

Vocal Chicago priest suspended after remarks on possible reassignment

CHICAGO - Father Michael Pfleger, the outspoken pastor of an African-American parish on Chicago's South Side, has been suspended from the priesthood after saying he would leave the Catholic Church if he were to be reassigned.

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago informed Father Pfleger of the suspension in a letter dated April 27 and made public by the archdiocese.

The cardinal told the priest that he had "already left the Catholic Church and are therefore not able to pastor a Catholic parish" after saying in national and local media interviews that he would refuse any assignment other than as pastor of St. Sabina Church.

Father Pfleger's remarks, Cardinal George wrote, "short-circuited" efforts that had been under way for weeks assigning Father Pfleger as president of Leo Catholic High School so he could continue working in the same neighborhood in which he was a pastor for nearly 30 years.

"A Catholic priest's inner life is governed by his promises, motivated by faith and love, to live chastely as a celibate man and to obey his bishop," Cardinal George wrote. "Breaking either promise destroys his vocation and wounds the church."

Parishioners and supporters planned to rally in support of Father Pfleger and meet with the media April 28 at the cardinal's residence.

Father Pfleger did not return a call seeking comment.

Cardinal George appointed Father Thulani Magwaza, associate pastor of St. Sabina, as parish administrator. He will be assisted by Father Andrew Smith, a priest serving at St. Ailbe Parish in Chicago.

In an interview on “Smiley and West” in early April, Father Pfleger told hosts Tavis Smiley and Cornel West that Cardinal George was seeking to remove him from St. Sabina and that he had been offered the presidency of a nearby high school. Father Pfleger described the school as “dying” and that he was told “I’d have no power to do anything but sit there and raise money.”

“I said that’s not my power, that’s not my gift,” Father Pfleger said in the interview.

He said he offered to take the high school under the auspices of St. Sabina Parish and hire an African-American principal, who would be the first in the school’s history.

Cardinal George denied in the letter that his intention was to remove the priest, saying such action is reserved for clergy who have sexually abused children or were involved in financial malfeasance. The cardinal also wrote that on several occasions Father Pfleger indicated he did not want to remain as pastor of St. Sabina for the length of his priestly ministry.

The cardinal said the move to the school would allow Father Pfleger to continue his work on education in the African-American community, gun violence and service to the poor.

The priest’s social justice activism, outspokenness on racism and comments on political issues at times have irritated archdiocesan officials. Most recently he was placed on a two-week leave from ministry after making national headlines for critical comments aimed at then-Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton during the 2008 primary campaign.