

The Making of Mexican *Molli* and Alimentary Theology in the Making

Doña Soledad's recipe for *mole poblano* – a traditional Mexican dish – contains a total of 33 ingredients. After they have been prepared these ingredients are ground until they are a refined powder (similar to ground coffee) which can then be stored in the freezer for a long time. In fact, similar to a good red wine, the older the *mole*, the better is its taste. It was Doña Soledad herself, a 60-year-old mother and grandmother living in Mexico City, who taught me how to prepare this complex dish. Her son, who is a professional chef, also became my mentor in teaching me how to make this Mexican recipe. Besides learning how to make *mole*, I also wanted to share it with my friends in a big fiesta, or feast. We were initially planning to make it for about 20 people. However, we ended up preparing *mole* for 100 people, and decided to divide the ground *mole* into equal parts to store it and use it for future dinner parties.

Doña Soledad learnt this recipe from her mother, who in turn learnt it from her mother – and this chain goes back many generations. In fact, and as we shall see in this chapter, one of the origins of this dish goes back as far as pre-Colombian times. Making this ancient recipe took us about 12 hours from buying the ingredients to the final product. After a long day's work, we put all the prepared ingredients into a local industrial mill, to make a refined powder. We then put this powder to “rest” in the freezer. Two weeks later, Doña Soledad's recipe was first shared amongst my friends in a farewell dinner before my departure for Cambridge, England. The remaining *mole* powder was later made up into the final dish in England, among the Dominican friars of my community at Blackfriars in Cambridge, and then, six months later, among a community of Dominicans in Berlin. The more I cooked *mole*, the more I learned how to refine my touch in finding the perfect balance, allowing all the ingredients to interact and create true gastronomic pleasure. Through this experience of preparing and sharing *mole* among

friends I became aware of an analogy that could be suggested between the making and sharing of this dish and the art of doing (or making) theology – which is also a sort of co-crafting (involving both God and humanity), a “culinary product.”

By taking the Mexican *mole* as a metaphor, and a cultural, material, and concrete practice, the main purpose of this first chapter is to explore what it means to practice theology in general, and to partake of the eucharistic banquet in particular, in that both are eccentric alimentary hybrids that feed our hunger. The chapter will build the foundations for the main argument of this book: theology’s vocation is to become a form of nourishment to people, and in doing so imitate God’s nurturing gesture of sharing. Thus, here I will look at the preparation of food (in this case, Mexican *mole*) as a paradigm for engaging in the crafting of theology, and I will discuss theology in terms of food to be shared.

These interrelated and mutually constitutive elements of nourishment and theology I will call “alimentary theology.” I will speak from my experience as a Catholic, and as one who is increasingly becoming “tricultural” (Mexican, American, and English). I hope that my particular angle may provide some food for thought to people from diverse religious and cultural practices, and to those who think about how religious beliefs may become transformative and nourishing.

Of course *mole* and theology are not identical, and so this comparison might sound contrived. My intention is not to collapse the differences and clear distinctions that exist between them. I only desire to stretch the theological imagination regarding thinking and talking about God as well as practicing the Eucharist, which I firmly believe is not only something concerned with reason, faith, and doctrine, but is also the bringing together of complex ingredients – such as the body and the senses, materiality and the Spirit, culture and the construction of meaning, and a divine–human blending of desires.

1 Doña Soledad's Mole

Ingredients

- 100 g. garlic, chopped
- 150 g. onion, chopped
- 250 g. almonds
- 250 g. hazelnuts
- 125 g. pine nuts
- 125 g. pistachios

250 g. shelled peanuts
 250 g. cashew nuts
 250 g. fresh plums, stoned and chopped
 250 g. raw pumpkin, peeled and chopped
 250 g. raisins
 8 tablespoons anise
 50 g. ground cinnamon
 500 g. sesame seeds
 2 tablespoons cloves
 4 tablespoons cumin powder
 250 g. coriander seeds
 2 tablespoons whole black peppercorns
 2 tablespoons ground black pepper
 50 g. fresh ginger, peeled and chopped
 500 g. wide chilies (a dry poblano pepper with a reddish hue)
 1.25 kg. *mulato* chilies
 1.25 kg. *pasilla* chilies (both *mulato* and *pasilla* are varieties of *capsicum annuum*; *mulato* is a dry poblano pepper, but with a darker hue than wide chilies)
 80 g. seeds from the three sorts of chili
 50 g. avocado leaves
 20 g. bay leaf
 20 g. marjoram
 50 g. fresh horseradish
 180 g. dark chocolate, chopped
 200 g. brown sugar
 20 g. fresh chopped thyme leaves
 100 g. breadcrumbs
 100 g. tortilla corn
 sunflower or maize oil for cooking
 salt to taste

Preparing the *mole* powder

Remove the veins and as many seeds as possible from the chilies.

Put the chilies in a tray, drizzle with oil, and put them in the oven for 10 minutes at 150°C.

Put the hazelnuts, peanuts, cashews, and the seeds from the chilies in a tray, drizzle a small amount of oil on them, and roast them in the oven for ten minutes to release their flavors.

Using a small amount of oil, fry the spices (anise, cinnamon, sesame seeds, cloves, coriander, black pepper, and ginger) with the chopped garlic and onion until golden.

Once these ingredients have been roasted and fried, put them into a manual or industrial mill together with all the remaining ingredients and salt to taste, and grind until you have a fine, well-mixed powder.

Cooking the *mole*

Enough for 10 people.

400 g. *mole* as prepared above

250 g. red tomatoes, skinned and chopped

2.5 liters chicken broth

140 g. dark chocolate, broken into pieces

salt, pepper, and brown sugar to taste

oil for frying

Sauté the tomatoes in a frying pan, then add some of the chicken broth. Bring to the boil and simmer for 5 minutes (or until the acidity of the tomatoes disappears).

Add the remaining broth, and then add the *mole* bit by bit, very slowly, until it has all dissolved. Add the chocolate, and finally add salt, pepper, and sugar to taste. It should have the consistency of a thick sauce.

For a better taste, cook the *mole* a day before serving it so that it can be rested to allow the flavor to develop.

To serve, bring the *mole* to boiling point and serve warm over cooked chicken, pasta, rice, or vegetables.

It was very early on a Friday morning, about 6 a.m., when I met with Israel (Doña Soledad's youngest son, and a professional chef) in hectic Mexico City – a city of about 20 million people. We drove towards the periphery of the city to La Central de Abastos (the Central Supply Station), which is a 304-hectare outlet with all sorts of wholesales supplies, including food products, furniture, clothing, plants, and so on.¹ Most businesses in Mexico City and from neighboring towns obtain their products there for a significantly reduced price. Israel was very focused on finding the very best ingredients for the *mole*. It took us nearly two hours to collect everything we needed and then carry it to the car. Since we had decided to make enough *mole* for about 100 people (since it improves with storage), some of the bags we carried were very large and heavy.

¹ For more information on the Central de Abastos, see the weblink: <www.ficeda.com.mx>.

But nothing was as arduous as having to open and remove all the veins and seeds from each of the three kinds of chili (the first step of the preparation). There were hundreds of them. To do this, we needed to put on plastic gloves in order to protect our skin from their spice and acidity. There were four of us doing the job: Doña Soledad, Israel, Rodney – a visiting friend from the US who offered his help – and me. Just getting the chilies ready took us about two hours. Once we finished, we moved on to the second step of the recipe (frying, roasting, and seasoning the ingredients). In performing this second step it is fascinating to observe the change of texture and color of the ingredients: some become darker, while others acquire a pale color, some become smoother while others become rough. This step is also “choreographical”: the ingredients dance to a kind of music while being fried and roasted. But even more fascinating is realizing how, little by little, the sense of smell intensifies when the many spices and ingredients start releasing their aroma. The smell that spread in the house became too intense, almost unbearable. When we put the chilies in the oven we had to open all windows and doors, and at times step outside, for the scent of hundreds of roasted chilies not only penetrated our nostrils, but was felt on the skin and in the eyes as well.

Once they were ready we put all the prepared ingredients (which we previously put into large saucepans) in the mill. Israel insisted on achieving a very refined powder in order to obtain a good mixture, so we ground and reground the products seven times. It was nearly 7 p.m. when we finally obtained our precious *mole* powder, which we then put in plastic bags in the freezer to let it rest and allow the flavors to mingle. And a good rest was what I was truly longing for at this point.

Two weeks later, the *mole* was ready to cook for the first time. Israel was also my guide in moving on to this third step. We met a day before the fiesta to prepare the *mole* sauce and let it rest for one day before serving. The most exhausting task at this point was dissolving the ground powder into the boiling liquid chicken broth (previously mixed with the tomatoes and seasoning). One has to pour in the powder very slowly, until it is entirely dissolved in the liquid, which, little by little, starts to acquire a dark brown-red color. As the pouring in and stirring of the mixture progresses, the *mole* sauce becomes thicker and darker. As the sauce is heated, the scent of all the spices and ingredients permeates first the kitchen, and then the entire house. Performing this step was a corporeal, mantra-like experience: constantly pouring in the *mole* powder, letting it dissolve, and stirring the sauce. I also included a repetitive prayer – similar to praying the rosary – to Pascual Bailón (I shall say more about him later) to ask for his spiritual assistance in making this *mole* truly exquisite. After completing enough sauce for 20 people, the *mole*

sauce was finally ready, and had a glorious smell. We then turned the heat off, and after letting it cool for a few hours we put it in the fridge.

