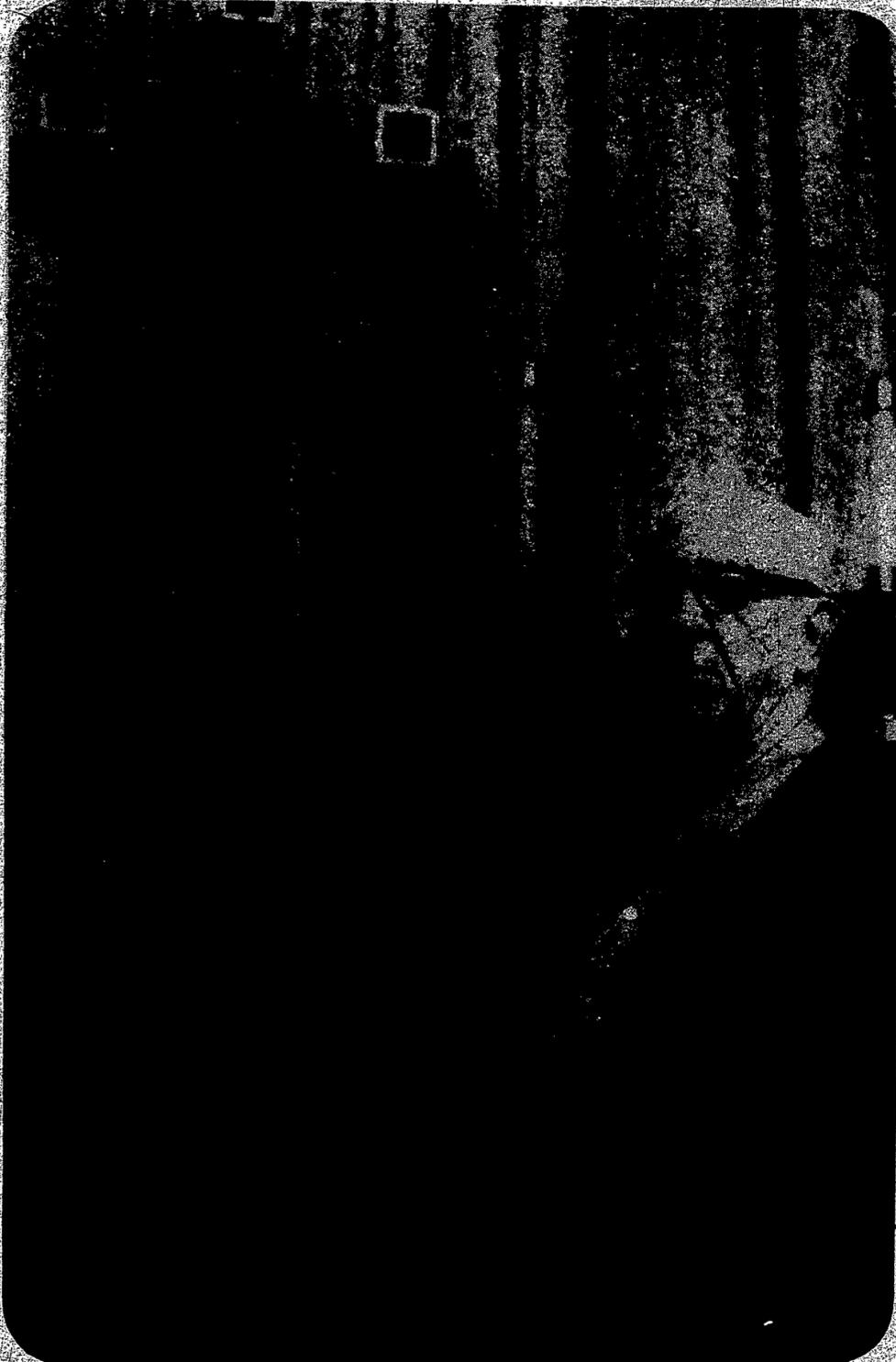


# Arsonist's Blaze Guts Elmira Church

By DICK BAUMBACH

All photographs by Susan McKinney unless otherwise indicated.



Elmira — A general alarm fire swept through the Roman Catholic Church of St. John the Baptist at 12:40 a.m. Thursday, Dec. 27. Police and fire officials investigating the blaze termed it "burglary and arson." The tabernacle was stolen.

"I didn't smell anything, I didn't hear anything," he reported. "I can't figure out how they got in because it was all locked up. But they stole the tabernacle; they ruined everything."

Father William D. Tobin, pastor, said on the night of the fire, "Burglars set fire to the church and they left."

A deputy fire chief, David Potter Sr., arrived on the scene at 327 Lake St. at 12:40 a.m. with three vehicles and immediately sounded the alarm for two more pieces of firefighting equipment. A few minutes later, he called for the help of all available off-duty firemen. The firefighters kept the flames from the rectory, which is attached to the church. A portion of the rectory was damaged by water, and the entire residence was filled with smoke.

Moments before he made this statement, Father Tobin and Msgr. Leo Schwab were inside the burning church and found the altar area strewn with torn pieces of the tabernacle veil. Blood could be seen on various parts of the sanctuary floor. Fires burned fiercely in various parts of the church as the priests looked over the situation.

Several of Elmira's leading citizens, including Mayor Richard C. Loll, a parishioner, were seen helping the priests carry things from the sacristy as firemen fought the wind-whipped flames. Six hose lines, and two aerial ladder trucks were used.

Fires were located in several pew areas of the first floor and several sections of the choir loft. The fire burned into the steeple and along the roof.

Chief Edward F. Ryan said the fire definitely was arson. A short time after the blaze broke out, police were chasing several persons, apparently in connection with the fire, but they lost their quarry in the large crowd which had assembled.

Elmira firefighters worked more than two hours to bring the blaze under control. At one point, a portion of the roof collapsed while firemen were inside the building. They escaped unharmed.

Father Tobin valued the building at \$503,000 and said ruined furnishings and equipment were worth almost \$200,000. This included the organ and air conditioning apparatus. St. John's was Elmira's only air conditioned church.

Patrolman Nicholas Draghi, on routine patrol, saw smoke pouring from the steeple and turned in the first alarm. Firemen arrived within a few minutes from the fire station three blocks away. The first ones there tried in vain to smash open the front door. The heavy oak door held fast, but Father Tobin was able to unlock it soon afterward.

Also damaged was the creche, which Msgr. Schwab said was the oldest nativity scene in the city. Part of the burning roof fell on it.

Smoke billowed over a broad area of the city and flames shot upward far into the air, illuminating the east side.

Paul Saxe, an art instructor at Thomas Edison High School, has volunteered to restore the hand-carved figures, however.

Msgr. Schwab said he was watching television when he heard the first fire trucks arrive.

Investigators were trying to  
Continued on Page 2

Other photos, stories  
Page 2, Centerfold

Msgr. Schwab and the emptied receptacle from which the tabernacle was taken.

## Recovery Begins

By CHARLES RANDISI

Elmira — The firefighters weren't able to quench the blaze immediately at St. John the Baptist Church, but they

managed to spare the rectory next door from damage. And it became the focal point of activity in the days following the fire.

Continued on Page 2

## Papal Message

The complete text of Pope Paul VI's message proclaiming the World Day of Peace may be found on Page 17.



Scene of destruction inside St. John the Baptist Church.