

Viva La Fiesta
By Jesús Nava

“Our calendar is crowded with fiestas”. — Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

There is nothing so essential to Latino culture as the fiesta, the religious and patriotic celebrations that mark the year. Octavio Paz, in his seminal work, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, writes: “The fiesta is by nature sacred, literally or figuratively, and above all it is the advent of the unusual. It is governed by its own special rules, that set it apart from other days, and it has a logic, an ethic and even an economy that are often in conflict with everyday norms.” As Latinos we understand the significance of our ritualistic observances when celebrating our faith and our history. As city managers when we embrace our culture, we build community through fiestas.

President Lyndon Johnson first proclaimed Hispanic Heritage Week in 1968. President Ronald Reagan extended the recognition in 1988 formally proclaiming September 14 through October 15 as Hispanic Heritage Month. The dates commemorate the independence of nine Latin American countries: Mexico, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, Brazil and Belize.

For Mexicanos, *El Diez y Seis de Septiembre* (the 16th of September), also known as *Las Fiestas Patrias* (the Patriotic Festivals) begins with the historic, *El Grito De Dolores*, the cry for independence shouted by Father Hidalgo y Costilla in Dolores, Guanajuato on September 16, 1810. *El Grito* is recreated annually throughout Mexico and the

Southwestern U.S. on September 15, the eve of independence and marks the start of the festivities. For Latinos in the U.S, *Las Fiestas Patrias* is a celebration of liberty and freedom from all oppression.

Many cities celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month and *Las Fiestas Patrias*. Chicago's 26th Street Mexican Independence Day Parade is billed as "one of the most colorful parades in the city". Parade floats, marching bands and mariachis fill the street. Santa Ana, California also boasts one of the largest Fiestas Patrias celebrations in the nation with over 200,000 visitors attending the two-day event. Both happenings are considered national cultural events with proven economic and social benefits.

Traditionally October 12 is Columbus Day, a celebration of the discovery of the new world by Christopher Columbus. A new trend is to celebrate the second Monday in October as Indigenous Peoples Day, a day of healing and reconciliation for native and non-native people. For many Latinos, Indigenous People's Day commemorates the struggle for justice for the aboriginal people of the Americas. Six states observe Indigenous Peoples Day, including Maine and Vermont. Cities like Austin, Texas and Lawrence, Kansas also formally celebrate the holiday. Los Angeles, California held their first official Indigenous Peoples holiday in 2018. The citywide event included a performance by Grammy Award Winners Black Eyed Peas.

Besides the traditional day to celebrate Halloween, October 31 also starts *El Dia de Los Muertos*, the ancient indigenous celebration of the dead. Traditionally celebrated on

November 2, it has melded and separated over the centuries with All Souls Day, a Catholic holiday held on the same day that honors the dearly departed. El Dia de Los Muertos is the one day when the barrier between the physical and spiritual worlds becomes permeable. Offerings of food, wine, sweets and tobacco served on intricately decorated alters entice the spirits of the ancestors to return to the world of the living. Major Day of the Dead events are beginning to appear throughout the U.S. Dallas, Texas is planning its inaugural Dia de Los Muertos parade and celebration this year.

Veterans Day follows on November 11. It is the national holiday honoring all persons who served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Originally Armistice Day, it recognized the end of hostilities with Germany on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. Armistice Day became Veterans Day in 1954. One of the most interesting Veterans Day celebration seen to date was an exhibit featuring the Latinos from Ventura County California that served in the Vietnam war. It was a moving experience to see and read about how many Latinos sacrificed their lives for our country.

December 12 is the Festive Day of Our Lady de Guadalupe, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*. It commemorates the apparition of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego on Mount Tepeyac, now Mexico City, in 1531. The fiesta begins at midnight with the traditional birthday song “Las Mañanitas” and a celebratory Eucharistic Mass. The remainder of day is devoted to prayer, family and friends. While the day is not a traditional U.S. holiday, it is a celebration of great importance for Latinos.

Las Posadas, nine days of religious observation ending Christmas Eve commence on December 16. It celebrates the Nativity of the Christ through reenactment. For eight nights a procession of neighbors dressed as nativity characters follow Mary and Joseph as they ask for shelter at appointed homes. Once the procession arrives the Catholic Holy Rosary is prayed and afterwards the fiesta begins. A traditional meal of tamales, carnitas, champurado, bunuelos and hot chocolate is served. Music, piñatas and fireworks round out the festivities.

Las Posadas are celebrated in Spain and throughout much of Latin America reflecting the overwhelming Christian religion. While each country has its own variation on the theme, the celebration remains one of family, community and faith. San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas has kept the tradition of Las Posadas alive since 1730. It remains an important part of the annual holiday celebration for the Alamo City and its people.

There are many occasions to celebrate life over the next four months. Religion and patriotism are but two. So say yes to the fiesta and allow the community to revel in the sacred and unusual for a day even if it conflicts with everyday norms.