

Nativity

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In a similar theft a few years ago in Clintonville, Lorge said, the baby Jesus figurine was returned to his manger on Christmas Eve, just as mysteriously as he had vanished.

But regardless of whether the motive is religious, Lorge said the perpetrator will be charged with a crime if police can solve this year's outbreak of holiday season thievery.

"It's still a theft," he said. "I would have no problem charging that person with theft."

All three nativity scene thefts were discovered Sunday.

Pastor Christian Burg of St. Martin Lutheran Church said he assumed the theft from his church was just a prank, maybe carried out by kids. Burg said he has never heard anyone in the community complain the baby Jesus

should not be displayed before Christmas.

"That may be how some people do a nativity scene," he said. "I've heard of people waiting like that, but I've never heard any controversy."

Christus Lutheran Pastor Brian Crocker agreed: "I don't read much into it."

When police checked other churches in the community, they found that other denominations generally did not plan to include baby Jesus figurines in their displays until Christmas.

Lincoln Wood, parish director at St. Rose Catholic Church, said some people go to even greater lengths, updating their displays daily to reflect the progression of people arriving at the manger for the birth.

Wood said St. Rose adds its baby Jesus figurine to the scene on Christmas Eve.

Wood said he doubted anyone would feel so strongly about the issue

COMING SUNDAY

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that they would resort to stealing figurines.

But, he added: "Maybe somebody got it stuck in their craw."

Lorge said police are continuing to investigate the incidents.

Marotz, who helped arrange St. Paul's nativity scene this year, has purchased and displayed a replacement figurine as the baby Jesus at the church. Although he said people have never complained about the arrangement, he said the thievery could have conceivably been motivated by religious differences.

"It's possible, but then they should speak up," he said. "You shouldn't just go and take it."

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