

# A Study Guide prepared by Julieta Sanchez & Jose Morones for Capstone Seminar at St. Mary's University, Department of Theology

## **COCO and a brief comparison to Metz's theology of *dangerous memory* and other eschatological themes.**

The movie Coco is an eschatological work in itself. Parting from one particular event, the celebration of Day of the Dead in Mexico, it touches upon many of the themes we have seen and discussed throughout the course in other readings. Some themes seem to be more conspicuous than others: a bodily afterlife and the portrayal of "heaven" as popularly imagined, for example. The idea of a final judgment, hell, retributive justice, among others, are themes that barely show up in the movie, if at all; if they come up, however, they are merely hinted at but not overtly addressed.

In Coco, death is definitely NOT the great equalizer. The afterlife depends much more (if not entirely) on the perception people have of you rather than on the accumulation of good deeds (Think of Hector on the one hand who, by no fault of his, is bullied and rejected by others including his family; on the other hand, De La Cruz, Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, El Santo, and Frida Kahlo, all famous people, are the heroes of the afterlife merely because they were well-known in this one). Fame, luck of being remembered, and other factors aside from good deeds, is what gives you access to a higher level of life in the complicated, set-up system of Coco's other world.

**Divine Agency in Coco.** God seems to play a very minimal role, if any, with regard to how people lives (or disappears/dies? E.g. Chicharron & De La Cruz) on the other life. Doing well in the afterlife heavily depends on one being remembered on earth, not with one being virtuous, benevolent or a faithful believer. The idea of divine judgment is therefore non-existent in Coco. One question posed for discussion read: According to Coco's portrayal, where are the dead living? **(A)** Are they in hell or heaven or purgatory or some other place? **(B)** Are the themes of God's mercy, God's judgment, the beatific vision or any other eschatological concepts even considered in the movie? **(C)** How can the idea of Johann B. Metz regarding "dangerous memory" play a role here?

**(A)** It would be difficult to answer this question from a one-sided perspective. On the one hand, those dead who are remembered seem to be living in a kind of paradise. Those who are being forgotten, although apparently confined to a different level of "afterlife success" can nonetheless seem to have access to some of the delights offered in such paradisiacal life. In the end, however, neither one group nor the other seem to spend "eternity" in such a place. When little

Miguel asks Hector where did Chicharon go after he disappears, Hector answers: “No one knows. . . but, hey, it happens to everyone eventually”. Indeed, even those who are being remembered at the time will be forgotten after a few generations have gone by. So they are definitely not in Purgatory (there’s no suffering of purification) nor in hell (there is no torment), but neither are they in heaven because all of them will go somewhere else after being forgotten.

**(B)** This part of the question has been answered already. God’s agency is very minimal and these concepts, as referred to God, are absent in Coco.

**(C)** Johann Baptists Metz’s idea of memory may resonate in one of Coco’s main themes: remembering the dead. Metz’s theology of memory stresses the obligation we (the living) have to remember those who have died; it’s an obligation not just to remember them but to tell others their story (Dr. Hanneken) and thus keep them alive.

Metz’s concept of “dangerous memory” may also lend to comparison to some of the scenes found in Coco. Remembering *all* the dead regardless of their virtues or vices is part of our obligation to the dead but somehow to the living also. Why? Because remembering those whose life and character was heroic (e.g. Mother Teresa, Gandhi, etc.) may impel us to act in the same way they lived their lives while remembering those whose life and behavior was cruel and barbaric (Hitler, Castro, etc.) may remind us of our civic obligation not to promote such leaders or foster similar behaviors (Dr. Hanneken). An example of this in Coco is De La Cruz’s character. When he was remembered as a hero, everyone wanted to be like and identified with him; once people found out De La Cruz’s real persona (murderer and thief), they wanted to distance themselves from him because they disagreed with his behavior. The only ironic and contradictory part of this example vis-a-vis Metz’ idea of “dangerous memory,” however, would be the concept of “forgetting” not “remembering” De La Cruz after he is discovered. Instead of his tomb’s inscription reading “Remember Me,” at the end it reads “Forget You”.

One last clarification with regard to the question on the “second dead” as it is described by St. Augustine in *The City of God*. Neither De La Cruz’s being smashed by the bell nor Chicharron disappearing as a result of being forgotten have anything to do with St. Augustine’s concept of suffering a *second death*. We all die a *first death* but only those deprived of God’s grace and presence (the damned) suffer a second death. And we have no proof that either Chicharron or De La Cruz have been damned. All we know is that the former disappears and the latter is smashed by the bell (disappears too?) To whichever place they might have gone, or to whatever state they might have conformed, none of them qualifies as suffering a second death as it is understood in St. Augustine’s *The City of God*.

**Metz, Johann Baptist. *Excursus: Dogma as a dangerous memory.***

We have included this short excerpt from the reading guide in order to refresh your memory vis-à-vis the main idea of Metz' article *Excursus: Dogma as a dangerous memory*. Metz's theological idea surely finds some echoing in Coco's main motif: remembering the dead.

Memory plays an important role in maintaining, perpetuating, and making sense of our present beliefs as they relate to the past and their original meaning. In reference to Christian beliefs, for example, memory help us keep in touch with the historical events, traditions, and people from whom such beliefs emerged and developed. Metz states that "Christian faith can be understood as an attitude according to which man remembers promises that have been made and hopes that are experienced as a result of those promises and commits himself to those memories" (200).

With the passing of time, however, those memories and the practices they evoke may become disconnected of their original source while still continue to exist though merely as a caricature of what it really was in the beginning. Apparently, when memory goes this direction it may fall short from achieving its intended purpose and become counterproductive in nature.

**Some general information behind the meaning of *Dia de Los Muertos* in Mexican Culture and its relevance in Coco.**

The "Dia de Muertos" celebration is one of the most important celebrations in all of Mexico, it is of great importance to the people and their culture and respected as much as Christmas festivities and Holy Week celebrations.

Coco illustrates the reality of death through some key universal themes:

- Death is unavoidable and happens to everyone
- We want people to remember us after we die
- We want to feel close to those who have gone before us
- We want to be connected with our family; those who are still currently living and our ancestors.

The portrayal of the "land of the dead" in Coco is not gloomy rather:

- full of color and "alive" in its own way
- the dead are happy
- the dead are together with other deceased members of the family
- there are parties, festivals, and concerts.

The placement and offering of the altar de Muertos is the foundational axis of the celebration of Day of the Dead. The different objects on the altar are intentional symbols

with the purpose of establishing a “bridge” or a channel of communication between heaven and earth and in order to honor and venerate the dead. **Some of these objects include but are not limited to:**

- A photograph of the loved one or personal objects they used
- Flowers
  - White (heaven)
  - Yellow (earth) cempasuchil or marigold guides spirits back home
  - purple (mourning)
- Papel Picado (union between life and death)

We have limited our study guide to mostly the first part of our presentation since the second part about ghosts, however interesting, adds little to our intended purpose here. We could surely have brought about some important themes such as that of C.S. Lewis’s idea of the damned leaving hell and approaching heaven and reaching heaven if they but wish and try hard (a theme addressed a week ago in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s “*A Short Discourse on Hell*”), but we have preferred to limit our study guide to the most relevant themes addressed in *Coco* and the meaning behind *Día de los Muertos* Mexican festivity.