

Holy Mass of Christian Burial
for the Repose of the Soul of
The Reverend Louis Joseph Breslan

Friday 23 October 2015, Church of Saint Patrick, Guilford

Homily by Very Rev John Hogan, Rector, Seminary of the Holy Spirit, Diocese of Parramatta

I am very grateful for having been asked to preach at Father Breslan's funeral Mass. I have been closely associated with him now for over 20 years and would like to present a personal appreciation of this man who served Christ and His Church so faithfully as a priest.

Today I am less interested in what Fr Breslan did, I'm far more interested in who he was. His list of appointments is on the back of the booklets and that list already speaks volumes.

But who was he? What was he about?

If you would indulge me for a few moments and I'll try and set the scene.

I arrived in Australia in late February 1995 to work here for two years. I was appointed as assistant priest in Guildford and Bishop Bede Heather brought me over to see Fr Breslan the next day. The meeting went well and when the good Bishop dropped me back in Wentworthville where I was staying, he said that he hoped I would be happy in Guildford. Well, I thought I would be, and I was! However, I had already heard on the grapevine that local priests were very surprised that the Bishop had put an Englishman to live with an Irishman and that they were expecting rows and ructions between us!

By the end of the week I took up residence here in Guildford and that evening concelebrated Mass with Fr Breslan. Afterwards we returned to the presbytery to have a cup of tea. In attendance, as usual, was Fr Breslan's support crew of five, three of them no longer with us. We chatted nicely, and if this wasn't an official interview panel, I was certainly being sized-up! The flow of conversation was polite and cheery. And then one of the crew, unable to contain herself any longer, asked, "So, what do you think it's going to be like having an Irishman and Englishman living together"? I looked over at Fr Lou and asked "are you English?" His mumbled response of "no" was accompanied by such a vigorous shaking of the head that I thought it would fly off! No, he

sure wasn't English, and since I am of pure Irish stock I announced to the crew that there were, thankfully, no Englishmen in the presbytery. This caused much relief and a total drop in levels of anxiety. From that moment on Fr Breslan and myself got on like a house on fire, especially when it was established that I was a real Catholic!

I've laughed about that incidence ever since, he loved it.

It is amazing what can happen when defences are dropped. Because of the warm and open friendship which emerged between us, I was in a privileged position to experience the realness of this man. What do I mean?

We have heard in today's Gospel that the meek are blessed and that they shall inherit the earth. Quite a reversal of expectations in the world of fallen humanity. In the case of Fr Breslan, any meekness was based on a solid foundation of faith and virtue. A mildness of disposition, a courteous temperament and a heart of hospitality and charity do not quite do justice to the spirit and soul of the man, which manifested themselves in these outward signs of inward grace. We need to probe more deeply to understand how and why he operated as he did.

I might bring up the issue of blessings, for which Fr Breslan was well known. I don't know if he ever studied the writings of Blessed John Henry Newman, and I kind of doubt it, but both were of the same firm conviction that when the priest gives a blessing – it is Christ who blesses. And, wow, did Fr Breslan keep Christ busy! Nothing was outside the jurisdiction of his outstretched hand, always ready and eager to sketch a benediction. People loved him for that. They loved him for the way he selflessly made precious time available for their concerns. They loved him for the way in which he treated their concerns with as much preciousness as they did. Whether it be rosary beads, holy cards, holy water to take home, toothache and other maladies, or whatever other desperation people suffered, they knew they could always approach Fr Breslan with the assurance that a blessing would always be given and that Christ stood behind the priest.

Now, what is it about these blessings which gives us such a deep insight into the soul of Fr Lou?

What I would like to do is follow up the words of the composer of *Psalm 131*.

O Lord, my heart is not proud

Nor haughty my eyes.

I have not gone after things too great

Nor marvels beyond me.

The heading for this psalm in the Divine Office is: childlike trust in God.

And it really is this trust in God in all things that marks out Fr Lou as a true priest of Jesus Christ.

And there are two elements of this which I would like to identify.

Firstly, most of us plan great things for our lives and give oceans of energy to achieving what appear to be “marvels beyond us”. We live so much in the future, anticipating only goodness knows what, or we live in the past of accomplished achievements or regrets of failures, so much so, that we hardly live in the present at all! It was in the present where Fr Lou made both his home and his contribution to the lives of others. If he had any goal at all it was to become perfect, not in one fell swoop, but day by day. His was a spirituality of small bites where the assurances of progression are based on trust in God, the more childlike the better.

This was the key to his success, the handle to his ministry: he lived in the present where God dwells, and it was in the present that he met both his Maker and all those whom He has made. Father Lou paid close attention to the “little things” of life and made these his world and the objects of his ministry and priesthood. Those of us who are proud of heart and haughty of lips will prefer to pursue things too great and marvels well beyond us. Maybe we want fame and fortune and power, not for Fr Lou Breslan. He knew how to mind his manners and to pursue that which really mattered and yet so often go unnoticed and unappreciated – the small things of life. In this way, Fr Lou was way beyond us all, for getting down to the heart of the matter is a simple piece of logic: 99.9% of our lives is made up of “little things” and in pursuing the great we miss out on most of life. I believe Fr Breslan’s charisma was for the sanctification of people’s lives in the midst of the overwhelming ordinary.

That great teacher of the spiritual path, Fr Adolf Tanqueray SJ, in treating of good spirits and bad spirits and how they influence us, gives us some direct advice on how a bad spirit can infect the soul: ostentatious acts of virtue, contempt for little things, a desire to be sanctified in the grand manner, false humility, constant complaining and a dissatisfaction that masks a refusal to

suffer anything patiently. Not only did Fr Lou not have any disdain for the little things, he embraced them wholeheartedly so that he could affect people's lives for the better at the level where it really counts – the spiritual life where God dwells in the present. He was indeed God's minister to the little things of life.

Secondly, in being focused so much on the little things of people's lives he had the tremendous advantage to excel in one of the most important elements in spiritual and psychological life. He cultured the ability to pay attention. I mentioned earlier how most of us are so involved in the past or in the future that we miss out on the here and now. The here and now were Fr Lou's domain, and the way in which he involved himself was by way of paying attention. And in paying attention to the present, especially in the little things, he was able to meet, continuously, the One who is always there. Little wonder that Fr Breslan would spend many hours in prayer and punctuate each day with visits to the Blessed Sacrament, before he went out, when he came back, before meetings, before meals. Being able to pay attention to the present has been identified by modern psychology and by the spiritual writers of the past and present as a vital but uncommon skill for true happiness. Indeed they go so far as to say that the ability to practise total attention to the present is to be found only in children and in mystics!

So, here lies before us a man who for 68 years ministered to Christ's brothers and sisters in a way he knew best. He was a channel of the flood of God's graces into the lives of people where that divine life is needed – in the 99.9% which is so often overlooked. His was a ministry of Christ's blessings which overcome our failures and shortcomings in order to sanctify both ourselves and our lives – not just the biggest and the best bits, but all the bits of the kaleidoscope of who and how we are.

Father Breslan, we'd like to ask your favour from your place in heaven. It's not to ask you to pay your attention to the little things of our lives, but rather to ask you to teach us to pay attention to our own little things and the little things of other people's lives. Be an inspiration to us so that in paying attention to the here and now, we may discover what you discovered, and pray as you did pray.

We'll leave you now in the hands of the angels to take you to that place which you already know so well, and where you can gaze in attention on the eternal beatitude who is God.