

Priest Bringleson toes line between saint, sinner

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Eric Westhaver
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Father Paul Bringleson relaxes in his home with his terrier, Lucius. - PHOTO BY ERIC WESTHAVER

Father Paul Bringleson is far from your typical Roman Catholic priest.

Instead of devoting his life to a dour existence of philosophical study, Bringleson finds meaning in his community.

Life continues for the 46-year-old patriarch of **St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church**, now in the midst of his 17th year as an ordained Catholic priest.

Bringleson was born in **Hamilton, Ont.** to a family that held high esteem for the Catholic Church.

"Church was a daily occurrence in our household, Catholic schools and so on.

We grew up with that, the ritual, the devotion, the prayer, the values – my mother and father had very strong convictions when it came to God and family," he said.

Always a bit of a **loose cannon**, Bringleson moved to Winnipeg at age 18 – sight unseen – to pursue study in psychology and philosophy.

"There wasn't a whole lot of planning or thought that went into that – it just sort of happened," said Bringleson.

Bringleson's studies eventually took him to Alberta, where he began working with the **Correctional Service of Canada**. After his move, Bringleson felt **uneasy in his day-to-day life** – he describes it as **a restlessness**.

"Life was great, but something was still missing," he said.

Around this time, Bringleson met a man who would prove to have a notable impact on his future – **Reverend Peter Sutton, the late archbishop** of the **Keewatin-Le Pas diocese**, which covers most of northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

It was after meeting Sutton that Bringleson first seriously entertained entering the priesthood.

"The restlessness continued to grow and he asked me, 'Why don't you consider joining the priesthood?' He was very influential in my life, as far as being a faithful Catholic. I never lost that relationship with him," said Bringleson.

Other encounters in his life also pushed Bringleson to a holy path.

"I was in a relationship with a woman at the time. Truth be told, it was her that had me see some light in all of this. She mentioned then that she knew that I cared about her and that I loved her, but she said, 'You never speak about me with the same passion and the same enthusiasm that you speak about your God,'" he said.

“She knew I was looking for something and it wasn’t that relationship.”

Bringleson enrolled at St. Joseph’s College in Edmonton and **joined the priesthood in 2000.**

Alcohol

On the surface, Bringleson’s personal tumult seemed to have slowed. Deep below his persona in the pulpit, **Father Paul was battling with his own inner demons.**

Bringleson’s private restlessness wasn’t fully quenched by joining the church. In the early days of his time in the clergy, Bringleson **retreated further into the bottle.**

“Of course at the time, I wouldn’t be able to tell you that,” he said. “You don’t just become **an alcoholic.**”

Bringleson had hidden his issues with alcohol from many he knew.

His issues came to a head in 2009 when, after a drinking session, he stepped behind the wheel.

“I had a car accident, **driving while impaired,**” he said.

The crash was exactly the **wake-up call** Bringleson needed.

“From that day on, I never had another drink.”

Bringleson entered treatment to settle his addiction. He joined **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**, walking the **12-step** path so many others have walked before.

Today, Bringleson has been in recovery for eight years. In the process of his recovery, Bringleson realized total internal absolution is harder than it may appear, reexamining everything he knew – including his faith.

“That led to a freedom of seeing God. It essentially **knocked me on my ass.** I realized I wasn’t as gifted as I thought I was, I wasn’t as powerful as I thought I was and I wasn’t as indestructible as I thought I was. **I’m in just**

as much shit as most other people every day and I need God just as much as anybody else, may I find him now,” he said.

Bringleson also volunteers with AA programs in and around Flin Flon.

“One of the strong tenets of AA is **service**, to put yourself in service. **In some odd way, being a priest helps me stay sober**. Alcoholics are always thinking about ourselves. When you start thinking about other people, things change,” he said.

“Sobriety at its very heart requires rigorous **honesty**. You have **to seek forgiveness** for the things you’ve done and the things you failed to do, and **make amends** for those things and to **be willing to keep practicing that** in all of our affairs.”

