

CrossCurrents *A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*



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Renewal Without Revolution?

When radical feminist theologian Mary Daly died recently, the Boston Globe described her times this way:

When she joined the faculty at Boston College in 1966, the liberalizing Vatican II conference had recently concluded...As later developments showed, not every moment of upheaval becomes a revolution. Contrary to the hopes of Daly and others, it wasn't foreordained that tectonic movements in American society would also transform Catholic doctrine...Changes in the church itself were, in the end, less forthcoming.

Many Catholics today might say the Globe has understated the reality. Some would say the euphoria of post-Vatican II 1960s Catholicism has deteriorated into the despair of post-scandal 21st century Catholicism. They might not be right -- but they can make a strong case.

One recent Sunday morning my wife and I joined five other couples and a Jesuit priest for a breakfast reunion. We had not met as a group for nearly twenty years. Back then our kids called it "The Catholic Group": a dozen parents committed to the home schooling of their kids' religious education. We met monthly, rotating host houses, for pot luck, fellowship and an intergenerational formation session. We met for more than two years, until careers and schools and family changes dispersed us.

The reunion group was parents only—all our kids are grown and many are living elsewhere. The fellowship among us quickly returned, and the pleasure of sharing each other's company and views felt as strong and supportive as ever. There was an air of gratitude for the chance to renew our bonds, and an obvious desire to meet again. But some of our sharing touched on the very thing the Globe had described.

All these people lived through the euphoria fueled by Vatican II, either as impressionable adolescents or as impressionable young adults. In a period when rebellion against 1950s conformity was spreading, Vatican II overhauled the public image of the Catholic Church. Suddenly Catholicism appeared poised for change, ready to tap into its vast ancient stores of wisdom and creativity to renew its spiritual power in modern dress. Quite unexpectedly, Catholicism seemed once again a revolutionary force!

This surprising shift captivated a generation of Catholic youth and young adults, some of whom hitched the wagon of their adult lives to the shooting star of Catholic renewal. They entered careers and marriages and family lives with Catholic renewal as their guiding force, full of hope that Vatican II's genius would transform their professions, their parishes, and their families for generations to come.

Our little reuniting group represented a microcosm of that generation, and now as we gathered our conversation inevitably slid into taking stock. Our report was not a happy one. We have learned, as the Globe said, that not every renewal becomes a revolution.

We remain frustrated by the mediocrity of the average parish, and many of us remain liturgical nomads. We have been appalled by our hierarchy's performance, which not only recycled child-raping priests but also failed to minister to their victims or prevent future victims. We know this gave many Catholics -- especially the next generation -- a silver-plated premise for writing off the Catholic Church as a trustworthy institution. This in turn made our generation's trust look foolish, even laughable.

And above all we are saddened -- though not surprised -- to learn that, except for one family, our grown children are currently not practicing Catholics. It is not even clear they plan to baptize their children.

In this regard, our group is typical of millions of American Catholics, who grew up strongly attached to the Church, and stuck by it through thick and thin, but find no such attachment among their children. Like many young Americans, those grown children are prepared to pursue their life's spiritual journey without the aid of any religious institution. Any

church seeking their allegiance will first have to prove itself to them.

We Baby Boom parents demanded proof as well, and we found it in Vatican II. For us, the Council proved the Church capable of breaking with its recent past (based on a "quarantine" strategy, ghetto-fying Catholic life to protect it from the infections of modern life), capable of throwing open its windows and admitting the freshening gusts of renewal, of engaging the world outside.

For us, this gave the Catholic Church a public presence, even an influence, it had never had in "Protestant" America. Instead of a ghettoized curiosity, Catholicism became a public force for good. Vatican II made Catholicism a player in the cultural struggles of the 1960s at the very time most institutions were being dismissed as arrogant, unresponsive, and irrelevant.

The key point here is not the objective reality of Vatican II, but rather our personal (and collective) *experience* of it. Sure, the Council changed the Church -- but more importantly, it also changed *us*! Once the dust settled, we were no longer the same people. We were still Catholics, to be sure -- but that no longer meant docile people going through the motions and rituals of Catholic life out of obligation or the comfort of conforming to generations-old family ways. Being Catholic now meant, rather, accepting stewardship of a vast ancient legacy offering priceless wisdom to a world beset by abuses of power.

Sadly, this change in us may be the source of the generation gap between us and our children. Perhaps our problem is not that Vatican II has failed, or that its changes have not lasted, or that a reactionary and fearful hierarchy is bent on restoring the pre-conciliar status quo.

For the most part, in fact, the reforms of Vatican II have lasted. They are still with us, and so our kids grew up in a Church that we know has changed. But it did not change *them*, because they have never experienced these changes *as change*.

We remember pre-conciliar Catholicism, so for us there is a "before" and an "after" -- and we experienced living through the transition from one to the other. That shifting experience

changed *us* as well as the institution, but our kids never lived through that shift.

Whereas we had Vatican II's constant shifting as our coming-of-age church, our children had John-Paul II's charismatic globe-trotting. Now, J-P II's papacy was unthinkable without Vatican II's changes, but he neither sought nor brought the kind of radical overhaul accomplished by John XXIII and Paul VI before him. Our children experienced renewal precisely as the *status quo* of Catholicism.

In short, the very thing that was the transformative experience of our lives became something our kids just took for granted. The Catholicism they knew in the 1980s and 1990s was nearly as stable as 1950s Catholicism. In that sense, their experience of Church was more like our own parents' (their grandparents') experience.

Who can blame them for not seeing the Church as we did—as a place of change, and hope, and even revolutionary promise?

As our group shared regrets about this generation gap, it occurred to me there might be some hope in comparing our situation to the experience of many immigrant families.

People who arrive here often cling fiercely to their own ways. Their children, having no memory of the world their parents knew before their great shift, do not share that transforming experience or the strong attachment to a distinctive identity. Instead, they prefer to blend into the prevailing culture of American life, assimilating without much concern for their parents' legacy. But the 3rd generation, the grandchildren, often find their parents' assimilation shallow and rootless. They often seek to retrieve a more distinct identity, and re-root themselves, not by returning to the old country, but by re-connecting with the transformative experience of their immigrating grandparents.

Maybe Vatican II Catholics, like immigrants, can hope for their grandchildren to embrace their Catholic roots? Maybe Catholic renewal skips a generation?

We certainly need hope of some kind, for even if we know that Vatican II euphoria was a passing, one-time thing, we also know its success depends on a lasting renewal, which

remains the work of more than a single generation. If "revolution" means the success of a new idea, we parents -- ourselves the children of Vatican II—still need some reinforcements to help finish the revolution.

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