

Children denied Catholic schooling, lesbian couple speaks out

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 15, 2010



Entrance to Sacred Heart of Jesus elementary school in Boulder, Colorado

Boulder, Colorado

Two Boulder women have been at the center of a firestorm of media attention here for the past ten days since news broke that their daughters would no longer be welcome at the Sacred Heart of Jesus parish school because their mothers are lesbians.

Local media have been covering the story seemingly around the clock. Television crews have come to the school. Articles, letters to the editors, and opinion pieces, including one by Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput in support of the expulsion, have appeared. Protesters have shown up outside the church with banners calling shame on parishioners. Police have been called in to patrol the school grounds for the safety of the children. Division has emerged within the parish though many Catholics ? and others ? here ask themselves how this could possibly have occurred in their progressive, welcoming community.

Referred to as "the mothers" by those who do not know the couple and by those who do and want to protect their identities, the women have avoided all media contacts and interviews ? until now. They also asked that they not be photographed.

I sat down with the women, both professional physicians, in the living room of their home here, walls covered with framed photographs of their five-year-old and three-year-old daughters. As we spoke for more than an hour, a long haired dog playfully rolled on the living room carpet before us.

The couple explained they agreed to speak with NCR because they wanted to clear up misconceptions in the media and specifically wanted Catholics to better understand their situation.

The women, members of the Sacred Heart parish, describe themselves as practicing Catholics eager to raise their children in the faith of their parents and grandparents. They say they attend Mass weekly at the parish with their children and continue to believe Sacred Heart of Jesus school, which includes a pre-school and kindergarten through eighth grade, excels in education and Catholic formation.

The women, meanwhile, said they have been overwhelmed by the media coverage and by the support they have received by friends and family. They said they are not political activists and have no agenda other than providing for the safety of their children. For this reason they asked not to be identified by name.

Following is their story, as they told it together. For the sake of the report I distinguish between them, when necessary, using the names Mary and Martha.

"People are making assumptions about us that are flat wrong, completely wrong, and we felt it was time to clear up some of these misconceptions," Mary said as we began the interview.

From the time they first enrolled at Sacred Heart three years back they never hid the fact that they are a lesbian couple, they said. "We decided for a number of reasons to send our children to Sacred Heart School," Mary said. "We have loved it there. Our children were thriving there. When we first enrolled our daughter in pre-school we told the school administrators our daughter had two moms. We asked if this was going to be a problem. We said that if it was going to be a problem we could go else where. We were very open and they said it would not be a problem."

The women said they never made a "big issue" of their family situation. "We have never flaunted it or pushed any political agenda at the school at all," Mary continued. "The parents know; the teachers know. We've sat with the kindergarten teachers and have talked with them. Never over a three year period we never had any indication that it would be a problem at all. We found it to be a very accepting environment for our child."

All seemed quite natural until a it came time for next year's enrollment a couple weeks back, Martha recalled.

"I went in to turn in our daughter's kindergarten application and was called into the principal's office. That's when, she said, she got "blind sided."

"She sat me down and told me we were no longer accepted here any more. She said it was not going to be a good fit for our child and that she would encourage us to look elsewhere," Martha went on, explaining the principal said she was worried there could be confusion when the teachers teach about the family unit.

"Her main point was she was concerned about our child, about her well-being. She never came out and said we were not welcomed to stay. But she pretty much told us it was time for us to move on."

That evening the women discussed what was said adding they were upset and so they decided they wanted clarification because the principal had stopped short of saying their daughter could not enroll, just that it would not be wise to do so.

Mary said she called the principal and asked for clarification. She recalls asking: "Are you just worried about how this is going to be for my child because of the church's stance on homosexuality?" She said she told the principal that if that was the case the women could handle it. I told her we did not expect any accommodations for our children based on our family situation. She then asked directly: "Are you telling us we are not allowed?"

At that point, Mary said, the principal replied that she needed to call the archdiocese. The next day, with the principal and the pastor of Sacred Heart parish, Fr. William Breslin, on the line, the women were told that their daughters could stay one more year in school and after that they would be out.

What changed?

The women say they don't know. They said they were told that the issue had been thoroughly discussed by the parish administrators. Yet the women said they never heard of any complaints about their children being in the

school from teachers or parents.

"At first we were conflicted about what the right response would be," Mary said. "We knew there was potential for this to become a big deal. But we felt it would be in our children's' best interest to simply focus on finding other educational opportunities for them."

"We did not feel then and we still don't feel now that pushing the church to change its mind would be in our children's best interests. We don't want our children to become targets in a place where they were not welcome. So we decided to meet with Father Bill and send a letter to the archbishop and we would leave it at that."

They women said they were "personally hurt, personally upset," but decided it was time "to move on."

But that was not the end. It turned out to be only the beginning. Following the decision the parish administrators told the school teachers and as best the women can reconstruct one of the teachers contacted a local television news channel. Word of the decision was soon flashed on local television and the story appeared the next morning in the Daily Camera.

"Within hours it was out to the entire community," Martha said. "The parents knew; it was the talk of the parking lot. This started on a Monday and by Thursday when I went to drop off our children I had people I didn't even know coming up to me and hugging me with tears in their eyes. We hadn't told any of them. It was spreading like wildfire. And it didn't come from us."

The women said there have been surprises along the way. One of the biggest was the amount of support they quickly received from parents at Sacred Heart school. "We have been around for years but just didn't think much about it and didn't think that it would be such an issue for so many," Mary said. "It meant a lot coming from this group of people."

