

**By Jan Schultz**

***The Imperial Republican***

A 13-year-old Imperial youth is alleged to have been involved in the Aug. 28, 2008, fire at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Imperial.

In the youth's first hearing in Chase County Juvenile Court on March 4, the state alleged his involvement in the fire, which burned the lectern on the altar, as well as a small pedestal, a decorative burse and some of the altar's carpet underneath.

Judge Edward Steenburg sternly told the youth that if he was older, the incident would be considered second degree arson, a Class III felony, which if convicted, could mean up to a maximum 20 years in prison, a \$25,000 fine or both.

The Aug. 28 fire was discovered by St. Patrick's pastor, Fr. Bernard Lorenz, who came over to the church from his parsonage next door for an adult religion class.

Upon entering, he smelled smoke, but first checked the kitchen in the church basement. Finding nothing there, he came back upstairs and said he "saw a lot of smoke and a small flame in the lectern."

After initial response by city police and the Imperial Volunteer Fire Department, two state fire investigators were called in. Little on the case has been released since that time.

The church displayed a newly-built lectern during the recent holiday season. After the fire, a professional cleaning crew was also brought in to clean the smoke residue from the church interior.

Fr. Lorenz said insurance has paid for most of the cost of the new lectern and clean-up.

Fr. Lorenz added, "If he is the youth involved, we hope he gets the help he needs and becomes an upstanding young man in the future.

"That is our hope and prayer," he said Monday.

At the same hearing last week, the state alleged the youth was also involved in break-ins at two Imperial homes, one on Dec. 14, 2008, and another on Feb. 26 of this year.

Attorney George Zeilinger was appointed the youth's guardian ad litem. In that capacity, he will represent the 13-year-old's legal and social interests, and make recommendations to the court during the proceedings.

Zeilinger indicated the youth was entering a denial to all three charges in the state's petition.

Steenburg ordered the Imperial youth's continued stay in a North Platte shelter under the custody of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Steenburg set an adjudication hearing on the state's allegations for Wednesday, March 25, in Chase County Juvenile Court.

However, Wine indicated this week the state will be asking for a continuance of that hearing because one of their key witnesses cannot be at the March 25 hearing.