

## Boulder pastor says Jesus turned some away

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 17, 2010



Father William Breslin

### Boulder, Colorado

Father William Breslin, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus parish, seemed to be a tired soldier of Christ as he sat outside his parish church March 13 greeting parishioners as they left the five o'clock Saturday Mass.

For more than a week, since word broke he had forbidden two young girls, five and three, to further their education in another year in the parish school because their moms are a lesbian couple, the parish -- and Breslin -- have been under attack, the parish has polarized, and even the school might be threatened with decreased enrollments.

"Let's pray that we find ways to come together, that we find the means for reconciliation," he said during the prayers of the faithful only minutes earlier. Already, it was said, long time parishioners had, at least for now, decided to worship elsewhere.

Reconciliation had been the theme of the mass readings and they seemed particularly appropriate. Sacred Heart parishioners are now passionately divided seemingly, though not exclusively, on generational lines, those over fifty likely to support the mindset of their priest more than others.

In this progressive outdoor loving community on the eastern edge of the Rockies, where people pride themselves on being open and welcoming, holding the line on traditional values is not easy or popular.

The issue that has emerged here has to do with the meaning of love. Is the love that Jesus taught heavy on compassion and light on judgment? Or does Christian love require vigilance and hard choices, separating eternal truths from passing fancies and misguided desires?

As parishioners left mass Saturday a number stopped to offer supportive words to the man they call "Father Bill." One elderly couple, standing next to him, said: "Father Bill, keep the faith. We're praying for you. Stay strong."

"Do pray for me," their priest, eyes glancing up, replied.

I asked Breslin what moved him to ban the girls from entering the parish elementary school and he responded:

"Let me tell you clearly. This whole matter is about having the freedom to uphold the teachings of our faith. It's about preserving that freedom when a secular society doesn't want us to have it. The same thing is happening in Washington, D.C., where government is dictating to the church."

When Breslin looks out at the world he sees an increasingly secular society, one that has lost its moral compass, and, as it grows more secular, it is all the more important the Catholic faithful stand firm and speak their minds, defending the faith.

This is what Breslin thinks he has done, taking a stand against homosexuality.

The priest writes a blog on the parish web site. In it he has explained his seemingly unpopular decision.

Last week he allowed comments to be posted freely. When they became so overwhelmingly critical of him, he took them off the site.

On his blog, Breslin wrote, "The complaint [against me] goes more or less this way: Jesus would never have turned anyone away, no matter where they came from or who they were. Now let us set things right."

"Actually Jesus did turn people away. In Mark 5 Jesus healed the demoniac, and after the healing the man wanted to become a disciple. Jesus said, No, go back to your own people and tell them all that the Lord in His mercy has done for you. And when the rich young man wanted to follow Jesus, He told him, Go first and sell what you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me. And in John 6, Jesus taught a very hard message so that most of those following Him turned away and would no longer walk in His company. He did not soften His message so as to win them back.

"So the post-modern thought that Jesus was warm and fuzzy and making no demands on anyone is just not true and avoids the very hard teachings that eventually led to His crucifixion."

Breslin wrote the church cannot simply give in to new thinking on marriage and family, writing: "The core issue for us Catholics on this question is our freedom and our obligation to teach about marriage and family life as our faith teaches. If parents see the cultural interpretation of what tolerance has become as more important than the teachings of Jesus, then we become unfaithful to the Lord and we lose the meaning of the beatitude, "Blessed are you when they insult you for My sake, for the Kingdom of Heaven is yours." Many of Jesus' teachings were not popular. In fact, He was crucified for His teachings."

"The issue, he went on, "is not about our not accepting "sinners." It is not about punishing the child for the sins of his or her parents. It is simply that the lesbian couple is saying that their relationship is a good one that should be accepted by everyone; and the church cannot agree to that."

Many who have criticized Breslin have said he has been inconsistent in the application of Catholic teaching. "Why gays and lesbians?" they ask. "Why not those who are divorced and remarried without the blessing of the church?"

