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Man pleads not guilty in sledgehammer attack on Glendale church monument

Police had presented the case as a possible hate crime, but prosecutors file felony vandalism charges over damage to the monument at St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church.

By Veronica Rocha, Los Angeles Times

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A 23-year-old man who allegedly used a sledgehammer to smash a religious monument outside St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church in Glendale has pleaded not guilty to felony vandalism, officials said.

Victor Petrescu of Glendale appeared in court Thursday to answer charges that included felony vandalism of religious property with an enhancement for damages exceeding \$50,000, a misdemeanor count of possessing a sledgehammer with the intent to commit vandalism and graffiti, and having a suspended and revoked driver's license, said Glendale police Sgt. Tom Lorenz.

Petrescu remains in custody in lieu of \$160,000 bail.

Glendale police had presented the case as a possible hate crime, but a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office said prosecutors settled on felony vandalism charges.

"After reviewing the evidence, we felt that these were the appropriate charges," said spokeswoman Shiara Davila-Morales, adding that if additional evidence is presented in the future, prosecutors may reevaluate the charges.

Petrescu was arrested Wednesday after two Glendale police detectives spotted him allegedly hammering into the church's monument in the 500 block of South Central Avenue, Lorenz said.

The detectives identified themselves to Petrescu, who made his way to a fence while carrying the sledgehammer, Lorenz said. Petrescu, identified by police as a local transient, was apprehended after a brief chase.

Church officials estimated the damage at \$80,000.

Church representatives deferred to authorities in evaluating the case.

"We commend the work of the Glendale police and, fortunately enough, they were there and were able to stop this assault in a very quick way, but we don't want to be in the position of condemning anyone," said Levon Kirakosian, a spokesman for the La Crescenta-based Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America. "We understand that there is a lot of facts

that need to be discovered."

The carvings on the monument, donated to the church in 2001, were heavily damaged, officials said. The monument, created from volcanic rock and shipped from Armenia, commemorates the day 1,700 years ago that Armenians adopted Christianity, church officials said.

The monument also represents the Armenian genocide, Kirakosian said. The genocide, from 1915 to 1918, claimed the lives of about 1.2 million Armenians under the Ottoman Empire, which became the modern republic of Turkey. The Turkish government disputes that it occurred.

"It was an assault on something that symbolically is a representation of the Armenian people and its history, and for that reason we're are shocked and we can only believe this man must have been disturbed," Kirakosian said.