

In Defense of Cardinal George

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 29, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Cardinal Francis George, the archbishop of Chicago, has suspended Father Michael Pfleger after the long-time pastor of Saint Sabina publicly flirted with the idea of leaving the Catholic Church if he were to be removed as pastor. Cardinal George was right to do so.

Generally, I think it is a mistake to leave one priest as pastor of a parish for too long a time. No priest can be all things to all men, no matter how gifted he is. It is not an insult to Father Pfleger to suggest that however popular he is, however much he brought life and the life of the spirit to his parish, there are some people there who did not warm to his brand of pastoring. Whenever a priest is in one assignment for too long, a cult of personality is sure to develop and the priest will become, in the minds of the people, virtually synonymous with "the Church," a burden no man should want and certainly no man can fulfill.

But, the issue is no longer whether or not father Pfleger should stay at Saint Sabina. The issue is obedience, not just to his bishop, although Father Pfleger, like all priests, took the most solemn vow to obey his bishop. Transferring a priest is hardly an abuse of episcopal authority: It happens all the time in every diocese in the country. It is what bishops do. But, what makes Father Pfleger's position indefensible, and Cardinal George's action necessary, was Pfleger's suggestion that he might walk. The one thing I think no Catholic should ever do is think the Church is something they can walk away from. I have my difficulties with Luther's theology. And, I also admit he was the greatest theologian of his day with insights the Catholic Church needed to here. My argument with Luther, however, is that he left. I simply can't conceive of ever doing so and I think that inability is one of the notes of the Church.

Of course, in our day, we all experience frustration with this or that our bishops say or do. It has ever been thus and will be until the end of time. But, the Church belongs to me as much as it belongs to a bishop. When someone tells me they are alienated from the Church, I always suggest that they are alienated from themselves because they are the Church. Sometimes our bishops do not make us feel that the Church belongs to us too, but we need to remind them. We don't need to bolt. This is even more true of someone charged with pastoral leadership. Who knows what parishioner at St. Sabina was struggling with their faith and who, upon hearing Pfleger's cavalier suggestion, thought that leaving the Church might work for them too. Pfleger's comments were irresponsible in the extreme.

I can't say I am happy to defend Cardinal George. The situation is unhappy all around. One wonders what breakdown in relationship and communication preceded this public spat and, as in a marriage, whenever there is a breakdown in the relationship usually both parties share some of the blame. But, when John Henry Newman found it incumbent upon himself to leave the Church of England, he did not speak to the press. He went away to a quiet place and prayed. Father Pfleger should do the same.