

DIOCESE OF BUFFALO

Retired priest removed from ministry following arrest on public lewdness count

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NEWS STAFF REPORTER

The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo removed a retired priest from active ministry Thursday after his arrest on a public lewdness charge Wednesday in Ellicott Creek Park.

Town of Tonawanda police charged the Rev. Charles M. Werth, 76, following an undercover sweep in the park aimed at indecent behavior.

Auxiliary Bishop Edward M. Grosz, diocesan administrator, removed Werth from ministry after the arrest and it's unlikely he will function again as a priest, according to a diocesan official.

It was the second time Werth has been arrested in Ellicott Creek Park. In 1994, he pleaded guilty to exposure, a violation, in Tonawanda Town Court.

At the time, Werth was serving as pastor of St. Barnabas Church in Depew. He was fined \$295, ordered to

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*Kevin A. Keenan,
diocesan spokesman*

stay out of the park and to get counseling.

Werth is scheduled to be arraigned on the latest charge on Aug. 18, according to his lawyer, Phillip A. Thielman.

Thielman said he would not discuss the "merits of the charges" or how Werth would plead.

Police said Werth was arrested about 3:15 p.m. in a park men's room allegedly engaged in a lewd act.

During the sweep, police made three other separate arrests of men from Lockport, North Tonawanda and the Town of Tonawanda.

Werth was not accused of sexual abuse or involvement with a minor.

"There have not been any accusations against Father Werth involving children or young people," said Kevin A. Keenan, diocesan spokesman.

After his arrest in 1994, the diocese suspended Werth's priestly faculties — which means he could not celebrate Mass or sacraments or wear priestly garments.

Ordained in 1953, Werth has served at several parishes. He resigned as St. Barnabas pastor in 1994 and retired in 1995.

In 1998, after counseling, the diocese restored his priestly faculties, and Werth functioned as many retired priests do, filling in at parishes and celebrating Masses in the absence of vacationing or ill priests.

Thielman said his client "has been under continuing counseling since the previous incident" and hoped to remain in good standing with the church.

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