

Memory and our Spiritual Life

HITS: 513

JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



By Sister Mary Garascia

Coco, Pixar Studio's 2017 animated film, is a classic at this time of year. It is a charming story about Miguel and his family, and Dia de Muertos, the Mexican Day of the Dead celebration of All Souls Day. The bottom line of its plot is that the dead can only touch the present if their memory is preserved by their descendants.

November seems to keep calling our attention to memory, a vital part of our brains and also a rich component of Catholic theology and spirituality. Remembering, memory, is connected with the celebration of All Saints and All Souls days that begin November; memory also is the way our scriptures came to be, and we end Cycle A, Matthew readings, this month; and memory is connected with memorial feasts like our U.S. Thanksgiving and our Catholic Eucharist.

A prelude: On PBS's *Finding Your Roots*, people searching for information about their ancestors often have stories that they've been told in their families. But those stories turn out to be untrue, incomplete, or only partly true. Miguel, in *Coco*, gets many surprises about his ancestor stories. And even after all that historical research and DNA can reveal, the searching person has only partial knowledge about, not intimate knowledge, of their ancestor.

So how can we have intimate knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, who lived more than 2000 years ago?

When we listen to the Gospels, we are listening to preserved memories of our ancestors in faith. "Do this in memory of me," Jesus said at the first Eucharist; and so after his death, witnesses of Jesus' words and deeds gathered to share memories of him, to pray, and to break bread. Soon others who had not known Jesus began to join them, including non-Jews. Between Jesus' death around the year 30, and the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70, these small Christian communities spread beyond Jerusalem. Meanwhile, about the year 50, the earliest piece of our New Testament was written — St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. It took a few more years before the first of our four Gospels was written — Mark's, around the year 67. When November ends, we will switch to Cycle B of our lectionary when many of the Gospel readings will be from Mark.

When we hear from the Gospels, we are almost never hearing the exact words of Jesus, or exact accounts of his deeds as if they had been filmed. We are hearing remembrances of these things, preserved in communities (eg: the community of Matthew, of Mark, etc...). Not everything Jesus did or said was written down, but rather "aspects of his life that nourished...[their] faith...inspiring them, instructing them, and challenging them to follow in the way of Jesus." (Donald Senior, *Composing Sacred Scripture*, 66). Note also that there were more than four Gospels written, so our four Gospels represent a selection process, sometimes with heated discussion, that extended for about 100 years. During this period the Gospels went through some re-writing or editing. For example, the infancy stories in Matthew and Luke were added to earlier written accounts of Jesus' passion. Eventually our four Gospels were chosen over others by the early Church as "the best" at preserving the memories of Jesus and interpreting the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection.

Our take-away? Communities of believing people, their remembered stories about Jesus, and their faith understanding of what it all meant, produced the Gospels they "handed on" to us. Every age adds its own faith understanding to what it hands on to the next. So we also will "remember" differently than those first Christians, and

ages that followed. We will hand on our faith understanding of the historical the event of Jesus that inspires, instructs, and challenges us today in our following in the way of Jesus. Saints, not perfect people, handed on their unique interpretation of how to live as disciples. Their lives were flesh and blood reminders of something in the Gospels that spoke to their times and that we also should remember, and hopefully imitate. Choosing a saint name, an act of remembering- to-imitate, means a lot to youth in dioceses like San Bernardino where Confirmation is celebrated when youth are more mature.

Dear to our hearts is our November U.S. Thanksgiving holiday. Thanksgiving Day is a "memorial." Memorials remind and make present, in our minds and our hearts, events of the past that actively influence us now, in present time. Our remembering through "memorials" is different from the way we remember other historical events. We remember "actively." We are emotionally involved with the memory. We remember our country's history on Thanksgiving Day, and what being US people means for us. In our Eucharistic celebration, also a memorial, we actively remember the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In liturgical language, we "participate" in that life, death and resurrection as though we were there, but in an unbloody manner. The memories preserved for us in scripture helps us do that, as also does the very structure of the Mass, handed on to us from the early centuries. Note that sacrifice is an essential element of both civic and religious memorials. Sacrificing is both a remembered component in the past event but also something to be embraced by us now. What is remembered in memorials is something worth dying for. These past events that memorials celebrate are foundational events of our identity — as committed US people, as committed Christians. Memorials tell us who we are and how we must be.

Memorials also cause us to look to the future. Reflection on our US history quickly reveals its mistakes and flaws; so while we give thanks for our country, we also long to become "that more perfect union," that "city on the hill." The celebration of Christ the King on the last Sunday of November memorializes the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed but which is still not established. Perhaps in ages past, Christians focused more on the second coming of Christ and His heavenly kingdom. Today in the post Vatican II Church, conscious of our global culture and its complex international issues, our attention is on helping the Lord transform our human and global culture here and now.

All of us forget; we lose memories, become vague about them, lose details — even with all the media helps we have. And we distort memories through our own personal interpretive "take" on things. Attending Mass regularly helps us keep an authentic memory of Jesus of Nazareth. It keeps us remembering the deep and whole story of the Jesus who insisted on forgiveness, on compassion for the poor, and on carrying the cross — things we might easily forget!

So in this November month of memory, we give thanks for the saints we celebrate, the scriptures we treasure, our memorial Sunday celebrations of Eucharist — and for Halloween and Thanksgiving Day!

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