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The pancakes Sr. Tracey Horan made the morning her grandma died (Provided photo)



by Tracey Horan

Contributor

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Editor's note: *On Holy Thursday, Pope Francis prayed for the dead as well as for the priests, doctors and nurses who he said represented the "saints next door" during the coronavirus pandemic. Over the next months, National Catholic Reporter and Global Sisters Report will be bringing the stories of Catholics in this crisis: those who have died, but also those whose service brings hope. To submit names of people for consideration for this series, please send a note to*

saintsnextdoor@ncronline.org.

"*While he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him ...*" (*Luke 24:30-31*).

One of the most challenging things for me to adapt to while living in another culture has been making food for my housemates. I love to cook and try different recipes, but in a new environment, I found myself anxious about whether the sisters I live with would be open to my eclectic, mostly vegetarian cooking style in a house of enthusiastic carnivores. My Spanish seemed to turn to mush when I tried to navigate the bustling market-style grocery and the intimidating meat counter waiting system. At the beginning, I observed and tried to mimic some of the foods my housemates made. My guacamole never came out quite like theirs.



The pancakes Sr. Tracey Horan made the morning her grandma died (Provided photo)

Slowly, I started incorporating some of my tried and true recipes — Mom's tuna noodle casserole, my favorite quinoa salad, pancakes on Sunday morning like my dad used to make.

With these familiar recipes always flowed memories and stories. I would apologize for making such a large quantity of tuna casserole — my mom's recipe was always made to feed seven. Dishing out the quinoa salad, I remembered how my Sister of Providence friends and I would make wraps out of it to pack for a day hike in Southern Indiana. Pulling a homemade pizza out of the oven, I would regale my housemates with the story of the first time I tried to make whole wheat pizza crust when I lived in El Paso, Texas, and how it turned out so hard we joked about using it as a paperweight or a doorstop.

The sisters I live with are fabulous cooks, and as we've gotten to know each other, they've shared more and more about the foods they eat back home with their families. And always memories and stories follow.

I marvel at how smells, tastes and combinations of ingredients connect us so intimately with people and places from the past. They help us remember.

I yearned for this sense of connection last month when my paternal grandma became ill and then died of COVID-19. The morning I got the news and knew there would be no way for me to travel to Indiana — much less the chance for all of our large family to gather during a pandemic — I was desperate for something familiar.

As I rummaged in the kitchen that morning, I remembered my dad telling us about the big pot of oatmeal Grandma would make for all 10 of her children. I could picture my aunts and uncles gathered around her table. In my mind, I looked around Grandma's kitchen and could almost pinpoint where each famous recipe from each family would sit for our holiday pitch-ins growing up. Grandma's chicken and noodles always had a prominent spot.

I remembered where Grandma's garden sat in her yard and a conversation we had once about her green bean crop that year. Pleased with herself but in her humble, steady way, she shared how she had harvested so many that she had bags of green beans in the fridge to last her through the winter.

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That morning I couldn't find any green beans, and it was too hot for oatmeal. So, I settled on making pancakes in honor of my dad, who had lost his mother that day.

We all have foods and recipes that connect us to our roots — to who we are and the relationships that have shaped us. Given this connectedness, it's no surprise that so many pivotal moments in the Christian Scriptures revolve around food.

Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding feast. As they celebrated their Passover meal together, Jesus and his followers had a serious conversation about the fate that awaited him. And he told them he would be given over as bread and wine for them: as food to sustain them, body and soul. Jesus taught his disciples about radical abundance as they fed 5,000 people together. Then on the road to Emmaus, two of his friends finally recognized their resurrected rabbi in the breaking of the bread.

Food — its smell, taste and texture — has a way of connecting us to our own humanity and etching memories on our hearts. Inherent in the process of making food is a death and resurrection: a plant or an animal has given its life for our nourishment, and our bodies transform this gift into new energy.

This moment in time has forced many of us to dig deep into the things and people that ground us. We are desperate for a familiar recipe — a set of ingredients that might nourish us the way they did in the past.



Sr. Tracey Horan makes sopas, a traditional dish from Central and Southern Mexico* (Provided photo)

The hard truth is that no number of pancakes thrown on the griddle would allow me to hug my dad and tell him in person how sorry I am that he lost his mom and didn't get to say goodbye. No number of virtual gatherings can replace real embraces and in-person laughter. And although Jesus' followers did break bread with him again after he was sentenced to death, they all knew it would never be the same.

In this moment, we're all making up recipes as we go, mostly from scratch. We're throwing together pieces of relationality and encounter and praying, trusting that God will make them enough; that the final product will come out edible, will nourish us even if we've never made it that way before. And sometimes we're smiling at each other between bites, with a knowing look that the toast is burnt or the rice wasn't fully cooked or you should have waited one more minute before flipping that pancake. And it's okay.

As people of faith, our belief in a God of transformation and possibility tells us that both hurt and hope are OK and real. We can both feel the helplessness of this moment and continue digging deep to discern what a worldwide pandemic asks of us. We can both mourn the loss of loved ones and be present to those still here who are suffering. We can feel the pain of separation, and continue to decide each day to self-isolate out of care for the most vulnerable among us.

In living this hurt and hope, the bread of our lives is broken, but that means there are more pieces to share. And in that breaking, we find new recipes that we may someday remember and even pass down. We nourish one another in ways we never thought possible.

[Tracey Horan is a member of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. She is the education coordinator at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona, and Sonora, Mexico.]

* *This column has been edited to correct a photo caption.*

This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.