

Amen: Ecclesiastes and 1968

“What has been, that will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun. Even the thing of which we say, ‘See, this is new!’ has already existed in the ages that preceded us.” – Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

The Old Testament bemoans the monotony of life in the third century B.C., but also resonates as we enter an uneasy 50th anniversary. Social media pronounces that there has never been this much discord and downright hate in our nation. I wasn’t around for the Civil War, but do recall the mess that was 1968.

Today, we have blue states and red states, and a digital divide that fragments audiences and households. Then, we had a Generation Gap, with a Silent Majority calling for law and order while college students raised their voices in dissent.

Walter Cronkite, frequently cited as “the most trusted man in America,” used his platform on CBS in late February to challenge the rosy proclamations President Lyndon Johnson and the Pentagon were making about the war in Vietnam.

A month later, Johnson, regarded as one of the most astute legislators in the history of Congress, announced that he would not seek a second full term in the White House. My father, an Army officer stationed at the Pentagon, nearly dropped his tea cup as he watched that televised address.

(He was more shocked the following January, when the Baltimore Colts, easily the class of the NFL in 1968, lost Super Bowl III to the New York Jets, as a long-haired Joe Namath bested the flat tops of Johnny Unitas and Earl Morrall.)

On April 4, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, precipitating urban riots across the nation, including in Baltimore, where the crime rate was exploding thanks to a relatively new menace, heroin.

On June 4, Robert F. Kennedy was gunned down in Los Angeles, following his brother, John, into martyrdom. July’s Democratic National Convention in Chicago turned into a rolling brawl.

On Sept. 22, my brother, Bill, took a short ride to Friendship Airport and shipped out to Vietnam. He was 19. I was 13, and used a closet in the attic to hide my tears and the fear that we would never meet again.

Richard Nixon was elected president, and the American death toll in Vietnam continued to mount, eventually to more than 58,000. Like Johnson before him, Nixon lied to us, as did his vice president, Spiro Agnew, a former Maryland governor and Baltimore County executive. Before there was “fake news,” there was Agnew, who would label Cronkite and his peers “nattering nabobs of negativism.”

Other institutions were unsettled, including the church. Vatican II brought English and folk music to Mass, and left some religious questioning their calling. Of the eight men ordained for the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1968, only one remains in this year’s directory. Some have since died, but the majority left the priesthood.

Obviously, whatever unrest unfolds in 2018 can’t approach what the United States faced in 1968 – a short-sighted perception which has to elicit head shakes from the generation that preceded mine. Other than the Great Depression and World War II, they didn’t have much to test them.

Throughout their ordeals in the 1930s and ’40s, families had little to hold on to, other than their faith and each other. As long as we embrace the faith of our fathers – and mothers – we will endure.

Email Paul McMullen at pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org