Hunger, Food, Eucharist: An Interview with Ángel F. Méndez Montoya

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Recommended Citation
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Editor’s Note: During Fall 2012, Dr. Peter J. Casarella, Director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, and Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University, interviewed Ángel F. Méndez Montoya, OP, Ph.D, about his recent book, The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist, published in 2009 by Wiley-Blackwell (and the next year in Spanish translation in Mexico under the title, El Festín Del Deseo: Hacia una Teología Alimentaria). Dr. Méndez Montoya teaches theology, philosophy, and cultural studies at universities in Mexico City, such as the Universidad Iberoamericana. He has provided lectures in Mexico, the United States, and Europe; he is also a brother and a member of the Southern Dominican Province in the United States. He earned a B.A. in Dance, an M.A. in Philosophy and Theology, an M.Div. and a Ph.D. in Philosophical Theology from the University of Virginia. He wrote his dissertation at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom as a scholar-in-residence.

Peter J. Casarella (PJC): It’s my great pleasure and privilege to welcome Ángel F. Méndez Montoya today to the DePaul Office of Missions & Values. The second edition paperback of your book is about to come out. This is a fascinating work, and not just from my own personal conviction: the book was nominated in 2011 for the prestigious Michael Ramsey Prize. Dr. Méndez Montoya, welcome to Chicago. Welcome to DePaul.

Ángel Méndez Montoya (AMM): Thank you, Peter. It’s a pleasure to be here.

PJC: The pleasure is ours. Let me begin with something that you state in the preface to your book, The Theology of Food, which is dedicated to your parents, Vicente Méndez Domínguez and Ofelia Montoya de Méndez. You say that “cooking for others is a form of theological rejoicing.” I like that phrase. You state that you learned this from your parents. Could you elaborate a little about that?

AMM: Yes, I think that actually my work was inspired by my biography and I have a lot to thank my parents for. Both my parents love to cook, particularly my father, who was an excellent cook. We always had real fiestas every weekend. He used to cook on the weekends, and my mother during the week. It was really fantastic. I think my first theological experience through the family was cooking and helping my father host big fiestas. It was really awesome to see my father come alive [at these functions], because he was very introverted: When he was cooking, you could see how much love he felt for cooking as well as for hosting and giving food to others. The house was usually very busy with guests, mostly extended family but also a lot of friends and neighbors. I think that is where I started to learn the virtue of hospitality [in theology]: preparing, giving oneself to others, and celebrating. That experience may have been the first inspiration for my book, and I am very thankful for that.

PJC: How about a very basic question, one that you address in the book: Should we be thinking about a “theology of food” when so many people in the world today go to bed hungry?

AMM: Definitely. I think, right now, it’s very important. At the time that I was writing the dissertation, which later became the book, matters related to food were not very common in the theological discipline. The subject of food is becoming more and more urgent. We are currently facing a terrible food crisis, but the problem is not a lack of resources. The problem is the lack of sharing food with others. My book contemplates a God that is superabundant, but also a God that gives generously. But what does it mean to believe in a God that is superabundant when there is so much hunger in the world? Why is it that in some parts of the world people are eating a lot, and wasting tons of food, when there are other places in the world where people are very hungry?

My book also calls attention to who the people are who are hungry: most of them are children, the elderly, and the great majority are women. So it is called the
feminization of hunger. It also tells us something about marginalization, especially toward women. I think that these are theological matters, and any theologian should be concerned about these matters. We need to become more aware and bring attention to the realities of hunger in the world. So I think that is very theological in itself. The subject of food is important because it's not only about things related to hunger but also to the things that we eat, and the relationships between food and labor: for instance, relationships between food and the treatment of animals, and between food and the treatment of ecology. Food brings attention to all these relationships, and theology is about opening up our awareness to relationships. The theology of religions is about how we relate to one another, how we relate to the planet, animals, and how [we relate] to God. So all these are food matters and also theological matters.

PJC: Let me pick up on the concept of the superabundant God and ask a question from the theological perspective. Taking into account your Dominican background, as you know, Aristotle said that all people, all men, desire by nature to know, and St. Thomas deepened that with the Christian perspective of Creation being [a] gift. Your book depicts a theology of desire, and relates it to alimentation: eating. How would you briefly explain the relationship between your theology of desire, and the earlier Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition?

