News

by Catholic News Service

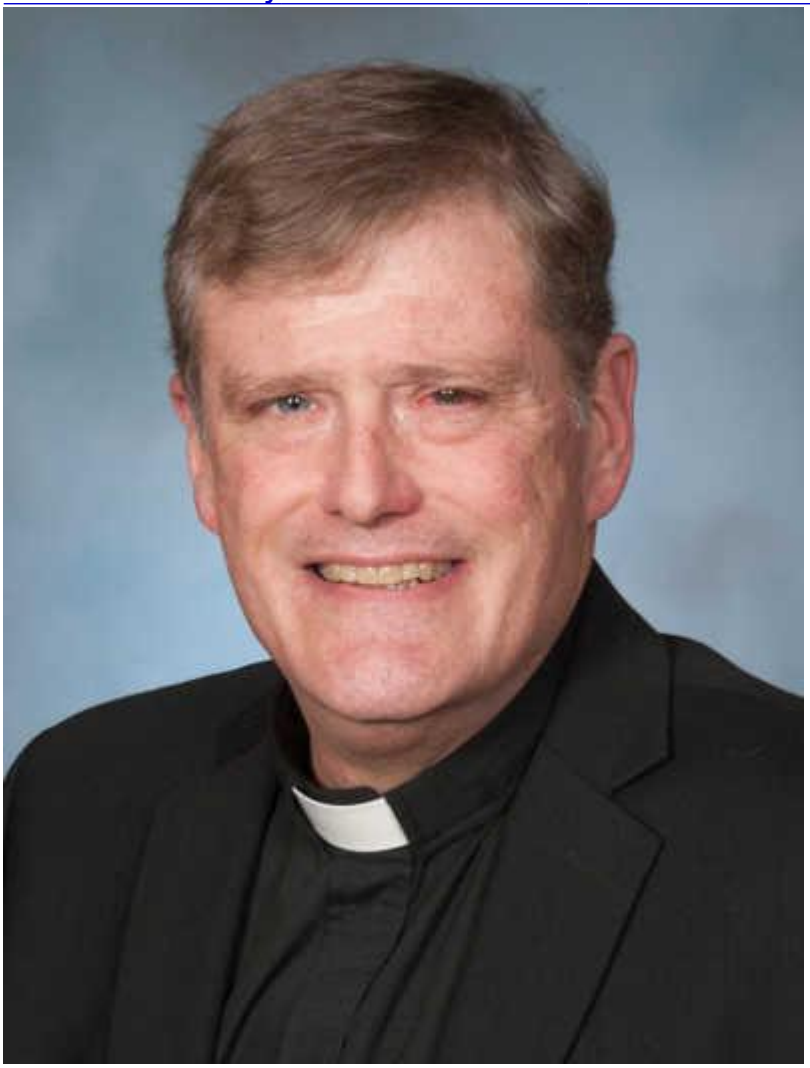
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Arlington, Va. — August 23, 2017

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Fr. William Aitcheson (CNS/courtesy of Arlington Diocese)

Updated Aug. 25: **Former KKK member, now a Catholic priest, went public after journalist's inquiry**

Writing in the Arlington Catholic Herald, Fr. William Aitcheson, a priest of the Diocese of Arlington, asked forgiveness for having been a member of the Ku Klux Klan years ago as "an impressionable young man."

"As a young adult I was Catholic, but in no way practicing my faith," Aitcheson, 62, wrote in an Aug. 21 op-ed in the diocesan newspaper. "The irony that I left an anti-Catholic hate group to rejoin the Catholic Church is not lost on me. It is a reminder of the radical transformation possible through Jesus Christ in his mercy.

"While 40 years have passed, I must say this: I'm sorry. To anyone who has been subjected to racism or bigotry, I am sorry. I have no excuse, but I hope you will forgive me," he said.

In response Arlington Bishop Michael Burbidge said in a statement: "While Father Aitcheson's past with the Ku Klux Klan is sad and deeply troubling, I pray that in our current political and social climate his message will reach those who support hate and division, and inspire them to a conversion of heart.

"Our Lord is ready to help them begin a new journey, one where they will find peace, love, and mercy. The Catholic Church will walk with anyone to help bring them closer to God," he said.

The diocese said "no accusations of racism or bigotry" have been directed against Father Aitcheson "throughout his time in the Diocese of Arlington." His article "was written with the intention of telling his story of transformation," it said. The diocese added that it had approved his request "to temporarily step away from public ministry, for the well-being of the church and parish community."

Father Aitcheson's article was published with the headline "Moving from hate to love with God's grace" and also posted on the newspaper's website, http://catholicherald.com/home.

Here is the full text:

In the course of one's life, there are seminal moments that humble us and, in some cases, even bring shame. For the past several decades, I have been blessed with the opportunity to serve as a Catholic priest. Originally ordained for (what was then) the Diocese of Reno-Las Vegas, I transferred to my home area here in the Diocese of Arlington.

What most people do not know about me is that as an impressionable young man, I was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. It's public information but it rarely comes up. My actions were despicable. When I think back on burning crosses, a threatening letter, and so on, I feel as though I am speaking of somebody else. It's hard to believe that was me.

As a young adult I was Catholic, but in no way practicing my faith. The irony that I left an anti-Catholic hate group to rejoin the Catholic Church is not lost on me. It is a reminder of the radical transformation possible through Jesus Christ in his mercy.

While 40 years have passed, I must say this: I'm sorry. To anyone who has been subjected to racism or bigotry, I am sorry. I have no excuse, but I hope you will forgive me.

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The images from Charlottesville brought back memories of a bleak period in my life that I would have preferred to forget. The reality is, we cannot forget, we should not forget. Our actions have consequences and while I firmly believe God forgave me — as he forgives anyone who repents and asks for forgiveness — forgetting what I did would be a mistake. Those mistakes have emboldened me in my journey to follow the God who yearns to give us his grace and redemption.

The images from Charlottesville are embarrassing. They embarrass us as a country, but for those who have repented from a damaging and destructive past, the images should bring us to our knees in prayer. Racists have polluted minds, twisted by an ideology that reinforces the false belief that they are superior to others.

Christ teaches something different. He teaches us that we are all his creations and wonderfully made — no matter our skin color or ethnicity. Realizing this truth is incredibly liberating. When I left my former life, I did a lot of soul-searching. God humbled me, because I needed to be humbled. But abandoning thoughts of racism

and superiority gave me the liberation I needed.

We must condemn, at every opportunity, the hatred and vile beliefs of the KKK and other white supremacist organizations. What they believe directly contradicts what we believe as Americans and what we, as Catholics, hold dear.

If there are any white supremacists reading this, I have a message for you: you will find no fulfillment in this ideology. Your hate will never be satisfied and your anger will never subside. I encourage you to find peace and mercy in the only place where it is authentic and unending: Jesus Christ.

I ask that you pray for the victims of racism and bigotry. Pray that they would never feel like anything less than children of God, bestowed with dignity and love.

Pray also for those who perpetuate racist beliefs and wrongly believe they are superior to others. God forgives everyone who truly repents. Nobody is outside of his loving grasp. With conversion in Christ, they can find new life in the truth.