The following day we prepared the farewell fiesta at a friend's house. Several friends arrived early in the afternoon to help. Israel and I cooked chicken thighs and legs. Once these were ready, we put the cooked chicken into the *mole* sauce, and allowed it to heat very slowly. We had also prepared a mushroom soup for our first course. The *mole* was the second and main course, and we planned to serve it with white rice and home-made corn tortillas. For dessert, we served vanilla ice cream with mint Irish cream on top (as we shall see later, serving *mole* allows you to play with syncretism, so including Irish cream for dessert offered a bit of international flavor to our dinner). We also decided to serve very good tequila for the dinner drink, which we served in small glasses.

Everything was ready when the guests started to arrive around 7 p.m. The table (large and with space for 20 people) was set with flowers and candles. Since the weather was lovely – it was the middle of spring – we decided to place the table in the garden. We sat at the table around 8.30 p.m., so as to allow our guests time to arrive, socialize, and have drinks before dinner. Since all the guests were close friends of mine – most of them professional dancers and choreographers from my younger years of being a professional dancer in Mexico City, and some whom I had not seen in years – the crowd was friendly, relaxed, and happy to meet other friends. When we were gathered at the table, a friend proposed a toast and recited a prayer, particularly asking for blessings upon me, as I was to move to England and undertake the task of writing my doctoral dissertation. We then began to dine.

To quote Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*, I would say of what happened during our meal that "nothing definite can here be stated."² I can only say that the diners became more and more delighted in their eating and drinking, and most intensely so while tasting the *mole* dish, which was truly exquisite in its harmonious balance of flavors. I say this with some degree of both pride and modesty. Making *mole* is a laborious task that requires much energy and time. But the excellent outcome was not only due to my own work, for I was blessed by having both Doña Soledad herself and her son Israel guiding me through the making of this complex dish. Nonetheless, it filled me with joy to see the pleasure (expressed in both gestures and sounds) of the dinner guests as we ate Doña Soledad's *mole* recipe and breathed in its aroma.

² Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast*, in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 53. I shall say more about *Babette's Feast* in chapter 4.

One could even say that this experience of eating *mole* among friends was “religious” or “divine.” Although this may sound exaggerated, there is a deep truth in it. After all, many cultures and traditions throughout the ages have expressed the connection between eating, drinking, and an experience of the sacred.³ And, in particular, Mexican *mole* has a long tradition of being associated with divine and otherworldly forces. I shall now turn to this exploration of the many layers of the “divine,” as well as the human, in preparing and creating Mexican *mole*.

2 A Gastronomic Miracle

Sor (Sister) Andrea de la Asunción is in a great hurry. She is a Dominican nun living in the Dominican convent of St. Rose of Lima. It is near the end of the seventeenth century (around 1680) in Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico (then known as the New Spain, La Nueva España). Sor Andrea de la Asunción is hurrying and feels anxious because, as the assigned cook for the convent, she has been given the difficult task of preparing a lavish banquet for the arrival of “don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, marques [marquis] de la Laguna y conde [count] de Paredes, virrey [vicero]y de México y esposo [husband] de doña María Luisa Manrique de Lara, novia espiritual [spiritual girlfriend] de sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.”⁴ In her haste and anxiety in having to host such a distinguished figure, Sor Andrea receives a gastronomic vision: to mix up all sorts of ingredients and spices, even contrasting elements such as various chilies (Mexican peppers) and chocolate, and create a lavish, extravagant sauce that she will then cook with turkey – *guajolote*. The result of Sor Andrea’s providential and eccentric culinary creation was baptized *mole* because, the story goes, Sor Andrea spent many hours *muele y muele* (grinding and grinding) various spices in order to achieve the dish’s final consistency, thus creating true gastronomic ecstasy for all her guests, and all people thereafter.

³ On the subject of religion and food, see especially Perry Schmidt-Leukel (ed.), *Die Religionen und das Essen* (Munich: Heinrich Hugendubel, 2000); Charles B. Heiser, Jr., *Seed to Civilization: The Story of Food*, 2nd edn. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1981); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (1st pub. 1966; London: Routledge, 2001), and *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologies*, vol. 1, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Stewart Lee Allen, *In the Devil’s Garden: A Sinful History of Forbidden Food* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002).

⁴ Paco Ignacio Taibo I, *El Libro de Todos los Moles* (Mexico City: Ediciones B, 2003), 51.

Paco Ignacio Taibo I points out that the origins of this story lie in folklore, the creation of popular narrative.⁵ And there is yet another popular story. In this story we are also immersed in the monastic world of colonial baroque Mexico, and in Puebla de los Angeles as well. Like Sor Andrea, Fray (Brother) Pascual Bailón is also the principal cook in his convent.⁶ Fray Pascual is also in a hurry. He is anxious because a very important archbishop is visiting his monastery. And monasteries (of which there were many, particularly in Puebla) were quite famous in colonial Mexico for their sophisticated cuisine and gastronomic inventions – a sort of *nouvelle cuisine* of the so-called “New World.” Preparing banquets and eating was, as in most Mexican fiestas, the central event. The success or failure of a feast depended upon how gastronomically impressive (or not) the food served at the gathering was. It goes without saying that our friar cook had a massive responsibility upon his shoulders.

The story goes that, while Fray Pascual was preparing the main dish, in his anxiety and haste he accidentally dropped a huge piece of soap in the cooking pot, and irreversibly ruined the meal. He became furious with himself for such a catastrophic distraction. In his fury he started throwing into another pot – where he was cooking a turkey – all sorts of ingredients and spices, including chocolate and various chilies. But immediately after his attack of fury, a feeling of repentance suddenly overcame him. He dropped to his knees, and with all his heart he begged for God’s forgiveness and help. The story relates that the miracle was granted him. This miracle gave birth to the *mole poblano*, an extravagant stew/sauce concocted of a symphony of flavors that not only delighted the honorable guest for that day at the convent, but which also – as the legend goes – became one of the most glorious culinary achievements in Puebla, across Mexico, and throughout the entire world. Such was his success that Fray Pascual was beatified by the church, and is now known as the patron saint of cooks: a saint not to be found in the clouds of highest heaven, but in the pots, the fire, the spices, the smells, and the flavors of the kitchen. When it is time to cook, many people in Mexico (myself included) still pray to the saint-chef for a successful outcome with these words: “Pascualito muy querido / mi santo Pascual Bailón / yo te ofrezco mi guisito / y tu pones la sazón”⁷ (Very dear little

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Both stories of the baroque *mole* created by Sor Andrea and Fray Pascual are oral stories that have been transmitted throughout the centuries. I am here primarily taking a version from Taibo I, *El Libro de Todos los Moles*.

⁷ The word *sazón* is difficult to translate into English. It is more than “seasoning.” *Tener sazón* means to possess a natural gift for cooking delicious food. It is a special culinary touch that makes a dish something extraordinary.

Pascual, my holy Pascual Bailón, I offer you my dish, and may you offer your distinctive “culinary touch”).⁸

One of the “origins” of the *mole* is, then, the popular imagination: allegorical stories that were passed orally between communities. These stories were also recipes that were part of the culinary tradition of religious communities, families, towns, geographical regions, which were then further transformed by others, each bringing their individual touch to the *mole*. The number of ingredients in the *mole* varies according to region and personal taste. Some may have as few as five ingredients, while others have more than 30 – as in Doña Soledad’s recipe. There are an infinite number of *moles*, for *mole* itself is a hybrid that changes, transforms, and adapts itself according to the particular tradition, taste, and fancy of the cook. Some people like it more spicy; others prefer to taste the sweetness of chocolate and cinnamon or anise; others may be inclined to intensify the taste of almonds, walnuts, pistachios, and so on. Nevertheless, the hybridity of *mole* is not the mere result of spices and ingredients, plus an added personal touch. It is also a cultural hybrid, a mixture of multiple culinary world-views and cosmovisions.

3 *Molli*: Food of the Gods

Many recent historical and anthropological researchers point to the fact that *mole* was already an important part of pre-Colombian cuisine.⁹ For the purpose of this chapter I am concentrating on the food and cooking traditions within the region of Mesoamerica.¹⁰ As far as the term “cuisine” goes, I use it here in a broad sense: as a development of cooking

⁸ Regarding references to Pascual Bailón, see, in addition to Taibo I, the essay by Herón Pérez Martínez, “La Comida en el Refranero Mexicano: Un Estudio Contrastivo,” in Janet Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida: Consecuencias del Encuentro de Dos Mundos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003), 505–28.

⁹ Most of my historical and anthropological research on food in both the pre-Colombian and colonial times in Mexico is taken from Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, a book that resulted from an international and interdisciplinary symposium entitled “1492: El Encuentro de Dos Comidas,” which took place in Puebla, Mexico, in July 1992. See also Gustavo Esteva and Catherine Marielle (eds.), *Sin Maíz no Hay País* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, 2003); Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Vivan los Tamales! La Comida y la Construcción de la Identidad Mexicana* (Mexico City: Ediciones de la Reina Roja, S.A. de C.V., 2001); and Maximiliano Salinas Campos, *Gracias a Dios que Comí: El Cristianismo en Iberoamérica y el Caribe, Siglos XV–XIX* (Mexico City: Ediciones Dabar, 2000).

¹⁰ David Carrasco explains that the term Mesoamerica is “given by scholars to designate a geographical and cultural area covering the southern two-thirds of mainland Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and parts of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.”

techniques, the combination of food products and ingredients, a series of traditions and practices that relate to food and eating and that differ from one region to another, a sense of taste, social construction shaped around food, ritual practices centered on food, and so forth. Cuisine is a category that relates to what Carole M. Counihan calls “foodways,” which she defines as “the beliefs and behavior surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food.”¹¹ In other words, cuisine is understood as a sort of alimentary linguistic/discursive and symbolic form of communication, one that shapes communities and cultures, as well as changing according to place and time.

