

Sacred Blood: The Liturgy of Human Sacrifice (in a Christian Context)

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This paper is about worship, the worship that the early Catholic missionaries to colonial Mexico imported, imposed, and reinvented with the cooperation, creativity, and even impetus of the native populations, principally the Aztecs. Also known as the Mexica (the term they used for themselves), these Mesoamerican people of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries inhabited the central plateau around Lake Texcoco and the sacred metropolis of Tenochtitlan, the site of present-day Mexico City. As speakers of the Nahuatl tongue they also carry the name Nahuas, and it was their language that the mendicant missionaries – Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians – adopted as the *lingua franca* of the evangelization enterprise.

Inculturation

The friars not only adopted the Aztec language for texts, but they also adopted and adapted selected signs, symbols, metaphors, and religious practices of the people they came to convert. This process of critical adaptation to the ethos or mores of a people was called *accommodatio* (accommodation) in the colonial period, and more recently “inculturation,” but it goes back to the first centuries of the Christian era.¹

Douglas Hayward identifies three conditions for a successful inculturation of the Christian message: (1) the manner of communicating the Gospel must reflect the communication styles or forms appropriate to the recipient culture; (2) the language and imagery of the Gospel must reflect those of the recipient culture, particularly its picture-language; (3) and the content of the Gospel must be such that it addresses the needs and concerns of the people of the recipient culture.²

Christianity has always been indebted for some of its ritual and formal aspects to the religious languages, visual and verbal, of the pagans to whom the Gospel message was addressed. The same can be said of sixteenth-century Mexico. In many ways the conversion of Mesoamerica paralleled that of the ancient Roman Empire, not the least of which was the fact that both occurred during times of pandemics and contagious diseases.³ It also paralleled the conversion of the Germanic Saxons in the eighth century by Charlemagne and his missionary monks. That evangelical enterprise produced what was perhaps the greatest attempt at inculturation in the first millennium, the *Heliand*, a paraphrase of the four Gospels not only in the Saxon language but also with all the colorful metaphors of a macho warrior culture, with parallels between Christ and Woton, and the spirit-world of forests, sacred groves, forts, clans, chieftains, and thanes.⁴

In the Americas of the mid-sixteenth century the exercise of inculturation was the product of a selective adoption and remodeling of Christian ways resulting in a Nahua Christianity.⁵ Early Nahua-Christian texts, for example, commonly use the word *teotl* (god) for the Christian *Deus* or *Dios*; more surprisingly, they borrow epithets belonging to individual Aztec deities and apply them to the Christian Trinity: *ipalnemohuani*, “He by Whom One Lives”; *tloque nahuaque*, “Possessor of the Near, Possessor of the Surrounding”; and *ilhuicahua tlalticpaque*, “Possessor of Heaven, Possessor of Earth.” These epithets imply universality, omnipotence, and human dependence, and thus were easily applied to the new deity of the friars.⁶ Such a process of

selective “recycling” was a planned and deliberate search for cultural compatibility to create an indigenous Christianity, and although done under the political hegemony of the European invaders and the religious hegemony of the Christian clergy, obviously many of the Amerindians became proactive partners in the evangelization, especially in sacred music and art.⁷

In large measure this indigenous or Nahua Christianity was accomplished on the level of the religious imagination, both visual and verbal. Liturgy, whether Aztec or Christian, uses the language of metaphor and the imagination.⁸ But metaphors are also the most difficult elements of a cultural system to translate, hence better to adopt the metaphors of the recipient culture. By applying the rich root metaphors of the Amerindian world – including sunlight, the human heart, and human blood – to Christ crucified, the missionaries hoped not only to convince their new flock of the veracity of the Christian story, but also to instill in them what ISM Professor Aidan Kavanagh used to call right worship (ortho-doxia) with its corresponding right living; in other words, a holistic Christian orthodoxy.⁹ In this project, they found willing informers, interpreters, scribes, translators, and liturgical assistants among the native scholar-elite, some of whom had formerly been Aztec priests.¹⁰ We might say that in the more “liberal” and experimental late medieval and pre-Tridentine period, the missionaries were instinctively operating out of two unspoken principles: ritual substitution, and dynamic equivalence.¹¹

The first principle, ritual substitution, refers to removal and replacement, or what I have called “recycling” in the case of Mexico.¹² It can be traced back to Pope Gregory the Great, who, when he sent Augustine of Canterbury to the pagan English, instructed him not to destroy the pagan temples but to baptize them, and even to re-incorporate animal sacrifices now as Christian picnics.¹³ As I use the term here, ritual substitution was a means of avoiding a ceremonial vacuum caused by the demolition of the Aztec temples, which were useless for Christian worship, and the suppression of their cults. Conjointly, a creative assimilation of select material components of the recipient culture enriched the liturgical order of worship: feathers, costumes, musical instruments, rhythms, etc. In my opinion, the liturgical aspects of the evangelization were probably the most palpable and successful part of the cross-cultural missionary enterprise.

