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Kennedy assassination a pivotal event in the lives of a generation

Pat Perriello | Nov. 20, 2013 NCR Today

I was walking out of the chapel following a brief visit to the Blessed Sacrament after lunch. I have no recollection of who I was with, as we were supposed to fall in with the first person to walk by in order to avoid particular friendships.

We walked past the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and noticed that a student was standing at the top of the wooden staircase overlooking the courtyard. He was saying something to the gathering group of young men below. As we drew closer we heard him say, "The president has been shot."

The 200 or so seminarians shuffled silently to the one black-and-white TV that was available in the recreation room. Our eyes were glued to the TV screen as the reports continued to come in that the president was dead.

The words of Walter Cronkite droned on each succeeding day in wall-to-wall coverage that predated the cable news networks' 24/7 coverage. The entire seminary was in shock and gloom over the news of the president's assassination. Normal activity simply stopped for several days.

He had been the pride of Catholic nuns, priests and laity throughout the land. Irish Catholics in particular were ecstatic over the elevation of John F. Kennedy to the White House. A number of my seminary professors had varying degrees of contact and involvement with the New Frontier administration and were devastated by the news. I think it's impossible to overstate the hopes and dreams Catholics invested in the young and charming Catholic president. In some ways, it may parallel the feelings African-Americans must have experienced with the election of the first black president.

In my own case, the experience was more schizophrenic. Philosophically a Barry Goldwater Republican, I was somewhat bemused by my confreres shuffling dazedly along the halls in silent thought over the nation's gigantic loss. I was also deeply affected but was determined not to show that President Kennedy had been important to me, as well. While intellectually adhering to my line that Nixon would have been a better choice in 1960, I had been following with interest and excitement every move the new president was making. Underneath it all, I was a believer in "Camelot" and was moved by all of the same images (such as young John-John saluting the casket) that my classmates were responding to on TV.

The Kennedy assassination in 1963 was the pivotal event in the lives of our generation. My son has told me more than once that the assassination was for our generation what 9/11 has been for his generation. We experienced a loss of innocence in even coming to terms with the notion that such an event was possible. Our dreams were shattered, and with the assassination being followed by the loss of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, it was difficult to find meaning in the world in which we lived. The escalation of the Vietnam War added to the malaise of the 1960s.

It has been 50 years since that terrible day in 1963. What meaning does it continue to have for us today? Our political conflicts of the day are still somehow impacted by this shattering event in ways we can't even begin to formulate. One thing is for sure: Camelot has come and gone. None of us who lived through that experience will

ever be the same again. Our country will never be the same again.

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