

Juana de la Cruz's Heavenly Banquet: A Utopian Way of Thinking about Food

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Introduction

In this work I propose to discuss ecstatic and utopian visions of the heavenly banquet, focusing on the figure of Juana de la Cruz. This visionary Spanish woman, who was born in 1481 and died in 1534 in Toledo, was a Franciscan tertiary (and later nun) in the *beaterio* of Cubas de la Sagra. She had the fame of being a “living saint,” a term coined by Gabriella Zarri (1990 & 1996) to refer to certain Italian women whose influence at the Court helped delineate a model of feminine holiness between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the sixteenth century. Sor Juana's contemporaries (including King Fernando II and the Great Captain Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, who came to visit her) and later generations considered her holy; in fact, she received the title of Venerable.¹

Although today figures like Juana de la Cruz are quite unknown outside the scope of the Church and Women's History, in their time visionary *beatas* (or tertiaries) were recognised as people of great spiritual authority. Juana composed a book of visionary sermons, *Libro del conorte* (ca. 1509), transcribed by her fellow nun María Evangelista with some help from other Franciscans, who contributed as well to compile the book of Juana's life (*Vida y fin de la bienaventurada virgen sancta Juana de la Cruz*, first half of the sixteenth century).² Also surviving is a work written by nuns from her convent, the *Libro de la casa y monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Cruz* (second half of the sixteenth century). But it is especially in her book of revelations, *Libro del conorte*, where Juana speaks extensively of the heavenly banquet. Indeed, in her visionary sermons she describes a paradise filled with celestial *agape* meals, dances, and musician angels playing trumpets. Thus, I would like to consider here how utopian heavenly banquets are depicted in this formidable text, and ultimately to contrast them with the demands that extreme fasting made on visionary women's bodies.

Heavenly banquets, visionary women and fasting

Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love.

Song of Solomon 2:5

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

Isaiah 55:2

The imagery of the heavenly or Messianic feast comes from the Holy Scriptures and is an influential concept in Christian theology. Banquets were described both in the Old Testament, such as the famous episode of the quails and manna that rained from heaven (Exodus 16: 1-36) and others that involved sharing food with God (Genesis 18:1-8), and in the New Testament, where we find scenes of common meals like the wedding at Cana, the Last Supper and the meal that preceded the Ascension. As stated by Aragüés Aldaz (2010: 47), these feasts legitimated and sacralised the idea of a festive celebration around the table.³ Elsewhere, Jesus mentions eating and drinking in the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 8:11, 22:4, 26:29; Luke 13:29, 14:15, 22:28-30, 24:41-43), and we can find allusions also in other texts from the New Testament (1 Corinthians 10:3-4, cf. Romans 14:17; Revelation 2:7, 2:177, 19:9, 22:1-2).⁴

Frequently depicted in early Christian art but nowadays used sparingly except when explaining the Eucharist, the heavenly banquet refers to a place in heaven where the faithful go after death, in particular the martyrs. Correlated with times of deprivation and fasting, the liturgical calendar and the Spanish versions of the Golden Legend, the *Flos Sanctorum*, fixed the existence of various moments for joy and feast to savour what the saints of the *Flos* already were enjoying (Aragüés Aldaz 2010: 48). If in this mortal life Christmas and the period between Easter and the Pentecost feast allowed moderate and regulated meals, in heaven eating was not to be limited.

Nevertheless, these scenes of feasting did not depict that food excess which accompanied some common meals outside the convent, described with carnivalesque humour by shepherds in Juan del Encina's plays.⁵ In heaven they were bound to be not untidy but orderly pleasures, and the celebration of the Eucharistic meal was a heavenly treat expected to be enjoyed as a harmonic eternal banquet, a sacred feast ritualised in the company of singing angels. Through communion, there was the pleasure of eating together because, as highlighted by Barthes (2003: 163), the rites of communion seek a shared symbolic ingestion of food. Communion is transformed, thus, into a rite of inclusion, integration and imitation. The motifs of the heavenly meal and the Eucharist then take over a lexicon of conviviality permanently exiled from its worldly frame. These two feasts share some anagogic and allegorical elements, without subtracting the real and corporeal character that, under transubstantiation, holds the blood and body of Christ in the sacrament (Aragüés Aldaz 2010: 48).

