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Father Tom O'Connor of St Francis Xavier Catholic Parish examines damage. Picture/Michael Cunningham

## Church sites target of vandalism spree

17.05.2007  
By Abi Thomas

A 49-year-old man is facing charges after a Whangarei Roman Catholic church hall was set on fire and daubed with Satanic slogans.

He is also accused of having a hand in the destruction of gates at an Exclusive Brethren church in the city. The Whangarei man was arrested yesterday after break-ins and fires at the St Francis Xavier Church hall in Kensington. He was charged with two counts of arson and one of burglary.

The man, who was to appear in the Whangarei District Court today, has also been charged with wilful damage over destruction of the gates to the Exclusive Brethren Church in Corks Rd, Tikipunga.

A front window at the Catholic hall was broken early on Tuesday and a burning plastic bag dropped through the broken pane on to the hall carpet. About 4am yesterday the hall was again broken into and the kitchen area set alight.

Police said yesterday they believed another fire set in a rear corner of the building was meant to ignite once the main kitchen fire took hold, but the Fire Service had the kitchen blaze under control before that could happen. The fire left an acrid stench and a pile of soot on the kitchen stove top.

"Anticht" (sic) and the number 666 were spraypainted on the back of the building.

Parish priest Father Tom O'Connor arrived to find the mess just as he was about to hold his regular morning mass at 7am.

"Why did they target the hall? There's nothing of value in there," he said. The hall had been tagged with graffiti before, and church staff normally tried to remove it before parishioners noticed.

Despite the Satanic graffiti, he did not believe the attack was religiously motivated.

"It's just so annoying."

Church administrator Monica Steiner said the attack had made her realise the importance of monitoring and alarms. "One of the parishioners has even suggested a camera, and

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we're thinking about a security light."

Father O'Connor said the hall was well used by the church and St Francis Xavier School, and the vandalism had inconvenienced groups that booked the hall.

"They were supposed to have a kapa haka practice in there, and after-school care was cancelled too. There's also a youth group who use it."

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