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A group of clergy abuse survivors at a news conference in Baltimore in November 2021, outsi

A group of clergy abuse survivors at a news conference in Baltimore in November 2021, outside the plenary assembly of the U.S. bishops' conference. (CNS photo/Rhina Guidos)

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A Catholic priest ordained just over four years ago for the Diocese of Syracuse, New York, has been charged with several counts of child sexual abuse and removed from ministry.

Fr. Nathan W. Brooks, 36, faces four misdemeanor counts of third-degree sex abuse, forcible touching and endangering the welfare of a child for incidents that took place between 2019-2021.

According to a news release issued by the Cortland County Sheriff's Office, the complaint was filed Aug. 22, and Brooks was arrested Aug. 31.

The sheriff's office said in its release the investigation regarding Brooks "revealed that the defendant ... had subjected one victim to inappropriate sexual contact on

multiple occasions over several years."

The victim "was known" to Brooks, the release said.

Brooks was arraigned Sept. 5 in Homer Town Court in Homer and then again Sept. 6 in Cortland City Court, since the alleged incidents occurred in both locales of New York state.

The priest, who was ordained in 2019, has been "suspended from all priestly ministry during the investigation of these charges," said Bishop Douglas Lucia of Syracuse in a statement posted on the diocese's website.

Lucia's Sept. 1 statement listed Brooks' current assignments as administrator of the Church of the Nativity at St. Joseph in LaFayette; Immaculate Conception in Pompey; St. Leo in Tully; and St. Patrick Mission in Otisco.

"In keeping with our Memorandum of Understanding with the local County District Attorneys, the diocese has and will continue to fully cooperate with the Cortland County District Attorney’s office," said Lucia in his statement.

The investigation is ongoing, Lt. Garry Williams of the Cortland County Sheriff's Office told OSV News.

"There is no reason to believe there are or aren't other victims," he said. "If anyone comes forward based on the information we've been provided at this point, we're going to investigate to our fullest."

Local media reported that Brooks has pleaded not guilty and is being represented by Syracuse-based attorney Michael J. Vavonese. OSV News did not receive an immediate response to its request for comment Sept. 6 from Vavonese's office.

Danielle Cummings, communications director for the Diocese of Syracuse, told OSV News that Brooks has retained "separate counsel not provided by the diocese."

Court documents detailing the charges have not yet been made available online, a staff member at the Homer Town Court office advised OSV News, which has submitted a request for electronic copies of the documents.

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The Post-Standard newspaper, which obtained copies of the documents, reported the charges stem from complaints made by a now-18-year-old girl and her mother regarding incidents that happened to her starting when she was 14. In her deposition to the sheriff's office, the girl said she and her mother decided to come forward after observing Brooks interact inappropriately toward other girls.

According to The Post-Standard, the mother said in the deposition that Brooks had met the family in 2019 when he became their parish priest, and was often invited to their home.

The girl and her mother's deposition, reported The Post-Standard, stated that Brooks would constantly send the girl "flirty" messages, even though the mother had forbidden him to do so, reminding him of diocesan policies that prevent priests from contacting minors.

The Post-Standard reported the girl said Brooks told her to delete the messages to avoid detection by her mother, and he also interacted inappropriately with her during a bus trip for a youth outing. She said in her deposition, "We were way too close and I realize now that this was inappropriate."

Lucia's statement said the news of the charges against Brooks is "distressing news."

The Syracuse Diocese in July tentatively reached a $100 million settlement with survivors of clergy sexual abuse as part of its journey out of Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

"As a Catholic family, we have been on a journey of trying to make amends for the great harm that was caused in the past and now we are faced with this situation," Lucia said. "Like me, I can only assume that you have many questions, but we must prayerfully await the conclusion of the investigation."