The Mesoamerican system of food production was indeed complex. Héctor Bourges Rodríguez argues that Mesoamerican cuisine enjoyed a high reputation as a result of its “long development, complexity and wisdom, for it had deep roots in history.”¹² He also suggests that Mesoamerican cuisine had an “exceptional aesthetic sensibility and a fine nutritional balance suggesting specialized nutritional knowledge.”¹³ Bourges Rodríguez disagrees with the common portrayal of Mesoamerican nutritional practices as lacking in balance, and particularly as lacking in animal proteins. He shows that pre-Colombian Mexican cuisine was indeed rich in both animal and non-animal proteins, which were mainly collected by hunting animals and birds and fishing, as well as from gathering a variety of insects, reptiles, beans, and seeds. Besides proteins, the diet of Mesoamerican people was “largely based on vegetables, fruit, an abundance of fibers, a small amount of fat and large amounts of energy.”¹⁴

Cooking techniques were also important in the acquisition of a proper nutritional balance. These included grinding, boiling, smoking, grilling,

For further analysis on Mesoamerica in pre-Colombian times, see David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 1. For other sources on Mesoamerica, particularly regarding religious views, see Miguel León-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1963); Alfredo López Austin, *Hombre-Dios: Religion y Política en el Mundo Náhuatl* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1973); and Diego Duran, *Book of Gods and the Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. and ed. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970).

¹¹ Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

¹² Héctor Bourges Rodríguez, “Alimentos Obsequio de México al Mundo,” in Donato Alarcón Segovia and Héctor Bourges Rodríguez (eds.), *La Alimentación de los Mexicanos* (Mexico City: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 97–134: 124; all citations from this essay are my own translation from the Spanish original.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

and cooking food over charcoal or in holes made in the ground. Frying did not exist, for this was a later import brought by the Spaniards. Perhaps one of the most innovative cooking techniques used in Mesoamerica was the use of *tenéxtli* or *cal* (lime) which allowed the preparation of *nixtamal* – the cooking of corn in water with *cal*. This technique created a texture in the cooked corn that enabled the making of tortillas, to be used “simultaneously as a plate, wrap, spoon, and food.”¹⁵ Bourges Rodríguez points out that this technique allowed for more effective absorption of nutrients, particularly niacin and calcium, while also preserving the corn fibers.¹⁶ Reflecting a rich sense of aesthetic variety, the banquets prepared for the Aztec emperor Moctezuma were a telling example of Mesoamerican cuisine.¹⁷ Early Spanish historians reported with awe that for Moctezuma’s banquets there was prepared every day a lavish presentation of about 300 different dishes that he could choose from.¹⁸ Beauty, variety, and nutritional balance were the elements that constituted this time-honored cuisine.

Foodways in Mesoamerica had a profound religious significance as well. In his book *Gracias a Dios que Comí*, Maximiliano Salinas Campos analyzes this centrality of food in pre-Colombian traditions, and shows how these traditions were linked with religious symbols and rituals. Life and death, communal relationships, and the people’s relationship with its deities were deeply embedded within food practices and alimentary symbols.¹⁹ Following the same line of thought, David Carrasco argues that Mesoamerican cosmology – particularly within the Aztec world – was deeply rooted in the symbolism of food and eating. Carrasco remarks:

[The Aztecs] developed a sophisticated cosmology of eating in which gods ate gods, humans ate gods, gods ate humans and the sexual sins of humans, children in the underworld suckled from divine trees, gods in the underworld ate the remains of humans, and adults in the underworld ate rotten tamales! It is also important

¹⁵ Ibid., 112.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For more information on the Aztec culture and Moctezuma’s empire, see Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*. See also Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

¹⁸ This historical testimony is mainly taken from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who wrote a book entitled *Historia verdadera de la Conquista de Nueva España*. This version is taken from Bourges Rodríguez, “Alimentos Obsequio de México al Mundo,” 124.

¹⁹ See Salinas Campos, *Gracias a Dios que Comí*, 7–19.

to note that at certain points in their sacred history, the Aztecs conceived of beings in their sky as a devouring mouth and the earth as a gaping jaw.²⁰

According to Carrasco, the Aztec cosmic world-view considered eating an important part of a sacred economy that transformed everything into food, and that such a transformation was a means of cosmic and human divinization.²¹ In this particular Aztec cosmivision, both the earth and the human body were conceived of as food; as one of their mythical songs read: “we eat the earth and the earth eats us.”²² The earth was depicted as a large mouth and a sacred digestive system for the cosmos. Humanity was first created out of corn by the gods, and, at the moment of death, humans nurtured the gods. Death was not viewed as final, but as a transformation into a source of cosmic energy, to the extent of becoming nourishment to feed divine hunger. The human heart and its blood were the most important sources of fuel in the recycling of cosmic energy. In this context, human sacrifice – and its dramatics of excision of the heart – was not conceived as mere cruelty, but rather as a highly honored ritual and liturgical act that contributed to the recycling of energy and the preservation of the cosmos.²³

Mexican *mole* became an archetype of this cosmic-divine nourishment. *Mole* was not first created, as has commonly been understood, as part of the seventeenth century’s convent cuisine tradition, borrowed from Spain (an already hybrid mix of cultures and cuisine traditions, as

²⁰ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 168.

²¹ Not all of the Aztec cosmivision was based on food and eating symbols and practices. However, for the purposes of this book I am concentrating on this particular symbolic aspect, and hope to provide some explanation of why food in general, and *molli* in particular, were important to the practices of Mesoamerican culture. I am grateful to Professor Vanessa Ochs for suggesting this important clarification.

²² Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 172.

²³ This is the main argument in David Carrasco’s *City of Sacrifice*, particularly ch. 6, “Cosmic Jaws: We Eat the Gods and the Gods Eat Us,” 164–87. For a similar argument, see Christian Duverger, “The Meaning of Sacrifice,” in Ramona Michel, Nadia Naddaff, and Feher Tazi (eds.), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 3 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 3: 367–85. Regarding the Aztecs’ notions of the human body as part of “a cosmic banquet” or an “eating landscape,” see Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts Among the Ancient Nahuas* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988). Finally, for an analysis of Mesoamerican notions of the body, particularly regarding the body as nourishment, see Sergio Raúl Arroyo, “In Praise of the Body,” *Artes de México*, 69 (*In Praise of the Meosamerican Body*) (2004), 75–7.

we shall see later). The invention of *mole* goes far back, toward the Aztec world: the cuisine of the so-called *mexicas* of Tenochtitlán (located in central Mexico).²⁴ In fact, the word *mole* comes from the Náhuatl *molli*, meaning sauce, mixture, or stew.²⁵ Or at least this is what the early conquistadors from Spain thought the word meant. Yet, prior to that meaning, which is not totally unrelated to the Spanish understanding, *molli* actually means *alimento*: alimentation or nourishment.²⁶ The *molli* of the *mexicas* was a thick sauce made of a great variety of chilies and spices, plus chocolate, to which was most commonly added different sorts of meat, particularly *huexolotl*, what we now know in Spanish as *guajolote* or *pavo* (turkey).²⁷ Chilies and chocolate (in the form of cacao) were highly valued, for they were, like the *huexolotl*, Aztec deities. So, to eat *molli* that was made out of several deities was a way of eating the gods, who in turn would eat humans – as Carrasco points out – at their moment of death.

As one of the most popular dishes in pre-Colombian civilization, *molli* was mainly served at important festivals and consumed during religious rituals. It was also a gastronomic delicacy at the banquets of the Emperor Moctezuma and social and religious leaders of Tenochtitlán. The *mexicas* preferred to serve *molli* with *frijoles* (beans) and *tortillas de maíz* (corn tortillas). Again, beans and corn were also highly valued because they were viewed as different representations of Aztec gods that symbolized divine sustenance. This is particularly the case with corn, which was highly revered as one of the most important deities within the Olmec, Mayan, and Aztec mythologies, and which was also considered as the essential matter for the creation of humanity.²⁸ Because of its main ingredients of chilies and chocolate, plus the elements of corn and beans, and

²⁴ For a further analysis of *mexicas*, and Tenochtitlán, see Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, and the additional sources listed in n. 10.

²⁵ Náhuatl was the official language, or the “true *lingua franca*” as Miguel León Portilla puts it, of Mesoamerican culture. For a further analysis of Náhuatl language, culture, and cosmivision, see Miguel León Portilla, *La Filosofía Náhuatl*, 9th edn. (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001).

²⁶ Taibo I, *El Libro de Todos los Moles*, 108. From this point I will use the term *molli* rather than the baroque *mole* in order to emphasize its original cultural and etymological roots.

²⁷ In the *mexica* mythology the *huexolotl* was revered as a deity, and was also considered a symbol of great nobility (hence, the use of its feathers for the emperor’s crown). See Doris Heyden and Ana María L. Velasco, “Aves Van, Aves Vienen: El Guajolote, la Gallina y el Pato,” in Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, 237–53.

²⁸ See e.g. Esteva and Marielle (eds.), *Sin Maíz no Hay País*, esp. 29–55.

the additional cooking with turkey, the Aztec *molli* was not just an ordinary dish; rather, it was a food of the gods, a divine alimentation.²⁹

4 Alimentary Hybridization, or the Craving for Spice

Because of the deep religious, social, and cultural significance of *molli*, it is not surprising to find that it survived the systematic extermination of the European *encubrimiento* (“covering up”) of America – to use Enrique Dussel’s term.³⁰ In fact, one of the socio-religious and cultural practices that the Spanish conquistadors had most difficulty wiping out was the dietary customs of the mistakenly named “Indians.”³¹ But during colonial times the exchange and transformation of dietary customs were inevitable, and this transformation occurred in both directions (in the New as much as in the Old World). What is so interesting about the colonial baroque period in Mexico is the resulting hybrid or *mestizaje* not only of races, but also of inherited cultural, social, political, and religious practices. The culinary constructions of the original inhabitants of the American continent, as well as of Europe, were not an exception to this hybridization of (often) clashing world-views. From the perspective of alimentation, this complex mixture was what José N. Iturriaga calls “hibridación alimentaria.” This “alimentary hybridization” was the way in which all the continents and cultures “mixed up their foods” (“mestizaron sus comidas”).³² And we must not forget that, in addition to this *mestizaje*, there was also an alimentary *mulataje* that resulted from the African presence in the Americas, as in the Caribbean.

