

The Changing Farm and Church

By John Madigan

“There is nothing permanent except change”, said the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Yet, when I look at the farm buildings that served our family for the past one hundred years, or the parish Church building from the same era, there doesn’t seem to be much change on the outside at all. However, we know that in the past century life on the farm and life in the Church has undergone a tsunami of change.

In the late 1920s, when my father took over the family farm from his parents, the farmhouse, the main barn, and several smaller buildings were already standing to support the mixed farming type of agriculture. The horse-drawn farm implements such as mowers, rakes, and grain binders were gradually acquired and used to grow a variety of crops such as wheat, oats, hay, and potatoes. This diversity of crops was used to feed and raise cattle, chickens, pigs and, at least one good team of horses. The farm was self-sufficient enough to support the family and even provide some extra crops and animals for sale.



During the winter months, Dad was able to earn some extra cash working in a nearby lumber camp with his team of horses. He used some of these hard-earned dollars to upgrade to the “new” farm implements, e.g., in the 1950s, he bought his first tractor and moved to more specialized, mechanized style of farming. This entailed cutting back to one or two types of crops or one type of livestock. It was necessary for financial reasons. It also became necessary for one or both parents to work for cash outside the farm. So, the farm work had to be done in the early morning, evenings, or weekends.

As the eight children grew into adulthood, they saw the kind of effort farming required and the significant investment necessary to upgrade the machinery. The cities were beckoning with jobs aplenty so, one by one they headed up the road. The farm held lots of fond memories but except for weekends or special-occasion visits and holidays, they were not interested in that lifestyle.

Today, my siblings and I are struggling to pay the bills and do the repairs to keep the farm afloat as a recreational property. The farmer who has been renting the fields for these many years is looking towards retirement and none of the young Generation Z are interested in the overwhelming workload and financial obligations required to take over the homestead.

The little parish church just four miles up the road from the farm holds many fond memories too. We warmly recall fasting from midnight, attending Sunday Mass, the Rosary before Mass, Benediction after Mass, the Forty Hours, the parish Mission, and two weeks of Catechism during the summer months. There was a great emphasis on the mystery and reverence of the Mass which was celebrated in Latin with the priest in the sanctuary, his back to the congregation. We maintained a strong observance of traditional Catholic doctrine. The Church teachings found in the Nicene Creed, the authority of the Pope, the significance of the sacraments was essentially the same as they had been since the Council of Trent in the 16th century. We felt we were exceptional, convinced that we were the one true church, that the other denominations were somehow out of step.



Then the Second Vatican Council, commonly known as Vatican II took place from 1962 to 1965. It became known as one of the most significant events in the history of the Catholic Church and resulted in changes in several areas, including liturgy, theology, ecumenism, and social issues. It effected notable liturgical reforms such as the introduction of the vernacular language, greater involvement of the laity, and a more open attitude toward other denominations and religions. Other theological changes took place because of a renewed emphasis on scripture, church history, and a greater openness to modern ideas and social issues. More focus was afforded to concerns about the dignity of the human person as well as on ecumenism and interfaith dialogue.

For many Catholics, Vatican II provided great enthusiasm and hope for the future of the Catholic Church. However, the years following the 1960's were not without challenges and controversies. There were debates over issues such as birth control, the role of women in the Church, the authority of the clergy, and these days, over LGBTQ issues. But even during the Council, and ongoing in the Church to this day there are bitter and sometimes hostile ideological skirmishes between those who want a more traditional and insular Church and those who want one that is more open and engaged. The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) resolutely defends the Church's doctrine and faith. Those who don't pay fealty to Rome, who publicly question, or dissent on the Church's stand on issues such as women's ordination can be investigated and severely disciplined.

But Pope Francis wants to move the Church towards a closer conformity to Christ's own way of modelling an authentic God-centered life. He views war, nuclear weapons, and large immoral empires in a negative light. He has brought a pastoral approach to some of the most sensitive issues with which the Church is wrestling: the ordination of married men, LGBTQ relationships, and who is and who is not eligible to receive Holy Communion. His critics want Catechism clarity about what is right and what is wrong. They accuse the Pope of watering down the teachings of the Church, and even of heresy. But it may be that they are suffering a sense of loss and mourning the death of a church forged in a different time.

Like so many other churches in the western world the status of the little parish up the road is unsustainable. Church attendance is low, the weekly collections are little more than four hundred dollars and the aging parish priest is assigned to two other parishes. There are attempts to revive the bygone years with prayers, novenas, and novel fund-raising efforts but the past is gone and "it ain't coming back" (as the song says).

But wait! There is great hope and enthusiasm being generated by the Synod on Synodality. In October 2023, representatives from around the world, including members of bishop conferences, religious orders, and lay men and women will gather in Rome to discern together how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church, a more working-together Church in a collegial mode of governance. Many say this event will be of more significance than Vatican II and will shape the future direction of the Church.

The future of the farm and of the Church will be determined from the bottom up, not the top down. As for the farm, my siblings and I have been the leaders to date. Now we need to listen to the vision and hopes of the new generation. Even those who don't visit or show an interest are saying something too. As for the Church, there are thousands of pages of submissions and suggestions from around the world which have been summarized and synthesized into the twenty-four pages of the Working Document.

Therein lies the vision of the future Church. It is from these submissions that the General Assembly will “plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish... and awaken a dawn of hope.”

As an old timer from our parish once said, “There’s something in the wind. You just have to listen.”