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50 years after Vatican II, faith and culture operate at different speeds

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 17, 2012 A small c catholic

I was nearing the end of my high school days when the Second Vatican Council [1] got under way 50 years ago and was in the middle of college when it ended.

But even as a Presbyterian [2] I sensed then some of the excitement and energy that radiated from Rome in those roller-coaster days of awakening and renewal -- not just in the church but in many sectors of life.

The pastor of my small-town church [3] had warned us a few years earlier that if John F. Kennedy were elected president, the pope would run the U.S. -- a fear-mongering charge of such absurd proportions that even some of us teenagers knew enough to ignore it, if not challenge it.

But with Kennedy in the White House -- a man we now understand to have been politically flawed and operating with the sexual morals of a vacuum cleaner -- there was a sense of hope and possibility in the country and the world. This buoyant atmosphere prepared Catholics and non-Catholics alike to hope that the Catholic church could find the strength and courage to adapt to modernity in creative ways.

There was, after all, much work of liberation still to be accomplished for people in various states of racial, religious, economic and gender subjugation. And the world needed the church to be part of the answer by proclaiming and demonstrating the reign of God through Christ.

That the Catholic church was led then by Pope John XXIII was a fortuitous gift. A good way to understand what this remarkable man brought to the church is by reading Greg Tobin's excellent new book, *The Good Pope [4]*.

But here we are 50 years later, and though much liberation has occurred -- some of it due to pressure from the church universal -- we seem to be in a time of retrenchment of hope. No doubt part of this, at least as seen through American eyes, has to do with how long it is taking us to recover from a profound economic recession fueled in part by wars we didn't pay to wage and a gluttonous financial system we allowed to run amok without enough regulatory oversight.

That, however, does not explain all of our feelings of frustration and angst. But maybe this does: We are operating at two madly different speeds, and the tension is almost unbearable.

On the one hand, we can send email, texts and tweets around the globe in nanoseconds, starting revolutions, changing minds, alerting others to developments in real time.

On the other hand, our faith communities often move at the speed of moldboard plows pulled by recalcitrant oxen through lumpy soil.

In some ways, of course, this slowness is a good, healthy thing. We don't want our churches to be whipped about by the winds of every small change. We value our traditions, want continuity with our past and wish to proclaim truths today that were truths 2,000 years ago.

But when the world is moving and changing at astonishing speeds, the inability of our churches to adapt often means they are being bypassed by the very people who should be the foundation for their future.

Those of us who remember the effervescent days of Vatican II and the churning engines of change of the 1960s understand that some of what resulted was a mistake. Why, after all, would we want to encourage our kids today to drop acid or to ask every priest in every church to play bad guitar?

But there was, in the midst of all that, a thrilling openness to the restless, wildly mobile spirit of God. That same living spirit today is seeking to draw us out of our religious cocoons and into those places in the world where God already is at work, bringing change and hope to those who need it most. I hope we are smart enough to find those places and join the party.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [5] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [6]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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