Was this somehow about making a point on gay issues?

"People have suggested that we put our children in the school to make a political point or that we are fighting this battle and making our children political footballs. This is not the case," Martha insisted. "You are the first person we have talked to. We haven't spoken to any of the reporters who have wanted to speak with us. We value our privacy."

Both of the moms were born and raised Catholics. Mary went to Catholic schools from pre-school through 12th grade. Martha went to Notre Dame [UNIVERSITY??]. Mary's mother taught in a Catholic school system for 25 years. Martha's aunt was a Catholic school teacher for decades. "We have a lot of history with the Catholic school system. It is what we are familiar with. It is what we are comfortable with. We value what a Catholic education can do for our kids," Martha said.

As for Sacred Heart, the women say it has been good place for their children's education. They say they appreciate the moral foundation the teachers have provided. They say they support the character of Catholic education. They say it is very important to them that their children be provided with religious education. "We want our kids to learn about religion. We feel religion is really important. And they love it. They love God. They love their school. They love their friends. They love their teachers," Mary said.

The women take pride in the fact that their children like to repeat bible stories they learn in school. They say they encourage these stories.

Mary and Martha each gave birth to one of the children. Legally each has joint custody of both children. The women are not legally married. They have lived in Colorado for nearly a decade and Colorado does not allow

gay marriages.

Each of the children was baptized by local priests, one who is in a neighboring parish and another who has been reassigned outside the area. The baptisms followed by months the publication of a 2006 statement issued by the U.S. bishops offering guidelines to ministers and parents of gay and lesbian children. The outlines suggest baptism for children of gays and lesbians, the women say, as long as there is a reasonable assumption that the children will be raised as Catholics.

"They asked if we would raise our children in the Catholic faith and we said we would and we have really tried to live up to that commitment," Martha said. "We take them to church every week. We switched to the Sacred Heart parish when our kids starting going to the school. We signed up and our money goes into the basket every week. Our kids go to Sunday school. We are making the effort."

Part of the disappointment for the women is that they feel the Catholic church is now not fulfilling its part of the promise to provide all the support it can in the raising of the children as Catholics.

Said Mary: "We are trying to live up to the promises we make to raise our kids as Catholics and now the church we made the promise to is sort of undermining our attempts to do so." They said they were shocked when a local priest suggested they raise their children as Episcopalians.

After being told their children could not continue into the elementary school, the women said they spoke with Sacred Heart pastor, Fr. Breslin, and were told they could continue to come to church and that their children could come to CCD classes. They then asked what was the difference between CCD education and school education. "Isn't the doctrine the same?" they asked. They felt Breslin was not able to provide an understandable answer.

They say they are also troubled because behind the decision to forbid their children from going to the elementary school is a presumption about their personal lives and that no one ever asked them about what it means for them to live as a couple.

"No one has every asked us if we are celibates. How do they know we are not upholding official church teachings?" Mary asked. Meanwhile, other parish parents, they say, have been coming to them saying they are not upholding church teachings. Some have noted they are divorced and remarried without a church blessing. Others say they are practicing birth control methods contrary to church teachings.

Said Martha: "The frustrating argument for me is that our priest and archbishop are saying we are openly living in disagreement with the doctrine of the church. They are saying people who are divorced are not as open, but everyone knows they are divorced. They imply that we are flaunting our relationship. That is the last thing we do. We go to church as family. We never show any affection for each other in church. We are very private. But that's how the archdiocese is seeing it."

Bottom line, the women regret this whole incident has happened. They regret it not only for themselves and for their children, but also, they say, for the school. "This is unfortunate because Sacred Heart is a great school. Those teachers are dedicated and they are good. And the families are wonderful. It's just the people above. It's the administration that's the problem. I feel very bad that the school is getting such a black eye from this. It is a wonderful school."

The women also regret their children are going to suffer from the decision. Then they gave a telling example.

Last week they were driving home from school having just picked up their children in the car. Recalled Martha: "In the car, our older daughter was helping our younger daughter with words from the "Our Father." They were

both trying to get the words right. Then they began the "Hail Mary" and we listened we had tears in our eyes. We were really sad about it because they are going to lose it."

The women say they have tried really hard not to let anger take a grip on them. At the same time they wanted, they said, to express their gratitude to the parents of the children in their classes and to the school teachers. So they wrote them a letter and emailed it, expressing their thanks, trying, as they could, to explain the situation as they best understood it. They also asked the teachers not to say anything "that could put themselves at risk for our benefit."

One point that the women wanted me to know and report is that they are not part of any gay movement. They are not activists. "You have never seen us at protests or marching in parades. We never intended to pave the way for gays in the Catholic church. We just wanted to be a normal family."

The morning after meeting with Fr. Breslin the women woke up to see their story on the front page of the Boulder paper. They were shocked and worried. So they immediately called Breslin and had him paged. They said they wanted to let him know that the leak did not come from them. "I actually called to warn him this was coming out. He needed to know," said Mary.

"All through this we have decided that we are not going to let our hearts be filled with anger and disgust and hatred. We decided we are just going to move on, take care of our family and we are going to be fine. The family is going to be fine and maybe bringing this out to the forefront of people's minds is going to have some positive effect. You can't let it drag you down."

Later, the women said they were working on a press statement and wanted to be sure I knew its last sentence so that I could report it. The sentence reads: "We will continue to raise our children with strong Catholic values and hold faith that through our actions, we are doing our part to create a more loving, inclusive world."

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