²⁹ For more detailed information on the historical roots and religious symbolism of chilies see Patricia Van Rhijn (ed.), *La Cocina del Chile* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2003). For chocolate, see Martín Gozáles de la Vera, “Origen y Virtudes del Chocolate,” in Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, 291–308. For beans see Lawrence Kaplan and Lucille N. Kaplan, “Leguminosas Alimenticias del Grano: Su Origen en el Nuevo Mundo, Su Adopción en el Viejo,” in Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, 183–98. For corn see Esteva and Marielle (eds.), *Sin Maíz no Hay País*, and Pilcher, *Vivan los Tamales!*

³⁰ Enrique Dussel argues that what actually took place on the arrival of the conquistadores on the American continent was not a “discovery,” as has been commonly understood, but rather a “covering up,” because of the systematic obliteration of the inhabitants’ customs, belief systems, and lives. See Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “The Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995).

³¹ The first European explorers that came to the American continent mistakenly thought they were in Asian-Indian lands, and thus gave the name “Indians” to the inhabitants.

³² José N. Iturriaga, “Los Alimentos Cotidianos del Mexicano o de Tacos, Tamales y Tortas: Mestizaje y Recreación,” in Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, 397–407: 399; my translation from the original Spanish text.

If we examine this closely, it is permissible to say, as Iturriaga does, that the alimentary *mestizaje* of the Mexican colonial period somehow included *all* continents. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish people on the American continent, medieval Spanish cuisine already enjoyed an impressive international culinary tradition. Spain's cosmopolitan culinary expressions were a product of Christian Roman and Muslim Arabic influences. Xavier Domingo explains that both Christian and Muslim culinary world-views craved a rich variety of spices and aromas.³³ This excess of spice constituted what Domingo calls "the medieval flavor" ("el sabor de la Edad Media").³⁴ The Islamic occupation of Spain from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries intensified this syncretistic culinary tradition, and its receptivity to food and gastronomic pleasure.³⁵ It was indeed syncretistic and hybridized, for the Christian Roman and Muslim Arabic culinary traditions resulted from prior historical explorations and exchanges with both the Asian and African continents.

Therefore, complex elaborations of food, and a taste for spice, were central aspects of Spanish cuisine before the Spaniards' arrival on the American continent. In fact, as interdisciplinary research shows, one of the main reasons for Christopher Columbus's explorations – which eventually took him into the American continent – was this European craving for "exotic" spices.³⁶ George Armelagos also shows that "the

³³ Xavier Domingo, "La Cocina Precolombina en España," in Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, 17–28.

³⁴ Xavier Domingo mentions the following products and spices that made up this medieval flavor: "la albahaca, la canela, el cardamomo, el culandro, el clavo de olor, el comino, el tomillo, el hinojo, la galanga, el jengibre, el hisopo, el perejil, la hierba luisa, el romero, la menta, la mostaza, la nuez moscada, el oregano, la pimienta negra y la blanca, la ruda, el azafrán y la salvia." *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁵ For a further analysis of the Islamic culinary influence on Spanish cuisine, see Antonio Riera-Melis, "El Mediterráneo, Crisol de Tradiciones Alimentarias: El Legado Islámico en la Cocina Medieval Catalana," in Massimo Montari (ed.), *El Mundo en la Cocina: Historia, Identidad, Intercambios*, trans. Yolanda Daffunchio (Barcelona: Paidós, 2003), 19–50. Riera-Melis analyses five main products that were brought to Spain by the Arabs: sugar (from canes), rice, a variety of citrus, eggplants, and spinach. These ingredients were later on imported into America, and also influenced the dietary customs of the New World, from which Mexican cuisine grew. On the influence of Islamic culinary traditions on Spanish cuisine, see also Salinas Campos, *Gracias a Dios que Comí*, esp. 86–117.

³⁶ "Este gusto por las especias exóticas, uno de los motivos del viaje de Colón, se prolongó durante muchos años y caracterizó la cocina española del tiempo de la Casa de los Austria. Eran sabores que costaban mucho dinero y abaratar su precio, importando las especias por rutas más cortas y al mismo tiempo acabar con la dependencia de los

Europeans had an insatiable desire for spices, and this was a great impulse for [trans-Atlantic] exploration.” This craving, he argues, was “even greater than their greed for gold.”³⁷ And they did find in America a true paradise of gastronomic delights, particularly with products such as chilies, chocolate, corn, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, and so forth. America’s export of its products to the Old World further influenced the latter’s cuisine and dietary customs.³⁸

5 Subversive *Molli*

It is thus significant to find “early” stories of the creation of *molli* located in the kitchen space of convents and monasteries. Of course, these narratives often assumed a colonizing form, obliterating the entire history of pre-Colombian cultures and belief systems, including dietary and gastronomic indigenous traditions. From the baroque period to the present, the narrative that most Mexicans know of *molli*’s origin is the one constructed during the colonial period; the earlier pre-Colombian origin has been obliterated from people’s memories and knowledge. Yet, in a subversive manner, dietary and eating traditions from the original inhabitants persisted. The ancestors’ culinary traditions stubbornly became practices of resistance to colonization.³⁹ So, while there is a process of transgression and transformation within the practice of making *molli*, there is also a powerful sense of continuation and determination despite subjugation. In the religious communities, encounter

comerciantes de las ciudades-republicas italianas, de los turcos y de los portugueses, entró en línea de cuenta, sin duda, a la hora de financiar el viaje de Cristobal Colón.” (“This taste for exotic spices, which was one of the reasons for Columbus’s explorations, was prolonged for many years and became a characteristic of Spanish cuisine in the time of the House of Austria. These were expensive spices, and lowering their price – by importing them via commercial short-cuts, as well as by ending the dependence on traders from Italy, Turkey, and Portugal – doubtless became an important factor at the time when the decision was taken to finance Christopher Columbus’s expedition.”) Xavier Domingo, “La Cocina Precolombina en España” (my translation). Domingo’s argument echoes the main line of reasoning of Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*.

³⁷ George Armelagos, “Cultura y Contacto: El Choque de Dos Cocinas Mundiales,” in Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, 105–29: 108; my translation from the Spanish original.

³⁸ For an analysis and an index of food products that traveled from the American continent into the rest of the world, see Héctor Bourges Rodríguez, “Alimentos Obsequio de México al Mundo.” Long (ed.), *Conquista y Comida*, contains a series of essays exploring this aspect of native food products and their influence on world cuisine.

³⁹ For a study of the history of Mexican resistance to colonization through food and dietary customs, see esp. Esteva and Marielle (eds.), *Sin Maíz no Hay País*, Pilcher, *Vivan los Tamales!*, and Salinas Campos, *Gracias a Dios que Comí*.

and clash, subjugation and subversion, took their most extravagant shape during this process of reinvention of this gastronomic hybrid. For, in the *molli*, not only do a plurality of cultures and culinary traditions, spices, and food elements come together (often conflictingly so), but gods and goddesses as well. If in pre-Colombian times *molli* was a material expression of divine alimentation, in the colonial and post-colonial periods it intensified its divinizing presence in a more eccentric fashion. Somehow the *molli* managed to continue being, throughout the centuries, a “spiritual alimentation,” but more stridently so, and in an even more highly flavored, spicy manner.

During the baroque period in Mexico, most culinary inventions were created by women, with a very few exceptions, such as Fray Pascual Bailón. In a male-dominated society where women were not allowed to assume roles of leadership in public spaces, female attempts at empowerment and self-expression often arose in the kitchen (both in the convents and homes).⁴⁰ In colonial times, space (both geographical and architectural) was delimited and manipulated by a strong sense of hierarchy, including class, race, and gender control.⁴¹ In a patriarchal colonial world such as that of Mexico, the kitchen and the refectory were virtually the only spaces where women were able to express themselves.⁴²

Such was the case, for instance, with the famous erudite Mexican nun Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz (1651–95).⁴³ From her early childhood (at about 3 years of age) Sor Juana learned to read and write.⁴⁴ Then, during

⁴⁰ For a study of the historical development of the kitchen in Mexico see Margarita de Orellana, *Los Espacios de la Cocina Mexicana, Artes de México*, 36 (1997).

⁴¹ On the issue of the control of space by means of colonial power, see e.g. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, 2nd edn. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

⁴² This patriarchal control of space and restriction of women to the kitchen was well established in the history of Christianity. For example, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that during Middle Ages women (particularly religious women) had a complex relationship with food and at times displayed eccentric eating behavior. Many of their mystical experiences were intensely somatic and closely related to food and the Eucharist. Walker Bynum explains that this somatic relationship with food (feasting and fasting) was indeed a form of empowerment in the midst of marginalization. See *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁴³ Most of this reflection on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and her relationship with cuisine and the kitchen in a patriarchal society is taken from Angelo Morino, *El Libro de Cocina de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, trans. Juan Pablo Roa (Mexico City: Editorial Norma, 2001).

