

# CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

## THE GOOD ENOUGH SYNOD

Good, better, best; never let it rest, till the good is better and the better is best.

That's a slogan I heard somewhere on the Catholic road to now. I even felt it implemented in schools and seminaries I attended. The constant theme of our studies, spiritual direction, conduct, and emotional life reflected this insistent drive to become the best. The good was not good enough; the better was mediocre, and the best was unachievable. "You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) The misapplication of this one verse filled libraries with rule books, created myriads of disastrous spiritualities, destroyed the self-esteem of countless adherents, and shattered the possibility of love for anyone who tried to live this command.

Pretty dire, huh? But that is the logical consequence of that cute little slogan. If it isn't the impossible best, then it is mortally flawed.

It is valuable to recall, and then reject, this slogan as we try to figure out and evaluate the recent Synod on the Family. Just for the record and for what it's worth, I believe the synod was a modest, and hopeful, success.

But the failures are obvious. Here are two of them:

1. By one vote, they found a narrow path for civilly divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion. Wow! What a breakthrough! The internal forum (an appropriate, private conversation with a priest) opens the door to Communion. There are priests who have been doing that for decades. On the other hand, given the celibate males who came to that conclusion, it is a noteworthy accomplishment.

The bigger problems are the many divorced and remarried Catholics who will not have anything to do with the Catholic Church anymore since they have been rejected for trying to find love in their lives. They didn't leave us; we left them. We are called to evangelize but it's difficult to evangelize while we're kicking these people out.

In terms of accepting people to our sacred meal, we don't come close to the standard my mom intuitively lived by: anyone who showed up, invited or uninvited, around lunch or dinner time, got fed. That includes my sometimes contentious, bachelor step-uncle who regularly "stopped by" around dinner time. No questions, just set another

plate at the table. Why can't the Church be more like my mom? No worthiness standards; Jesus doesn't need us to protect him from a presumed sinner.

So, to me, the "great accomplishment" of the synod for finding a skinny trail for some repentant remarried Catholics to join the Communion line at your parish church is a welcomed but awkward step in the right direction.

2. The glaring absence of women and families as voting members of the synod reflects the absurd reality of our current hierarchical make-up. How different those earnest discussions would have been if women and families had participated as full and equal partners! This flaw, along with the liturgical visuals during the Pope's visit to the USA, makes the elimination of women so obvious that everyone notices it. It is a powerful unpaid commercial to right this clear wrong. So, keep the grassroots pressure to ordain married men and women going. Francis will need your voice to nudge the hierarchy he inherited into a more equitable and fruitful group of decision-makers.

The final report cautiously mentioned that married couples, through "consensual dialogue", need to arrive at decisions regarding responsible parenthood. That's better than an outright condemnation of "artificial contraception" but still a long way from the reality of Catholic married life. The synod message for the LGBT community is effectively non-existent but it does encourage all of us to "learn the art of accompaniment". Baby steps. There's still a long way to go on many fronts.

Despite these disappointing shortfalls, the synod was a necessary stage in a process to transform this huge, multinational institution into a loving, mercy-filled community of diverse people, cultures, and nations. Perhaps Francis' suggestion to regionalize the governance of the Church with more decision-making tailored to the lived situation of various localities is another next step. The encouraging thing is that, with Francis as Bishop of Rome, there will be a next step.

Was this the best possible Synod on the Family? Of course not. But, it was good enough and, like many things in life, the good is not the enemy of the best.