Take a Deep Breath

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Anniversaries come in all shapes, colors and flavors. A birthday or wedding anniversary, especially of the round-number variety, marks a significant milestone, affording an opportunity to appreciate the sheer longevity of a person or the staying power of a relationship. We all need to celebrate our resilience amid life’s challenges and transitions.

Anniversaries of particular historical events also evoke a wide range of emotions. The recent centenary of the sinking of the Titanic prompted a peculiar blend of emotions, most of them gloomy. Washingtonians just celebrated the happier centennial of their city’s stunning cherry trees, a 1912 gift from Japan. We in Boston just marked 100 years since the opening of Fenway Park; even Red Sox haters have to admire the continuing appeal of that “lyric little bandbox of a ballpark,” as John Updike described it. The university where I teach, Boston College, is gearing up to celebrate its sesquicentennial anniversary, a great opportunity to review its contribution to church and society and to reaffirm its mission.

Most Catholics could not imagine a church without Vatican II.

Few anniversaries can rival the upcoming 50th anniversary of the opening on Oct. 11, 1962, of the Second Vatican Council for sheer influence, theological heft and even drama. Unless you are planning a six-month hibernation, you will be hearing a great deal about this momentous event very soon [see America’s occasional series, 2/13 and 4/30], and I wholeheartedly encourage all Catholics to take full advantage of the many offerings that will come their way and to familiarize themselves with the work and legacy of Vatican II.

If I may plug the outstanding work of two friends, you cannot go wrong with investing time in anything produced by John W. O’Malley, S.J. (full disclosure: He is my former colleague and housemate) and Richard Gaillardetz (my colleague these days at B.C.). In books, articles, public lectures and even audio mini-courses, these two scholars of church history and ecclesiology present accessible and insightful analyses of what the council fathers wrought half a century ago. Many parishes, dioceses and colleges are planning excellent lecture series and events to celebrate the opening of Vatican II, though not every one of them can feature O’Malley and Gaillardetz!
Although the council had roots in longstanding theological trends and ecclesial developments, the actual work of Vatican II unfolded between the time Pope John XXIII announced the Council on Jan. 25, 1959, and the conclusion of its fourth and final period on Dec. 8, 1965. The anniversary may occasion a new wave of gripping anecdotal accounts of the council proceedings. Besides the ample politicking that went on behind the scenes, the impressive main stage was the central nave of St. Peter’s Basilica, which despite its immense proportions could barely hold the council’s nearly 2,500 attendees, mostly bishops.

We all know the buzzwords associated with the council and its 16 major documents: aggiornamento, ressourcement, people of God, full participation of the laity, the communio of all the baptized, development, collegiality, dialogue. Even if most adult Catholics could not offer a complete account of the theological content and significance of Vatican II, they probably could not imagine a church without the legacy it bestowed. The way we today take for granted its momentous contributions—from liturgical reforms to new commitments to both accept and transform the modern world—is proof of its lasting mark on our church.

I was born too late to have a personal recollection of Vatican II, but a wonderful coincidence provides an inspiring note on which to close. As I was drafting this column, the phone rang, and I entered into a delightful conversation with a 90-year-old nun who was seeking a bit of social justice programming advice. When she asked about my next column, I invited her reflections on Vatican II. She waxed poetic about how Good Pope John opened the stained glass windows of the church to let in some fresh air and expressed her fear that her final years might witness a shutting of those windows.

I am grateful for the good sister’s recollection. Since we need every deep breath of fresh air we can get these days, let us keep celebrating the style, spirit and vision of the council.

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