With his previous issues now in the rear-view mirror, Bringleson **moved to the north in 2011** – partially on the recommendation of Archbishop Sutton.

Ministry

Another part of Bringleson’s move to the north was how he viewed the ministry in the north.

“I found the church in the north far more relaxed and open-minded than some of the other dioceses in the south. There’s a little more leeway as far as expectation here than there is in some of the stricter conservative parts of the country,” he said.

A more relaxed, less heavily-regimented approach to faith **fit Bringleson like a glove**. The keystones to Bringleson’s ministry are the people he meets and the stories he hears.

His **people-first approach** can, at times, lead him to **butt heads** with some aspects of traditional Catholic dogma.

“I’m heavily opinionated and I don’t think that will ever change,” he said.

A prime example came earlier this year, when Bringleson gave the opening prayer at the first-ever **Flin Flon Pride** celebration and opened the church

for Pride events – a bold move, considering **the Church's official stance on homosexuality. It still considers it sinful.**

It's a position that Bringleton does not fully support.

"Flin Flon Pride was a milestone event here. Jesus Christ needed to be there. He would have been there, he would have wanted to be there," he said.

"I would like to think that we, as a church, can grow in our understanding of what love looks like. We can never be afraid of that," he said, adding, "I don't think we can use 1950s thinking to solve 2017 issues."

Bringleton believes that humans have limitless potential, saying that **the church can be a vehicle to help people reach their utmost ability.**

"I think there has to be an admission, on my part as a person, that **we never reach a point in life where we can't grow anymore.** I think, historically, the church has taught that message, but hasn't really practiced it concretely."

Bringleton's humanistic approach to the gospel leaves some controversial areas of scripture open to interpretation, saying that in order to move closer to God, some church customs need to be disputed.

"I think that the church needs to be challenged in certain ways to develop a healthy, loving approach rather than judging people. Instead of telling people they're wrong all the time, why not walk with people and help people to make good choices? They help us as a church to make good choices," he said.

"I also believe that we, as a church, cannot shy away from the public circle, to engage in helpful conversation about what it means to live dignified lives."

Today

Bringleton doesn't like **cooping himself up** in his home or in the sanctuary.

In between holding services in **Flin Flon, Cranberry Portage** and **Snow Lake**, Bringleton finds time to spend with **his pets**, which include a small **terrier** named Lucius, a **parrot** and a pair of **sugar gliders** – small, nocturnal, squirrel-like creatures from Australia.

“In the evenings and the mornings, they’re extremely playful. They’re about the size of your hand, they look like little squirrels. They will spend the better part of their day in my shirt, asleep and very content,” he said.

Bringleson said his animal companions help him focus on his life and provide him with loving camaraderie.

“I’ve never had anybody this excited to see me come home in my entire existence. **They’re good, they help me to not be selfish. When you have animals, you have to put them first,**” he said.

“When you’ve got critters at home, you can’t just do your own thing, you always have to worry about your decisions and your choices.”

In the winter months, Bringleson can be found more often than not on **Kisseynew Lake**, ice fishing in his own small shack or quadding on the many nearby trails.

“The love of my life up here is Kisseynew Lake. **It is by far my favourite place,**” he said.

“I love that lake. That lake is one of the most scenic lakes I think we have up here. We have an ice shack we use up there that we use on a regular basis. In the summer, we have a boat we can use. To me, it’s **a little piece of heaven.**”

Bringleson also spends time with several community groups as a **chaplain**, including the Royal Canadian Legion and emergency services.

Since moving here six years ago, **Bringleson has found a deep appreciation for Flin Flon itself and the stories of its residents.**

“I think **at the overall heart of life in the north**, for me, is **a sincere gentleness**. The communities work together. I find Flin Flon to be extremely helpful that way. **I don’t think I’ve ever found a problem where I can’t find people to assist.**

‘Yes’ is a very common response. That was one of the things I was attracted to here,” he said.

“I’ve met some great people here. The diversity of the city, the development of the arts here, it’s unparalleled with any place I’ve lived. **It takes my breath away.”**

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