Feathers, for example. In pre-Conquest days, feathered headgear and vesture had been the exclusive possession of the gods, nobility, and heroic warriors: it was the supreme sign of honor and distinction. Feathers were also associated with sacrificial victims: as bird-like messengers to the gods their heads were decorated with featherdown. Later, under the tutelage of the friars, feather-artists created Christian crosses, mosaic panels, and even bishops’ miters in colorful feathers, using especially those of the divine quetzal bird, and even in gilded feathers, thus transferring notions of divinity, royalty, and even sacrifice to the Christian images (see figure 1 on the accompanying CD). Some outdoor crosses display plumed terminations on the crossbeam and at the headpiece, according them the same signs of distinction and regal honor¹⁴ (fig. 2).

The second principle, dynamic equivalence, refers to language and the translation of texts as an attempt at a nuanced rendering to capture the meaning of the original in equivalent forms of the “receiver” language. Early on in Mexico the evangelizers realized that they could not translate word-for-word into Nahuatl because such translations either made no sense or had no impact on their hearers. This is evident in the fact that upon his arrival in Mexico in 1524, friar Andrés de Olmos immediately set to work on compiling a list of metaphors and figures of

speech that the “old ones” (the native priests and elite) had been using.¹⁵ Thus, dynamic equivalence aims to transmit the message of the original text to the recipient by using comparable linguistic components. It is especially successful with rich picture language. For example, the Aztec neophytes apparently had difficulty understanding the biblical concept of “the Son of Man” as found in the book of Daniel and in the Gospels, so friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his elite scribes replaced the expression “Son of Man” with “the Son of the Virgin,” making it overtly christological. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of the Virgin and drink his blood, you can not have life in you” (John 6:53) made the act of receiving Christ’s sacramental body even more carnal. Or again, to clarify the meaning of the phrase in the Lord’s Prayer “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” the translators rendered it “forgive us our trespasses only after we have forgiven others.” This is a significant change of meaning, in my opinion.¹⁶

In Mexico, comparisons to feathers, jewelry, tortillas, and even to the ancient gods themselves, made the impact of Christianity tangible, colorful, and gave it, so to speak, a Mexica taste. In fact, “taste” might be a very apt metaphor here because Aztec theology was deeply imbued with a sense of human existence as a cycle of foodstuffs feeding the gods, the cosmos, and returning to feed human beings.¹⁷ This concept, so strange to us Westerners, was later to season the Nahuas’ taste for Jesus Christ.

Mesoamerican Transubstantiation

The Indians [of old] had in their possession the whole Bible written in pictures and in hieroglyphics. With the passage of time they garbled them, applied the stories of Scripture to themselves, and so set their own history and religion on its head. What was the religion of the ancient Mexicans after all, but a Christianity confused by the passage of time and by the equivocal nature of their hieroglyphs? I have made a thorough study of their mythology, and in essence it amounts to God, Jesus Christ, his Mother, etc. . . . Since the Spaniards did not recognize Christianity when expressed in a different language and liturgy, and since enormous abuses had been introduced into it, they set out to destroy the very same religion they professed.

~ Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, O.P.¹⁸

While no one today holds to the naïveté of this nineteenth-century Dominican in believing that the Aztec religion was a wayward form of primitive Judeo-Christianity, it was not so far-fetched a thought for the sixteenth-century friars. One common belief was that the New World Indians were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel who finally settled in the Americas, and whose legitimate animal sacrifices were perverted there by Satan, transforming them into human sacrifices.¹⁹

The Franciscans in particular were quick to observe those similarities between Catholicism and native religious expression. In the initial and optimistic period of the evangelization, such coincidences were believed to be part of a remote plan of Divine Providence to prepare the Amerindians for orthodox Catholicism. These practices also confused the friars, raising in their minds the possibility of an earlier missionary campaign and subsequent demonic perversion, but opened up points of mutual religious association as well, for missionaries and Mexica alike.

The Aztecs were an extremely religious people, totally immersed in a sacred cosmos. They were

pious polytheists whose animistic religion included a pantheon composed of a bewildering number of male and female deities, some of whom bore superficial affinities to the Christian God, Christ, and the saints. These polymorphous gods not only personified earth, wind, water, lightning, fertility, and death, but those forces were the gods themselves.²⁰ Indeed, for the Mexica, who lacked a notion of the profane, the cosmos was alive and imbued with divine energies. Devotees encountered those energies in the use of psychotropic drugs, in the intoxication of pulque beer, in ecstatic dancing, and above all in ritual performance. This transmutable vitality could be found in all of matter, which was living and active, constantly feeding other living matter in the cosmos and needing to be fed.