⁴⁴ For biographical and textual analysis on Sor Juana, see Sandra Lorenzano (ed.), *Aproximaciones a Sor Juana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005).

her childhood and early adolescence she managed to “trick” the male-dominated system of her time by dressing as a boy and sneaking into school in order to obtain an education that was exclusively designed by and for men. When she was 18 years old she entered the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico and had a prolific writing career, but not without controversy and even public scandal. The ecclesiastical hierarchy eventually forbade her to write or to visit her beloved library and lecture halls, and subsequently she was sent – as a punishment – to the kitchen, where women “were supposed to be.”

But, somehow, Sor Juana survived, and transformed the kitchen into a space of creativity and liberation. There is a book of Mexican recipes attributed to her. Sor Juana even considered the culinary arts to be a higher form of knowledge and wisdom than that provided by traditional philosophy and theology. She once remarked that if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a good deal more.⁴⁵ In her *Libro de Cocina* Sor Juana included her own recipe for a *molli* named *cle mole de Oaxaca*. Sor Juana’s perception of the correspondence between food and knowledge suggests that – as we shall see in the next chapter – there is a relationship between *sabor* and *saber* (savoring and knowing). Perhaps the kitchen and the library are in fact united by one and the same splendid desire: the desire to both savor and know. Sor Juana truly incarnates what Roberto Goizueta describes as the religious world-view of the Mexican baroque era: an experience that is “sensually rich,” an experience of divine nearness as being deeply embodied.⁴⁶ In this organic and symbolic world both the intellect and affectivity, the rational and the sensual, the human and the divine are intimately connected. Moreover, Ada María Isasi-Díaz is right in pointing out that women’s empowerment in the midst of disempowerment has been possible because of their “turning the confinement/spaces to which [women] are assigned

⁴⁵ “Qué podemos saber las mujeres sino filosofías de cocina? Bien dijo Lupercio Leonardo, que bien se puede filosofar y aderezar la cena. Y yo suelo decir viendo estas cosillas: si Aritóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito.” (“What could we women possibly know if not philosophies of cuisine? Lupercio Leonardo said it so well: that it is certainly possible to both philosophize and season a supper. And I also always say when I see this sort of thing: had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a good deal more.”) Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1997), 838–9 (my translation). For an English version, see Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Answer/La Respuesta*, ed. and trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: Feminist Press, 1994), 75.

⁴⁶ Roberto Goizueta, “The Symbolic Realism of U.S. Latino/a Popular Catholicism,” *Theological Studies*, 65/2 (June 2004), 225–74.

into creative/liberating spaces.”⁴⁷ Thus, this illustration of Sor Juana demonstrates how in the *molli* we find not only a harmony that suggests a festive reality, but also a struggle and subversion. It is hot, spicy, *picante!* Thanks to women, the culinary art that is the Mexican *molli* has been preserved and re-created, but not without pain and struggle.

6 Making *Molli* and Alimentary Theology in the Making

As we have seen in the previous sections, the Mexican *molli* displays and brings attention to multiple interactions of ingredients, narratives, and traditions that coexist in one and the same dish. In using *molli* as a paradigm, I would like to coin the phrase *alimentary theology*, a theology that is more attentive to and welcoming of the multiple layers contained and implied in the making of theology. This is a theology that not only pays closer attention to matters related to food and nourishment, and the many ways they can relate, inspire, and inform theological reflection. Most importantly, it is an envisioning of theology *as* nourishment: food as theology and theology as food. Alimentary theology is envisioned as food for thought; it addresses some of the spiritual and physical hungers of the world, and seeks ways of bringing about nourishment.

For the same reason, alimentary theology envisions theology as a culinary art that is not only aesthetic, but, further, points to the necessity of integrating an ethics and politics that question our systems of global exchange. Theology as food for thought is not a disembodied abstraction, but a performance that increases awareness of the body, allowing corporeal and material experience to become a primary source of reflection.

⁴⁷ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “*Burlando al Opressor. Mocking/Tricking the Oppressor: Dreams and Hopes of Hispanas/Latinas and Mujeristas*,” *Theological Studies*, 65/2 (June 2004), 340–63: 346. There is of course, the possibility of reading too much of liberation and empowerment into the events of Sor Juana’s life. As Vanessa Ochs has pointed out to me, it could have been quite otherwise. There are, however, elements in her life of what Isasi-Díaz calls “mocking/tricking the oppressor” which could be interpreted as a reaction to marginalization: she dresses as a man to get into school, she writes on matters related to food and has high regard for cuisine, and so on. To what extent were Sor Juana’s actions instances of empowerment? My guess is that this is a question that can be answered from different angles. I am inclined toward a more positive reading since foodways manage to survive despite colonization (here as the obliteration of culture and values), as was the case with pre-Colombian cuisine. Such a reading I propose, following Isasi-Díaz, does not undermine the aspect of suffering and struggle either in Sor Juana’s life or in the survival of *molli*.

This embodied alimentary theology is rooted in a multi-dimensional vision of the body, incorporating individual, social, political, human, ecological, cosmic, and divine bodies. As one ultimately learns how to make a good *molli* after hours, days, and years of preparation and practice, so it is with theology practiced as a culinary art that is only learned in the actual making, a constant process of refining. Like cooking, alimentary theology is a theology in the making: a performance that involves both contemplation and action. However, alimentary theology, like a good *molli*, is not just about the skillful crafting (*poiesis*) of a gift. *Molli* and alimentary theology are gifts to be shared in the form of nourishment among concrete communities. Like making an intricate dish, this alimentary theology can be said to be a complex “culinary art”: a theological vocation that is simultaneously gift and reception, preparation and sharing, contemplation and consumption, materiality and transcendence, human and divine.

In what follows, both here and in the rest of this book, I shall explore the meaning of alimentary theology, its constitutive ingredients, the implications it calls attention to, and why I consider Mexican *molli* to be paradigmatic for envisioning theology as alimationation.

As I have already noted, Mexican *molli* is the result of many ingredients, elements, and realities coming together. If theology is seen as a culinary art, one can also become aware of its analogy to the culinary extravagance of *molli*. Theology envisioned as nourishment brings greater attention to the many converging ingredients and processes involved in the making of theology: revelation, tradition, faith, history, cultural background, popular devotional practices, and so forth. In addition, and similar to the way in which *molli* is made, this understanding of alimentary theology is also aware of the inherent situatedness or locality (*locus*) that contributes to the making of theology; or, to be more precise, alimentary theology is aware of the many situations and different localities that play a significant role in the making of theology.

However, while there might be many ingredients in the making of both *molli* and theology, there are some ingredients that predominate over others. In the making of both *molli* and alimentary theology not just “anything” goes. In *molli*, for instance, the chilies and the chocolate are indispensable. Speaking from a Catholic viewpoint, my particular articulation of this alimentary theology contains two indispensable elements: the element of God’s desire to share divinity with humanity (through the Creation, time and space, the Incarnation, the cross and resurrection, the Eucharist, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so on), and the believer’s desire to unite with God in and through communal

relationships.⁴⁸ These two desires (divine and human) coming together play an important role in the making of alimentary theology: they are the “chilies and chocolate” of theological practice. This blending of desires, as in the *molli*, does not create mere homogeneity, but rather constructs a milieu of heterogeneous unity. And this unity creates the love between God and humanity, wherein – in the words of Pope Benedict XVI – both “remain themselves and yet become fully one.”⁴⁹

Just as *molli* is a point of contact between different elements, I argue that alimentary theology communicates this reality of in-betweenness, a hybrid discourse of a divine–human encounter. It is discursive because it is an act of communication between God and creation, and the communication expressed between people. Yet I agree with Graham Ward, who remarks that “discursivity” means more than verbal (written and spoken) expression. Paraphrasing Ward’s reflection on the discursive dimension of theology, this alimentary theology that I articulate is a hybrid discourse that also includes a great variety of expressions (expressive acts) that communicate, for example, “music, painting, architecture, liturgy, gesture, dance, in fact any social action.”⁵⁰ And, certainly, one must include food, cooking, and digestion in these diverse forms of communication. As in *molli*, the multiple elements in these expressive acts may reflect a struggle more than a harmonious ensemble or fusion. What exactly is this desire between God and humanity about? Whose voice is it? Whose authority are we talking about? Who is included or excluded in this hybrid discourse? Rather than offering facile solutions, this understanding of theology may instead open further questions and critiques, a space of unfinished and unresolved conflicting discourses. Alimentary theology exposes us to a space of indeterminacy, fragmentation, and ambiguity. These unresolved issues often create an experience

⁴⁸ Because this view is partial and limited I assume that not all Catholics or other Christians will agree with my prioritization of elements in this particular religious tradition. If this is the case with those who belong to the Catholic or wider Christian tradition, I imagine that disagreement with my viewpoint might be even greater among those from other religious traditions. Again, this is only my personal experience and viewpoint, and not a generalization. This same applies to what I say about (alimentary) theology in the rest of this book.

⁴⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, taken from the web: <www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html>.

⁵⁰ Ward goes on to describe discourse as “that expressive act that intends or means and is therefore immediately caught up in the receptive processes of translation and interpretation. Discourse as *expressive act* becomes inseparable from practices, and practices from hermeneutics” (emphasis in original). Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

of frustration. For me, this experience of irresolution in theology usually brings about a sense of perplexity, similar to that of tasting *molli* when one is uncertain as to what ingredient is being tasted. What do we “taste” in a theological work? Like eating *molli*, this experience of taste in theology is often plural, a complex network of ingredients interacting without a final semiotic resting-place.

