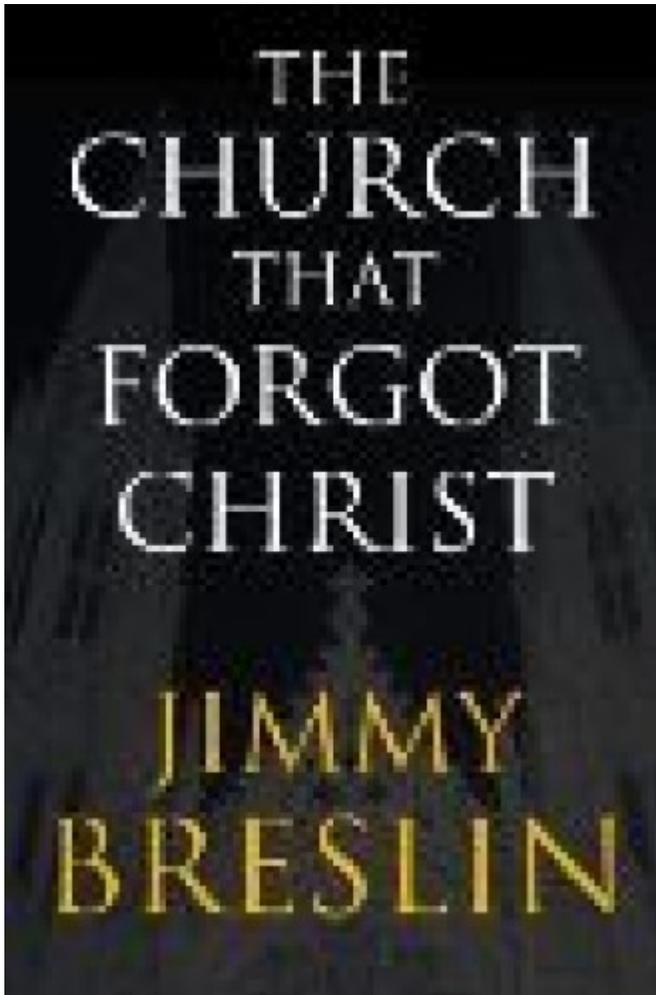


The Church That Forgot Christ

reviewed by [Edward L. Beck](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Church That Forgot Christ

Jimmy Breslin

Free Press

Mark Twain once said, "Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." If this is true, then Jimmy

Breslin is in harm's way. He unleashes his sometimes irrational anger at the Roman Catholic Church—its bishops, its priests and even its would-be saints. Beginning his acerbic rant by proclaiming, "I qualify for the rank of bishop because I'm not a pedophile," he proffers the seemingly serious proposal that, having given up on the Catholic Church in which he was reared, he become bishop of his own church. He sees himself as a man with a divinely inspired mission: to destroy the church of demons and replace it with a church that will have "no gold, brocade, rings or any other vain, useless articles. A gold ring on a bishop's finger is the commercial of a pimp."

Breslin was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary in 1986, but there is little that distinguishes this mess of a book. Beginning with abortion ("The present pope has four subjects on his mind: abortion, abortion, abortion, and Poland"), Breslin jumps from issue to issue with no rhyme or reason and then enumerates a disjointed litany of pet peeves: church wealth, contraception, pedophilia, annulments, the Holocaust, evil bishops, and even a helicopter-loving Mother Teresa. It seems as though Breslin puts down on paper whatever pops into his mind. Where was the editor assigned to shape this meandering diatribe?

The Church That Forgot Christ is written in the style of many of Breslin's newspaper columns, with Breslin playing the hard-hitting journalist out to right wrongs and correct the injustices of corrupt institutions. While he is justified in taking aim at a church that has, by its egregious errors, invited legitimate criticism, this book reads as though he threw all of his antichurch newspaper columns into the air and constructed his own "Ninety-five Theses" from wherever they landed.

While taking his readers on walking tours of New York neighborhoods and churches now sullied by the evil priests who seem to lurk behind every altar, Breslin proves to be a most unreliable guide. Careening from Brooklyn rectories to Queens' cemeteries, he even rails against fictional movie priests, like the Bing Crosby cleric in *Going My Way*. Although some of his protestations contain kernels of truth, his exaggerated exposition is ludicrous. He suggests that one of the most beloved bishops of Brooklyn, Francis J. Muguvero, pocketed \$10,000 for an annulment he granted to a married couple and that the present bishop of Rockville Centre, William Murphy ("Mansion Murphy" to Breslin), threw out a group of aging nuns from their convent so that he could build himself a palace where the front lawn "seems as big as the sheep meadow in Central Park." Breslin is similarly perturbed that Bishop Murphy uses cars while "Christ walked on foot." Perhaps he would like the bishop to

visit his diocese atop a donkey. In an even more mind-boggling critique, Breslin takes umbrage that the bishop's residence has heat and air conditioning, leading one to suppose that, if he were bishop, he would courageously brave the elements, caveman style.

Perhaps the most egregious flaw in Breslin's shoddy reporting involves the serious issue of pedophilia in the priesthood. He writes, "The result of forced celibacy shows it has been an act of madness for the church. It leaves priests without wives and with masturbation. Or with an eye on the boys' choir." Breslin's ridiculous suggestion that celibacy causes pedophilia is made without any empirical evidence. He further suggests that a misogynist and Jansenistic church is to blame for priests sleeping with young boys. "They demanded so unceasingly that people live a cold life that a church so constricted would writhe uncontrollably and so many would decide that if women are so bad, then it might be best to sleep with a choirboy." Obviously Breslin needs to bone up on the etiology of the illness of pedophilia.

While anger can indeed sometimes be the impetus to fight injustice, Breslin's anger seems to have the opposite effect: creating yet one more injustice. In his unwillingness to provide a fair and balanced treatment of the current ills of the Catholic Church, Breslin indiscriminately spews his acid upon anything even remotely Roman Catholic, thus hoping to deal a fatal blow to an institution that he can no longer tolerate. But it is Jimmy Breslin himself who may suffer from the acid of such a disgorgement.