The Aztecs understood that while they ate the fauna and fruits of the earth, they in turn were consumed as “first fruits” by the same landscape and its deities who ate them. The cosmos, with its sacred energies, was an edible reality for human beings, but humans were also the foodstuffs of the sacred landscape. Reciprocity was the operative principle as “debt payment” for vitality, and the necessarily violent consequence was human sacrifice. Debt payment or satisfaction (*neixtlahualiztli*) was a commonly used metaphor for sacrificial offering. In the pre-Conquest period it was possible to have a deputy-victim sacrificed in one’s stead. For example, a person who survived a serious illness used to sacrifice a slave, or even his own child, to pay the debt payment; in this way he paid for the death that he avoided. Or again, when a slave personifying the patroness of weavers was killed, all the women of the corporation died somehow through the victim, provided that all had contributed to her purchase, and had assimilated themselves to her by their penitential behavior of fasting, dancing, and self-bleeding.²¹ In Mexica belief, one person could “die for the many”: *ut unus moriatur homo pro multis* (see John 18:14).

Debts could also be redeemed by divine sacrifices. By such payment the gods gave their lives and liquids to men and women as food and drink, and humans in turn offered their lives and liquids to the gods as sustenance. To borrow a line from Aidan Kavanagh, we might say that blood was the elixir poured out “for the life of the world.”²²

The Aztecs believed that the human heart they were tearing from the bodies of warriors was a sanctified substance, the flesh of the gods, or, metaphorically put, a nopal – “a precious eagle-cactus fruit.”²³ This corresponded to the fact that the human actor, when he/she performed in liturgical action and was sacrificed, became a *teotl ixiptla*, an icon of the god.²⁴ These human beings encapsulated or incarnated the deity; they became “the perfect god within a corporeal covering.”²⁵ This was heightened by their regal treatment as divinities, by the precious green jade jewelry that they wore, reminiscent of the verdant earth, and by their elaborate costumes that included corn tassels, or feathered headbands made to imitate corn tassels²⁶ (fig. 3).

Mesoamerican peoples often considered humans to be another form of maize or flowers. They are born to die and become sustenance in sacrifice and ritual cannibalism, but they also contain within themselves the seeds of regeneration.²⁷ Corn, that most common of foods for the Mexica, was also a god in their pantheon, and a figure of speech for sacrificial eating. As nourishment for human beings, corn was the symbolic sustenance for all living entities; in human sacrifice people became metaphoric corn tortillas for other beings. In fact, human beings were said to be born in corn; in the womb a baby was understood to be surrounded by maize gruel. Human life was literally “cooked into existence,” like bread in the oven.²⁸ Thus at some point in a biological cycle of life one was either eating or being eaten. As one author puts it: “Aztec life was based on an interactive reality that food promoted in the relationship between

life and death. Food was the vehicle of transubstantiation from one reality to another and therefore was an appropriate ritual articulation of transition between realms of being.”²⁹ Or as my colleague at Harvard University, David Carrasco, puts it, “the gods eat us and we eat the gods.”³⁰ Human beings are twice transubstantiated: once into proxies of the divine, and a second time into a meal for gods and other humans. *Theophagia*, the ritualized eating of a god, thus became a divine *anthropophagia*, cannibalism.

Catholic Christians, of course, had their own theology of substantive transformation and anthropophagic sacrifice, a theology that Aidan Kavanagh expressed in his book *On Liturgical Theology*. In fact, I am quite sure that the Aztecs would have loved Aidan Kavanagh and his unique way of expressing the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Genesis says that we began in a swamp teeming with life, but that something went vastly wrong one evening at dinner. Apocalypse says that the difficulty was finally resolved into something called the Banquet of the Lamb. [The Letter to the] Hebrews tells how the resolution was accomplished, not in an orchard set in a pleasant countryside but in a butcher shop located at the city’s center. The world’s story from beginning to end pivots upon this resolution, a resolution the faint of heart, the fastidious, and the squeamish find hard to bear. Suburbia prefers its meat wrapped in plastic, all signs of violence removed so as to reduce the necessity of entering into the dark and murderous transaction with reality which one creature’s giving up its life for another entails. . . . To slay rightly is to transact the inexorable business of life.³¹

Let us look at how this played out in the culture-contact and evangelization of sixteenth-century Mexico.

Aztec Baptism

Before the culture-contact the Mexica had a sort of pre-Christian ritual of baptism, and even circumcision. Their “sacrament” consisted of a ritual bathing of the infant in a river or fountain soon after birth, usually at sunrise, at which time the child was named. The purpose of the rite was for the child to be ritually born a second time. According to the chronicles the midwife “offered” the baby at four days to the waters as an oblation. At that moment an animistic entity, associated with the breath of the gods, entered the child’s body. The breathing-in (a type of insufflation) took place in the offering to the water. This action was purificatory, but not in the moral sense of removing an original sin. It was to expel bad influences from the newborn’s body, and to cleanse the animistic centers of the heart, head, and liver through water before inviting in those entities required for human vitality.³²

A second naming ceremony took place in the springtime when babies born during the previous year were brought to the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan (as Christ had been brought to the Temple of Jerusalem for his circumcision). There, the native priest made a small incision in the children’s earlobes with an obsidian knife, and in the penis, if they were male. A fire was then built, over which the temple priest briefly held the baby and symbolically roasted it like popcorn in order that the child might become future food for the cosmos. Through these two ceremonies the infant became fully human.³³ Therefore these pre-Christian rites had implicit correlation to godparenting, priestly activity, purification, dedication, sacrifice, and even eating corn tortillas. To the eyes of a naïve European, water, fire, breath, and bread looked ever so much like a parody of similar elements of Catholic initiation sacraments. Conversely, seen “from below,”

from the point of view of the Mexica, the sacrament of baptism would probably have appeared as a less dramatic imitation of long-established indigenous traditions.

