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Pfleger back at St. Sabina; transition plan agreed upon

by Robert McClory



Father Michael Pfleger takes part in anti-violence march near St. Sabina Church in Chicago in mid-June last year. The priest and pastor of St. Sabina's is pictured with Mayor Richard M. Daley, center, and other participants. (CNS 2010 file photo)

He's back!

Chicago's St. Sabina Church (capacity 1,200) was packed to overflowing Sunday, May 22, and the praise and worship portion of the liturgy which leads off the 11:15 Mass was even more buoyant and uninhibited than usual. The predominantly black congregation was overjoyed to have their pastor, Fr. Michael Pfleger back in action after serving a three-week suspension imposed by Cardinal Francis George.

The cardinal had been greatly offended by remarks Pfleger made on the Tavis Smiley show on *National Public Radio*, and many believed he would at last remove Pfleger from the pastorate at St. Sabina he's held for almost 30 years. During that broadcast in April, Pfleger said that if he had to choose between moving to the presidency of a local high school as the cardinal wished or being forced out of the priesthood, "then I would have to look outside the church" (for ministry opportunities). In his letter of suspension, George said he regarded Pfleger's words as a threat. "If that is your attitude," he said, "you have already left the Catholic Church and are therefore not able to pastor a Catholic parish."

St. Sabina members weighed in with prayers and petitions, rallied at the church and held a press

conference and a picketing of the cardinal's mansion, in support of their pastor. Meanwhile, the archdiocese and the media were inundated with demands that this disobedient and troublesome priest be put in his place. Many noted the current crisis was one in a 30-year series of disagreements between Pfleger and his superiors.

Yet on Friday May 20, the media were provided separate, brief, benign statements from Pfleger and George. Declared Pfleger, "If my remarks in a radio interview seemed to be threat to leave the priesthood, I am sorry. I am committed to the priesthood and the Catholic Church....I have spent the last 36 years of my life trying my best to preach the Gospel, to be a voice for justice and the poor and build up the Church. In our conversations, Cardinal George and I recognized that the Church has been hurt and this concerns us both." He noted that, as part of the settlement, he, with the people of St. Sabina, Bishop Joseph Perry, the Episcopal vicar, and the Priests Placement Board, "I will prepare a transition plan for St. Sabina" to be submitted by this coming Dec. 1.

In his statement, George said, "Father Pfleger and I have discussed how the Church has been wounded and how necessary it is to find a way to heal the hurt and confusion. Father Pfleger's statement, which he discussed with me, is a genuine step toward healing the hurt?I am personally pleased to restore Father Pfleger to his sacramental and pastoral ministry."

What brought the storm to such a quiet conclusion were three days of negotiations the week of May 15 involving George, Pfleger and five other Chicago priests at the archdiocesan headquarters. The other priests included Bishop Perry, Fr. Edward McLaughlin (a longtime friend of Pfleger), the dean of the vicariate in which St. Sabina is located, the archdiocesan vicar general and the head of the Priests' Placement Board. On Tuesday in a two and a half hour session -- the seven aired their views. They met the following day without George's presence to discuss the next step. Then, with the cardinal present on Friday, the group met for 90 minutes, prepared and released the final statements.

Pfleger told *NCR* the meetings provided a good conversation. "Everyone was concerned for the people and what was best for everyone." McLaughlin said the discussion proved difficult at times, but the central goal was "how to keep this good thing at St. Sabina going."

Before delivering the homily at this Sunday mass on his 62nd birthday, Pfleger spoke intimately to the congregation. "It's good to see you, family. I love you." He said he was sorry that his words were interpreted as a threat. "I love being a Catholic priest, I love the church, I'm sorry to put you through all this."

He thanked Cardinal George, his staff and parish members, and "the pastors all over the country" who offered their support.

"Whatever it takes, as long as I'm able," he said, "I will fight the genocide that is taking our children from us. People say, 'Why don't you be a good priest and be quiet?' I believe I am a good priest and I'm not quiet."

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He added that it "feels good" to be presiding at the liturgy "and not peeping out from the sacristy" (as he had been doing during Mass when under suspension).

In his homily he asked the congregation not to make judgments. "You've got to know somebody's story,

and then you'll look at them differently," he said. "We've all got stories, and we're all survivors." But crises will pass, he said, if people stay in God's presence and expect something beautiful to come out of troubled times.

"I believe the best days of St. Sabina are ahead of us," he said.

Speculation now concerns the transition plan Pflieger is to give the cardinal in six months. Will it recommend a new pastor at St. Sabina and the departure of Pflieger? Will it ask for him to remain at Sabina for another three years until he reaches the retirement age of 65? Or will it give him another year or two to determine whether the South African associate pastor at the church is ready to take over? Will it perhaps suggest some new and innovative arrangement of leadership that can maintain the high-energy intensity and social involvement of the parish after Pflieger moves on? No one knows and no one, especially Pflieger, is talking about the possibilities at this point.

Speculation also concerns why Cardinal George, noted for his hard-liner and rule-keeper approach, once again blinked when he could have thrown down the hammer. No one has an answer on that one either. But it's apparent he is aware and respectful of the extraordinary things Pflieger has done in that parish and in the larger black, southside community.

Hopefully, those achievements will outlast Pflieger's tenure at St. Sabina, and they are achievements that redound to the credit of the Catholic church. George does not want his legacy and the legacy of Chicago Catholicism to include the breakup of this extraordinary parish. On that, he and Pflieger are surely on the same page.

[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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