

Father Pfleger reinstated, tells parishioners: 'Let's get back to work'

CHICAGO (CNS) – Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich announced on May 24 he is reinstating Father Michael Pfleger as senior pastor of the Faith Community of St. Sabina a “thorough review” showed “insufficient reason” to suspect the priest is guilty of abuse allegations made against him.

His reinstatement is effective the weekend of June 5-6.

In early January, the Chicago Archdiocese asked Father Pfleger to step away from ministry temporarily after it received an allegation that the priest had sexually abused a minor over 40 years ago. A second allegation was filed on Jan. 22 by the complainant's older brother.

In adherence with the archdiocesan child protection policies, these allegations were reported to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Cook County State's Attorney. The alleged victims were offered the services of the archdiocesan Victim Assistance Ministry and the archdiocese began its investigation.

The archdiocesan Independent Review Board, “assisted by our Office of Child Abuse Investigation and Review and outside investigators, conducted a thorough review of the allegations,” Cardinal Cupich said in a letter to the St. Sabina community. “The Review Board has concluded that there is insufficient reason to suspect Father Pfleger is guilty of these allegations.”

“Having given careful consideration to their decision, which I accept, I now inform you that I am reinstating Father Pfleger to his position of senior pastor,” the cardinal said.

"I have asked Father Pflieger to take the next two weeks to prepare himself spiritually and emotionally to return, realizing that these months have taken a great toll on him. He has agreed to do so," he added.

"The weekend he will return is the feast of Corpus Christi when we celebrate that we are one in the body of Christ, sharing each other's joys and sorrows," Cardinal Cupich said. "It is in this spirit that I ask you to welcome back Father Pflieger, thereby helping him take up again the ministry that has distinguished St. Sabina in the archdiocese and beyond."

This past year "has been a time of great trial for us all," the cardinal said, "and our church, our city and society are in need of your witness to Jesus' love. Please know you will have my support and prayers as you continue to be a light in the community."

The popular 72-year-old priest, an outspoken advocate for social justice and racial justice and against gun violence, denied the allegations immediately after they were reported by Chicago media outlets, and his parishioners rallied outside the parish church to show their "unequivocal and unwavering" support for their pastor.

Addressing parishioners from the church's front steps on May 24, Father Pflieger said: "I am innocent of those charges and accusations. And I cannot tell you how grateful I am to God and to all those who prayed for me and supported me through this painful time."

According to CNN, he said he spent the time away from the parish in a one-bedroom apartment in Chicago and felt many emotions – "anger, depression, frustration" – but "never lost faith."

"We are going to continue to fight every injustice we see," he told parishioners, noting that the next day would be the first anniversary of George's Floyd's death at the hands of police,

“and yet racism, injustice, unemployment, food insecurity and bigotry and prejudice continue to reign in this country. Let’s get back to work.”

CNN also reported that the attorney for Father Pfleger’s two accusers had provided the cable news outlet an affidavit that a third man had come forward in March with an allegation against Father Pfleger.

Eugene Hollander said his clients, the two brothers, were “incredibly disappointed” by the decision to reinstate Father Pfleger after they had fully cooperated with the Review Board. They had presented what he described as a “mountain of evidence.” Hollander said he is talking to his clients about possibly filing a lawsuit.

Throughout the investigation and his suspension, Father Pfleger did not speak about the accusations except in social media posts where he has thanked supporters, and that even though he was hurt, devastated and angry, he reminded himself of how others are suffering, adding: “The pain in our world is REAL.”