Eucharistic Cannibalism

It should come as no surprise that the Aztecs also had had a practice of ritual eating that was misunderstood as a parody of Christian communion. The Nahuas practiced communion under two forms: one, ritual cannibalism in which small pieces of a ritual victim were ingested, and a second in which a miniature deity-impersonator made out of dough – a sort of gingerbread man, to use a modern comparison – was eaten.³⁴

In regard to ritual cannibalism, the human victims were the game-trophies won in the Flowery Wars that the Aztecs waged against their neighboring tribes. In their understanding a prisoner was captured by the grace of a god/goddess and so belonged to that divinity. The captive was not thought to be an enemy as much as a foodstuff, specifically corn that needed to be harvested in the battlefields of rival cities.³⁵ The most important capturing of human beings took place for the Feast of the Flaying of Men (*Tlacaxipeualiztli*) during the month of March. By his death the captive also became a comestible messenger to the gods, and so attained to a level of honor, and even divinity; he was momentarily transubstantiated into an image of the god (*teotl ixiptla*). During the ritual the victim's heart was extracted and placed in a *cuauhxicalli*, meaning "eagle bowl," from which it was symbolically transported by the solar eagle to the heavens³⁶ (fig. 4).

Thereupon they stretched them one at a time, down on the sacrificial stone; then they delivered them into the hands of six priests, who threw them upon their backs, and cut open their breasts with a wide-bladed flint knife. And they named the hearts of the captives "precious eagle-cactus fruit." They lifted the hearts up to the sun, the turquoise prince, the soaring eagle. They offered the heart to the sun; they nourished him with it. And when it had been offered, they placed the heart in the *cuauhxicalli*. And these captives who had died they called "eagle men."³⁷

After the sacrifice the body was rolled down the steps of the temple to dissect, cook, and communicate. Some sacrifices also took the form of holocaust offerings in fire (fig. 5).

Another communion day was held in the springtime. After the blood of the victims had been smeared on the doorposts of the temples and chambers of the gods, it was sprinkled on a corn-dough-man that represented the flesh and bones of the god. In a seeming foreshadowing of the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi, this impersonator in bread, called *tzoalli*, was vested in precious robes and carried around in procession. The dough-man was then cut into pieces, distributed, and eaten. It was held in great reverence and awe, and, like Viaticum, was even carried to the sick.³⁸

Thus we see that the notion of eating human flesh, or the flesh of a god-man under the guise of corn dough, was neither new nor (if you'll excuse the pun) distasteful to the Aztecs. Both were *teotlaqualli*, the "divine food" or "food of god." What is most intriguing to me is that the Franciscan liturgical scholar, Bernardino de Sahagún, recycled the very same Aztec term *teotlaqualli*, with all its sacrificial and bloody connotations, for the Christian Eucharist in his Nahuatl hymnal, the *Psalmodia Christiana*, for Corpus Christi:

Mother Church, you alone are guardian of the divine food (*teotlaqualli*), the holiest of sacraments that your guardian, that your leader Jesus Christ has kept for you....With sacred words our Lord Jesus Christ made tortillas and wine his body and his blood, the riches of the soul.³⁹

A Frenzy for Blood

Lest you think that this is all too gory, I would remind you that by the late Middle Ages blood was not only revered in Christian Europe, but the bloodbath from an exsanguinated Christ had moved to the very center of European piety. Devotional art and poetry were awash in blood; blood erupted in iconography and visions as well. Medieval mystics, in particular, made overt use of blood-imbibing and the language of Christian anthropophagy.⁴⁰ Around 1060 the reforming monk Peter Damian had a vision of Christ pierced with nails hanging on the cross, and wrote that “with my mouth I eagerly tried to catch the dripping blood.”