As said by Enrique Sarabia (2004), there is no idea of paradise that does not include an abundance of food, and this imagery is so powerful that when imagining heaven many Christians almost forget that gluttony is a sin. Notwithstanding, the truth is that the heavenly treat would above all get the attention of those who go hungry, as is well observed by Camporesi (1988: 223):

In those very years, filled with the cries of famine, with climactic upheavals, with nature's calamities, unending rains, raging poverty, atrocities committed on wayfarers and children, cannibalistic excesses, there grew apace, across a web of forbidden dreams, descriptions of a sweet and beatifically serene life, ecstatic images of havens so scented as to stun the brain; of aromatic baths in celestial spiceries, of countries in which there is no need to eat, where "sweet and celestial food" trickles in a dew down gummy, resinous, honeyed and sweating trees, bestowing comfort and ineffable delight upon the privileged occupants of the sacred precinct.⁶

The living proof of this are female visionary texts. It is certainly striking to realise how some visionary women combined this imaginary with the extreme fasting that usually characterised their spiritual path. For medieval women's spirituality, fasting is a central element which, together with devotion to the Eucharist, frequently leads to mystical ecstasy. Ascetic exercises are omnipresent in hagiographies and revelations, and deprivation of food becomes in women's discourses a powerful symbol of their spirituality.

In hagiographies the effects of fasting certainly contribute to the visibility of these women, helping to read them as holy: in short, fasting allows the possibility of spiritual leadership. Traces of fasting on the female body, as traces of self-imposed penance, are signs of the divine presence, forms of externalising the intense and privileged experience of God, so that through their feeding practices women externalise the interior marked by the divine (Biddick 1993: 414). And so the new saints show interest in medieval hagiographies of Mary Magdalene and (later on) Catherine of Siena's (1347-1380) example of lengthy abstinence: visionary women thus agree in not seeing ordinary food as necessary (Sanmartín Bastida 2015: 95-96 & 103). Indeed, they become self-starving women who follow the example of their predecessors. For example, Rudolph Bell has called the habits of Catherine of Siena "holy anorexia," because the Italian Dominican learned to live practically without eating to achieve an ideal of fasting that ultimately challenged the Church's authority.⁷

Because of this ideal, for many of these women a delicious and hearty meal is imagined in heaven with serenity and without guilt: good taste would not then wake any sinful temptations, as for example happened to Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297), an extreme faster tortured by the devil with sensitive odours that came from foods she had never seen before (Bynum 1987: 142). Far from the heavenly meal is the culinary vision of hell of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-1282), who imagined those who engage in binge eating and binge drinking as thus condemned, among other punishments, to ingest bitter things instead of sweet (2004: 310). Instead, the heaven envisioned by these women is full of sugary foods, a place where eating and drinking are not measured, and they do not constitute a sin when excessive (as raised by Ecclesiasticus 37:29-31, or the fifteenth-century treatises *Castigos y doctrinas que un sabio dava a sus hijas*, Hernando de Talavera's *Tratado provechoso de vestir y calzar*, and *Enseñamiento de los religiosos*, which criticise any delight of the senses induced by delicacies).⁸

Contemplating the imagery of a heaven full of sweet and fragrant food in abundance (Camporesi 1988: 240 & 244-45) was then allowed and encouraged, and we should not wonder

that this food paradise caught the attention of fasting nuns in general and visionary women who exercised extreme abstinence in particular. The heavenly feast was no longer just about extolling the pleasures of the Eucharist but expanded the field of culinary enjoyment and recognised the good taste of other foods, not only spiritual but material.⁹

Juana de la Cruz's heavenly banquet

The most interesting example of this food figuration, the heavenly banquet, belongs to a Spanish visionary woman and extreme faster, Juana de la Cruz. This Castilian woman, as stated earlier, is not a saint recognised by the Church: in the year 1610 the process of her beatification began in Rome, but it was thwarted by the censors of both Juana's work, the *Libro del conorte*, and of the biography written by Father Daza.¹⁰

The *Libro del conorte*, written around 1509, responds to Cardinal Cisneros's command of getting Juana's visionary sermons copied, sermons that we are told were delivered over thirteen years. It seems that these speeches were collected at her cell by fellow tertiaries and, especially, by María Evangelista, who was also probably the main author of her manuscript hagiography (*Vida y fin de la bienaventurada virgen sancta Juana de la Cruz*). Juana's preachings usually lasted three or four hours during which she described and interpreted aloud the allegories of their imaginary visions, assuming the voice of each celestial character in a very dramatic way (Cortés Timoner 2004: 26; 2005: 612). Whoever attended the public disclosures of Juana (the audience of the trances was formed in part by important personages of the Court) would see the visionary *beata* interacting with scenes from sacred history in a time and space that reached toward transcendence.