AMM: The title of the book in Spanish is El Festín del Deseo: Feasts of Desire. I think it fits the purpose of the book better, because we are all desirers, we are all people of appetite. Actually St. Augustine, even before St. Thomas Aquinas, talks about a primal desire, desire in itself, which for St. Augustine, like St. Thomas Aquinas, is not bad: desire is something good because it's ultimately a desire for God. We are hungry beings. So we have this appetite, whether it is for a piece of bread or hunger. We are people of desire because we are a people made in the image of God, and God is the God of desire. Even in the Trinitarian relationship, we can conjecture about a God that is desire, God desiring God, and his desire doesn't go hungry; instead, He gives God's self with love and caritas (Latin, charity). We can say that the Trinitarian God is a God of desire, who desires nearness, and our first desires for God are born out of a God who desires us first. So God desires us, and therefore creates all Creation, all the cosmos, out of his desire. He also becomes more radicalized in nearness, with Incarnation. [This means] that God desires to be near; he desires to be intimate, but more extravagantly so. With the Eucharist, God not only nourishes his people, he becomes the very source of nourishment. You could talk about the Eucharist as the banquet of desire as well. Following Aristotle, this desire to know is a desire to be near God, because God desires us first. So we are talking about a festín del deseo, [a] feast of desire, and theology which should be involved in this feasting.

PJC: Let me try to jump around a little. One of things I like about this book, so unlike many other books I have read, is that it has recipes: In particular, you're fittingly devoted to the recipe for chicken mole, or molli (Náhuatl). You say this at the end of the book: “Theology … like … the making of molli, is a performance of the metaxu, where God and humanity blend desires without annulling difference.” Maybe you can talk a little bit about this recipe and then explain what it is, and how the making of this dish represents a bridge between a God who desires God and humanity's desires.

AMM: Well, mole is a great inspiration for the entire book, and in fact becomes the methodology for the practice of theology. What I have learned about mole, is that it's this blending, a hybridization of many things, first, of the ingredients: Mole combines and mixes all these ingredients and sometimes even contrasting ingredients, such as chocolates and chilies, fascinating to bring together in one dish. When I was doing research on mole, I discovered that the story we used to know and accept about the creation of mole being an invention during the sixteenth century in baroque Mexican society, was wrong; in fact this recipe goes back to pre-Columbian culture. The people coming from Spain, especially in the convents, were creating new dishes, with the help of native servants, and blending ingredients they brought with them from Europe and other continents with native ingredients … We can remember that Spain was occupied by the Islamic culture, which has great techniques and culinary traditions. They were bringing spices to this continent, and being very hungry for spicing, they found in Mexico and other Latin American lands great richness and variety of spices. So in mole they found that they could mix ingredients and spices from Africa,
Asia, Europe, and Latin America. To a certain extent, we could say that all the universe, the entire planet, is contained in one drop of mole. I was very interested in this blending, a mixing of ingredients that became an inspiration for doing theology today, when one is required to be interdisciplinary. This requires listening to other disciplines, to learn and create a dialogue with them.

Theologians cannot be so fragmented or elitist that they only speak to themselves—they should speak to everyone. And in order to speak to everyone, they have to listen to one another. In theology, there is a mixing of ingredients, and sometimes contrasting ingredients. It’s not about homogenizing the theological discourse because in mole you are not homogenizing taste; instead, when you taste it, you are in a state of perplexity. As soon as you identify one ingredient another one comes forward, and there is this kind of playfulness about mole. I think that it is the same in theology: There is no resting moment, there is always much more to taste. Particularly when we are talking about a God that is infinite, that is eternal, with whom we can open ourselves to the taste, to the touch of an infinite God. For me, in theology, mole becomes a paradigm, a blending of all disciplines, at times in pluralistic discourse. Not just human discourse, the blending of the human and the divine: a hybridization of human and divine desires.

PJC: How then, does the meeting of these desires function in the experience of the Eucharist?

AMM: The Eucharist is the highest expression where God becomes more intimate. What can be more intimate than a God that can be touched and also ingested? I think it is one of the most extravagant forms of intimacy by God. I think the Eucharist is the banquet of desire because God desires to be near us, and we desire to be near God. But here, the same as it is with mole, it is not to be fetishized. The problem, sometimes, with the Eucharist is that it has created this dualistic world: People go to celebrate the Eucharist, but once they leave the liturgical space they go into the public space, where there is no relationship between the ingestion of the Eucharistic banquet and what happens in their daily lives. So what I encourage people to do is to create the awareness of becoming Eucharistic people, where God becomes food for us and nourishes us with the purpose that we nourish one another, particularly those who most hunger. That is today’s challenge. The other challenge in the Eucharist is who is not invited to the table. So we have to ask ourselves, especially the Catholics, “Who are those that are not invited to the table?” We have to open the table to everyone. That is the challenge of the Eucharist. And I think we still have a lot to do in that sense.

PJC: To try to put it into some simple terms, the feast of desire and the open table, it seems to me that the dismissal after Eucharist is going forth into the world to serve for social justice. I also think about the openness of the invitation, like the question about Spanish Mass and Latinos in the U.S. But even something very old fashioned like fasting before Mass, I mean does that come into play too?