Most of the European visionaries were women who had come under the sway of the mendicant friars and their piety. Colette of Corbie, a fifteenth-century Franciscan tertiary, to whom Christ appeared as chopped meat on a platter, was warned in a vision that “the offences that people do against Jesus . . . tear Him into smaller pieces than the flesh cut up on this plate before me.” Catherine of Siena, a Dominican tertiary, articulated the emergent piety in a way reminiscent of the Aztec communion figures made of dough: “There is no way our appetite can be satisfied . . . except with His blood. . . . Only the blood can satisfy our hunger, because the blood has been mixed and kneaded with the dough of the eternal Godhead . . .”⁴¹ In their ecstasies mystics imbibed blood from the wound in Christ’s side, and they savored him in a sort of Christian cannibalism. Caroline Walker Bynum says: “[Medieval] women ate and became a God who was food and flesh. And in eating a God whose body was meat and drink, women both transfigured and became more fully the flesh and the food that their own bodies were.”⁴²

The reader may complain that I am using the word “cannibalism” in an equivocal manner, but anthropologists are quick to point out that cannibalism is always symbolic even if real. It is never just to do with eating but is primarily a medium for the maintenance, regeneration, and foundation of social order: related to notions of union, the acquisition of the deceased’s prowess, the release of the soul, etc. Were these topics that the friars avoided in their catechesis so as not to remind the Mesoamericans of their bloody past practices? This does not seem to be the case (fig. 6).

In Christian Europe the great welling-up of blood piety was manifested in grand altarpieces and life-size sculpture, in prayer cards, pamphlets, and broadsides. The ubiquitous image of the “Man of Sorrows” demanded some response from the devout believer, often in forms of self-inflicted pain. In Passion Week rituals Christ figures were often outfitted with bladders of animal blood that could be punctured at appropriate moments to display Jesus’ bleeding before the faithful.⁴³ This liturgical theater passed to the New World with the mendicant missionaries.

Holy Communion

Early in the evangelization process there were questions about the Indians’ readiness to receive Holy Communion. Some missionaries were of the opinion that the neophytes could not be admitted to the communion table because they had been too recently converted, or because they were incapable of knowing the value of the sacrament. Others thought that it was

impossible to make a general and sweeping judgment, and that it was reasonable to give communion to the Indians who asked for it. This was thought especially true when they had been confessing frequently for four or five years, and were able to distinguish between an unconsecrated *tlaxcalli* (literally, “tortilla”) and a consecrated *teotlaxcalli* (“godly tortilla”).⁴⁴

The earliest reference to the eucharistic bread in neo-Christian Nahuatl texts is the use of the words *iztac tlaxcaltzintli*, “little white tortilla,” which is, of course, an accurate description of how the communion wafer would have appeared to the Mesoamerican neophytes. An anonymous sermon of 1559 uses the term while at the same time assuring the faithful that it is something other than mere bread: “When during Mass it is said: ‘Indeed He is the true God,’ even though it appears as a little white tortilla (*iztac tlaxcaltzintli*). Indeed it is not a tortilla (*tlaxcalli*); indeed it is the very flesh of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁵

It would be a mistake for us to think that the word “tortilla” was used merely because it was the Mesoamerican maize equivalent of the wheat bread of the Old World. As we have seen, corn was also a god in their pantheon, and a figure of speech for sacrificial eating. In human sacrifice people became corn for other beings. In fact, the very act of making and kneading the dough, flattening it, and spreading it out (*uemmana* or *tlamana*) was also the meaning of the Nahuatl word “to sacrifice” a human being.⁴⁶ Therefore, the use of the word “tortilla” in the Nahuatl version of the Lord’s Prayer – “Give us this day our daily tortilla” – resonated with Nahuatl Christians, especially with women who were the tortilla-makers. It must have reminded them not only of eating tortillas and of nourishment, but also of making tortillas, and of another type of cosmic sustenance, human sacrifice. In a christianized context, a human being (Christ) could, once and for all time, be “spread out” in sacrifice like tortilla dough, and so become ritual food “for the life of the world.”

A page from the *Codex Tlatelolco* registers an occurrence in the year 1547: the installation of a tabernacle in the Church of San Francisco, Mexico City (fig. 7). Surrounding the eucharistic tortilla is a bonnet of divine quetzal feathers that is more than a decorative device. Green-blue quetzal plumes imitated the male efflorescence of the maize plant; hence, the sacred corn deity is once again intimated in the host. With its plumes the bonnet accords regal honors to the Christian tortilla – another way in which the Christian food was recast as the natives’ daily bread.

The Corn Christ

Christian artists carved outdoor crosses with images of corn on them (fig. 8) and created crucifixes whose corpus was made of corn (fig. 9). For the latter the framework for the body of Christ was a bundle of corn husks roughly covered with a mixture of corn-pith paste. After the figure was dry a fine coating of the paste was spread over it, like stucco, and modeled to bring out the rib system and facial features; then this was painted. The profuse blood was simulated by a compound of cochineal, a red liquid produced by insects that feed on the precious eagle-cactus fruit, the sacred nopal.⁴⁷ All of the ingredients were not only technically successful but also carried profound religious associations with pre-Hispanic divinities.

In a very Hebraic way maize had been one of the principal “first fruits” offered in the Mesoamerican temples, part of the sacrifices to the divine mouth of the earth deity. The Nahuatl word for maize dough is in fact “our sweet sustenance” (*toneuhcayotl*, similar to

medieval eucharistic hymns), and lent itself metaphorically for the flesh of Christ hanging on the cross or eaten in the Eucharist. As we saw above, Aztec images had also been formed of seeds, blood, and corn dough, and consumed in a manner similar to communion.