Responds Breslin: "People who are divorced do not say divorce is good. There are no pro-divorce parades. Divorce is a tragedy for everybody. So there's no comparing other issues to the issue of gay marriage. Actually, by this decision we really want to protect the child and his or her parents from the necessary conflict that their relationship would bring to a clear-seeing and committed Catholic community.

"The policy of the Catholic school system is also to protect the teachers from being forced " in our own schools " to face huge conflicts within the classroom, so they can teach clearly, and also support the family life of the children they are teaching."

One supportive comment moved Breslin to share it with his readers.

He wrote: "One of you readers sent me a quote from George Orwell that says it all: "During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act. Well, welcome to the revolution! And the revolution is to think differently about love."

If love were defined as doing or saying things that make people feel good, then such "love" would have been a choice often in conflict with Christ's actions and teachings. He readily challenged and confronted sin and those who participated in it. But if, instead, we adopt a more mature definition of love, as wanting what is truly best for another (e.g., a properly formed conscience, knowing right from wrong, correct relationship with God, and awakening into eternal salvation) and doing our part to help accomplish that, then there is no conflict between telling the truth and being loving."

Responding to the negative comments posted on his blog, Breslin wrote: "Many of the negative comments I have received have inferred that the only acceptable path of love means never speaking the truth about anything that would upset another. "Live and let live" would be the motto for this manner of loving.

"Would it not be far more loving to confront a loved one than to be silent about his or her pursuing, for instance, a destructive addiction, even though alcohol or drugs may make him or her "feel good"? In the case of drugs or alcohol, as with inappropriate sexual behavior, the parties involved could say that they derive some sense of "happiness" from their choices. Nonetheless, the wisdom of the church tells us that wrong sources of this supposed "happiness" are ultimately harmful and only seek to fill a void -- a void which, according to the church Fathers, can only be filled by a right relationship with God."

Denver Archbishop Charles J. Chaput has supported Breslin. He issued a statement that has appeared in the local media, has been on the parish web site, and in the parish bulletin.

Chaput wrote that the Catholic Church "never looks for reasons to turn anyone away from a Catholic education. But the Church can't change her moral beliefs without undermining her mission and failing to serve the many families who believe in that mission. "The church does not claim that people with a homosexual orientation are "bad," or that their children are less loved by God. Quite the opposite. But what the church does teach is that sexual intimacy by anyone outside marriage is wrong; that marriage is a sacramental covenant; and that marriage can only occur between a man and a woman. These beliefs are central to a Catholic understanding of human nature, family and happiness, and the organization of society. The church cannot change these teachings because, in the faith of Catholics, they are the teachings of Jesus Christ.

"The policies of our Catholic school system exist to protect all parties involved, including the children of homosexual couples and the couples themselves. Our schools are meant to be "partners in faith" with parents. If parents don't respect the beliefs of the Church, or live in a manner that openly rejects those beliefs, then partnering with those parents becomes very difficult, if not impossible. It also places unfair stress on the children, who find themselves caught in the middle, and on their teachers, who have an obligation to teach the authentic faith of the Church.

"Most parents who send their children to Catholic schools want an environment where the Catholic faith is fully taught and practiced. That simply can't be done if teachers need to worry about wounding the feelings of their students or about alienating students from their parents. That isn't fair to anyone -- including the wider school community. Persons who have an understanding of marriage and family life sharply different from Catholic belief are often people of sincerity and good will. They have other, excellent options for education and should see in them the better course for their children."

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**[Editor's Note:** In the days ahead *NCR* will publish the views of Sacred Heart parishioners who disagree with Fr. Breslin's decision. They talk about how the decision has affected their parish, even possibly threatening the school.]

[Tom Fox is NCR editor. His e-mail address is [tfox@ncronline.org](mailto:tfox@ncronline.org).]

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