

CHICAGO NEWS METRO/STATE

Rev. Michael Pfleger removed from St. Sabina for decades-old sexual abuse allegation

Cardinal Blase Cupich announced what he called “the difficult news” in a letter to the St. Sabina community Tuesday. He wrote he asked Pfleger to step aside while the archdiocese investigates allegations more than 40 years old.

By Sam Kelly, Elvia Malagón, and Robert Herguth | Jan 5, 2021, 5:35pm CST



Father Michael Pfleger speaks out against the violence in Chicago before a silent protest along the Magnificent Mile on Dec. 31. | Anthony Vazquez/Sun-Times

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Father Michael Pfleger, the longtime pastor at St. Sabina Church and one of the most prominent priests in Chicago, has been removed from the Auburn Gresham parish following revelations of a decades-old sexual abuse allegation against a minor.

Cardinal Blase Cupich announced “the difficult news” in a letter to the St. Sabina community Tuesday, saying he has “asked Father Pfleger 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.”

Cupich said Pfleger agreed to his request and will live away from the parish during the archdiocese’s investigation. The allegation has also been reported to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Cook County state’s attorney’s office, Cupich said.

Pfleger, 71, did not respond to requests for comment Tuesday evening.

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A group of parishioners released a statement on the church’s website, saying, in part: “We, the Cabinet of the Faith Community of St. Sabina, believes that these accusations are unfounded and we boldly stand behind the integrity, passion, work and ministry of our Sr. Pastor, Rev. Michael Pfleger.”

While pledging to cooperate with the archdiocese, the group said, “we believe that our Sr. Pastor will be fully exonerated from all accusations, and we stand with him during this process as he has stood with victims of injustice and will continue to uplift his work and the life he has committed to serving others. We will fight for the legacy of work done by Rev. Michael Pfleger!”

The parishioners’ statement was posted on Pfleger’s Facebook page as well, with an outpouring of support for him in the comments.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who has marched and appeared with Pfleger at events for decades, said late Tuesday he was in prayer after hearing the allegations.

“I’m in shock,” Jackson said.

Jackson said he hadn't spoken to Pfleger but described him as a civil rights leader and transformer.

Wendy Wade, who has been a parishioner at St. Sabina for 35 years, stopped outside the church to say a quick prayer Tuesday night. She said she was "appalled" by the allegations and refused to believe them, saying this is the first she's heard of any such behavior.

"I don't believe it in my heart and soul that he did this," Wade said. "He's always been giving kindness to the community, not just the church but the entire community."

Filmmaker Bob Hercules followed Pfleger for four years while producing the documentary, "Radical Disciple: The Story of Father Pfleger."

During his time on the film, Hercules said he never heard rumors or allegations of misconduct. "I only saw a man who was deeply committed to his parish, parishioners and the community," Hercules said.

Pfleger has served as pastor at St. Sabina Church since 1981. In the decades since his appointment, he has become one of Chicago's most well-known voices against gun violence, leading annual "peace marches" that routinely draw hundreds of people, **including Chance the Rapper and survivors of the Parkland school shooting.**

His **latest march happened New Year's Eve**, when Pfleger led about 150 people down Michigan Avenue to plead for city leaders to recognize the "virus of violence."

Over the years, Pfleger has clashed with cardinals and politicians but had managed to stay at St. Sabina, one of the largest African American churches in the city, for decades despite parish priests typically serving one or two six-year terms before being rotated to other assignments. Cardinal Francis George suspended Pfleger briefly in 2008 after the priest mocked Hillary Clinton from the pulpit as she ran against Pfleger's friend, Barack Obama. Pfleger apologized and soon was back at work.

Pfleger is just the latest high-profile Chicago cleric to face abuse allegations since Cupich arrived to lead the local branch of the Catholic Church in 2014.

The Rev. John Smyth, who ran the Maryville Academy for abused and neglected kids for decades, faced accusations before he died in 2019 at age 84.

The Rev. George Clements — who gained attention decades ago for his civil rights activism, his stewardship of Holy Angels Parish on the South Side and adopting a son in the 1980s — was also accused of abuse in recent years and died in 2019 at 87.

In both instances, the allegations were never proven and involved alleged misconduct from years earlier that was reported only recently.

As with Clements, Pflieger also became a father. According to his official biography, in 1981 he “became the proud adoptive father of an 8-year-old son, Lamar. In 1992, he also became the adoptive father of Beronti. In 1997, he became a foster father to Jarvis Franklin, who was tragically killed as a result of gang crossfire, May 30, 1998.”

Father Thulani Magwaza will take over the administration of St. Sabina Church during the investigation.

Contributing: Maudlyne Ihejirika



Father Michael Pflieger poses for a portrait inside St. Sabina in 2016. | Max Herman/ For the Sun-Times