Having said this, I must underline that a key element of Juana de la Cruz's holy performance was her ascetic behaviour. Juana had carried out extreme fasting since childhood that went back to no less than the stage of lactation (Daza 1613: 68). To help her, she placed in her mouth "ajenos amargos" [bitter wormwood] to remember "el amargor de la yel e vinagre que dieron a nuestro Señor Jesuchristo" [the bitterness of gall and vinegar which was given to our Lord Jesus Christ]; she also sometimes held in her mouth "una piedra algo grande que le dava dolor" [a somewhat large stone that gave her pain] and another time "un candelero mediano" [a medium candlestick], holding it "por la parte donde se pone la candela hasta que le dolían las quijadas" [by the part where one puts the candle until her jaws were aching] (*Vida...* fols. 13v-14r).¹¹ Her hagiographer María Evangelista also informs us that her early fasts were accompanied by a lack of sleep (an insomnia found in other visionary women):

Heran sus ayunos muy perfectos, e mucho assí espiritual como corporalmente, que no sólo usava dende su niñez ayunar ordinariamente comiendo una vez al día, mas aún estar tres días con sus noches sin tomar ningún mantenimiento corporal; y no solamente ayunava de comer, mas aún de dormir hazía penitencia e ayunava. (*Vida...* fol. 14r)

[Her fasts were very perfect, as spiritual as they were bodily, since she not only used to fast since her childhood, eating just once a day in the ordinary manner, but would even spend three days and nights without taking any bodily sustenance; and not only did she fast, but even did penitence and fasted instead of sleeping.]

However, this does not prevent Juana from describing the heavenly banquet with a remarkable enthusiasm. Perhaps because she was able to establish a strong connection between food and God, we are told that she eats thinking of God and claims meals as a way to reach the divinity.

Dezía muchas vezes esta bienaventurada que, quando comía o veía, tomava gusto en aquel manjar corporal pues savía ella Dios hera todas las cosas y en todas las cosas le podía hallar y con este pensamiento y contemplación que siempre tenía puesto en Dios en cada bocado que comía o trago que veía hallava dulçedumbres y gustos divinales, tanto que estando muchas vezes comiendo corporalmente se arrovaba en espíritu hasta ver los secretos celestiales y la visión de Dios e los spíritus angélicos. (*Vida...* fol. 21v)

[This blessed woman often used to say that while eating or drinking she enjoyed the taste of material delicacies since she knew that God was all things and in all things she could find him. And with this thought and contemplation which she had always focused on God, in every bite she ate or drank she used to find sweetness and divine tastes, so intensely that frequently while she was eating she entered into a trance and got to see the heavenly secrets and the vision of God and the angelic spirits.]

The correspondence between the quality of the soul and tasting is thus very present in her work:

Porque, así como la persona que está enferma y maldispuesta tiene el gusto de la boca muy amargo, y todo cuanto come, por dulce y bien guisado que sea, le amarga y le sabe mal, que así, por semejante, cualquier persona que tuviere el ánima enferma de pecados y el gusto amargo de incredulidad y dureza y malicia y envidia y otros pecados semejantes, no le sabrá bien esta santa escritura, porque cuanto ella es más excelente tanto menos la sabrán gustar los malos. (Juana de la Cruz 1999: II, 1472)

[For, as the person who is sick and bad tempered has a very bitter taste in the mouth, and all he eats, even when sweet and well-stewed, tastes bitter and bad, so any such person, having their soul sick with sins and the bitter taste of unbelief and hardness and malice and envy and other similar sins, will not taste this holy scripture as good, because the more excellent it is the less the bad ones will know how to savour it.]

For Juana to taste depends directly on the soul. Certainly this sensitivity towards food, shown in the central comparison between her work and a delicacy that can only be savoured by those who are close to God (II, 1472-73), could be due to her work as an assistant cook at her convent

(see García de Andrés 1999: 64), though it is of note that this role is shared (in a lesser degree) by other visionary women (Mazzoni 2005).¹² It is no wonder that her revelations, not always sought through meditation, could befall her at any quotidian moment, even while dedicated to kitchen chores. Juana took advantage of this, and in her sermons her practical wisdom about the process of preparing food turned the Lord into an expert in the kitchen. He, through her – because she insists on being the instrument through which the divine voice flows (Surtz 1990: 131-67) –, used cooking terms easily understood by Juana's fellow tertiaries, as this was a more familiar vocabulary than the usual one heard in sermons.

