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The Michael Pfleger I know

Cathleen Falsani Religion News Service | Jun. 10, 2008

CHICAGO -- One of the most vivid, and perhaps most telling, memories I have of the Rev. Michael Pfleger is the image of him standing on top of -- not in front of or behind -- the wooden altar that's shaped like an African drum inside the gothic sanctuary of his South Side parish, St. Sabina's.

Pfleger, in robes trimmed with Kente-patterned cloth, is sweating and shouting into a microphone as about 200 people, many of them addicts in various stages of recovery, ring the altar where he is perched and pelt him with packs of cigarettes.

"Come on, give 'em up!" Pfleger, once a three-pack-a-day smoker, shouts at the group assembled in the sanctuary, with its enormous mural of a black Jesus with outstretched hands adorning the back wall. "God didn't deliver you from cocaine and alcohol so you could be addicted to nicotine!

"God loves you, God loves you," Pfleger cries, reaching out to gently pat the head of one worshiper. "Some of you haven't heard it in a long time, that someone loves you."

That is what Pfleger's ministry looks like inside the sanctuary.

Outside of it, Pfleger, 59, has spent the 33 years of his priesthood among the impoverished black community on Chicago's South Side creating a ministry that's based in equal parts on a thoroughly Catholic understanding of the social gospel and its notion of God's preferential option for the poor, and the not-so-Catholic belief in salvation by grace, through faith -- period.

At the same time, Pfleger, who says he became a born-again Christian more than 30 years ago, also has built a public reputation for being a loudmouth rebel (some say renegade) -- a rabble-rousing, bishop-defying troublemaker.

Which is where we find him now, three weeks after he mocked Sen. Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and was quickly put on a short leash by a somewhat exasperated Cardinal Francis George.

Over the years, he's been arrested more than three dozen times for civil disobedience, including citations for scaling and defacing billboards for alcohol and tobacco products that he says are unfairly marketed to poor blacks.

Pfleger has run afoul of all three cardinal-archbishops at whose pleasure he has served, beginning with the storied Cardinal John Cody, who (begrudgingly) ordained a young Pfleger in 1975 and then tried to sack him six years later when Pfleger adopted the first of his two African-American sons. (In 1998, his foster child, Jarvis, was hit by gang crossfire in the street near St. Sabina and died.)

Along his unique spiritual journey, Pfleger has made a lot of enemies and acquired a few interesting traveling companions, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, poet Maya Angelou,

singer Harry Belafonte, the Rev. Al Sharpton and black liberation icon James Cone.

Sen. Barack Obama's controversial former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, is one of Pfleger's closest friends. In fact, Pfleger credits Wright with teaching him how to preach in the fiery style that landed him in hot water and resulted in an involuntary leave of absence from St. Sabina. (Many of his parishioners and other fans worried that the "temporary leave" was a guise to remove Pfleger permanently, but George later assured the flock that their pastor would return to the pulpit on June 16.)

So how did this fair-haired, blue-eyed German kid from 81st and Talman wind up as a champion of the African-American community, to the point of, quite literally, risking his life? Pfleger regularly receives death threats and is trailed by a security detail during Mass after a disgruntled gang leader threatened him mid-sermon one Sunday a number of years back.

It began in 1966, when a teenage Pfleger rode his bike to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak in Marquette Park. He watched in horror as whites in the crowd -- including some parents he knew from the neighborhood -- hurled racial epithets and, eventually, rocks, bottles and firecrackers at the civil rights leader.

Pfleger now quotes King almost as often as he quotes Scripture, lacing his sermons and casual conversation with King's musings on faith, race and humanity. Pfleger remains close to the King family; when King's widow, Coretta, died in 2007, her children asked Pfleger to deliver one of the eulogies at her funeral in Atlanta.

As a seminarian, Pfleger's education in black culture continued as he worked side-by-side on community projects with the Black Panther Party on Chicago's West Side. His first parish assignment after his ordination in 1975 was at St. Sabina, a former Irish Catholic stronghold that had dwindled to fewer than 300 as the surrounding neighborhood's racial demographic changed.

As a young associate priest, Pfleger pushed to make St. Sabina feel more like the black folks who increasingly filled its pews. He began to incorporate black culture and liberation theology, raising up black leadership within the parish and, as a result, fueling the white exodus. When he took over as pastor on Christmas Eve 1981, one of his first official acts was to banish bingo from the parish hall.

St. Sabina is now one of the most vibrant parishes in the Chicago archdiocese, drawing more than 2,000 to its Sunday morning Masses that go on for more than three hours. Its parochial school is filled to the gills with more than 500 students.

Pfleger continues his life's work undeterred (if momentarily silenced) -- pushing, cajoling, protesting, shouting, screaming and praying for racial reconciliation and the fulfillment of what he called, in that now-infamous sermon at Trinity United Church of Christ last month, "the unanswered prayer of Jesus."

That we all might be one.

(Cathleen Falsani is the former religion reporter and now a columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times and Religion News Service. She has covered Pfleger for more than 10 years.)

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