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Why have you utterly forgotten us,
forsaken us for so long?
Bring us back to you, Lord, that we may return
renew our days as of old (Lam 5 15–21)

A church that is prophetic is one that has learned how to be obedient to the voice of the Spirit in laments. This spiritual wisdom stands at the heart, the sacred heart, of Jesus' identity and mission — Bradford Hinze, "Ecclesial Impasse: What Can We Learn from Our Laments"

On the tenth anniversary of 9/11 I reread Bradford Hinze's article in our September 2011 issue not as an editor but for spiritual reading. I wondered what would come to me regarding the decade of lament provoked by terrorist assaults on targets in the United States—not only by what issued from the assaults themselves but also from the decade-long and often misguided U.S. response to the assaults, with no end in sight. But my thoughts were continually brought back to the particular focus of Hinze's article: our Church.

Hinze argues that lament plays a critically important role in religious living. I draw readers' attention to his article, because it offers the kind of analysis and deep wisdom that can draw us all to the creative side of lament, the Holy Spirit's role, and to see in lament the dark night in which alone the lights of heaven, typically obscured by faux-lights of earth, can dazzle us with divine presence. In the Christian dispensation, lament and hope are correlative, provided we allow ourselves to experience lament as participation in the Spirit's "inexpressible groanings"—the Spirit's intercession for us who "do not know how to pray as we ought," but who "groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8 22–27). Authentic lament accompanies the pain of growth; it is the "groaning in labor pains" that marks the hope for what will be born.

Vatican II and its immediate aftermath was a time of high hope, almost euphoria, for those who lived through it, studied its documents, and imagined the Church that might be born of it: a Church turned away from the generations-long internal focus that followed the French Revolution and marked by the divorce of church and state and ecclesial grief over loss of influence in many sectors of life—education, health care, social work, labor, etc. Vatican II hoped for a Church facing the world in compassionate proclamation.

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every human being. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. (*Gaudium et spes* no. 1)

The text still astonishes!

Some even declared that Vatican II was a revolution of sorts. Certainly, as John O'Malley has pointed out, its documents departed from the more canonistic, dogmatic genre of previous councils, adopting instead a pastoral, epideictic genre.

characteristic of the shepherd who draws his flock by bonds of affection rather than drives it by reprimand. It was to be a kinder, gentler Church that would engage in dialogue with those of other faiths, that would even recognize the ecclesial character of other Christian communities, that would see the workings of the Holy Spirit in other world religions.

Facing the world and its many cultures and religions with a posture of cordial openness rather than guarded suspicion or hostility, Catholics thrilled to the possibility of a new world order being born out of the Church's own rebirth in the Holy Spirit. It was to be, as Pope John XXIII declared, "a new Pentecost." The whole Church was mandated afresh to "go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). Our liturgical texts were revised and translated into the vernacular; a new course of seminary studies was inaugurated, emphasizing Scripture and deeper immersion in the riches of Church's theologies and tradition; and more pastoral training in celebrating the sacraments and homiletics was to replace mechanical practice and sermonizing. Who can forget the renovations of worship space that turned the celebrant to the congregation and allowed face-to-face celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation (as we now call it)?

Then reality set in. The very difficult task of embracing the teachings of the council and adapting them to the church universal was caught up in powerful, post-World War II currents such as massive population shifts and technological advances that promoted globalization and, with it, increasing loss of control over populations on the move and plugged in to new, unimaginably powerful modes of communication that vied with the Church's effort to communicate the gospel. There has been a worldwide relativizing of authorities competing for allegiance, and with it—at least in the West—a marked decline in church affiliation and in vocations to the priestly and religious life. This has led to the closing of churches, seminaries, and religious houses. These developments have shocked and scared many, leading to fearful reactions and anxious searches for causes of decline. Some critics concluded that certain streams unleashed by Vatican II were mistaken, misinterpreting the documents and going too far; others saying not far enough. An all-too-obvious result has been division rather than unity in the Church, compounding the difficulty of presenting a cordial face even to ourselves, let alone to the world.

Thus my lament. Thus, I venture to conclude, the grief in the hearts of many who love the Church and grieve over what we see happening. But a major point I take from Hinze's article is that what has happened in and to the Church from Vatican II to the present should be seen not as deplorable but as a perhaps necessary phase in which the Holy Spirit is every bit as present and active as in the halcyon days of the council and its immediate aftermath. Approached in deep faith, hope, and love, the pain of the present situation can be seen as the labor pains accompanying the Church that is still being born out of Vatican II. It took the Church many generations to appropriate the graces of the Council of Trent, an appropriation that remains incomplete. It will take the Church many generations to appropriate the graces of Vatican II in a practical, faithful way. In the process, we can rejoice that we lament. Lamentation indicates that we love the Church, that we mourn its losses and failures, but that enduring grief faces the future with undiminished hope.

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