A wonderful visualization of the Eucharist is found in a pictographic version of the “Our Father” (fig. 10). In the second register on the left, illustrating “give us this day our daily bread,” a friar holds out the eucharistic tortilla to the faithful. In his left hand he holds a stack of tortilla-hosts that he has taken from the stepped altar further to the right (which is labeled *momoxtli*). The fact that this altar has all the appearances of an outdoor cross on its base is significant, for it demonstrates that the word for the Aztec altar of human sacrifice used here, *momoxtli*, has been recycled both for the cross-with-podium and for the Christian eucharistic table. Further to the right of the *momoxtli* two Nahua Christians eat their “daily tortilla.” By an ingenious use of pictures and word-play the phrase in the Lord’s Prayer has been made to refer both to the liturgical host and to the daily bread eaten in the Nahua home – both of which are understood as *tlaxcalli*, “tortillas.”

The Altar of the Cross

Notions of human sacrifice appear as well on outdoor crosses that the missionaries erected at crossroads and in front of the conversion-center churches. At Cuernavaca the cross in the atrium is imbedded in an ancient *cuauhxicalli*, the stone box used to hold the sacrificed humans hearts (fig. 11). The base of the cross, called *momoxtli* even today – that is, “altar of human sacrifice” – has corner spikes like the Jewish altar of holocausts in the Temple of Jerusalem.⁴⁸

At Nonoalco, an Augustinian mission chapel, the cross rises out of a stylized barrel cactus that is more than decorative (fig. 12). Human victims were impaled on the fishhook-like spikes of a barrel cactus before having their chests opened and hearts extracted.⁴⁹ In addition to the cactus base, the cross at Nonoalco has been carved with a heart at the crossing; this, in turn, was framed by a crown of thorns. Moreover, it had been erected on a platform that is a true *momoxtli*: a liturgical altar with stepped gradines and an insert in the tabletop for an altar stone, allowing Mass to be celebrated there.

Once again we see that the new Christian sacrifice of the cross modified and superseded the former human sacrifices of the Mexicas even while it continued their metaphors. The Augustinian friar, Juan de Mijangos, dealt with this new sacramental economy of human sacrifice in his Nahuatl devotional work, *The Divine Mirror*. After discussing the sacrificial practices of “our [pagan] fathers and our grandfathers in the time of the ancient way of living,” he turns to the once-and-for-all self-offering of Christ and reemploys the Aztec metaphor of sacrifice as “preparing the corn dough”:

First know that how today in our time...we spread out and make an offering to our Lord God of the honoured body and precious blood of his beloved honoured child, our Lord Jesus Christ, in Mass. It is as though with it we appease, we placate our deity and ruler, God, if he is angry with us because of our sins, because at Mass is remembered how for our sake he was crucified, how he was made to suffer burning pain because of our sins and faults, our great and abominable sins.⁵⁰

We note here the use of Mexica sacrificial vocabulary of being *spread out* like the corn dough of the tortilla, and the implied roasting on fire as food or holocaust.

In sum, the sixteenth-century missionaries to Mexico were confronted with a predicament. Being thoroughly Catholic pastors and theologians, they had to preach and teach the passion and the “right slaying” of Jesus Christ. There was no way that they could avoid addressing the topic of the voluntary sacrifice of one human being whose broken body and spilled blood were the very core of the message of salvation. Nor could they dilute the doctrine that this body and blood could now be ingested in ways that were not wholly different from Mexica practices of old. The emphasis on the sacrifice of the Mass as a re-presentation of Calvary, albeit unbloody, was particularly acute in the mid-sixteenth century when Protestant reformers were denying the sacrificial aspects of the Eucharist, and when the Council of Trent was insisting on it as dogma. It is clear that the friars wanted to condemn the rites of human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism, and demonize the ancient Aztec pantheon. However, I submit, the mendicants also needed to build upon the indigenous notions of sacrifice as a manifestation of an archetypal blood-debt satisfaction (*neixtlahualiztli*), as the restoration of balance between God and humankind, and as an act of spiritual feeding. They needed to rehabilitate them all in orthodox ways, both as correct doctrine and especially as right worship, “transacting the inexorable business of life”— as Aidan Kavanagh would say – in which Jesus Christ plays the part of the deputy-victim once and for all, and for the life of the world.

