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The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist

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Food, wine and the art of cooking are deeply rooted in ancient traditions and the practice of hospitality. The concept of hospitality has continued through the ages: to host, welcome, satisfy, and serve others. It is manifested in openness and a welcoming spirit, the willingness to receive others when they are in need, and the desire to serve others. The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist (2012), by Ángel Méndez Montoya, depicts this essence of hospitality in his invitation to share in the joy and festivities around the Mexican dish, molli (Náhuatl word for mole), joined to his spiritual interpretations.

Hospitality and the metaphor of God as host are evoked in the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel were utterly dependent on God for their survival in the wilderness, where God prepares them for life in the Promised Land, described as flowing with “milk and honey” (Exodus 17:1). Hardly limited to the abundance of cattle, goats, and bees, this phrase pictures life in the Promised Land as a rich banquet from God’s own table (Deuteronomy 6:3).

Ángel Méndez Montoya’s Theology of Food explores hospitality in the symbolic, paradigmatic relationship of food, the Eucharist and spirituality. The centerpiece of his book features molli and its rich tradition, which is embedded in Mexican culture. He connects the nature and mystery of food to alimentary theology, to cognition, spiritual nourishment, and sharing in the divine experience. He illustrates the meaning of food in various religious contexts, to revel the manner in which gastronomy, table fellowship and food bring us together as people of faith and conviction.

Méndez Montoya’s discussions are methodically organized around the philosophical—theological reflections, accompanied by concrete practices and food narratives designed to bring individual and social transformation. He eloquently likens the making of molli to the making of theology: a complex, rich tradition of many ingredients, materials, and spiritual nourishment.

He begins with “The Making of Mexican Molli and Alimentary Theology in the Making” (Chapter One). Molli contains close to 33 ingredients. Méndez Montoya points out that the recipe or culinary formula for molli is analogous to “co-crafting both God and Humanity” (12). If nothing else comes from the book, there is the beautiful recipe for molli, spelled out in systematic details. He reflects on the gastronomic miracle of molli, its origins, allegorical stories, and the labor of love required for its preparation and presentation to guests.

“Molli: Food of the Gods” is cleverly and carefully linked to religious symbols, rituals, and communal relationships. “Alimentary Hybridization, or the Craving for Spice” delves into the historical significance of social, political, and religious practices, and the impact of various cultures “mixing up their foods” (24). “Subversive Molli” powerfully articulates the “sense of subjugation and subversions” (26) associated with molli in the patriarchal, colonial world of Mexico. “Making Molli and Alimentary Theology in the Making” alerts us to the “spiritual and physical hungers of the world” (29). Méndez Montoya effortlessly creates an analogy of nourishment for the soul, discovered through ingesting tradition, faith, revelation, and devotion. “Body and Flesh: Incarnation and Alimentation” launches the connection to the Eucharist, “wherein God becomes food and drink in and through materiality” (30). Chapter One ends with “Daily Bread and Daily Hunger” a contrast of those in hunger and need with those who are nourished, who celebrate the joy of eating and drinking in a Trinitarian communion with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Chapter Two begins with ideas of knowing and tasting: “Sabor/Saber: Taste and the Eros of Cognition,” put forth as a platform to link and explore the relationship between food and body, and its impact on cognition: “the experience of being in the world and God’s interaction with creation” (47). Méndez Montoya discusses a “Food Sensual Medium of Communication,” referencing the film Like Water for Chocolate (1992), to illuminate the importance of food as language, passion, and expression akin to knowing. “Bodily Cognition and the Construction of Meaning” explores the complexity of cognition and subject-object relations. He associates cognitive thought and practice to
cuisine, in the subjective experience of cooking and eating. Cuisine has a larger connection in constructing social and communal meaning (53). “Cognition as Relationality, Intimacy, and Participation” examines the relation of our senses to our thoughts and physical experiences. Our relation to self and others is experienced through taste, emotions, feelings, and memories. “Eucharistic Desire and the Eros of Cognition” explains the eating of divine food, and experience that brings others into communion and participation with God.

In Chapter Three, “Being Nourished: Food Matters,” Méndez Montoya describes connections between Creation, food, and eating, by discussing the origin and destiny of Creation (79). Ingesting the forbidden fruit is grounded in past self-realization and participation in divinity, in contrast to future self-realization or a promised reconciliation from the “Fall from Grace” (85). “Schmemann: Food and the Cosmic Sacrament” reminds us that the Church’s main source of nourishment is the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharistic banquet practiced through daily ritual provides the opportunity for communion with God. “Bulgakov: Food and the Communism of Being” offers insights for an integrated “metaphysical, social, and economic” life, which he calls vital to man’s survival (89). Here he examines in detail the Sophianic Banquet in Hebrew scriptures: Sophia is a figure of wisdom, with nourishing capabilities, particularly to those most in need (101). “Being Nourished at the Eucharistic Banquet” reveals how unity with God, the promise of a resurrected life is available to all (109).

Finally, Chapter Four, “Sharing in the Body of Christ and the Theopolitics of Superabundance,” discusses the film Babette's Feast (1987), illuminating a polarity between scarcity and superabundance: how sharing food can transform self and community. As a servant-leader, the character Babette gives all she has for others—her culinary craft and talent is on display for those she serves. Her transformation is their transformation, through table fellowship, and uniting with others in communion, communication and contemplation of divine grace. Méndez Montoya transitions to “Manna from Heaven: Sources of Divine Sharing,” noting that manna is a commitment from God to nourish and sustain humanity, especially the hungry, the poor, infants, widows, and foreigners (124). As in other gospel narratives, food is supplied through miracle: from the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, to Jesus changing water to wine, and the Last Supper. He links the importance of sharing the body of Christ in companionship today, and to ritualistic gestures of the breaking of bread, giving thanks, and sharing with one another in communal sense (138).

“Sharing in the Divine Edible Gift, Becoming Nourishment,” focuses on the process of giving and receiving the “edible gift,” expressed through the Trinitarian perspective brought to Earth, and analogous to the interplay between the cook, the meal, and the ensuing banquet fellowship (145). In “Sharing in the Body of Christ and the Theopolitics of Superabundance,” Méndez Montoya indicts our current capitalistic society and lack of sharing, in opposition to the “edible gift from God” and human orientation toward plenitude and sharing (154).

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