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Cleveland — July 7, 2020

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Fr. Robert McWilliams, 39, a priest in the Diocese of Cleveland, was being held on $100,000 bond in Cuyahoga County Jail Dec. 6, 2019, a day after he was taken into custody at St. Joseph Parish in Strongsville. The priest is facing charges of possessing child pornography following his arrest at the suburban Cleveland parish. He is pictured in an undated photo. (CNS/courtesy Diocese of Cleveland)

A grand jury indicted a Catholic priest on federal charges involving child pornography and the sexual exploitation of children.

The July 2 indictment charged Fr. Robert McWilliams, 40, a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland, with two counts of sex trafficking of a minor, three counts of pornography-related charges involving children and three counts of sexual exploitation of children.

McWilliams was arrested Dec. 5 at St. Joseph Parish in suburban Strongsville where he had been serving as parochial vicar. He continued to be held without bond July 6.

The diocese said in a statement it was "grateful to those in law enforcement who have worked diligently to investigate this matter. As the criminal case against McWilliams proceeds, let us continue to pray for justice to be served and healing for those who have been harmed by sexual abuse."

Officials of the Ohio Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force arrested McWilliams in December while serving a warrant to search the living and office spaces of the priest at the parish. The raid led to the seizure of electronic equipment, which had child pornography stored, according to court records.

The records showed that officials in Geauga County, east of Cleveland, began investigating allegations by children who said someone was extorting them to send nude photographs online. The messages were linked to the priest after they learned he was the person allegedly seeking the photos while he was in ministry at St. Helen Catholic Church in Newbury.

Investigators later learned the McWilliams allegedly met a male teenage through a cellphone app after offering payment in exchange for sex, the records showed. The teen told authorities he performed sex with the priest three times beginning in April 2016 and was paid $200. He was 15 at the time, the records said.

Last December, the priest was placed on administrative leave immediately after the Cleveland Diocese learned of his arrest. "As a consequence, he is not permitted to be on any diocesan or parish property or at any diocesan or parish event," the diocese said in a statement. "Also, he no longer receives a salary from the parish. McWilliams' legal fees and bond are his sole responsibility."

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