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Popular Chicago pastor pressured to leave parish

Robert McClory | Mar. 21, 2011

CHICAGO -- Fr. Michael Pfleger, the white pastor of St. Sabina, one of the largest and most active black Catholic parishes in the country is once again under strong pressure to leave the post he has held for nearly 30 years.

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago called him in March 11, wanting Pfleger to take over as president of Leo Catholic High School, a few blocks from St. Sabina. The school has been struggling for years with financial problems, small enrollment and mediocre student performance.

Pfleger has declined to discuss the contents of his letter of reply to George March 18 but has made it clear to parishioners that he doesn?t want to leave Sabina or take over Leo Catholic. He told his congregation at Mass March 20 that he feels ?spiritually good, but emotionally I?m very stretched.?

Pfleger became pastor of St. Sabina in 1981 (after serving five years as associate pastor), and under his leadership church members have engaged in protests, marches, boycotts, rallies and other actions to curb drugs, alcohol and cigarette advertising, prostitution and the proliferation of guns in the area. Working with local legislators, including Barack Obama (when he served on the Illinois legislature), St. Sabina has greatly improved the neighborhood, with a renewal of businesses, elderly housing, recreational and social and health services.

Pastors in Chicago generally serve two six-year terms, with a third term permitted in special cases. Pfleger is concluding an unprecedented fifth term, having successfully resisted numerous efforts by George to move him elsewhere.

Pfleger?s popularity at Sabina and in the larger, southside African-American neighborhood, along with his outspoken condemnations of racism and social injustice have made him an iconic figure who cannot be easily replaced.

But Pfleger?s innovative tactics, regular appearances in the media and his creative liturgical approach have earned him the resentment of many who criticize him for seeking the spotlight and the cardinal for not removing him.

Awaiting developments, parishioners began wide distribution of a flyer March 21, urging the public to ?show some love to Father Pfleger? by writing letters, making phone calls or sending emails to Cardinal George and the archdiocese?s priest placement board.

?Let it be known,? says the flyer, ?that you are asking for Father Pfleger to remain as pastor of St. Sabina, which he has expressed is his desire.?

[Robert McClory, a longtime *NCR* contributor, is the author of the 2010 book, *Radical Disciple: Father Pfleger, St. Sabina Church, and the Fight for Social Justice*.

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

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The flyer from St. Sabina parishioners **Show some love to Father Pfleger** [1]

NCR's review of McClory's book on Pfleger: **Book asks: What's a parish? What's a priest?** [2].

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