

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 28, 2011 at 10:26am

Father Pfleger and obedience

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NCR Today

If Cardinal George's suspension of Father Michael Pfleger was meant to shut him up, so far it seems to be working. Plenty of folks have been speaking out—mainly hurt and angry parishioners—about the letter the outspoken Chicago priest received yesterday, but Pfleger has declined to speak to the media.

In the sternly written letter—which the archdiocese gave to Pfleger, the parish and the media—George officially suspends Pfleger from his duties as pastor of St. Sabina Parish on Chicago's South Side. The straw that broke the bishop's back seems to be Pfleger's public remarks that he would leave the Catholic Church if reassigned.

"If that is your attitude, you have already left the Catholic Church and are therefore not able to pastor a Catholic parish," the cardinal wrote.

To some, Pfleger is an egotistical man unable to obey his superior. To others, he is a godsend to a community that desperately needs his spiritual leadership and social justice activism. As someone who has met and covered Pfleger, attended Mass at St. Sabina and spoken to his parishioners, I tend toward the latter. But perhaps there is truth in both views.

It's sad that this personnel matter is being played out on the front pages of Chicago newspapers and in Catholic blogs, where it becomes just another conservative/liberal rift. But it highlights another aspect of Catholic priesthood that is extremely countercultural: obedience.

There's lots of discussion about whether lifelong celibacy is psychologically healthy for adult people. A priest friend of mine once admitted that he was less concerned about celibacy and more worried about obedience. To give up control over your own life seems inconceivable to most Americans.

Of course, if your obedience is to someone who cares about your well-being, like a child's obedience to a parent, it can be beneficial. But priests are not children. And sometimes even the best parents take out their frustrations on their kids.

Whether that's what George is doing or not, it certainly appears that way to outsiders reading about this in the media.

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