Que entonces fueron todos los santos y santas frutas cuajadas y sazonadas para comer, cuando con sus ejemplos y doctrinas hicieron tan gran fruto que todas la Santa Fe Católica dejaron harta y abastada de buenas vidas y obras, para que todos podamos aprovechar a nos y a otros con ella. Porque, aunque las flores son cosa que dan buen olor y buen parecer, no son cosas que puedan comer ni dar hartura a nadie como hace la fruta, cuando está cuajada y sazonada, que cualquiera la puede comer y cumplir su necesidad. (Juana de la Cruz 1999: I, 405) [Then all the saints became mature fruits seasoned for eating, when with their examples and doctrines they made such a great fruit that all the holy Catholic faith was full and heavy with good lives and works, so that it can be helpful to us and others. Because although flowers are something that gives good smell and good looks, they are not things that you can eat or that fill you like fruit when it is mature and seasoned, which anyone can eat and so meet his needs.]

Y dijo el Señor: Que, así como con la harina se encubre el agua para que la pueda masar y con la levadura la sazonan para que la puedan comer, así, bien masada la preciosa Humanidad tuvo por bien de se nos dar a conocer, porque le podemos gustar y entender. El cual gusto y entendimiento hace el Espíritu Santo, porque procede del Padre y del Hijo, como la levadura del agua y de la harina.

Y dijo el Señor, después de ser masada la masa, hace muchos panes y van todas tres cosas en un solo pan. Y dijo, que en esto podíamos entender ser tres en uno, encarnándose. (II, 834) [And the Lord said that, as water is covered with flour so it could be mashed and is prepared with yeast so it could be eaten, in this way the precious Humanity thought it would be convenient to show us himself as well-mashed so that we can taste and understand him. The Holy Spirit causes this taste and understanding, because it proceeds from the Father and the Son as yeast does from water and flour.

And the Lord said, after the dough is kneaded, it makes many breads and all three things go in one bread. And he said that in this we could understand there to be three in one yet incarnated.]

This ability to convert food into spiritual reason, so that every day becomes a daily feast, is also seen in Juana's life:

Como hera esta sancta virgen tan cuydada de aprovechar en el espíritu, quando travajava corporalmente endereçava con su pensamiento e limpia intención todos aquellos servicios e trabajos que hazía por la sancta obediencia a la persona realíssima e divina del poderoso Dios, e contemplando [...] los platos que fregava [...] pensava que heran de oro e de piedras preçiosas para en que comiese su Alta Magestad. [...] Y, quando guisava de comer, contemplava heran muy preçiosos y delicados manjares para que comiese su divina Magestad. (*Vida...* fols. 14r-v)

[As this holy virgin was so careful to benefit her spirit, when she was working she used to, by means of her thoughts and pure intentions, lift up to the most royal and divine person of the powerful God all those services and chores that she did out of obedience. And while contemplating the dishes she was washing she used to think they were made of gold and precious jewels so that his High Majesty could eat on them. And, when she was stewing the meal, she contemplated it as a very precious and delicate food to be eaten by his divine Majesty.]

Nevertheless, what calls our attention is the fact that Juana demonstrates on several occasions (not always related to the Eucharist) a great ability to relate parts of the human body with food. As she says in one of her revelations:

Y dijo el Señor, que no solamente quiere él los pensamientos, mas aun quiere comer y cebarse de corazones muy bien guisados, es a saber, de deseos muy fervientes y amor muy entrañable del corazón muy bien ordenado y ocupado y aparejado para recibir a sólo él y no a otro ninguno. Y las especias con que ha de ser guisado el corazón para que él le coma, es a saber, para que él le posea, han de ser muchedumbre de virtudes y buenas obras y mucho buen ejemplo, el cual es figurado por el olor de la canela. Porque así como cuando guisan alguna cosa para comer, cuando le echan especias le da buen sabor, empero cuando le echan canela no solamente le da buen sabor, mas aun le da buen olor, que así por semejante hace la persona cuando da buen ejemplo, que no solamente sirve ella y place a Dios, más aún place a los otros y los provoca a que también le amen y sirvan. (Juana de la Cruz 1999: I, 328)

[And the Lord said that he not only wants thoughts, but also wants to eat and be fattened with hearts that are very well-cooked, namely, with very fervent wishes and very fond love from a heart that is very well organised and busy and equipped to receive him only and no other. And the spices – which are for stewing the heart so that he will eat it, that is, so that he possesses it – should be a multitude of virtues and good works and many good examples, which are symbolised by the smell of cinnamon. For as when one cooks something to eat, and by throwing spices in they give good flavour, when one throws cinnamon in it not only gives good flavour but also gives a good smell. So similarly does a person when he provides a good example, who not only serves and pleases God, but also pleases others and makes them love and serve God.]

