Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist

Angel F. Méndez Montoya
Theology of Food
Illuminations: Theory and Religion

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Religion has a growing visibility in the world at large. Throughout the humanities there is a mounting realization that religion and culture lie so closely together that religion is an unavoidable and fundamental human reality. Consequently, the examination of religion and theology now stands at the centre of any questioning of our western identity, including the question of whether there is such a thing as “truth.”

ILLUMINATIONS aims both to reflect the diverse elements of these developments and, from them, to produce creative new syntheses. It is unique in exploring the new interaction between theology, philosophy, religious studies, political theory and cultural studies. Despite the theoretical convergence of certain trends they often in practice do not come together. The aim of ILLUMINATIONS is to make this happen, and advance contemporary theoretical discussion.

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When the World Began

In the beginning was the Word. It was only when human beings appeared that the Word became food on a table. We know that language allows us to understand each other and to express what we think and feel. We humans, however, are more than language. We humans are *cookingage*, i.e., that which allows us to prepare the food with which we can nourish not only our body, but also our spirit. It was when we started to cook our first meals and when we started to conjugate the incarnate Word that we noticed that we were human. Both table and Word humanize us. No wonder it is essential that the table on which our meals are served be conjoined with good conversation: at the table, the word is essential.

Although plants must have been the main ingredient of primitive diets, through a series of leaps forward – from when people began hunting to the agriculture of the Mesopotamian lands with their spices and seasonings – we arrived at the delicious dishes served at feasts, with their exotic fruits and roast meats. Thus food came to be not only our physical sustenance, but also part of the customs and rites of the peoples of the world.

Today, I face the marvelous challenge of inviting readers to journey through the pages of this book, which Angel Méndez, a Dominican friar and doctor in philosophical theology, sets before us. Page by page, it leads us along a pathway that is deeply committed to history and to our ancestors’ way of life: those who filled our lives with flavor, from the primitive gatherings round cooking fires to the dinner-party table, turning each meal into a celebratory rite.

Friar Méndez, with his profound knowledge of alimentary theology, will make us re-create the fact that *mole* may well act as a pathway to love. This link, out of which the spirit of love gradually emerged – a spirit that must be present whenever we sit down to eat – means that in eating we satiate
not only the hunger of our stomach, but also the hunger of our spirit in the very act of sharing. It’s true, however, that the presence of love is often lacking at the table, even though the abundant dishes laid on it are excessive. The amalgamation of food and love, manifested in the act of sharing and celebrating a eucharistic meal, is becoming less and less common.

I cherish the hope that we will be able to make each one of the ingredients that Friar Angel shows us and teaches us about grow in shared love, and that we may thus offer them to the Almighty Maker, without keeping them to ourselves in our insecurity – as the ancient Israelites tried to do with manna. The deep commitment, of body and soul that Friar Angel thus has to the perfect culmination of a holy day in his delectable contemplation of the Eucharist will help us achieve that state of ecstasy which engages all our humanity – physical and spiritual.

Dearest reader, you are welcome to wander along the marvelous, winding path that takes the form of sentences, history, and the exposition of ways of life and faith. With love and mastery, Friar Angel Méndez introduces us to a gastronomic experience that takes us to the very roots of the holy everlasting supper.

Our table is a table of hope and charity – or caritas, as Friar Méndez notes. Wherever hope is great, caritas should be even greater. The more we love what we trust, the more we love what we hope for. Just as our bodily eyes see through the sunlit air, so caritas makes spiritual use of its qualities through hope, and hope through charity.

A wise man once said, “Goodness and gluttony are opposites within the individual in which they exist because goodness preserves the self whereas gluttony destroys and corrupts it. They nevertheless exist in the same individual. If goodness, a virtue, and gluttony, a vice, therefore coincide within the same individual, how much more convenient that goodness be something within which there is no vice, something that cannot be vice.”

The Supreme Maker did not distance Himself from our brothers, our friends, ourselves, not even when each one of us – we who have turned the holy moment of our meals into the mere pleasure of gluttony – renounced the wholeness of spirit and the communion of a whole people.

