

ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

Office of the Archbishop

Post Office Box 1979



Chicago, Illinois 60690-1979

April 27, 2011

Reverend Michael L. Pflieger
Pastor
Saint Sabina Catholic Church
1210 W. 78th Place
Chicago, IL 60620

Dear Father Pflieger:

Several times in recent years you have told me that you do not want to remain as Pastor of Saint Sabina Parish for the length of your priestly ministry in the Church. Each time we discussed the subject, it was clear that there was no other assignment that would make equally good use of your talents in ministry and that it would also be difficult to find another pastor to take up your ministry at Saint Sabina's with comparable fervor.

Some months ago, however, an opening at Leo High School for the presidency of a fine school very important for the mission of the Church gave us the possibility of offering you a transfer that would keep you in the neighborhood and among the people to whom you have dedicated much of your life and also give you a position from which to continue to espouse the causes dear to you: education in the African American community, control of gun violence, service to the poor in the name of Christ. As you know, this was an honest offer, not driven by pressure from any group but by a pastoral need in the Archdiocese. You promised to consider what was a proposal, not a demand, even as I urged you to accept it.

Your written response to me after our preliminary conversation left open some possibility of your serving at Leo, and I continued discussions with those who are involved in priest transfers in the Archdiocese: the Priests' Placement Board, the Vicars for Priests, the Episcopal Vicar. The process would have necessarily involved conversations with Leo to clarify the position of President and see if you could meet their expectations, with the parishioners of Saint Sabina's to speak about their pastoral needs, and with priests who might be candidates to take your place as pastor, should that become necessary.

Even as these conversations began or were being planned, our private conversation was misrepresented publicly as an attempt to "remove" you from Saint Sabina's. You know that priests in the Archdiocese are "removed" only because they have been found to have sexually

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abused a minor child or are guilty of financial malfeasance. In all other cases, priests are reassigned, moving from one pastoral office to another according to the policies in place for the last forty years.

That process has now been short-circuited by your remarks on national radio and in local newspapers that you will leave the Catholic Church if you are told to accept an assignment other than as pastor of Saint Sabina Parish. If that is truly your attitude, you have already left the Catholic Church and are therefore not able to pastor a Catholic parish. 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. Breaking either promise destroys his vocation and wounds the Church. Bishops are held responsible for their priests on the assumption that priests obey them. I have consistently supported your work for social justice and admired your passion for ministry. Many love and admire you because of your dedication to your people. Now, however, I am asking you to take a few weeks to pray over your priestly commitments in order to come to mutual agreement on how you understand personally the obligations that make you a member of the Chicago presbyterate and of the Catholic Church.

With this letter, your ministry as pastor of Saint Sabina Parish and your sacramental faculties as a priest of the Archdiocese are suspended. The official rescript will follow, but this suspension permits you to retain the office of pastor while temporarily without permission to function. During this time, Father Thulani Magwaza, who is well known to the people of Saint Sabina's as your Associate Pastor, will be administrator of the parish, and Father Andrew Smith, a Chicago African-American priest currently at Saint Ailbe Parish, will assist him.

Father Pflieger, I deeply regret that your public remarks have brought you to a moment of crisis that I pray will quickly pass. This conflict is not between you and me; it's between you and the Church that ordained you a priest, between you and the faith that introduced you to Christ and gives you the right to preach and pastor in his name. If you now formally leave the Catholic Church and her priesthood, it's your choice and no one else's. You are not a victim of anyone or anything other than your own statements. To avoid misrepresentation and manipulation on anyone's part, this letter will be released to the parish, which is to publish it in its entirety, and to the media after it has been delivered to you.

You remain in my prayers, and I hope I remain in yours.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Francis Cardinal George". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small flourish at the end.

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Chicago