

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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THE BOOK

I hope you noticed but in case you hadn't, it's been a long time since I wrote a Church Chat column. Over six months, in fact. It's time to get chatting again.

The reason I interrupted the columns is that I reorganized the previous chats and turned them into a book. The title is *Church Chat: Snapshots of a Changing Catholic Church*, and it is now available as a hardback, soft cover or an e-book from iUniverse, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or through the *Church Chat* website (www.churchchat.net). You can also get them from me. (tom.smith@karlasmithfoundation.org).

It was an enlightening project. I arranged the columns around 7 themes: Yes, Your Eminence; Can You Believe It?; You Gotta' Be Kidding; Culture vs. Catholic; Spiritual Tidbits; Holydays or Holidays; The Francis Factor and other Signs of Hope.

What I found in putting them together like this is that each chapter borrows from the neighboring chapters and has a different nuance than it had as a stand-alone. So, even if you read all the columns over the past five years, my guess is that they will take on some added dimensions when you read them again in the context of a common theme. But I doubt that everyone has read all 100 columns anyway.

If you read the book, here are some features to keep in mind:

- Be sure to read the Introduction because it explains the purpose, format, and some things to look for as you proceed.
- One major thread throughout the book is the contrast between John Paul II and Benedict XVI on one hand, and Francis I on the other. This surprising change in papal leadership creates an historic and exciting time in church history, and these chapters catalogue that experience and demonstrate a dramatic turning point in Catholicism. And we get to live it!
- This is a great time for a book like this. We are still close enough in time to remember some details about how it was with John Paul II and Benedict XVI. And now Francis makes different news every day. Transition times stir things up and rearrange priorities, and this book gives us a chance to stand back a little, catch our breath, and see where we've been while we try to process what's happening each day.

- I updated some of the chapters with a short section at the end which I call “Francis Follow-Up”. These current comments demonstrate the contrast between the topic of the chapter with the new Francis spirit. I also included some brief but appropriate quotes from Francis’ book *The Joy of the Gospel*.
- We don’t know the permanent impact of a Francis-lead church. Will everything that I want and you want become church policy? Probably not, but it certainly is much more encouraging than it was a few years ago. So, let’s enjoy the ride and see where we end up!
- The final section of the book is an expansion of the character I created in my last few columns: the fictional Bishop Schneider. The poor guy is having a very difficult time with Francis because it appears that, among other things, Francis has pulled the bishop’s Persian rug out from under him. You can finish reading the book by peeking into Schneider’s journal and feeling the terrible dilemma he faces.
- There is a thorough Index at the back of the book so you can find any theme, person, or topic you might want to re-read.
- I am proud to have the endorsements of Mike Leach and Dan and Sheila Daley for the book. Mike is a noted author (*Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life Changing Question*, among others) and a columnist for NCR (*Soul Seeing*). Dan and Sheila are co-founders of *Call to Action*. I appreciate their encouraging comments.

I am deeply grateful to Jon Garinn for creating a website and a Facebook page around this book. Check it out: www.churchchat.net. There are multiple features on the site and all future Church Chat columns will be posted there as well as the regular email distribution. The site also provides a place for all of us to chat, some references to my other books, and a place to recommend favorite authors and their books. Jon is a master and I can’t thank him enough for making this social outreach possible.

In short, two things: buy the book and, if you like it, recommend it to others. To be frank, there is no budget to promote the book. So, word of mouth and the website/Facebook social media efforts are the best ways to spread the message.

Actually, that approach fits best with what this is all about anyway: chatting.