

[News](#)



by Dan Morris-Young

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

April 25, 2018

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

A pastor's Facebook upbraiding of [Billings Catholic Schools](#) and the associated [Billings Catholic Schools Foundation](#) for including a same-sex couple on a fundraiser planning team sparked an uproar in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Montana, and attracted national media attention.

Fr. Ryan Erlenbush, pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Great Falls, wrote in an April 16 Facebook post that Billings' Catholic school system "lost its way when a prominent homosexual couple is advertised as the chairs for the annual fundraiser," according to the [Billings Gazette](#). The post has since been deleted.

News reports name Travis Heringer and Dan Sutter as the couple. They are two of six members of the 43rd annual [Mayfair Gala Dinner and Auction](#) coordinating team. The May 5 event is projected to raise about \$500,000 and draw an estimated 650 people.

According to the *Billings Gazette*, Erlenbush advocated boycotting the effort, the Billings Catholic school system's largest fundraiser.

About 1,000 students are enrolled in Billings Catholic Schools between St. Francis School and Billings Catholic High School.

"Why would any Catholic (Indeed, any Christian) attend or donate to Mayfair 2018?" Erlenbush reportedly asked in his post. "What does a Catholic school have to do

before people say 'enough' and take their kids (and their money) elsewhere?"

The priest concluded, "I'm an alumnus of the Billings Catholic Schools and I say, 'enough.' "

According to the [Billings Gazette](#), "The post blew up, with people registering opinions either strongly in favor or vehemently opposed to the priest's stance. Erlenbush eventually took it down."

Reaction also included:

- An April 18* [open letter by Great Falls-Billings Bishop Michael Warfel](#) in which he expressed praise and confidence for Billings Catholic Schools and [quoted from the Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) on homosexual acts;
- Harsh criticism of Erlenbush's message in two Billings Gazette opinion pieces — [an April 19 commentary](#) and [an April 22 editorial](#);
- Praise for the "six wonderful chairs" of the gala-auction event from Billings Catholic Schools and foundation officials;
- A [statement by the six co-chairs of the Mayfair event](#) encouraging supporters to "celebrate and share those personal memories and moments of how the schools have enriched their lives."

The Associated Press [reported on the controversy](#) and the dispute has been grist for multiple websites.

Contact information for Heringer or Sutter was not immediately available. Both declined direct comment to the Billings Gazette.

Erlenbush had not responded to NCR requests for comment by press deadline. There is a Facebook page [dedicated to the priest's blogs](#), which links to a website featuring his thoughts and writing, titled "[The New Theological Movement](#)." A website [summarizing Erlenbush's homilies](#) is also available.

The [Corpus Christi Parish website](#) homepage features a Latin Mass form being celebrated with celebrants' backs to the congregation and links to a site where the pastor tutors pronunciation on "the various prayers of the Vatican II Mass in Latin, mostly from the Sanctus to the Angus Dei."

In his letter addressed to parishioners, Warfel "strongly" endorsed "the education and formation that students receive from Billings Catholic Schools" and expressed

"conviction that students receive a solid presentation of the Catholic faith in the areas of doctrine and moral life."

Warfel reminded Catholics that church teaching "is clear regarding homosexuality, distinguishing between the inclination and behavior that is contrary to the moral teaching of the Church."

He also included three successive paragraphs from the Catechism on homosexuality which declare, among other things, "Sacred Scripture ... presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity," church tradition has always considered homosexual acts "intrinsically disordered," and "under no circumstances can they (homosexual acts) be approved."

Warfel [told the Billings Gazette](#) that Erlenbush's post was spurred by comments the pastor had received from the community. "Warfel said he didn't think the priest was out of bounds, but he questioned Erlenbush's methods," the newspaper reported.

"He's a Catholic priest holding up Catholic principles," Warfel said. "The issue is not the principle, the issue is how things were communicated. I would judge there are better ways to handle it."

Advertisement

In the [April 22 Billings Gazette commentary](#), editor Darrell Ehrlick lauded the "fine work" of Billings' Catholic school system and derided Erlenbush.

Ehrlick said the priest "has a right — and some may argue a responsibility — to articulate a theological message."

However, he continued, "Pope Francis' words seem to be out of sync with Erlenbush's statement. There's a difference between articulating theology and practicing a religion. Erlenbush has confused doctrine and action."

When students "see an adult leader of their religious community shun other adults for their sexuality, it sends a powerful and wrong message to them," Ehrlick wrote. "They see parents and community leaders who are torn down and not uplifted; whose help is belittled because of something as unrelated as their sexuality."

In an interview at the Billings Catholic School Foundation offices, Janyce Haider, the foundation's president and executive director and Shaun Harrington, Billings Catholic Schools president, "both said they stand by all six of their co-chairs," according to the Billings Gazette.

"We have six wonderful chairs," Haider said. "They're doing a great job, and we're going to get through this Mayfair, and it's probably going to be [the best Mayfair we've ever had](#). They're loving, kind, caring people. They're living a good life, and they're giving back."

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent. His email is dmyoung@ncronline.org.]

**This story was updated to correct the date of Bishop Warfel's letter.*