ENDNOTES

1. On the terminology of inculturation, contextualization, and indigenization, and the important difference between inculturation, enculturation, and acculturation, see Ary Crollius and Théoneste Nkéramihigo, *What Is So New about Inculturation?* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1984) 2-9.
2. Douglas Hayward, “Contextualizing the Gospel among the Saxons,” *Missiology: An International Review* 22 (1994) 439-53.
3. On this topic see Daniel Reff, *Plagues, Priests, Demons: Sacred Narratives and the Rise of Christianity in the Old World and the New* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) esp. 1-34, 124-29. Early chroniclers in America often made comparisons to ancient Rome.
4. G. Ronald Murphy, *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel: A Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and idem, *The Saxon Savior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 28 and 119.
5. Stephanie Wood, *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003) 13-14.
6. Louise Burkhart, “Doctrinal Aspects of Sahagun’s *Colloquios*,” in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, ed. Jorge Klor de Alva (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988) 67-68.
7. Gauvin Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 3-43, 183-98, and passim. Richard Pointer, “The Sounds of Worship: Nahua Music Making and Colonial Catholicism in Sixteenth-Century Mexico,” *Fides et Historia* 34:2 (2002) 25-44, calls this a “fellowship” between Indians and friars, the latter receiving spiritual sustenance from the natives who acted as their surrogate brothers.

8. For Christianity, see Mark Searle, "Liturgy as Metaphor," *Worship* 55 (1981) 98-120, and Margaret Mary Kelleher, "Liturgy and the Christian Imagination," *Worship* 66 (1992) 125-48. For the Mexica, see Kay Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) esp. 29-43.

9. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) 74-77.

10. Louise Burkhart, "The Amanuenses Have Appropriated the Text," in *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, ed. Brian Swann (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 339-55, and Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo, "The Painters of Sahagún's Manuscripts," in *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, ed. John Frederick Schwaller (Berkeley: Academy of America Franciscan History, 2003) 167-92; both emphasize the mediating role and creativity of the friars' assistants.

11. See Luis Balquiedra, "The Liturgical Principles Used by Missionaries," *Philippiniana Sacra* 30:88 (1995) 81-89.

12. See Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) 10, 204.

13. Bede the Venerable, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.30, and Gregory the Great, *Epistolae* 2. 76, both in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 77:1215-17. "The heathen temples of these peoples should by no means be destroyed, only the idols which are to be found in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the temples are well built, it is a good idea to detach them from the service of the devil, and to readapt them for worship of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God. And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this. So on the day of the dedication of the holy martyrs, whose relics are deposited there [in the former temples], let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of pagan shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision. Thus while some outward rejoicings are preserved, they will be able more easily to share in inward rejoicings. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors at one stroke" (my combination of several translations). The works of Bede, as well as those of Gregory the Great, abound in colonial Mexican libraries.

14. Lara, *City, Temple, Stage*, 154-57.

15. Andrés de Olmos, *Of the Manners of Speaking That the Old Ones Had*, ed. Judith Maxwell and Craig Hanson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992).

16. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Evangeliarium, epistolarium et lectionarium aztecum* [c. 1540] (Milan: Jos. Bernardoni Johannis, 1858). On these equivalents see Jaime Lara, *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008)

56-58.

17. On this very complex and pervasive concept in Mexica understanding, see Philip Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1999); David Carrasco, "Cosmos Jaws: We Eat the Gods and the Gods Eat Us," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63:3 (1995) 429-63; and especially Read, *Time and Sacrifice* (note 8).

18. *Ideario político* (Mexico City, 1813), 11.

19. Lara, City, *Temple, Stage*, 68-69.

20. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Christianity and the Aztecs," *San Jose Studies* 5:3 (1979) 6-21. On Aztec piety, see Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) 220-22.

21. Arnold, *Eating Landscape*, passim; Carrasco, "Cosmic Jaws," 435: "[H]umans and god, in order to survive for 'a little while longer,' were constantly in the hunt for vital forces embedded in the bodies of gods, humans, and plants."

22. Kavanagh, *loc. cit.*

23. Nopal is the edible red fruit that grows at the end of a cactus stalk.

24. Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988) 1:376-77: "It was not men who died, but gods – gods within a corporeal covering that made possible their ritual death on earth. If the gods did not die, their force would diminish in a progressively aging process."

25. David Carrasco, "The Sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca," in *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes*, ed. David Carrasco (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991) 46-50.

26. Arnold, *Eating Landscape*, 84, 160.

27. On sacrifice as energy redirected from destruction, see Christian Duverger, "The Meaning of Sacrifice," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone, 1989) 366-85.

28. Arnold, *Eating Landscape*, 162.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Carrasco, "Cosmic Jaws" (note 17).

31. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 34-35.

32. López Austin, *Human Body*, 1: 213.

33. On children as metaphoric foodstuffs, see Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, 133 and 177: "Children, when they were in their first year of life, were symbolically captured like corn in the fields and

cooked over a fire in order to prepare them properly as little tortillas for the cosmos” (p. 177).

34. Carrasco, “Cosmic Jaws,” 435, “[the Aztecs] were constantly on the hunt for vital forces embedded in the bodies of gods, humans, and plants.”

35. Diego Durán, *History of the Indies* [1581], trans. Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas (New York: Orion, 1964) 231-32; see the interpretation in Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, 132-33.

36. In the Aztec pantheon the eagle was the supreme hunter in the sky. In medieval Christian lore, as in the writings of Gregory the Great, the solar eagle was a symbol of Christ.

37. Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, book 2, chap. 21; translated by Arthur Anderson (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1950-1982). On the inherent theatricality of these rites, with their costumes and props, see Martha Toriz, *La fiesta prehispánica: Un espectáculo teatral* (Mexico City: Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información Teatral, 2002).

38. Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites of the Ancient Calendar*, ed. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Hayden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971) 94-95.

39. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmódia Cristiana y sermonario de los sanctos del año*, ed. José Luis Suárez Roca (León: Diputación Provincial de León, 1999) xxxvii.

40. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

41. For “eating Christ” in the medieval period, see Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) esp. 79-139; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 53, 65, 273-75. The quotation from Catherine of Siena is cited in Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 165.

42. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 275.

43. Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 4. Similar bleeding props were used in Mexico during the 1539 production of *The Conquest of Jerusalem*, a catechetical play.

44. Jacob Baumgartner, *Mission und Liturgie in Mexiko* (Schöneck/Breckenried: Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1972) 1:231-36; Osvaldo Pardo, *Origins of Mexican Catholicism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004) 136-58. On the neologism *teotlaxcalli* and similar ones for communion created for the Nahuatl Christians, see David Tavárez, “Naming the Trinity,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 9:1 (2000) 21-47.

45. Tavárez, “Naming the Trinity,” 24.

46. Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, 144-45 and 176.

47. Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, *El cristo de Mexicaltzingo* (Mexico City: Dirección de Monumentos Coloniales, 1959) 9-19; Sofía Velarde Cruz, *Imaginería michoacana en caña de maíz* (Morelia, México: Conacultura, 2003) 53, 57-58.

48. See Lara, *City, Temple, Stage*, 150-75.

49. Human sacrifice over a barrel cactus (*Echinocactus grusonii*) is attested in Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 3. Around Nonoalco the barrel cactus grows at high altitudes on hilltops, which made it a choice place for religious rituals, and precisely where missionaries later planted crosses.

50. Mijangos, *Espejo divino*, translated in Vivian Díaz Blasera, "Instructing the Nahuas in Judeo-Christian Obedience," in *Nahuatl Theater*, ed. Barry Sell and Louise Burkhart (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004) 1:102-3; italics mine.

FIGURES

1. Feather artists. (From Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, ed. Paso y Troncoso, 1905. Public domain.)

2. Atrial cross at Huandacareo, Michoacán. (Photo © J. Lara.)

3. Scenes of captives and human sacrifice. (Sahagún, *Historia general*.)

4. Heart sacrifice. (Sahagún, *Historia general*.)

5. Human holocaust. *Codex Vaticanus Latinus 3738*, plate 77. (From *Manoscritto messicano vaticano 3738, detto il Codice Rios*, 1900. Public domain.)

6. Franciscan friar preaching with pictures of Christ's Passion. (From Diego Valadés, *Rethorica cristiana*, 1579. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.)

7. *Codex Tlatelolco*, colonial almanac, page for the year 1565. (Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City, MS 35-39. Used with permission.)

8. Atrial cross at Tizayuca, Hidalgo. (Photo © Diana Roberts. Used with permission.)

9. Calpan, Puebla. Corn-paste crucifix. (Photo © J. Lara.)

10. *MS Edgerton 2898*. The Lord's Prayer. (The British Library. Used with permission.)

11. Atrial cross and cuauhxicalli at base at Cuernavaca, Morelos. (Photo © J. Lara.)

12. Atrial cross at Nonoalco, Hidalgo. (Photo © J. Lara.)

Jaime Lara taught at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music from 1995-1997 and from 1998-2009, and chaired the program in religion and the arts. His interest in liturgy, missiology, architecture, and iconography is evident in three books: City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain (2004), Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico (2008), and The Flowering Cross: Holy Week in an Andean Village (2009), this last with the photographer Robert Lisak. Professor Lara was recently awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Senior Fellowship, and is currently the Samuel H. Kress Senior Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The occurrence of human sacrifice can usually be related to the recognition of human blood as the sacred life force. Bloodless forms of killing, however, such as strangulation and drowning, have been used in some cultures. The sacrificial offering of humans to a god has been well attested only in a few cultures. In what is now Mexico the belief that the sun needed human nourishment led to the sacrifice of thousands of victims annually in the Aztec and Nahua calendrical maize (corn) ritual. Some early Christians were falsely accused of cannibalism, consuming sacrificial victims at nocturnal feasts, a misunderstanding probably due to the secrecy surrounding the Eucharistic rite and the use of the words body and blood. Sacrifice is the offering of food, objects or the lives of animals or humans to a higher purpose, in particular divine beings, as an act of propitiation or worship. While sacrifice often implies the ritual killing of an animal, the term offering (Latin *oblatio*) can be used for bloodless sacrifices of food or artifacts. For offerings of liquids (beverages) by pouring, the term libation is used. Scholars such as René Girard have theorized that scapegoating may account for the origins of sacrifice.