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# Book asks: What's a parish? What's a priest?

Tom Roberts | Nov. 5, 2010

Fr. Michael Pfleger walks with Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and others June 18 to kick off the beginning of summer and urging an end to violence in their community. (CNS photo/Karen Callaway, Catholic New World)

Any Chicago journalist will tell you Fr. Michael Pfleger is good copy. There's always a provocation or a threat looming somewhere around the inner-city blocks of his parish, St. Sabina, on 79th St. on Chicago's South Side. And Pastor Pfleger responds to such matters.

He's painted over billboards in a years-long campaign to rid the neighborhood of cigarette ads. He and his parishioners have confronted store owners who sold drug paraphernalia. He's taken on gun shops. He's used underage kids from the parish in a meticulously documented sting that demonstrated to police and Chicago's mayor that most of the liquor stores were selling to minors without even asking for ID.

He adopted a son, took in two foster sons, one of whom died violently.

He's tangled with civil authorities, church leaders, courts and police and more often than not has come away with what he wants or having made his point. And he knows how to make a point beyond the confines of his congregation ? for a period during the late 1980s to late 1990s he had a minister of communication on staff, someone with experience in and wide knowledge of the Chicago media.

Michael Pfleger, activist priest. He's good copy. Comb through the files of any news outlet in Chicago and you've got the basic story. Among the latest entries will be the embarrassing imitation he did of then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, the loop we all saw on national TV where he's mocking her tearful moment in New Hampshire. It was part of a much longer sermon on white privilege and the expectations, far different from those of many people of color, that whites in the culture bring to situations. It was one of those moments that makes Pfleger easy to caricature.

Radical Disciple: Father Pfleger, St. Sabina Church, and the Fight for Social Justice
By Robert McClory
Lawrence Hill Books, 2010, $24.95

What makes *Radical Disciple* far more compelling than a rehash of what's already known, however, is that Robert McClory pushes deep beneath the clippings and allows Pfleger's life to confront all Christians, and in this case particularly Catholics, with some fundamental questions.

McClory, a long-time *NCR* contributor who taught for years at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern

University, knows this story well from several angles. He knows the stories of the clip files and he knows the story of priesthood from the inside. In his younger days he was a priest of the Chicago archdiocese and spent seven years assigned to St. Sabina.

McClory left the priesthood in 1971 to marry his wife, Margaret, who had been the principal of the parish's school, and to pursue a career in journalism.

In the time he was at the parish, however, he saw membership drop from nearly 3,000 families to 530. A parishioner had warned him when he first arrived that "they are coming." By the early 1970s, white flight had left the parish on the brink of closing, it's best attended activity was Thursday night bingo.

Pfleger turned up as an assistant pastor immediately after ordination in 1975. To many, including the old and infirm pastor at the time -- who had been the object of hate mail from parishioners who thought him "a traitor for letting the blacks push them out" -- it was only a matter of time before the parish plant became too great a burden and was closed by the archdiocese.

Pfleger had other ideas and took advantage of his status as the only assistant and began turning St. Sabina into an African-American friendly parish, replacing a crucifix at the front of the church one Easter with a painting depicting "the resurrected Jesus as a black man in slave attire, with wild hair and broken manacles on his hands and feet."

Five years into his term, Pfleger, 31, was named "administrator" when the pastor suffered a fatal heart attack. He was to be a temporary place holder. Thirty years later, he's become an institution. For all the criticism -- he receives a great deal and McClory doesn't short-change the critics -- Pfleger's bona fides lies in what he asks of others: commitment for the long haul. It's tough to make the charges stick or mean much -- that he's a glory hound, that he loves the spotlight, that he is liturgically off base, that his preaching is too black, that he's too tied to politics -- when he's stuck with and built a place where McClory says most Chicago priests don't want to go.

At a time when diocese after diocese is shutting down inner-city parishes, Pfleger's is thriving and it's self-sufficient, including the school. It doesn't take a dime from "downtown," as the chancery office is referred to.

Among the fundamental questions many Catholics are asking today, in a time of demographic shifts, tight money, downsizing and mergers, are: What's a parish supposed to be? What does it mean to be a priest/pastor? How significant is any individual community?

And why pay attention to Pfleger and his model outside of South Chicago?

McClory, in an interview, answers the latter: "Why would anybody pay attention to a probably uneducated Jewish peasant walking around a land totally under Roman rule in a country were nothing's going on. It's the same God-blessed story. Pfleger's not perfect. He's got failings, but he's also got this incredible integrity about himself, about what you have to do."

In the book, Pfleger answers the questions about parish. The parish is more than his community, it's his family. His role of pastor is more than maintaining and nice place to worship. Worship is only worth the time (and a Sunday service at St. Sabina can stretch to three hours) if it inspires action. Worship, he says, should turn believers into disciples.

"I want to see the day when St. Sabina is not an exception in the archdiocese but the norm." he told McClory. "I want to infect believers with the knowledge that social justice is the basis of our mission. I think church leaders have really outsourced our mission ? We've forgotten our real mission is freeing the captives, feeding the poor, reaching out to the outcasts."

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