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Pope Francis leads his Christmas message and blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the wor

Pope Francis leads his Christmas message and blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world) from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 25, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

by Catholic News Service

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Cleveland — December 28, 2021
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Pope Francis has dismissed from the priesthood a Cleveland man who is serving a life sentence in prison for sexually exploiting children.

The action against Robert McWilliams, 41, means he will no longer be able to serve in any role as a priest, the Diocese of Cleveland said in a statement Dec. 21.

"This dismissal is a penalty imposed directly by the pope. There is no possible appeal," the diocese said.

McWilliams told U.S. District Judge Sara Lioi during sentencing Nov. 9 that he had sought dismissal from the priesthood. He blamed his actions on an addiction to pornography.

In July, McWilliams pleaded guilty to two counts of sex trafficking of youths younger than 18, three counts of sexual exploitation of children and three counts involving child pornography.

Lioi said she imposed the strict sentence because the public needed to be protected from McWilliams because he had preyed upon youths who turned to him for help.

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The diocese said it continued "as a family of faith to offer prayers and support for his (McWilliam's) victims and for all those impacted by his reprehensible actions. We ask our loving Father to heal any and all wounds they have suffered."

McWilliams, who was ordained in 2017, was arrested Dec. 5, 2019, after officials with the Ohio Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force served a warrant to search the living and office spaces of the priest at St. Joseph Parish in suburban Strongsville, Ohio, where he served as parochial vicar.

The incidents for which McWilliams was charged stemmed from his time in ministry beginning before his ordination at another suburban parish and continued for more than a year. Court 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.

Investigators later learned that Father McWilliams allegedly met a male teenager through a cellphone app after offering payment in exchange for sex, according to the records. 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.