some of the attacks took place around December 8, which is a feast day for the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church. To Las, the repeated attacks on the shrine suggested that the vandals’ were trying to tell the congregation that they weren’t welcome in the neighborhood. But the motivation behind these attacks has been difficult to prove.

Wasko still remembers his first thoughts after seeing the destruction. “Why did you do it?” he thought. “What’s the reason? Why?”

The church had installed a surveillance camera after the second or third vandalism. They also put up an overhead light. Strzadala said that, unlike [the vandalism in December of 2016](#), when three men who were “fooling around” accidentally toppled the statues, the person who smashed the statues this time seemed to have acted deliberately.

The [surveillance tape](#) showed that the intruder was a white man dressed in a dark peacoat jacket, light-colored pants and sneakers. He approached the shrine just before 4 a.m. on December 2. Flanked by the two angels, the statue of the Virgin sits partially surrounded by an iron gate near the entrance of the church. The man urinated on the statues, then picked up and smashed one of the angels. After a brief struggle with the second statue because of its weight, the angel toppled over and shattered. The man headed down the street in the opposite direction from which he came.

Strzadala told the congregation about the attack at all the masses. He said that many of the parishioners were distressed by the news. Claire Lanyi, 25, a graduate student and youth minister who has been attending the church for about eight months, said that she felt particularly disturbed that the vandalism would happen to a church with such a strong sense of community.

“I think it’s just a violation of tolerance in society, and a misunderstanding of what the Church is,” she said.

Diana Eck, a religious scholar who directs the Pluralism Project at Harvard, has not been surprised by the surge in anti-religious hate crimes. She said that in the last few decades there has been a vast increase in religious diversity within the country. But “rather than being more comfortable with that fact, people are getting more alarmed by it,” she said.

And even as some hate crimes have inspired calls for unity, discord continues to exist between religious groups. Perpetrators of some recent hate crimes have used [distorted versions of Christianity](#) to justify attacking individuals who are of a different religion, race, or sexual orientation.

But in Brooklyn, and across the country, faith leaders chose a different path. When they heard about the press conference, some from the Brooklyn Borough President, others from fellow faith leaders, most of them didn’t hesitate. Rabbi Potasnik of the New York Board of Rabbis said he felt that participating in the conference was the right thing to do. He believes that a show of support can help targeted communities feel less isolated. “It’s reassuring to know that you’re not in this battle against hatred alone,” he said.

Potasnik also sees what happened at Our Lady of Consolation as a reminder that any religion can be the target of a hate crime. “Today it’s a statue,” he said, “tomorrow it could be a mezuzah.”

Kashif Hussein of the Pakistani American Youth Society said he believed that reaching out to other faiths can help to break down negative stereotypes across sectarian lines. When people from the community reach out to them, he said, “we’re the first ones to respond.”

On the day after the press conference, Mark Meyer Appel, director of the Bridge Project, a Brooklyn-based organization that does multicultural work and community outreach, stopped by the church with a check for \$1,000 from his organization.

“I wanted to meet him in person,” said Appel, referring to Strzadala. “I wanted to see the damage myself.” Appel said that Strzadala afterward sent him “a beautiful letter of thanks.”

About a week after the press conference, the police arrested 28-year-old Andrew Oshesky for the attack on the angels and charged him with criminal mischief as a hate crime.

At a hearing on January 28, Oshesky pled guilty to criminal mischief in the fourth degree, a lesser offense, and was sentenced to 15 days community service and an alcohol treatment program.

Oshesky’s lawyer, Matthew Galluzzo, disagrees that Oshesky’s vandalism was motivated by hate. Although Oshesky never made a statement explaining his reasons for the vandalism, Galluzzo said that, as far as he could tell, Oshesky “has no animosity toward the Church.”

Although Strzadala believes that Oshesky’s actions were deliberate, he also said he felt sorry for Oshesky and assumes that he was drinking when he committed the crime.

Strzadala announced the news about the press conference to the parishioners at mass, and he also put it in the church bulletin. He sees the support from the Interfaith community as a reminder of the resilience of faith. “You can destroy a statue,” he said, “but you cannot destroy the Church.”

The parish used the money from the press conference to replace the statues, and Strzadala said he was considering putting up a security gate in front of the shrine. For now, however, the Virgin Mary remains unguarded—except, of course, for two security cameras, an overhead light, and the two new angels that flank her.