Because of the enormous complexity of *molli*, it is difficult neatly to categorize it. Is it a dish, an intercultural expression, a mixture of world-views, an inter-religious cacophony, or a gastronomic manifestation of a power struggle based on race, gender, and class? Even at the level of flavor and taste, it never completely rests with one particular palate’s identification of a specific ingredient. As soon as one is able to taste one ingredient, suddenly another taste arises, and then another, and so on. Without arriving at a final synthesis, there is always still more to taste, still more flavors to discover and experience. It is as if the *molli* acts as a mobile signifier moving beyond the signified. A system of continuously displaced signs, for they point to other signs without final semiotic stasis. In *molli* there is an experience not so much of the “either/or” type, but rather the realm of the “both/and.” Better yet, in *molli* there is a dynamic sense of in-betweenness at a multiplicity of levels. In its continuous re-creation, *molli* becomes a paradigmatic example of José N. Iturriaga’s term “alimentary hybridization.” Such gastronomic eccentricity (of even mythical dimensions) is what makes *molli* so amazingly playful, so perplexing and pleasurable.

When talking of God it seems we must inevitably arrive at this experience of perplexity, for God is ultimately excess. God exceeds any discourse, including “official” ones. Signification falls short of its signified signs, for God perpetually and dynamically displaces God-self from any sign. Like the non-static semiotics of *molli*, God’s significations are likewise excessive, and extravagant. However, this does not mean that God’s signification is a perpetual deferral of meaning that ultimately leaves us dissatisfied, or famished. God’s signs are nourished by God’s plenitude and superabundant gifts.⁵¹ Here – and particularly from the scope of

⁵¹ This book will look at three main aspects of God’s nurturing signs. Chapter 2 will explore the aspect of phenomenology and knowledge constructions whereby God and humanity co-create signs. Chapter 3 will explore an ontological dimension of God’s nurturing of signs, particularly the perplexing sign of Being. Chapter 4 will look at how God’s nurturing of signs (such as manna) shapes a political body. For a further study of theology’s dependence on God’s nurturing signs which provides an alternative to post-modern nihilistic theories of meaning and signification, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

both the Incarnation and the Eucharist – sign and body dynamically co-arise in a gesture that brings about alimationation.

At the same time, *molli* is a product of human creativity, and a dish whose main purpose is not to be fetishized, but to nourish and to be shared in communal meals. Theology in general, and alimentary theology in particular, is also incarnational, human-made, and as such it attempts not to be a fetish that would make of God a static idol, but rather the result of a human dynamic quest for God, a human response to God's initial desire to become closer to humanity. Theology as alimationation is a discourse that expresses, and hopefully feeds, humanity's hunger for God's goodness, truth, justice, and beauty. This form of theologizing also highlights a communal dimension, for it initiates a complex communal *tropos*, and it is to be shared in the public space – always avoiding the temptation of too exclusive and individualistic purposes.

Both apophatic and cataphatic discourses are thus necessary for a theological feast that expresses God's own excess (a divine ineffability that exceeds both apophasis and cataphasis). While, on the one hand, God's excessiveness can never be reduced to language, symbols, concepts, and so forth, on the other hand God is also incarnational, and encountered in loving relations as well as in language, liturgy, and everyday practices – despite the limits and partialities that we always inevitably encounter. Both Silence and Word nourish the theological vocation.⁵² Simply talking about *molli* does not amount to the actual experience of eating it. Talking about God from a safe distance for the sake of preserving God's "purity" because of God's being "beyond" situatedness, leaves us empty and malnourished. God is also personal, loving, and sharing, and walks with humanity the pilgrimage of history, what faith believes and hopes to be God's orientation toward an eschatological future. Theology's extravagance is to become alimationation – alimentary theology. It must feed human hungers, both physical and spiritual. For this reason, alimentary theology is also intimately concerned with the concreteness of everyday life as well as analogical mediations, language, the body, materiality, and so on. Yet this situatedness is not the whole story. Without ever transcending situatedness, and yet because of its participation in the excess of divine desire, alimentary theology is also perpetually opened and unfinished. There is still more to taste, more flavors yet to discover.

Making *molli* is not an easy task, and I ask the reader to recall the description of this laborious process that I offered at the beginning of this chapter. It takes time, discipline, and personal engagement. It is

⁵² See e.g. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

more than merely following a recipe – although recipes are very helpful in providing guidance and for preserving traditions. But, more than a recipe, it is a meticulous crafting that could be compared to an art form, a culinary art.⁵³ Like making art, making *molli* involves a self-sharing: much of the cook's person is put into the *molli*, which is then further shared in the communal banqueting. Likewise, alimentary theology takes time and effort, and often great discipline and sacrifice.⁵⁴ While, on the one hand, alimentary theology is attentive to preserving traditions and institutions (and here there is a certain analogue to recipes); on the other hand it is also open to being transformed by fresh ingredients (different forms of feedback), such as inter-religious and interdisciplinary dialogue, for instance. Moreover, like the experience of preparing *molli*, alimentary theology requires self-involvement, and there is a sense of

⁵³ “Crafting” and “creation” are distinct notions. In general terms one could say that, while the former requires technical skill and is often understood as mechanical production, the latter implies a greater sense of personal involvement and is usually closely related to aesthetics and – in the Christian tradition – to divine making. Graham Ward points out that both crafting and creating are founded on a notion of *poiesis*, a creative action, that Christianity also understands as “a power to create anew, to transform; it announces a production not a mindless reproduction” (Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 8). Ward follows Robert Miner's preference for a Christian understanding of *poiesis* as “creating,” rather than “crafting.” A principal reason for this preference has to do with a theological account of creativity which is analogous to divine creation, while crafting is thought to relate to a technical, mechanical, and even “mindless” making. Speaking from a Mexican viewpoint, I have a more positive understanding of “crafting” than Ward and Miner. In Spanish the word for crafting is *artesanía*, and it is closely related to art-making. Since pre-Colombian times Mexican *artesanos* (craftspeople) have been greatly respected because of their highly developed gift for creating objects that are a reflection of their personal involvement and deep sensibility, even passion. This is less a Western understanding of crafting (like that of Ward or Miner) and more a syncretistic European understanding that inherits a pre-Colombian view of craftsmanship as an organic cosmic (and thus implicitly sacred) knowledge, and which is intrinsically corporeal. For an investigation of the related subjects of the body, craftsmanship, and cosmovision, see Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *In Praise of the Mesoamerican Body, Artes de México*, 69 (2004).

⁵⁴ For instance, those who have undergone the process of preparing for doctoral studies may know how painful at times this enterprise is (particularly those doctoral students who are married and have children). For a Dominican friar, becoming a theologian is never seen as mere individual achievement, but rather as a communal task, and for the purpose of serving the church and the wider world. Some theologians may suffer harsh criticism, imprisonment, torture, and even death because of the political and social implications of their theological statements (Bishop Romero in Central America, who was eventually killed for the political implications of his preaching, comes to mind). And in a mostly male-dominated academy of theology, women theologians can speak of this ostracizing experience.

self-fulfillment. There is a joy (at least in my own experience) of sharing the product. This is a “kenotic delight,” a non-possessive rejoicing in the feeding of the concrete – not abstract – Other.

7 Body and Flesh: Incarnation and Alimentation

Earlier it was proposed that theology is a hybrid discourse of divine and human desires. While this blending of desires activates the intellect and spirit, it is nevertheless, like cooking and eating, a deeply embodied experience and practice.

Growing, cooking, and eating food are intense somatic or bodily experiences that bring about knowledge. Lisa M. Heldke argues that this somatic knowledge, unlike modern epistemological categories that set the mind over and against the body, actually constitutes a broader and non-dualistic “bodily knowledge” that takes place within food practices.⁵⁵ I hope that this reflection on *molli* may increase awareness of the need for theology to become more attentive to the reality of the body, both at the individual and communal levels.⁵⁶ The body is constitutive of our being. We are in the world as embodied beings. The fact of embodiment is an important element that underlines our experience of our inner and outer selves. We are never totally divorced from the reality of embodiment, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson rightly argue.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ “For theories like Descartes’ [which] conceive of my body as an external appendage to my mind, and see its role in inquiry as merely to provide a set of (fairly reliable) sensory data on which my reasoning faculty then operates to produce objects of knowledge. But growing and cooking food are important counterexamples to this view; they are activities in which bodily perceptions are more than meter reading which must be scrutinized by reason. The knowing involved in making a cake is ‘contained’ not simply ‘in my head’ but in my hands, my wrists, my eyes and nose as well. The phrase ‘bodily knowledge’ is not a metaphor. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that I *know* things literally with my body, that I, ‘as’ my hands, know when the bread dough is sufficiently kneaded, and I ‘as’ my nose know when the pie is done.” Lisa M. Heldke, “Foodmaking as a Thoughtful Practice,” in Deane W. Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke (eds.), *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 203–29: 218.

⁵⁶ In the next chapter I will explore how the senses, particularly those closest to the act of eating such as smell, touch, and taste, display this complex reality of embodiment and connectivity with the world. For an analysis of the senses in general and the sense of taste in particular, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). Chapter 4 will also reflect on the political dimension of the body.

⁵⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

Without the body it is impossible to experience anything at all, and no thought process take place in a bodiless mind.

But what exactly does it mean to be a body? Are we all ontologically similar because of this reality of embodiment? The body is not a mere pre-social or absolutely determined biological entity, but – like the *molli* – is constructed, shaped, and even “invented” by society. The body is “socialized” by a series of social constructions such as gender, race, class, age, and so forth. We behave bodily according to these social constructions, which are relative to particular localities, and thus the body does not have a universal or essential character. As a social construction, the body could be also seen as a *symbol* of society; it acts as a microcosm of society. Particular communities and social groups construct symbols and concepts that are explicitly concerned with the body: notions such as male/female, sacred/profane, nature/culture, healthy/disabled, and so on. Thus, to theologize in light of a notion of alimentation means to speak from within this complex reality of the body: I embody my own theology, and theology also shapes my own body.

