News

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It was not images from the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Va., that spurred a Virginia priest to come forward this month and confess he was a Ku Klux Klan member charged in several cross-burnings in Maryland and other offenses 40 years ago.

Rather, it was a journalist who had contacted the Diocese of Arlington and said she learned that the Rev. William Aitcheson's legal name matched that of a man arrested in the 1970s.

Diocesan officials then confronted the priest.

"Aitcheson was approached about this, he acknowledged his past and saw the opportunity to tell his story in the hopes that others would see the possibility of conversion and repentance," the diocese said in a statement.

Until earlier this week, Aitcheson served as parochial vicar at St. Leo the Great in Fairfax, Va. He has since been granted a leave of absence.

In a personal essay published in The Arlington Catholic Herald, the priest appears to be motivated by the national news to acknowledge his past: “The images from Charlottesville brought back memories of a bleak period in my life that I would have preferred to forget.”

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He is referring to an Aug. 12 rally by white nationalists against the removal of a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E Lee. Authorities canceled the rally after violent skirmishes erupted, and the day ended in tragedy when a man rammed a car into anti-racist protesters, killing a woman. Two law enforcement officers also died when their helicopter crashed as they were monitoring the day’s events.

Citing his own white supremacist views as a young man, the 62-year-old priest wrote: “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.”

In his 20s, while a student at the University of Maryland, Aitcheson was charged with making bomb threats, manufacturing pipe bombs and threatening to kill Coretta Scott King in a letter.

Aitcheson pleaded guilty to several cross burnings, including one in the front yard of an African-American couple in 1977. He was convicted, sentenced to 90 days and ordered to pay a judgment of about $20,000, according to The Washington Post.

In 1982, he was also ordered to pay civil damages to the couple, Phillip and Barbara Butler. The diocese acknowledged he did not pay those damages.

“Father Aitcheson fully understands this is his obligation and that he must do what is possible to make this situation right,” the diocesan news release said.

A spokesman for Arlington Bishop Michael F. Burbidge said the bishop was not available for an interview.

Aitcheson attended seminary in Rome and in 1988 was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Reno-Las Vegas, Nev. He transferred to the Arlington Diocese in 1993.

It’s not clear when the Arlington Diocese first learned of Aitcheson’s past.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 8-21, 2017** print issue under the headline: Catholic priest admits past as KKK member.