

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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FEELINGS

Chatting about the Church is not my full-time job, even though my family and friends tell me I talk a lot about the Church. My official full-time job is retirement which I claim to have honestly earned.

My semi-official work during retirement (which means working without pay) is with the *Karla Smith Foundation*, the organization Fran and I founded, along with our son Kevin, after our daughter, Karla, Kevin's twin, died by suicide in 2003 following 7 years of dealing with bipolar disorder. The mission of KSF is "to provide hope for a balanced life for the family and friends of anyone with a mental illness or who lost a loved one to suicide." It is rewarding work which often feels like full-time - but who knows with the amorphous daily scheduling that accompanies retirement? If you are interested, check us out at www.KarlaSmithFoundation.org.

In any case, it is inevitable that some of the issues we deal with through KSF overflow into my Church chatting. A case in point: feelings.

We encourage people in our support groups to name and claim their feelings which is not as easy as it sounds. The idea is that if we can identify our emotions accurately and own them, then we have a better chance of coping successfully with our negative feelings and nourishing our positive emotions. It's a crucial process when dealing with the mental illness or suicide of a loved one.

It is also a valuable process as we try to figure out our honest stance with the Church. We can analyze every aspect of faith and church life intellectually and not say anything about our feelings.

So, here are some feelings about the Church that may or may not be yours. The purpose of this list is to provide some possible words to the emotions that some people seem to have about the Church. What we do with these feelings is the next step. First, we must identify them as clearly as possible.

- **Betrayed.** This feeling emerges from the ashes of shattered expectations, in many cases stemming from a view of the Second Vatican Council which promised to provide pervasive collegiality, creative subsidiarity, hospitable dialogue with the modern world while maintaining basic biblical values, liturgy

that is adaptable to various cultures and personalities, and a church easily perceived as a community more than an institution. The feeling of betrayal accompanies the stark reality that none of these expectations have been realized within the official, institutional church. But there are more sources for feeling betrayed: the sex abuse/cover-up scandal, personal affronts, irrelevancy, institutional arrogance, etc.

- Sad. Some of the basis for feeling betrayed may lead others to feel sad. There's less anger in sadness but more depression. As a result, the two different emotions of betrayal and sadness will likely lead to different sets of actions. But the anger fuels both.
- Embarrassed. The pride that was once a hallmark of Catholics is replaced by a humiliating gloom.
- Division. The comforting feeling of church as a community is severed from the heavy handed authoritarianism of the church as institution. The resulting feeling is a deep-seated internal spiritual division. Some people formalize this emotion and leave the church community. Those who don't leave struggle with this discord.

There are also positive feelings to be identified and owned, some of which may be:

- Acceptance. This emotion coincides with belonging to a community. Being a part of a respected group of people creates a feeling of acceptance. Some people may also feel that they are accepted by God through this connection to community.
- Comfort. Some people feel comforted through their experience in the church. This feeling of comfort comes from many sources: Eucharist, community, shared beliefs, long term friendships, religious structure, etc.
- Security. Some people feel more secure in their spiritual life by belonging to the Catholic Church. The belief system, the desired code of conduct and the predictable rituals supply spiritual protection against the whims and impact of a non-spiritual society.

There are many more positive and negative emotions that accompany Catholics as we journey through life. Our challenge here is to identify those feelings as clearly as possible. Label them and own them. No one and nothing can make you feel anything. You own your feelings. Don't lay them on your parents, spouse, children, priests, bishops, popes, or Spiderman. We can argue intellectually about a zillion things but each of us is accountable for how we feel.

Once you accurately know your feelings, then comes the fun part: what are you going to do with them?