

Chicago Father Pflieger steps aside over allegation of abuse more than 40 years ago

WASHINGTON (CNS) – Father Michael Pflieger, a popular Chicago priest and outspoken advocate against gun violence, gangs, poverty and racism, has stepped aside from his ministry after the Chicago Archdiocese said it received an allegation that the priest had sexually abused a minor more than 40 years ago.

Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich announced the move in a Jan. 5 letter to Father Pflieger's parishioners at St. Sabina and members of the parish school, St. Sabina Academy, asking for prayers, patience and privacy for their senior pastor at this time. The 71-year-old priest has led the historically African American parish since 1981.

"In keeping with our child protection policies, I have asked Father Pflieger to step aside from ministry following receipt by the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office for Child Abuse Investigations and Review of an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor more than 40 years ago," the cardinal wrote.

"Allegations are claims that have not been proven as true or false. Therefore, guilt or innocence should not be assumed," he added.

The cardinal said that priest will live away from the parish while the allegation is investigated, and the pastor, Father Thulani Magwaza will serve as temporary parish administrator.

In a Jan. 6 post on Facebook, Father Pflieger said he couldn't "possibly respond to the hundreds of texts, emails and calls that I have received from all across the nation since yesterday."

"I am devastated, hurt and yes angry, but I am first, a person of faith," he wrote, urging people to trust God and to keep him and the parish of St. Sabina in their prayers. He said he had been asked by the diocese not to speak out at this time and added that he is "blessed with good leadership and amazing members, whom I love."

"Pray also for the person, my life is more than a 40-year-old accusation, and on that and my faith I will stand," he wrote.

Over the years, Father Pflieger has made national headlines for his crusades against violence on television and for a successful campaign that stopped the placement of billboards with alcohol and tobacco ads in Black neighborhoods. In 2002, he received the first Egan Social Justice Award by DePaul University's Egan Urban Center. The award is named for the late Msgr. John J. Egan, a Chicago priest who was active for decades in many U.S. social justice movements.

In his letter to St. Sabina parishioners, Cardinal Cupich said that in adherence with the archdiocesan child protection policies, the allegation against Father Pflieger had been reported to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Cook County State's Attorney. The person making the allegation has been offered the services of the archdiocesan Victim Assistance Ministry and the archdiocese has begun its investigation.

No charges have been filed.

"In the days and weeks ahead, members of the archdiocese's Office for the Protection of Children and Youth will be available to answer any questions you may have and provide you with support during this challenging time," the cardinal wrote.

"Please know that you are in my prayers. We will do our best to keep you informed of developments as they occur," he said.

A statement issued Jan. 5 by the cabinet of St. Sabina's said they believe the allegations against their senior pastor "are unfounded" and they said they "boldly stand behind the integrity, passion, work and ministry" of Father Pflieger.

The parishioners wrote that although the archdiocesan "process and protocol" has to be followed and they will fully cooperate with it, they said they believe their priest "will be fully exonerated from all accusations" and they will "stand with him during this process as he has stood with victims of injustice."

They also wrote that they will "continue to uplift his work and the life he has committed to serving others. We will fight for the legacy of the work done by Rev. Michael Pflieger."