In Christian theology, this already complex reality of the body is linked with a notion of the “flesh,” such as is found in John 1:14, which proclaims that *the Word became flesh*. This is both at the core of John’s theology and the foundation of Christian theology. Flesh is the most primary sense of embodiment. It lies within the realm of the experience of extreme proximity with humanity’s *pathos* that, as Michel Henry describes it, is “pure affectivity, pure impressionness, that which is radically immanent auto-affectation.”⁵⁸ God’s incarnation takes this human flesh at its primordial materiality in order to divinize it, from within and not from without. In this act, the God–human conjoins what appears to be a mutually exclusive ontology of divinity and humanity, and maximizes a new ontology that is non-dualistic but participatory and reciprocally related. This is a new ontology revealed as *relationality*.⁵⁹ As a living organism, the flesh performs in the body a sharing with Life itself – which is already divinized, but in a way that does not do violence to or transcend its own human condition, but which rather intensifies and celebrates its humanity. This reality of human flesh delighting in a divine embrace posits difference not as in-difference, but as sharing and return.

⁵⁸ My own translation from the Spanish version by Michel Henry, *Encarnación: Una Filosofía de la Carne*, trans. from the French original, *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair*, by Javier Teira, Gorka Fernández, and Roberto Ranz (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 2001), 159.

⁵⁹ In chapter 3 I will further explore this relational ontology and its intimate connection with nourishment.

Moreover, from a Christian perspective one could make the conjecture that, because of Christ's flesh as non-indifference to flesh as such, this divine embrace (the Incarnation) allows us to envision a dimension of *affectivity* and *affinity* as being prior to sheer difference.

Christ's flesh aligns itself with human flesh. In the flesh, Christ blends God's desires with the desires of humanity. Like *molli*, Christ's flesh displays a dimension of a divine-human *mestizaje*, and one which is profoundly encultured. He is born, grows up, experiences hunger and thirst, he loves and cries, becomes tired, suffers, and dies – within the reality of human flesh and within a particular cultural symbolic world-view.⁶⁰ God is not indifferent, but shares divinity within and at the core of the human flesh. From within, God continuously walks humanity's historical *pathos* and further transforms it into a present and future story of resurrection and deification. By virtue of Christ's incarnation, flesh is perpetually in flux; it is the in-betweenness of the divine-human relationality. In this vision, humanity is invited to become co-creator of this human-divine *poiesis* (a making that is also performing, a creative practice).⁶¹

The aesthetic dimension of the flesh brings about an ethical demand, for it depicts the beautiful as the good (that which is beloved and desired). It is all-inclusive. Yet the painful fact is that in human society (and Catholic and Christian social groups are not an exception to this reality) some bodies are rejected and cast out because their embodiment is depicted by those in power as “imperfect” and/or “impure”: black and brown bodies, female bodies, disabled bodies. and so on.⁶² In spite of this human rejection, Christ identifies with the excluded one (Matthew 25): the one who is desired, and embraced with love by God – not rejected. Christ transforms a social cycle of violence, and reveals self and other as mutually constitutive by virtue of divine kenosis. Christ's

⁶⁰ This analysis of the relationship between flesh and culture is inspired by Graham Ward's notion of “culture,” which articulates it as “a symbolic world-view, embedded, reproduced and modified through specific social practices.” Although Ward does not address here the particular issue of the relationship between flesh and culture, I believe that one does not exist in isolation from the other. Hence, the aspect of syncretism or *mestizaje* that they share, for both – like *molli* – are not monolithic, but “polyphonic, hybrid, and fragmentary, always being composed and recomposed.” Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 5, 6.

⁶¹ I will say more about *poiesis* in the next chapter.

⁶² For a reflection on how in fact this violent politics of exclusion of the “imperfect bodies” echoes a colonial Christian missionary agenda, see Sharon Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission: Religion and the Politics of Disablement,” in, Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (eds.), *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004). I am grateful to Mayra Rivera, who generously gave me a copy of this book.

reversal speaks of peace and reconciliation in a world of violence, exclusion, and destruction.

The Catholic narrative proclaims that in Christ's "in-fleshing" the world reaches its climax and is enacted in the Eucharist wherein God becomes food and drink in and through materiality. As we shall explore in the next chapter, in eating this divine food, sensuality – particularly the senses of touch and taste – is intensified in a way that nothing material is surpassed. Catholic theology envisions the Eucharist as the body of Christ that, in its act of self-sharing offered up as alimentation, transforms the partakers into Christ's own body, and calls us to feed both physical and spiritual hungerers.

The Eucharist, like *molli*, is an alimentary hybrid, a complex interplay of multiple narratives.⁶³ The eucharistic body (the hybrid of humanity and God, materiality and divinity) displays its own corporeality as a sharing of differences whereby difference is not eliminated but celebrated: peoples of all races, classes, genders, and sexual orientations, the healthy and the sick – all are united by the one and excessive divine perpetual love that nourishes body and soul.⁶⁴ I said earlier that one drop of *molli* contains the entire world, for it brings together different nations, cultures, races, and so on. Likewise, the eucharistic body nourishes in its act of sharing and celebrating difference. The catholicity of the body celebrates a corporeal reality bringing together both the local and universal bodies that coincide in the one body of Christ. Under this eucharistic construction, the "alien other" is no long rejected but included. Still more challenging, the other is alien no longer. In the Eucharist, self and other are not juxtaposed, nor do they collapse into one another, but difference is preserved in a stage of mutual constitution. That is the challenge that the Eucharist presents – particularly to those who belong to the Catholic church. I painfully realize that there is still much to learn in this.

⁶³ See e.g. Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Smith rightly argues that the Eucharist does not exist in its own "purity," but it is rather a syncretism, a hybrid constructed by many traditions and narratives (such as Jewish, Greco-Roman, and, later, patristic, medieval, and so forth). And I must add: the Eucharist continues to be reshaped by history, cultures, and communities; simultaneously, the dynamism of the Eucharist also continuous to shape or "make" the Church. See also Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

⁶⁴ There is not space here to discuss the soul-body relationship. In the Catholic tradition, this non-dualistic relationship is very important: it actually serves as a re-intensification and celebration of the body, the material, and thus can become a solid foundation for sacramental theology.

8 Daily Bread and Daily Hunger

In word and deed, Jesus Christ – the one who enjoys eating and drinking with the excluded ones – teaches about a God who nourishes and who celebrates love and solidarity with humanity in the midst of a shared table.⁶⁵ He teaches us to tenderly call God *Abba*, and as God’s children to ask the loving Father for our daily communal bread, *el pan para todos* (bread for everyone).⁶⁶ Jesus Christ (the God-human) is the “master of desire,” who incarnates God’s own desire to feed all hungers, and who promises that the kingdom of heaven will be a lavish banquet, a big fiesta.⁶⁷ Yet this feasting will not wait until that eschatological promised day. The Christian narrative proclaims that, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, God sends the Holy Spirit as *donum*, the procession of a divine gift that is a desire to practice reciprocity within an all-inclusive communal feasting (a practice already anticipated within the intra-Trinitarian community). In and with the Holy Spirit, Christianity learns that *imitatio Dei* is in fact *imitatio Trinitatis*. In and with the Holy Spirit, community already takes place here on earth, at the locus of a collective table that offers solidarity to all, particularly to those who physically and spiritually most hunger in the world.

Theology in general, and alimentary theology in particular, cannot be indifferent to the question of why there are so many people in the world who are malnourished, and indeed starving. Frei Betto rightly insists on reminding us of the great number of human bodies dying of hunger and malnutrition. And this horrific fact reflects people’s indifference and selfishness:

According to the FAO, 831 million people are now living in a chronic state of malnutrition. Every day, 24,000 die of hunger, including a child under five years of age every minute. Why is it that there are so many campaigns around other causes of premature

⁶⁵ For a New Testament analysis of table-sharing see Rafael Aguirre, *La Mesa Compartida: Estudios del NT desde las Ciencias Sociales* (Bilbao: Sal Terrae, 1994), and also Xabier Pikaza, *Pan, Casa, Palabra: La Iglesia en Marcos* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1998).

⁶⁶ See Ricardo López, and Daniel Landgrave (eds.), *Pan Para Todos: Estudios en Torno a la Eucaristía* (Mexico City: Universidad Pontificia de México, 2004). See also Ricardo R. López, *Comer, Beber, Alegrarse: Estudios Bíblicos en Honor a Raúl Duarte Castillo* (Mexico City: Universidad Pontificia de México, 2004).

⁶⁷ See Éloi Leclerc, *El Maestro del Deseo: Una Lectura del Evangelio de Juan*, trans. from the French *Le Maître du désir* by Javier Sánchez (Madrid: PPC Editorial y Distribudora SA, 1997).

death, such as cancer, accidents, war and terrorism, without the same being true of hunger, which produces many more victims than these? I can think of only one explanation, and that is a cynical one: that, unlike those other causes, hunger is a respecter of class. It is as though we, the well fed, were saying, “Let the wretched die of hunger; it doesn’t affect us.”⁶⁸

Hunger has a physical and existential as well as an ethical-political dimension, as we will explore further in chapter 4. Humans are hungry beings, for without eating we die of starvation. But hunger is also a reflection of ethics and politics, for it involves power relations, and the sharing (or the lack of sharing) of God’s gift.

From this ethical-political dimension, hunger reflects society’s practice of the disempowerment of certain groups and their lack of communal vision, virtue, and *caritas*.⁶⁹ Why is it that hunger is predominantly related to issues of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and social class? Patricia Hill Collins advocates paying greater attention to Black feminist thought as an example that does not ignore these co-related factors. Hill Collins also argues that Black feminist thought contributes to the development of what she calls a “politics of empowerment,” precisely because it challenges thinking – to develop an epistemology – from the perspective of just and unjust power relations.⁷⁰ This challenge must also move beyond mere epistemology; it must integrate a theological vision of nourishment and communal sharing as the locus of divine self-expression.

