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Under the moon of Vatican II

Nicole Sotelo | Oct. 11, 2012 Young Voices

In first grade, my teacher retired at the end of the year. On the last day of school, after the other children had left the campus, Mrs. Heath invited me back to the classroom. She had something to give me.

She took the 2-foot-high portrait of Jesus that had hung on the wall during the school year and placed it in my tiny arms. I couldn't have been happier.

Jesus' face was painted in a golden hue and surrounded by a gilt wood frame. He earned the spot on the wall above my bed, and I gazed up at Jesus every night until one day -- I can't recall why -- Jesus was moved to the dining room.

That night, I looked up from my bed at the green-and-white floral wallpaper to the space on the wall where Jesus had been. Instead, I beheld a golden ray of light.

As a child, I always thought miracles were right around the corner. At night, if I felt Mary might appear, I would ask her not to come so I wouldn't be frightened. But this time was different. I had no warning. God was making an appearance.

At an acceleration known only to luxury vehicles or pajama-clad children, I sped out of my room to the side of my parents' bed. Pulling a skeptical mother with me, I ventured cautiously and excitedly back to my room.

My mother's doubt turned to a gasp as she beheld what I had: the light!

But only a second later, she recognized the light as a mix of moonlight and street light emanating through the bedroom curtains. I was half relieved and half disappointed.

Looking back, I know this was one of those clear moments when I was jolted into an adult spirituality, understanding that Christ is still with me, no matter the form.

Later that night, I recall seeing the moonlight in a new way as it moved through the trees and into my room. Miracle or not, what remained was a sense of God's presence.

Perhaps that is what small "miracle" moments do: capture our attention, bring us closer to one another as we share the experience, draw us closer to God.

Today, Oct. 11, Catholics celebrate another moonlight moment. It is the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II and the magical moment that has become known as John XXIII's "Moonlight Speech."

Fifty years ago tonight, the pope made a surprise appearance from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square as the moon hovered over the Vatican. He addressed the thousands who had come to welcome the council's beginning earlier that day.

He cried out, "I hear your voices!" and noted that people from across the globe were gathered for the council. He remarked that it seemed "even the moon hastens close tonight" to see what might come of the gathering.

While I was not yet born at the time of the council, I still celebrate Vatican II's 50th anniversary. I think of the miracle it must have seemed to those who gathered that night or heard of the historic moment taking place. I also recognize that the council's impact and growth over the last 50 years was not what anyone expected, whether one felt the council went too far or didn't go far enough.

Either way, there is no doubt that the council documents shed a new light on Catholicism. It invited us to see the church -- ourselves and our relationship to God and one another -- in a renewed way. It called us to see ourselves as full, participatory Christians. The laity was no longer relegated to a pew, but was called to engage fully in the life of the church.

As a result of the council, as a young adult today I am able to participate in the faith in a way not seen since the first centuries of the church. I see the face of the pastor during the prayers of the Mass. I hear the service in a language I am able to understand. I have been a lector and eucharistic minister sharing God's word and body. I have not only been encouraged to read the Bible, but to study scripture and church history. In word and practice, the council told me, not only as a layperson but as a woman, that I matter to the church, that I matter to God.

As Catholics, we may still dialogue and debate about how the council's documents will continue to inform the church. But one thing is certain: Catholics across the globe have had the opportunity to encounter our faith in renewed ways since Vatican II, and, in doing so, more of us have participated in the life of the church, have been drawn closer to God.

To this day, the child I was and the adult I am still thank God for moonlit nights that help me see in new ways. I am grateful for the small miracle that was, and is, Vatican II.

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