

April 2, 2007 - Pflieger to remain St. Sabina pastor

By Many A. Brachear, Chicago Tribune religion reporter

With nearly a dozen priests facing reassignment or retirement in the Archdiocese of Chicago this year, at least one outspoken activist and pastor will stay at the helm of his South Side parish.

During a recent meeting with Cardinal Francis George, Rev. Michael Pflieger was told he would not be removed from St. Sabina's pulpit, where he has spent more than 25 years.

The decision comes just months after Rev. Jack Wall, the longtime pastor of Old St. Patrick's Church in the West Loop, left to become the president of the Catholic Extension Society.

The cardinal has traditionally enforced church policies, dating back to the 1970s, that limit pastors to two six-year terms in a parish. Exceptions for Pflieger and Wall had been made under the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, giving them both third terms.

An uproar at the end of those terms in 2002 led George to extend both priests' appointments indefinitely. It was the announcement of Wall's new role last month that called Pflieger's future into question again.

Pflieger has a reputation for rebelliousness dating to his seminary days. While enrolled at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, he chose to live and work at a West Side parish and chided fellow seminarians for caring more about perfecting liturgy than fighting for social justice.

Ordained in 1975, he went to St. Sabina, 1210 W. 78th Pl., in 1981. Since then, he has become synonymous with the mostly African-American congregation in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood and its activism.

He has been arrested for defacing alcohol and tobacco billboards, picketed stores that sell drug paraphernalia and marched against gang violence. Most recently, Pflieger has supported presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama, whom he has known since Obama's community-organizing days.

"We live in a scary time that when you criticize the government, you're unpatriotic and you criticize the church, people tell you why don't you leave," Pflieger said. "Because I love the Catholic Church I want to keep challenging it to be its best."