If during her speeches Juana offered a dramatisation of evangelical episodes and a narrative description of the joyous and musical celebrations held in heaven, this festive atmosphere becomes

constantly rewritten in her work during the extensive space devoted to heavenly celebrations. All her sermons represent the positive side of food, which plays a key role in many of them in explaining doctrine and making it available to the laity. Thus there are frequent episodes in which the celestial beings, after a game, a performance, or a procession, sit at a table with the blessed and are offered various filling foods that they consume happily, a meal both sweet and sacred if the food offered happens to be eucharistic.

The overflowing tables of platters establish a direct identification between food and heaven, and it is God / Christ himself who, probably thinking of their past fasting, gives license to eat all they want to compensate for their hardships in life.

Y a deshora les puso tan grande hambre, que todos empezaron a comer con muy grande sabor. Y parecíales, según la dulcedumbre y deleite sentían en el pan y en el vino y en los manjares, nunca verse hartos ni abastados. (I, 342; cf. II, 946)

[And at that moment he gave them such a great hunger that all began to eat with great enjoyment. And it seemed to them, according to the sweetness and delight they tasted in the bread and wine and platters, they never got full or tired of eating.]

- Pues yo, mis amigos, que di y doy la gana de comer a los que viven en el mundo, y se la quito cuando es mi voluntad, quiero ahora y me place que, pues es escrito y lo dejé yo en memoria en aquel evangelio de las beatitudes, que eran bienaventurados los que tienen hambre y sed de la justicia porque ellos serán hartos y abastados en el reino de los cielos, y, por tanto, yo quiero que, pues vosotros tuvisteis hambre y sed y estáis ya en el reino de los cielos, que comáis y os hartéis y embriaguéis y abastéis de todos estos manjares que aquí están. Y que así como él hubo acabado de decir estas palabras, a deshora, les puso tanta gana de comer que comieron todos los manjares y panes y frutas y dulcedumbres que allí en las preciosas mesas estaban. (II, 974)

[- Well, my friends, I, who gave and give the desire to eat to those living in the world, and who remove it when it is my will, I want now and I am pleased that, since it is written and I left it to be remembered in that gospel about the beatitudes, those who have hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed for they shall be filled and full in the kingdom of heaven, and, therefore, because you were hungry and thirsty and are already in the kingdom of heaven, I wish that you would eat and get drunk and surfeited with all these delicacies that are here. And just as he had finished speaking these words, at that moment, he gave them a such a desire to eat that they ate all the dishes and breads and fruits and sweets that were on the precious tables.]

If, as we have seen, the body could also serve as a food metaphor, starting with the long Christian tradition which sees the body as food from the Eucharistic mystery, Juana de la Cruz

masterly draws an allegorical reflection of this in the heavenly banquet. Her conception of divinity as food is presented through scenes of a great feast, and this brings us again to the image of the sacred banquet, a central idea in Juana's text. In the festive atmosphere of her sermons in which the inhabitants of heaven are dedicated to eating various delicacies as a form of celebration, Christ presents himself as food enjoyed by all the blessed invited to the party. From the imaginary of the Last Supper, in which Christ offers bread and wine to the apostles as symbols of his flesh and blood, Juana insists on the metaphorical image of Christ alleviating hunger and thirst for souls in heaven, because other food, although plentiful, does not cover the needs of a holy stomach (see Ecclesiasticus 24:21). And if Christ made his flesh the center of the feast, he will be both the cook, the serving page, and the initiator of the subsequent dance:

