

JIMMY BRESLIN'S INCOHERENT RANT

The Church That Forgot Christ

By Jimmy Breslin. Free Press. 239 pp. \$26

Reviewed by Kenneth Woodward

Ostensibly, this is a book about the clergy abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. But like everything Breslin writes, it is really about himself. Or rather, it is about him writing a book about clergy abuse. He wants us to know that he has lost faith in the church of his childhood. "I need no person wearing vestments to stand between God and me," he proclaims up front, as if that were the clergy's function. Still, he wants us to believe that writing this book has caused him considerable pain. Having been taught by nuns in grade school to believe everything the church says is true, he now finds he can believe nothing that the pope and the bishops have to say.

Who cares? Breslin has produced an incoherent rant that tells us nothing new about the abuse crisis, much that is demonstrably false and more than anyone would want to know about his loss of a very literal and childish faith. In chapters that read like a string of his newspaper columns, his rage erupts in spasms of paralyzing bathos. Among other self-indulgences, we get an imaginary interrogation of the pope, a running gag about consecrating Breslin bishop of his own church, and juvenile statements of outrageous scorn: "The church of Rome today cries 'abortion!' to distract us from crimes by all their pedophiles and pimps." Abortion is very much on Breslin's mind. In a typically implausible scene, for example, he reports a baptism in which the priest uses this intimate family occasion to denounce pro-abortion politicians. "We have been ordered that at every liturgical ceremony, we must make a statement against abortion," the unnamed priest replies when questioned by one of Breslin's friends. I've

covered the Catholic church for as long as Breslin has been writing, and I don't believe this ever happened. If a priest ever did make such a claim, a serious journalist would investigate whether such a policy existed, not simply tell a story. But there are no footnotes or identifiable sources in this screed, nothing that would suggest that Breslin has done much more than wing it.

On issues surrounding the clergy abuse scandal, Breslin is single-minded in his prosecutorial approach. Most of the cases he discusses have been reported better and at length by others. What he gives us is a columnist's rewrite job. As a result, his book bristles with errors large and small.

For instance, Breslin consistently calls the predators "pedophiles," a term used to describe adults who are sexually fixated on pre-pubescent children. But in nearly all cases the victims have been adolescents—a very different syndrome that requires different treatment for both the victims and the victimizers. And many are clearly cases of homosexual rape, a fact Breslin simply ignores.

As to causes, Breslin points to one—priestly celibacy—that he claims was suddenly forced on secular clergy by ecclesiastical fiat for purely economic reasons. In fact, celibacy was the Christian ideal for centuries before the church made it mandatory for secular clergy—a decision that owed as much to the influence of monasticism as it did to problems the medieval church had with married priests bequeathing church property to their children. Breslin apparently knows nothing of this history, still less of the numerous recent studies by Andrew Greeley and others showing no connection between celibacy and child abuse. In fact, most child abusers are men living with women.

Like any ordinary Catholic, Breslin is angry with bishops who transferred known predators and failed to protect the faithful and their children. But he makes no mention of priests falsely

accused, including the famous case of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago. But then Chicago is a long way from Breslinland. He mocks the bishops for relying on canon law: Clearly, he does not realize that church law—like civil law—grants the right of due process to priests accused of misconduct.

The abundant mistakes in this book suggest that Breslin long ago lost touch with the Catholic Church. He complains that the church's anointing of the dying is no longer a sacrament. It still is, only the name has changed, from Extreme Unction to the Sacrament of the Sick and Dying. In outlining his new non-church Catholicism, he ascribes to St. Francis of Assisi a famous saying of St. Benedict—"to work and to pray"—and even gets the saying wrong. He dismisses Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Nigerian who works in the "scheming" backrooms of the Vatican, as an Uncle Tom "who hasn't been in Africa in twenty years." The truth is that Arinze, an Ibo, spends every summer in his native city of Onitsha. Breslin is even careless in identifying close friends, describing writer Eugene Kennedy as a former Jesuit when in fact he was once a Maryknoll priest. And so it goes.

Sexual abuse is not the worst sin Breslin puts on exhibit. To paraphrase Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," the entire book smells of mendacity.

Kenneth L. Woodward is a contributing editor of Newsweek. This article is reprinted from the August 1, 2004 edition of the Washington Post, with permission.