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Vatican II: It's about that 'fresh air'

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Catholics often recall the words of Pope John XXIII when he opened the Second Vatican Council. He said it was time to "open the windows and let in the fresh air." It was a marvelous metaphor. The church of the 1950s was indeed in a stultified space, with very little opening to the issues of the world or to other faith traditions.

But as we approach the 50th anniversary of the council, I am sad to realize that those windows are closing again, and some are truly shut. Over that last half-century, Vatican officials, cardinals, bishops and popes have gradually worked to shut off that fresh air, and it's getting stuffy and hot and humid in this church once again.

I remember Vatican II as an exhilarating time to be a Catholic. New modes of liturgy, ecumenical and interfaith initiatives, the reform of religious life, a fresh look at social teaching in the *Church in Modern World* -- it was all part of the landscape. And central to it all was what I believe to be the council's most important utterance: "the Church is the People of God."

I thought of Vatican II not as a finished product, but as a "seed" that would grow and flower and flourish, bringing new life with each decade thereafter. Soon, I thought, we would have a married clergy and not long after that, women would be ordained. The laity would truly run parishes in democratic forms and would be consulted widely by bishops. Theologians would be free to publish and speak and dialogue in a church that valued and welcomed new ideas and new insights.

These hopes and others have not flowered -- at least not yet. Yup -- it's getting stuffy in here again. It may be time for Vatican III.

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