

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

Number 106, February 9, 2015

THE BIG UMBRELLA

I have one of those cool umbrellas that fold up from a number of directions and fit nicely into my coat pocket. It's very handy if rain sneaks up on me when I am going from my car to a building. It keeps my head dry unless, of course, the wind is blowing and then I get soaked from the neck down and wet on the side away from the wind.

That convenient little umbrella helps but doesn't really protect me as well as I want.

I also have one of those big ole umbrellas that creates an extra foot of protection in all directions and lets me walk dryly through Noah's 10th day of flood-rain. It is an ugly umbrella and certainly not very convenient to carry around but it is big enough to house a couple of us.

I think of the church as a big umbrella available to many while other people believe the church is like the little, convenient but minimally effective, fold up, pocket sized umbrella.

And here's the main point: we can choose which church umbrella we carry.

Once we are baptized and adult, we can choose to be whatever kind of Catholic we want to be. The church doesn't really kick people out, even though it sometimes is very unwelcoming. As a result, some people self-select out of the church. In the end, the only thing that, in practice, keeps people away from the church is their own uninformed or informed decision to leave.

Here are a few examples:

1. Since 2014 and 2015 are the years for synods on the family, and divorce/remarriage is a hot item, let's chat about that issue a little. The official teaching says that divorced Catholics without an annulment cannot remarry and still receive the Eucharist. That law is based on some flimsy sacramental theology regarding Catholic marriage reflecting the union of Christ with the Church. Doesn't it seem oppressive that every single valid Catholic marriage must measure up to the highest possible standard imaginable: Christ's love-union with the People of God? Catholic couples are condemned and denied the Eucharist because they don't love as much and as well as God does? Why does a valid, sacramental marriage carry such a burden? How does

the forgiving, compassionate Jesus wind up being the bad guy, through this church law, who rejects people who want to receive Him in communion? That's clearly not the Jesus of the gospel.

The big umbrella church takes a different stance. As a divorced, remarried person without an annulment, you can choose to participate fully in the Eucharist, receive communion, grow in your faith, and continue your journey toward love. Do not internalize the church's current law about divorce and remarriage, and be at peace. If you want to jump through the annulment hoops, do so. If you don't, continue as a practicing Catholic. The church can't kick you out. If someone tries that, ignore him/her and do what you choose. You are not a bad person and Jesus continues to love you. Don't let them separate you from your Catholic community. We want you and need you, and so does Jesus.

2. If you feel that the church condemns you because you are "living in sin" – cohabitating, stealing from your employer, selling drugs to feed your own addiction, in a gay/lesbian relationship, etc., you can keep coming to church and receive the Eucharist and participate in the ministries of the community as much as you want. Jesus' invitation to follow Him trumps the worthiness requirements the church has created over the centuries. If you wish, the sacrament of reconciliation can make the healing ministry of Jesus very real. If you can't do that right now, keep coming with an open heart and participate fully.

Again, the church can't keep you out if you decide you want to remain an active part of the community. Ultimately, it is your decision if you want to be an active Catholic.

3. Some people have opted out of the Catholic Church because of some of the teachings, structure, run-ins with popes, bishops or priests, or something that happened years ago. This decision also is up to the individual. But remember this: some people who object to those same teachings, structure and who have had similar run-ins choose to remain in the church because other parts of the church and other positive experiences are spiritually enriching and these people don't want to lose those other experiences.

With a big umbrella view of the church, the choice is ours about whether we remain Catholic or not. Go ahead, open that umbrella and stay with us.

(The book, *Church Chat: Snapshots of a Changing Catholic Church*, is available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, iUniverse or from me. Check the website: www.churchchat.net and the corresponding Facebook page for more information and to chat back.)