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Cardinal George leaves Pfleger at St. Sabina

Robert McClory | Feb. 7, 2012 NCR Today

Fr. Michael Pfleger told his parishioners at Mass on Sunday that he will remain as pastor of Chicago's St. Sabina Church, apparently indefinitely. As of July 1, he said he will become co-pastor, along with Fr. Tulani Magwaza, who has been an associate at St. Sabina for more than two years.

Details of the arrangement were reportedly worked out during a meeting between Pfleger and Cardinal Francis George at the cardinal's residence Jan. 23. In addition, Pfleger announced he will become, at George's request, the official diocesan spokesperson on gun violence, and has agreed to serve as administrator at another South Side parish, St. Margaret of Scotland, whose pastor, Fr. Daniel Mallette, was severely beaten during a break-in at the rectory in December.

Massgoers at St. Sabina clapped, cheered and hugged one another at the news, which undoubtedly came as a surprise to many. Just last April, Pfleger was suspended by the cardinal for two weeks after he threatened to leave the church rather than accept George's appointment of him as president of a nearby Catholic high school. But he was reinstated by the cardinal in May with the understanding that he would provide George with a "transition plan" for the future leadership of the parish by Dec. 1. Pfleger complied, though specifics of his plan were not made public.

George has frequently chided Pfleger for his freewheeling style and outspoken criticism of archdiocesan policies. He has on several occasions attempted to move Pfleger out of St. Sabina, where he has lived for 37 years and served as pastor for 31 years, a phenomenal feat of pastoral longevity by Catholic standards almost anywhere. His performance has made him perhaps the best-known cleric in Chicago and surely one of the best loved as well as most controversial.

Under his direction, St. Sabina was transformed into the largest and most active black Catholic parish in Chicago, perhaps in the country. Through his leadership, the neighborhood around the church complex, once the violence-ridden haven of gangs, drug dealers and prostitutes, now boasts two senior citizen high-rises, employment and health centers and a revival of retail businesses. Pfleger's no-nonsense assault on drugs, alcohol and especially gun violence continues unabated. At the same time, his frequent appearances in the media have earned him the enmity of those who consider him a publicity seeker, a maverick cleric and a determined rule-breaker.

Pfleger's co-pastor as of July, Magwaza, came to St. Sabina from his native South Africa at Pfleger's request and with George's approval in 2009. He is active in the parish and well-liked by parishioners. But considerable doubt remains among the people in the pews as to whether he -- or anyone else in the world -- could ever replace Pastor Pfleger.

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