AMM: It does, it does. Although I wanted to concentrate on the idea of celebration and feasting and banqueting together, it also has a required sense of fasting as well. Not only for devotional matters, but more so, as a way of being in solidarity with those who most hunger. Also, in a country like the United States, and Mexico as well, we have a problem with obesity. Fasting also reminds us of less being more. I’m sure that you and many people have now seen the documentary *Supersize Me* (2004): it is terrible. There is this paradox of superabundance, and I was a little worried about using the term in the book. We have to remind ourselves that when we are talking about superabundance and a superabundant God we are also talking about a God that is superabundant in generosity: that is the part that we are forgetting; to be generous to one another. What is lacking, or where there is hunger, we should be providing for one another.

PJC: This book is written from different locations. You now teach in Mexico City, and occasionally in other countries, and you [were born and raised] in the U.S./Mexico border area, so there is, and not just in the recipes, a lot of Mexico in the book. But you also wrote parts of it in Charlottesville, Virginia and Cambridge in the United Kingdom. This may be a little personal, but why these three places? And also, how did your experience of cuisine in these three places affect the outcome?

AMM: I tried to apply the exercise of cooking as well, not just talk about food. While I was writing, I made the effort of cooking as much as possible and to learn from...
other people's cooking and traditions. So one thing that I learned was to open my eyes and my ears and all my senses, especially taste: to taste different culinary traditions. It was very inspiring for me to talk about this kind of interdisciplinary and pluralistic discourse of theology. Coming from the border, which is already hybridization, it was very appropriate to be in different places, such as the United States and then in the U.K., where we probably think they don't have many gastronomic traditions. But in fact, the “Nivelco” scene in the U.K. is excellent because they are blending all these culinary traditions from India and other countries, including those in Latin America. And for me, it was a wonderful exercise to travel around and learn other traditions, and then try to incorporate them into my own writing. I think that you only learn about food when you put your hands on food, when you see other people eating, what, how, and where they eat: it tells you who they are. We are what we eat. I think that it is very true: the way we eat, and our traditions, say a lot about who we are.

PJC: What about shopping for food and the kind of mentality brought into consumption at that level? People in Chicago might have to decide between Dominick's and Whole Foods, but there's also community-based agricultural services and co-ops that bring fresh food. Do you have any thoughts about that?

AMM: Yes, definitely. It is addressed in the last chapter of my book, the politics of food. And that is actually the main goal of the entire work: to become aware of the food that we put on our plates. Sometimes we just go to the supermarket and don't realize what was the process for the food to be there. Or when we have food on our plates, we don't think about what took place before it arrived on our plates. I think that we should become more aware of the many things that happen before food is on our plate. For example, the treatment of animals. Another very interesting documentary, Food, Inc. (2008) addresses this. Also, farming and labor. As a Latino, I am aware that a country like the United States is also exploiting a lot of Latinos in the workplace and in farmwork. We should become more aware of the political dimensions of food and what it takes for it to be on our plates, and to be thankful for the food we have. People sometimes eat fast food or just eat as they are walking from one place to another. We are losing the custom of eating together.

Families don't sit together at the dinner table, [and] even when they do, the teenagers are on their iPods and iPhones and no one really pays attention to one another. And needless to say, we don't even give thanks for the food on our plates. So I think we need to become more aware not only of what we are eating, but also how we are eating. I think it's very Christian to question ourselves.

PJC: You just mentioned a couple films in your book you have detailed. Interesting analyses of Babette's Feast (1987) and Like Water for Chocolate (1992). Could you say a little bit about the importance of film in your theology—it's not just entertainment?

AMM: Definitely not, and right now there are several books and theories that are combining food theory and film theory. This dialogue between food and film is making the connections of how food can tell us something about who we are, and definitely these two classic works, Like Water for Chocolate and Babette's Feast, are paradigmatic for the importance of food. In Like Water for Chocolate, we can say the main inspiration is the desire of one lover for the other: Tita and Pedro cannot be together physically, but they can through the means of food. Tita, who is the cook, pours all of herself into the food that she cooks. This lends to the Eucharist, where God also gives God's self in the Eucharist, just as Tita does in her dishes. God can be united with the people. Babette's Feast, also a wonderful and beautiful film, tells us about the gift of food. Babette is an excellent cook. When she wins the lottery, she gives all of her money toward this lavish cooking that transforms the community, a community that was broken at the moment. But through eating and this banquet, they are transformed and once again reunited. It's not only about aesthetics in this case, or an aesthetic exercise; it's also about ethics, it's about how to become nourishment to other people. The words I use are “how to become Eucharistic people.”

