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Cardinal suspends Chicago priest

by Robert McClory



Fr. Michael Pflieger in March (MCT/Chicago Tribune/Phil Velasquez)

CHICAGO -- The saga of Fr. Michael Pflieger, the 30-year pastor of St. Sabina Church here, has reached a new crisis point. In a letter dated April 27, Cardinal Francis George suspended the priest from all ministry at his parish, largely because of remarks Pflieger had made on the nationally broadcast Tavis Smiley radio show the previous week.

On that program Pflieger declared that if he were forced to choose between accepting a high school presidency as the cardinal wished or leaving the priesthood, "then I would have to look outside the church. I believe my calling is to be a pastor. ? In or out of the church I'm going to continue to do that.?"

In his letter, released at the same time to Pflieger and the media, George said that if Pflieger's attitude is that he would leave the church rather than accept any assignment other than as St. Sabina's pastor, "you have already left the Catholic church and are therefore not able to pastor a Catholic parish.?"

Later in the letter, the cardinal asked Pflieger "to take a few weeks to pray over your priestly commitments

in order to come to mutual agreement on how you understand personally the obligations that make you a member of the Chicago presbyterate and of the Catholic church.?

George declined to discuss the letter with Pflieger or the press and flew to Rome two days later for the beatification of Pope John Paul II. Meanwhile, he appointed Fr. Thulani Magwaza, a South African priest who has been an associate pastor at St. Sabina for 19 months, as parish administrator and Fr. Andrew Smith, an African-American priest, to assist him.

Pflieger's only public comment to date has been, "I have never been more disrespected."

What originally triggered this imbroglio was George's attempt in early March to have Pflieger leave St. Sabina and take over as president of Leo Catholic High School, a struggling institution only a few blocks from St. Sabina Church. At that time Pflieger said he did not want the position and felt entirely unqualified for such a job. However, in reply to the cardinal, he wrote that he might consider taking on the school in addition to continuing at St. Sabina. "Although this would be an enormous amount of work and commitment," he said, "I am willing to give this all that I have to see if it can work." That remained the state of affairs until the Smiley broadcast and George's letter of suspension.



The day after that letter hit the media, more than 100

supporters of Pflieger assembled outside the cardinal's mansion on North State Street for a press conference and protest march. Isadore Glover, president of the St. Sabina's parish council, read a "statement of St. Sabina leadership," asking that the suspension be lifted immediately.

Glover said that George had taken Pflieger's comments about leaving the church out of context and seemed to be ignoring an agreement about pastoral succession already in progress.

He stated that Magwaza had come to St. Sabina in 2009 at Pflieger's request and with the approval of both George and Magwaza's South African bishop. The idea was that Magwaza might succeed Pflieger after three or four years. Now, after less than two years, the plan has been "short-circuited," said Glover. "Why has this plan not been respected?" he asked, noting that not once in a year and a half has George discussed the status of the plan with the two priests.

Television coverage of the story has been intense, with shots of St. Sabina parishioners expressing feelings of betrayal, some angry and indignant, some weeping, some praying for resolution. Eric Zorn, a *Chicago Tribune* columnist, had this advice for George (though he's admittedly not a Catholic): "Look the other way as the church has done so many times before, and leave him in place. ... A fight with Pflieger is not worth having, not a controversy you need right now. But if you must bring the hammer down, tell him first and face to face, not via a letter that you release simultaneously to the media. That's not kind, and it will earn you no respect from us disinterested observers."

The present fracas bears strong similarities to other disagreements Pflieger has had with his superiors. In 2002 he said he might leave the church when pressed to depart St. Sabina after 20 years. And in 2008 he

was suspended for two weeks after mocking then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in a sermon that received wide play on FOX News.

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Although Pflieger has many critics who call regularly for his dismissal from St. Sabina and even from the church, his work over 30 years has earned him credentials in the Chicago black Catholic community.

[Robert McClory, a Chicago-based writer and educator, is a longtime contributor to *NCR* and is the author of *Radical Disciple: Father Pflieger, St. Sabina Church, and the Fight for Social Justice*.]

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