



The Umbrella

While Minnesota has four distinct seasons with summer, fall, winter and spring, if you ask Venezuelans how many seasons there are, they'll tell you there are two: the rainy season and the dry season. The rains normally begin in May. By the time June arrives, we can figure on fairly intense rainstorms at least once a day, trailing off in September. So, when I packed my suitcase to return to Venezuela a year ago last July, I made sure to include an umbrella. It would obviously be a necessity if I were going to be out and about on those rainy days and, never knowing when those rains might come, that umbrella was my constant companion. Should the heavens open up and rain down while I was out on a home visit, no problem. Rather than sit it out for an hour or more, I just pop my umbrella out, wish them a blessed day, and go on my way.

As beneficial as it was during the rainy season, the umbrella became even more important during the sun-drenched dry season. Being of European descent, I was not blessed with the beautiful darker skin tones that favor the average Venezuelan. My more sensitive skin needs protection against the powerful rays of the sun radiating down with such intensity on this land...more, it turns out, than what sunscreen and a good hat can afford. In addition to getting around the parish, I like to take a good long hike for several miles at least once a week. While out on such a hike one day, I couldn't get my umbrella to open. It was one of those telescopic ones, and the mechanism was stuck. By the time I got home, I was worn out and sunburned.



But there was one thing...even knowing how beneficial an umbrella would be and having one with me in my shoulder bag, I was reluctant to take it out and use it. You see, while it's pretty common to see women out and about under the shade of their umbrellas, men here are generally never seen using them. The only ones I had seen doing so were Jehovah's Witnesses in ranks 20 or 30 strong in our barrios on Saturday mornings, each with a large colorful umbrella...a stream of color flowing down the street, separating off into rivulets two by two for home visits. I didn't want to be identified as a Jehovah's Witness, although it became a standing joke with some women parishioners whenever we were on the street together with our umbrellas. I was more concerned about it not seeming "manly", but not even the roughest looking groups of guys I passed on the street or saw hanging around their motorcycles paid me and my umbrella any notice.

I came to realize that most guys don't use umbrellas for two reasons. On days when the sun is beating down with greater intensity than usual, I notice guys going by holding a towel or a book or whatever else they can find over their head, glancing at my umbrella with a bit of envy. Most guys here simply do not have umbrellas. That's the first reason, but when I asked some Venezuelan guys, they simply said most guys just feel weird using umbrellas. Besides, women carry a handbag where they can put it, but an umbrella won't fit in a guy's pockets. Go figure.

No matter how lost we were driving around the country on family vacations, my dad would never stop and ask for directions. Men were supposed to be able to figure that out, and he only got more upset when mom would suggest we stop and ask at the next gas station. He never let my mom drive while he was in the car...that was a man's job. These are just a few things on the list of what many guys...fortunately not all... think of as manly or unmanly. On the "unmanly" list for too many guys here, unfortunately, is going to church. Sometimes they don't even have to "go" since the Mass comes right to them. At many a home Mass I have celebrated over the past several months, it has been most common that women and children attend while the husband and elder sons escape to another part of the house. I give great credit to those men who do attend Mass and take the faith seriously, leading their families in prayer at home. Such are the men whose example young guys so badly need as they come to understand what being "manly" truly means. Raise your umbrellas high in salute!

Points to ponder

What things do you consider "manly" or "womanly"? Do such perceptions help or hinder people?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.