Bread, and the lack thereof, has to do with the power of sharing and the potential refusal to do just that. It is therefore a profoundly theological issue, for it has to do ultimately with God’s gift and the sharing

⁶⁸ Frei Betto, “Zero Hunger: An Ethical-Political Project,” *Concilium*, 2 (2005), 11–23: 12.

⁶⁹ I agree with Frei Betto that alleviating hunger is not just about giving food to people, or making donations, but requires a more holistic approach that targets structural change: see *ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁰ “First, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about unjust power relations. By embracing a paradigm of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, as well as Black women’s individual and collective agency within them, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance. Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates concerning the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge. Offering U.S. Black women new knowledge about our own experiences can be empowering. But activating epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and that enable us to define our own realities *on our own terms* has far greater implications.” Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 273–4 (emphasis in original).

(or refusal to share) of this gift with one another. That is why the “Zero Hunger” project was an act of commitment that expressed the voice of dozens of religious denominations (Christian and non-Christian) in the shared conviction that “hunger results from injustice and represents an offense against the Creator, since life is the greatest gift of God.” They also expressed their belief that “to share bread is to share God.”⁷¹ For, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 3, creation is not devoid of God’s sharing. This implies that, without God, the possibility of overcoming hunger does not exist. Intrinsic – not extrinsic – to creation there *is* God whose sharing (enacted in concrete human communities) brings about nourishment. This is also another reason why alimentary theology could be a counter-secular practice in the midst of a starving world, devoid of God.

Moreover, as the Mexican *molli* is composed of the personal touch of numerous individuals, communities, and traditions, so alimentary theology invites us to bring our own selves into it, to add our own “spices,” and so make it more spicy. Theologians should offer their own particular situatedness, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, and social class. The making of this theological *molli* shall also include people’s own stories of hope, suffering, and struggle. Spiciness is a kind of subversion: its sharpness is *picante*, it stirs our tongues and mouths and awakens us. That which is spicy makes us alert, attentive, responsive – responsible. Thus, to bring our own spice into the theological *molli* also implies the acquisition of a *piquant*, or prophetic voice. This prophetic, “spicy” theology urges us to speak up about the concrete instances when communities fail to feed people’s hungers, when there is a refusal to welcome otherness (both human and divine) to the communal feasting table.

Making *molli* and the making of alimentary theology is not an attempt to collapse all differences and boundaries into a homogenizing category of *nouvelle cuisine*.⁷² In *molli*, and in the making of alimentary theology, harmonious difference is welcomed and celebrated. This notion of harmonious difference is akin to John Milbank’s argument in favor of the construction of a “gothic complex space,” which allows the intersecting

⁷¹ Cited in Betto, “Zero Hunger,” 11.

⁷² The warning in this statement regards homogenization more than the notion of *nouvelle cuisine* as such. Undoubtedly, *molli* was and is continually being re-created. So is theology. In this sense, both *molli* and theology are always open to newness. Thus, the notion of *nouvelle cuisine* could well apply to both. I am not arguing in favor of a return to a lost “origin.” I want to suggest that alimentary theology, like *molli*, is not about homogenizing, or becoming a monolithic entity, but is instead about being polyphonic, heterogeneous: allowing difference and contrasts, ambiguity and perplexity.

and even overlapping of bonds, ways of life, and identities.⁷³ In addition to complex space, alimentary theology integrates Talal Asad's notion of heterogeneous time, which includes:

embodied practices rooted in multiple traditions, of the differences between horizons of expectation and spaces of experience – differences that continually dislocate the present from the past, the world experienced from the world anticipated, and call for their revision and reconnection. These simultaneous temporalities embrace both individuals and groups in complexities that imply more than a simple process of secular time.⁷⁴

But rather than constructing a milieu of sheer difference with a tendency or potential to develop into total indifference, extreme antagonism, or even violence, a Christian-Catholic perspective envisions the eucharistic ecclesial body as a concrete communal locus for this interaction of complex space and time, and which allows differences to coexist in peace and continuous harmony (just as the ingredients in the *molli* interact). As we shall see in the chapters that follow (particularly chapters 3 and 4), the eucharistic body envisions all human beings and creation not as autonomous items existing in isolation – and even in antagonism to – from one another, but rather, as being different expressions of one cosmic, heterogeneous divine banquet.

This notion of heterogeneous space and time does not imply that alimentary theology is a new sort of religion made up of all religions. Neither is it a theology made up of all theologies cooked together in one single pot. It is instead an attempt to think about the complexity of food and its lack in the world. And food is not “just food,” but an expression of multiple connections within our bodies, the earth, local and global economies, and finally God. Food is also a construction of people's identities: national, political, economic, social, cultural, religious, somatic, sexual, and so on. Thus, alimentary theology envisions theology as food and food as theology: for both theology and food exemplify the need for a communal practice of delight and sharing.⁷⁵ Not surprisingly – as

⁷³ See John Milbank, “Against the Resignations of the Age,” in Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale (eds.), *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993).

⁷⁴ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 179.

⁷⁵ In very general terms, this is the main thesis throughout L. Shannon Jung, *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

I have pointed out – food has been one of the most paradigmatic symbols in many ancient (the case of *molli*, the Aztecs, for instance) as well as current religious practices.⁷⁶ Most importantly, alimentary theology is an invitation to bring together people’s desire to eradicate spiritual and material malnutrition, which again have to do with bodies – individual, communal, ecological.

This is an issue deeply rooted in the daily practices of sharing and refusal to share. Being attentive and caring not only requires us to reflect upon relationality and reciprocity among individuals and societies; it also requires us to become aware of humanity’s relationship with animals, plants, and the planet’s resources in general.⁷⁷ Alimentary theology is critical of any form of power that is exercised as the violent subordination of others, but also of the ecological power whereby humanity exploits the rest of the created order. In saying this I do not mean to imply that humanity does not enjoy a special place in creation, including over the angels, as the biblical narratives and Christian tradition teach. Rather, in saying this I want to denounce the exercise of power as coercion and annihilation, and thus as the betrayal of humanity’s vocation to be good stewards of creation and to promote harmonious and peaceful relations, including ecological ones. Humanity must be part of the larger ecological body, for it is not an “other” to us. I am aware that this coercive power has often been exercised by Catholics and Christians throughout history.⁷⁸ Because of this reality, alimentary theology insists on *metanoia*, a continuous process of conversion incarnated in daily practices of *caritas* that must start from within.

I envision alimentary theology as a practice of power that is non-coercive, but communal, rooted in nurturing, loving care for one another, and imitating God’s own radical gesture of love. I hope this will move us beyond a social practice of mere mutual “tolerance” and instead welcome an effort to a simultaneously local and global ecological embodiment of communion expressed as hospitality and mutual nurturance. Nurturing embodies *caritas* for everybody. The making of alimentary theology may hopefully become a true sharing of food for thought, soul, and body – the human delight in God’s self-sharing.

⁷⁶ See e.g. *Las Religiones y la Comida*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, trans. Lluís Miralles de Imperial Llobet (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 2002).

⁷⁷ For a further reading on ecology, religion, and genre, see Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para Repensar el Conocimiento y la Religión* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2000).

⁷⁸ See e.g. Catherine Keller’s arguments in her essay, “The Love of Postcolonialism: Theology and the Interstices of Empire,” in Keller, Nausner, and Rivera (eds.), *Postcolonial Theologies*.

Like the Mexican *molli*, the making of alimentary theology requires faith, creativity, imagination, and God's inspiration, just as Sor Andrea and Fray Pascual Bailón were inspired in making the baroque *mole*. Alimentary theology integrates God's gift that surpasses calculation, and is forever open to transcendence – God's actuality in surplus. Alimentary theology, like cooking a delicious *molli*, is not at all passive, but an active engagement and openness to divine inspiration. It is also interesting to note that both Sor Andrea and Pascual Bailón came up with the idea of the *molli* in the midst of pressure and anxiety, even chaos. Likewise, alimentary theology often results from uncalculated actions, a sudden "event" that arises from a divine donor (God's plenitudinous sharing); and sometimes even from chaotic contexts, as church historians remind us. With the reception of divine inspiration we do not know the full implication of what has been inspired. But this, of course, requires deep discernment in faith, and also a continuous practice of charity, situated within the landscape of hope.

In the making of Doña Soledad's *mole*, nothing was more satisfying than the moment when it was finally shared among friends in a big, convivial fiesta. As was discovered by many of the dinner guests at my farewell party, the experience of savoring this ancient dish was truly ecstatic. I would like to add that, for me in particular, this experience of preparing, sharing, and eating *molli* increased my awareness of a communal sense of ecstasy, for it truly opened a horizon of new ways of understanding self and other.

From a perspective of alimentary theology I would like to explore this notion of understanding further, and argue that there is a special connection between savoring and cognition, and that this is a connection that becomes more evident through eating. If this is so, one could also argue that knowledge displays a dimension of participation in the known via the senses – most particularly by touch and taste at the moment of eating and drinking. And what of growing in understanding of God? Could one also say that knowing God implies a dimension of "savoring," which then might imply as well an aspect of participation in God? This form of cognition might resemble the mystics' experiences of God that are often reported to be intensely somatic, even "erotic." This alchemy of divine understanding, this "eros of cognition" is, then, an aspect that alimentary theology will now explore in the next chapter.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ The term "eros of cognition" is borrowed from Philip Blond's introduction to id. (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998).