

Cardinal George asks Father Pfleger to take leave from parish post

CHICAGO - A Chicago Catholic priest criticized for a speech in which he mocked Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York has been temporarily removed from his pastoral duties by Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago.

In a statement released late June 3, Cardinal George said though Father Michael Pfleger doesn't agree that he should take a leave of absence from his post as pastor of Chicago's St. Sabina Catholic Church "I have nevertheless asked him to use this opportunity to reflect on his recent statements and actions in the light of the church's regulations for all Catholic priests."

Father William Vanecko - pastor of Chicago's St. Kilian Parish - will serve as temporary administrator of St. Sabina to ensure ministerial services are uninterrupted, the cardinal said.

This was not welcome news to several parishioners of St. Sabina.

"We respectfully request the cardinal immediately reinstate Father Pfleger as full pastor of St. Sabina," the parish council's president, Gerald Stewart, was quoted as saying in the Chicago Sun-Times daily newspaper.

During a June 1 "unity service" at his church, Father Pfleger said that his remarks the week before at Trinity United Church of Christ were about racism, not politics.

"All my life, I have had to deal with the reality of racism," he said. "I have committed myself to tearing down the walls that divide us wherever they stand."

The priest mocked Sen. Clinton May 25 at Trinity, the church to which presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois belonged for nearly 20 years. He said Clinton saw Obama as "a black man stealing my show" when the

senator entered the race for the Democratic nomination.

"She wasn't the only one crying," added the priest, who is white. "There was a whole lot of white people crying." A video clip of his address circulated on the YouTube Internet site.

Cardinal George has expressed deep regret about these statements and said the leave of absence will give Father Pfleger an opportunity to put the events into perspective.

"I hope that this period will also be a time away from the public spotlight, and for rest and attention to family concerns," he said June 3.

In a May 30 statement the cardinal said that "words can be differently interpreted, but Father Pfleger's remarks about Sen. Clinton are both partisan and amount to a personal attack."

Cardinal George said in that statement that, "while a priest must speak to political issues that are also moral, he may not endorse candidates nor engage in partisan campaigning."

"To avoid months of turmoil in the church, Father Pfleger has promised me that he will not enter into campaigning, will not publicly mention any candidate by name and will abide by the discipline common to all Catholic priests," the statement added.

In his statement June 1, Father Pfleger said the days following the dissemination of the YouTube clip were "the most painful days of my life, even more so than the death of Jarvis, my foster son."

Jarvis was gunned down in gang crossfire not far from St. Sabina in 1998.

"This was a new level, when the world is meeting you for the first time in a minute-and-a-half YouTube clip," he said.

Trinity United Church of Christ formerly was headed by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose racially divisive views have been denounced by Obama. The candidate

formally resigned his membership in the church after Father Pfleger's appearance.

The clip "in no way defines the sermon or the message that was preached and in no way defined the person or the pastor that I am," Father Pfleger said at St. Sabina.

"It is also grieving to me that a minute-and-a-half YouTube video became the headline when there are earthquakes and cyclones and tornadoes and children being killed right here in our own city because of easy access to guns and those become stories on pages 18, 19, 20, 25 and 30," he added.

Racism is a sin, he said. "It is against the commandment to love and it is against the God who is love."

"On Thursday, I apologized for the words that I chose, I apologized for my dramatization," he added, referring to a statement he issued May 29. "I apologize to anyone who was offended and who thought that it was mockery, especially the candidates and their families. That was never my intention. I am deeply sorry and pray that my apology will be accepted. I am neither a racist nor a sexist."

Since the YouTube clip began to receive wide airplay, Father Pfleger said, he has received 3,000 e-mails, some telling him he should kill himself.

Two guards followed him during the entrance procession for Mass at St. Sabina because, the priest said, he had received death threats, including some that specifically mentioned the June 1 service.

Father Pfleger titled the homily he delivered "Beyond YouTube," and said that if people pay attention only to the short clips on YouTube, or only to the headlines, they miss the rest of the story.