It is a great joy for me to enter into the spirit and customs of what used to be called New Spain. It is from here, however, that is, from the Old World, from the very entrails of the dust-ridden lands of the Manchegan gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha, that I – like Don Quixote riding the run-down Rocinante – with great interest and deep pleasure am attempting to delve into the realm of mole. However, all the dishes at Camacho’s wedding would have little worth if we did not fill them with the love and rites of the Holy Supper. Let us, then, accompany Friar Méndez through these pages, close to mole sauces, turkeys, partridges
and lamb, with some castrated cockerel, and on feast days some beef from our larder, and, like good old Sancho Panza, some stigmas of saffron and some chunks of onion for a better burp. May they trigger love and dialogue at the table, in good spirits and unending company, like that of our armed knight. In each corner of our selves such feasting touches our deepest feelings, sustaining not only the body but also the soul, and thus, step by step, in perfect harmony, achieving communion in wholeness just like the holy universal supper.

I would once again like to express my gratitude to Angel Méndez for such a marvelous work that will constantly sprout, generation after generation, like grains of wheat or kernels of maize. It is my deepest hope that these lines will nourish us with charity and hope and that this compendium will fill our saddlebags as we walk towards the plenitude of the Holy Table with our brother and theologian, Angel Méndez.

Joaquín Racionero Page
On the Day of St. Fermin, the Year of Our Lord 2008, Madrid
Translated by Leslie Pascoe Chalke
In general terms, food matters. It displays a complex interrelation between self and other; object and subject; appetite and digestion; aesthetics, ethics, and politics; nature and culture; and creation and divinity. In particular, this reading of food can cast light on what it means to practice theology, and why it so relevant for theology to be attentive to matters regarding food, and also the lack thereof. For, from a Catholic perspective, this book envisions God both as superabundance and intra-Trinitarian self-sharing of a nurturing Love, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. God’s gift is further shared with creation and humanity. Creation is a cosmic banquet and interdependent network of edible signs that participates in God’s nurturing sharing. The Incarnation is a continuation of God’s kenotic sharing, that, at the eucharistic banquet, performs a more radical form of self-giving by becoming food itself with the purpose of incorporating humanity into Christ’s body, which already participates in the life of the cosmos and of the Trinitarian community. Because food matters, theology’s vocation is thus to become “alimentary,” reorienting the interdependency between human communities, humanity with the ecology, and all creation with God.

By looking at some cultural and material practices and food narratives this book creates a dialogue that constructs a multifaceted eucharistic discourse, arguing that food is not “just food.” At the end, however, since this book envisions God as the ultimate source that nurtures all theological practice, and since this same God exists as surplus of meaning, the book situates itself within a milieu of mystery. For this reason it is only a prolegomenon to a eucharistic discourse: perpetually open to yet more elaboration, and responsive to the touching, tasting, and nourishment of God’s superabundant self-giving.
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learned from the example of my parents. I dedicate this book to them.
“Comer: nada más vital, nada más íntimo.” There is nothing more vital and intimate than eating, Claude Fischler tells us in L’Homnívoro.³ Eating is vital, for without food we perish. In one way or another, all living organisms need to eat or ingest a substance for their growth and survival. To eat – in its many forms and fashions, including drinking, absorbing a substance, and the like – is a way of being incorporated into the micro and macro organic cycle of life. Eating is a primal mark and act of life that evokes the cosmos as a great cosmic banquet. While being so vital, eating is also an experience of extreme nearness, even intimacy, as Fischler puts it. When we eat, we are literally “intimate” with food by physically bringing it near the body, lips, and mouth. The ingested substance breaks the conventional boundaries of inside and outside, oneself and alterity, and infiltrates the body with a variety of scents, textures, flavors, and substances, until the ingested food is incorporated into the body through a complex metabolizing process that transforms – transfigures – its initial consistency into calories, vitamins, proteins, and so forth. Deane W. Curtin rightly remarks that “our bodies literally are food transformed into flesh, tendon, blood, and bone.”²

Eating transforms food so that it becomes a vital part of our bodies, and, simultaneously, the embodied individual is also transformed by the act of eating. The body can become strong and healthy, weak or ill, by eating or abstaining from food. Eating can vitalize the body, but it can also make it sick and even bring about death. But eating not only brings about

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1 Claude Fischler, El (H)omnívoro: El Gusto, la Cocina y el Cuerpo, trans. into Spanish from the French original by Mario Merlino (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1995), 11.