At a gathering of BVMs (Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary) a few years ago, Helen Maher Garvey, BVM, Carolyn Farrell, BVM, and I were reflecting on the changes in our lives since Vatican II. When we first entered religious life in the 1950s, there was no way we could have dreamed that one day Carolyn would be Mayor of Dubuque, Iowa, I would preach sermons in synagogues, and Helen would kiss the pope! Vatican II had a momentous impact on our lives.

Carolyn, an administrator at Clarke College (now University) in Dubuque, Iowa, was elected to the City Council of Dubuque (1978–1982) and served as Mayor in 1980—in the very city where our founder, Mary Frances Clarke, had relocated in 1843. Mother Clarke established our motherhouse there. Little would she have imagined that one of her “daughters” would one day be mayor.

I became deeply involved in ecumenical and interfaith activities in Phoenix, Arizona after I was assigned to teach at Xavier High School (now Xavier College Prep) in 1966. From 1970–1976 I served as executive director of a cluster of five Protestant churches, one large Catholic church, and two synagogues (one Conservative and one Reform), known as the North Phoenix Corporate Ministry. My delightful challenge was to coordinate the interfaith activities of twenty-five priests, ministers, rabbis, and the lay people of these congregations as we worked together in education, social justice, liturgy, and communications. I lived at Xavier Convent and had my office at one of the Protestant churches. Part of my role was to teach and preach in the various congregations. I am still amazed that I preached my first sermon in a synagogue in 1970!

Helen, who had taught and studied in New York, served as vice-president of the BVMs and then president from 1984–1992. During her tenure she was elected President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). When Pope John Paul II made his second trip to the United States in 1987, Helen, as president of the LCWR, represented US women religious and addressed the pope at an assembly of Sisters in the Cathedral in San Francisco. At the end of her speech, she walked over to the pope, who was seated on his throne, to greet him. He smiled at her warmly, and she leaned over and lightly kissed him on the cheek. Yes—Helen did kiss the pope! Who would have believed in the 1950s that Carolyn would be Mayor of Dubuque, I would preach sermons in synagogues, and Helen would kiss the pope!

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In reflecting upon these remarkable experiences, I recall that the excitement of Vatican II was enhanced by a few books that I still treasure. One that had a huge impact was The Nun in the World by Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens of Belgium. He questioned rules of silence and a strict order for the day if these did not make nuns available to do the works of mercy. He noted that the habits we were wearing did not always contribute to our mission and were far removed from the garb of our founders, which was usually the simple dress of their era. Early members wanted to be inconspicuous to identify with the poor. Our habits made us anything but inconspicuous! Many of his ideas, such as recovering the charism of our founders, were basic to the document Perfectae Caritatis (Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life). To even discuss changing from the long black habit was almost unthinkable in the early 1960s. For a prince of the church to suggest these things was both exciting and mind-boggling.

The other book was The Council, Reform and Reunion by Hans Küng. I was teaching at Our Lady of Peace High School in St. Paul, Minnesota (1961-1966) and working on an M.A. in history at the Catholic University of America in the summers. To have the councils of the church put in historical perspective was very valuable. Küng did not present an idealized version of the church and offered interpretations from an ecumenical perspective. Pope John XXIII stated that the unity of the church was a major goal of Vatican II. Those previously labeled “heretics” were now “our separated brethren”—a radical change from when we were not even allowed to attend Protestant services. In a convent of thirty-five nuns, there were two copies of the book which were to remain in the superior’s pew in the chapel. Any Sister could use one for her half-hour of spiritual reading. When she finished, she returned it to the pew so it would be available for another Sister. Küng’s book was well-worn in a short time!

The idealistic version of the church faded further as I studied. For example, I was amazed to learn that at the Council of Ephesus (431), factions in the hierarchy condemned each other and civil leaders often influenced key decisions. The early councils were called by the emperors, and not one pope ever attended any of the four great ecumenical councils which defined key dogmas and promulgated the creeds. True, a papal legate was present, but there was enormous political intrigue—a new portrait of the church indeed!

Our superior/principal wanted us to be up-to-date when teaching religion. Theologians came for weekend workshops to acquaint us with new approaches to biblical studies such as salvation history. We attended conferences about liturgical renewal. Articles were assigned for discussion. Although I cannot now recall the author, I was excited to lead a discussion with another Sister, who was getting her Ph.D. in philosophy of education at the University of Minnesota, on an article titled “Existentialism and Religious Life.” It opened up a new world for me. We received copies of The Documents of Vatican II right off the press after the Council concluded in 1965. I assigned The Decree on the Laity and sections of The Constitution on the Church to my high school juniors in spring 1966.

I was fascinated by ecumenical and interfaith dialogue—probably because of my Greek Orthodox-Irish Catholic background. My dad was born in Greece and raised Greek Orthodox, although he became a Catholic when he married my beautiful Irish mother in Chicago. The meeting of Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem in 1964 brought tears to my eyes. I knew that theologically there were few differences and longed to see more unity in the church. I was the only nun who became acquainted with the Episcopal priest at the church across the street from the convent and the Ukrainian Orthodox priest in the church down the block. I asked the superior/principal if we could invite them and their wives to our spring concert. She agreed. When I gave them the

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complementary tickets, one would think I had given them tickets to Carnegie Hall! They had never been inside our Catholic school although we had lived across from each other for many years.

In the spring semester of 1966, when I became familiar with the document Nostra Aetate (The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) with its important Article 4 on the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jewish people, I asked another Sister on the faculty if she would be interested in having the students in our religion classes visit a synagogue. She was delighted. I phoned the nearest synagogue, Temple Mount Zion, and spoke with Rabbi David Goldstein. He was very welcoming and we set a date.

One lovely spring afternoon in 1966, about eighty Catholic high school girls in navy blue uniforms walked two-by-two, followed by the other nun and myself in long black habits, the four long blocks down Summit Avenue. It was the first synagogue I ever visited. I loved it when the rabbi took the Torah scroll from the Ark and explained parts of the service to us. That was the beginning of my involvement in Jewish-Christian relations.

I left St. Paul in 1966, never dreaming of my future interfaith experiences in Phoenix. During the summers I did an M.A. in theology at the University of San Francisco, writing my thesis, entitled “Two Covenants or One? The Relationship of Judaism to Christianity within the Ecumenical Movement,” under Avery Dulles, S.J. Later, I did a doctoral dissertation on theological roots of anti-Semitism. In 1984 I returned to St. Paul to teach at the Saint Paul Seminary (now the School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas). On the first day of class, as I dashed excitedly across the campus in my red and white polka dot dress, I reflected with amazement: I left Our Lady of Peace High School a nice young nun in a long black habit in 1966 and returned in a red and white polka dot dress to teach at the seminary in 1984!

My involvement in Jewish-Christian relations continued, and I have preached in other synagogues. Most significant, however, was when I was invited to preach at Temple Mount Zion in 2001—thirty-five years after my first trip there in that long black habit! Those two experiences at that synagogue on Summit Avenue are like bookends on a certain part of my life. Regarding Vatican II, I can only say in my heart to God in Hebrew—todah robah! —thank you very much!