

The memory of God

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue



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The memory of kings and heroes, of nations, tribes and cities, has always seemed worth preserving: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you." But it is the fate of most individuals to be assimilated to a collective past—like the bones reburied in the communal ossuaries of rural Greece or the ancestor tablets in a Chinese family shrine. Gradually, if not all at once, the generations pass away.

We're not happy about this slow dissolve. The anxiety to prevent it created the scrapbooks and diaries of pre-Facebook times and now swells the profiles of the 800 million plus Facebook subscribers with their names and faces, likes and dislikes, pets, politics and passing moods. But even with all the technology at our disposal, how can we be sure that the memories worth saving will be safely kept?

I remember when I was nine years old walking around my neighborhood in New York City and looking at things that wanted to be looked at—a glistening iron fence around a playground, earthworms surfaced after a rain, the Good Humor man with his three-wheeled truck, commuters emerging from the subway, the giant barrel outside the Romanian Pickle Works—and trying to retain it all. I was just narcissistic enough to imagine that the real-time "I am a camera" record of a nine-year-old girl's inner life would be universally fascinating. Yet when I grew up and became a mother, it was my children's experiences I wanted to record.

The children of Israel are repeatedly urged to keep their memories: "Remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness" and "Take heed lest . . . when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them . . . you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . led you through the great and terrible wilderness . . . brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna" (Deut. 8:2, 11-16, RSV). The things to remember are particular and concrete; yet as historian Yosef Yerushalmi once observed, God meant to establish a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, not a nation of historians.

Even so, it seems unfair that the saints and heroes who are most alive to me are the ones whose portraits or diaries happen to survive. I feel I know William James, C. S. Lewis and John Henry Newman personally because I have, in effect, received all their letters. I remember Augustine for his profound reflections on memory as well as the spiritual adventures his memory enabled him to record; but what of the other Augustines who had no opportunity to preserve their thoughts? Even Jesus isn't documented as thoroughly as many of his saints. We can't remember him the way we can remember, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer or the lavishly photographed St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

But perhaps that's the plan. To remember Jesus is to know him as fully alive. This is the sacramental memory of which St. Bernard speaks in his hymn "Jesu dulcis memoria": the "sweet memory" of Jesus is not confined to backward glances but calls us into his presence, which is sweeter still.

Not long ago, Pope Benedict XVI lost someone dear to him: Manuela Camagni, a consecrated member of the *Memores Domini* lay association (whose purpose is "to live the memory of Christ in the world of work") and an intimate part of the papal household, died in a traffic accident in Rome. In a message to her family, Pope Benedict reflected on Camagni's vocation as a *memor Domini*: "It gives me peace to think that Manuela is a *memor Domini*, a person who lived in the memory of the Lord. This relationship with him is deeper than the abyss of death. It is a bond that nothing and nobody can break. . . . We are *memores Domini* because he is *memor nostri*." Later, at a mass for the repose of Camagni's soul, Benedict returned to the theme: "We, human beings, with our memory, can unfortunately only preserve a shadow of the people we have loved. The memory of God, however, does not preserve only shadows, it is the origin of life; here the dead are alive, in his life and with his life they have entered the memory of God which is life."

The memory of kings and heroes is a fragile thing, subject to accidental deletion. The fame of the Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh was expected to last forever, for he ruled a great city-state, defied the gods, killed a monster, journeyed to the underworld and saw his achievements inscribed in stone; yet even Gilgamesh would have been lost to history were it not for some intrepid Victorian archaeologists. Happily, we don't have to worry about the permanence of our records; just when it seems that everything is dissolving, the thought returns: God is the God of the living, and our memories are safe with him.