

Traveling Companion: Spaghetti and Ragu Sauce

Fr. Michael Tracey

When I arrived in my new parish some months ago, various persons came to introduce themselves to me. One woman came and said, "When you were here many years ago (1972-1976), you used to come to our home every Sunday and eat Spaghetti and Ragu Sauce. That's when we were first married and that was the only thing I could cook and you never complained about it. Do you remember that?" Joann asked.

Initially, I was taken aback by her memory as mine was a bit clouded. Still, I was thankful that, at least someone remembered me, even in the context of spaghetti and Ragu sauce. So, rather than be outdone by my memory relapse, I said, "Let's do it again, just for old time sake." She agreed and assured me that she could also cook other things. I told her that spaghetti and Ragu sauce would be fine.

Two weeks later, I found myself in her home with her husband, older daughter and some friends, sitting down to a dinner of spaghetti and Ragu sauce, but this time, my plate yielded more. I enjoyed the evening and enjoyed walking over a bridge that now spanned twenty-five years.

Some months earlier, I remembered reading Fr. Andrew Greeley's latest autobiography, "Furthermore: Memories of a Parish Priest," where he says, "memory is the matrix of storyteller, the wedding bed where storyteller and audience meet for the purpose of possible epiphany. The storyteller reaches into his own memory to find pictures, scenarios, experiences which might somehow parallel pictures that lurk, perhaps unremembered, in the memory of the reader or the listener. The most important and powerful tool of storytelling is the picture. Perhaps indeed it is the only tool."

As I sampled the spaghetti and Ragu that evening after an absence of twenty-five years, I got the picture, the picture, not only of my past connections, but the picture of the Great Connector, who used storytelling pictures to reveal Himself, God and God's commitment to humankind. I remembered how he used picture-booked stories in parable form to help people connect and relate to their Creator. I remembered how, in ancient time, that same God constantly reminded his chosen people of His covenantal track record and their obligation to be faithful to that relationship. I remembered how he fed multitudes, not only with food, food for thought but also soul food. I remembered how his most intimate friends experienced their own epiphanies when their eyes were opened and they recognized him in the breaking of bread.

I realize that experiences of joy, suffering, celebration and death provide insights into the human search for meaning. They become the pillars on which every person's story and spiritual life become anchored.

The reason why people today search for family roots and spiritual roots is that our souls yearn for connections and communion with something deeper which our culture cannot provide. We search for something that puts us in touch with our deeper selves and our God.

I remembered something G.K. Chesterton once wrote that there are only two things that satisfy the soul: a person and a story. I had met a person, Joann, and she told me a story, a story of spaghetti and Ragu sauce and somehow, my soul felt connected, felt satisfied. A gap had been bridged; an impression impressed upon the mind's eye, a gesture had been recognized and rewarded.

Don't worry about me! Now that I have tasted Joann's progressive cooking, of course, I will say "yes" to another plate of her spaghetti and Ragu sauce, just for old time sake.