PJC: Your book brings together very traditional questions and themes like the Trinity and Eucharist, with challenging and progressive perspectives on the economy and consumerism. You use a term that not everybody is familiar with, “radical orthodoxy”: it sounds at first glance like an oxymoron, a paradox. Is that something we should be paying attention to? Is that something that you want to be seen as part of?
Hunger, Food, Eucharist: An Interview with Angel F. Méndez Montoya

AMM: Yes, in the sense that what I learned from radical orthodox theologians is the importance of going deeper into doctrinal themes, in this case the Trinity, the Eucharist, etc. For me, it's very inspiring because we have forgotten about the very content of our own doctrines. Radical orthodoxy helps us bring attention to them, to the richness of doctrine, and the importance of renewing doctrine, because it's not something from the past, but something that is also very present. For me, radical orthodoxy is an inspiration. Another theme of radical orthodoxy is an emphasis on the material world: on Creation, culture, the body, and in this case, for my book, more attention to the senses. I think radical orthodoxy has helped me articulate the importance of renewing, refreshing these doctrinal themes. They become very archaic and don't say much to people's lives in today's world.

I also want to say that my work is not exclusively radical orthodoxy but actually a blending, like the mole, of contrasting elements, or what could appear as contrasting elements. Because I mix radical orthodoxy with liberation theology, particularly liberation theology read from the perspective of Latin American theologians in the U.S., I am doing this extravagant mixing that some scholars would not do, but I do it with the purpose of trying to move beyond an academia that is ghettoizing the schools of thought. What I see in academia, sometimes in the current world, is that they are very fragmented, very divisive. They always are against each other, become very antagonistic, and very seldom is there dialogue; a mutual complementing of one another. I am trying to complement things that appear to be contrasting, to create this kind of lavish banquet.

PJC: Well, that gets to an interesting question for the academy, for the Church, for our world today, about how Latino perspective and fronterizo, or borderlands perspective, can contribute to the dialogue with the contrasting elements that we face.

AMM: Yes, I think that this is natural for me because I am from the border, Mexicali, Baja California. The other side is Calexico, California, and so for me, from the beginning, since I was growing up, the mixing and crossing over was very familiar. It is something we need to start learning [currently] because we put so many borders between one another and antagonize one another, and I think that theology today requires deeper attention: to listen to one another, to feedback with one another, and to complement one another rather than creating antagonisms. It is true that sometimes academia becomes like these theme parks, where you are drawn to Latino theology, African-American theologians, Asian-Americans, and religions too: Christian religions and the Buddhist religions and Islamic religions. How about creating common places, a common table where we can come together to share and feedback with one another? Once again, this is not meant to homogenize, but to allow for our contrast, for our disagreements: There is something underneath and beyond, that tells something about who we are and what God is calling us to do. For instance, I know that there is this effort of interreligious dialogue called Zero Hunger: leaders from all around the world gathered to talk about the problem of food and hunger. Even though we are different and diverse in our religions, we have the common understanding that we live on the same planet. We have to work cooperatively, and collectively, to avoid hunger, and particularly now that we are facing this great food crisis.

PJC: Thank you, that is very illuminating. Your book, The Theology of Food, was an instant success, and heralded during the Ramsey Prize ceremony as one of the most challenging books in theology today. I don't want to make you nervous, but what is your next big project?

AMM: Well, I continue writing about food because it is a subject that never ends. There is so much to talk about, and of course the book cannot completely cover all the different ways of talking about food. I continue researching food, food and film, food literature, etc., trying to bring it into theological discourse. As you mentioned, I have my B.A. in Dance; before becoming a Dominican, I was a professional dancer in modern dance, and continued dancing after I was a Dominican. Even now I continue dancing and choreographing. Something I would like to do is to go deeper: I talk about the senses in [the present] book, about food and the body. Now I want to go deeper and talk about the flesh. The flesh is really interesting, and exotic even. In St. John's gospel, we are told that God become flesh: that is a very interesting term because it talks about something that is very primal about who we are as human beings. I would like to use the means of dance to talk about flesh—flesh in flux. So I think something that
I am starting to develop is how to talk about theology and dance, in the perspective of the flesh; a primal sense of our very being, who we are.

PJC: Well, we will have to ask you to come back to talk about flesh and flux. Due to our earlier conversation, I’m starting to get a bit hungry. Is there a final word or thought you would like to share with us?

AMM: I am very thankful to be here. And I would like [for people] to become more attentive to food, to what is happening in the world, to open our eyes, and our senses to the reality of food, and, for those who are Catholics and Christians, to take up the challenge of becoming Eucharistic people, that is, to nourish one another.

PJC: That’s an excellent point on which to close. I want to thank Professor Ángel Méndez Montoya for sharing with us his provocative and interesting thoughts.

AMM: Thank you very much, Peter.