A deshora salían de sus preciosas llagas, manos y pies y costado y de todas las llagas y heridas que en su precioso cuerpo le dieron, muchas hostias consagradas. Y que como estaban en aquel alcázar puestas muchas mesas muy adornadas y enriquecidas y todas llenas de platos y vasos y copas de oro y de piedras preciosas, caían en ellos y se henchían de aquellos sagrados manjares. Y dijo el Señor, a deshora se tornaban algunas de aquellas hostias hechas a manera de alcorzas muy dulces y olorosas y confortables. Y otras como rosquitas y panecitos de azúcar y de pan muy blanco y floreado y sabroso [...]. Y dijo el Señor, él los mandaba a todos levantar y los asía de las manos y danzaba con ellos y después los hacía asentar a todos en aquellas mesas y los servía él a todos, así como paje muy galán y apuesto, y los hartaba y recreaba de los manjares de sí mismo. (Juana de la Cruz 1999: II, 1200-01)¹³ [At that moment, many consecrated hosts flowed from his precious wounds, hands and feet and side and from all the sores and wounds inflicted on his precious body. And as in that fortress there were many very ornate and rich tables, all full of plates and glasses and cups of gold and precious jewels, they fell into the blessed, who were stuffed with those sacred delicacies. And the Lord said that at that time some of those hosts changed into pastries made in a certain style with very sweet and fragrant and soothing icings. And others became like round cakes and sugar muffins and very white bread that is very flowery and tasty. And the Lord said that he ordered them all to stand up and he grabbed their hands and danced with them and then made them sit at all those tables and served them all himself, in the manner of a very gallant and handsome pageboy, and he satiated and refreshed them with these dishes of himself.]

And Christ can also become the waiter who divides his sweet body to others: “los mandó él mismo asentar [...] y se arremangó él y los sirvió a todos, y fue el manjar de los convidados” [he ordered them to sit down and he rolled up his sleeves and served everyone, and he was the food of the guests] (II, 1044). This body with which God feeds the blessed will make them full of food, since until Christ's body is eaten the feast does not seem complete.

- Ahora, mis amigos, yo os hartaré y os recrearé [...]. Y diciendo estas palabras, a deshora se le abrió la llaga de su sagrado costado y le manaba de él un caño de agua muy clara y olorosa; y, por semejante, caía en todos los cálices y tazas [...]. Y de la mano siniestra le manaba otro licor muy precioso y oloroso; y de las llagas de los pies le salían muchedumbre de manjares. Y luego voló en alto, y púsose sobre las mesas. Y a deshora salieron de todas las llagas y azotes que padeció en su sagrado cuerpo muchedumbre de panes y roscas muy recientes y dulces y sabrosas. (I, 342-43)

[- Now, my friends, I'll feed and refresh you. And saying these words, at that time he opened the wound in his sacred side and a jet of very clear and fragrant water flowed from it; and in this way the water fell in all the chalices and cups. And from his left hand another very beautiful and fragrant liquor flowed, and from the wounded feet came a great number of delicacies. And then he flew on high and stood on the tables. And at that time a great number of breads and very recent and sweet and savoury pastries came out from all the wounds and scourges suffered in his sacred body.]¹⁴

Thus, throughout the *Libro del Conorte*, Christ is always inviting the blessed to enjoy, be satiated by, and get drunk on the sweets and delicacies of his body (II, 841, 862-63, 1065-66 & 1181), which he distributes in turn among the saints around him. Of course all this came from Christ's claim that he is the bread who comes down from heaven (John 6:35), an image repeatedly developed by Juana when he opens the wound in his side to spill water and spiced wine, and when food and spirits emerge from the sores of his feet, hands, and head. But sometimes the explicitness with which Christ himself is dismembered to encourage diners calls out for our attention:

Y dijo el Señor que [...] llegaron todos los Bienaventurados, y uno tomaba la una mano y otro otra y un pie y el otro pie, y cada uno de los otros tomaba una llaga de las espinas de su sagrada cabeza y de las llagas de los azotes de su sagrado cuerpo, y ponían las bocas en todas aquellas sagradas llagas, y que así manaban dulcedumbres y manjares y bebidas y licores de ellas [...]. (II, 1299-1300)

[And the Lord said that all the blessed came, and one took one hand and another took the other and another one foot and the other foot another, and each of the others took a sore from the thorns in his sacred head and the wounds of the scourges on his sacred body, and they put their mouths on all those sacred wounds, and thus flowed sweets and food and drink and liquors.]

If, as we have seen, Juana focuses on occasion on the typical food of the Last Supper, in others her focus is directed to tables loaded with sweets and rich treasures that seem to play an ornamental role: delicacies which make the blessed get drunk and gorge themselves at highly adorned tables enriched with golden and jewelled cups. Thus, reading the *Libro del conorte*, it appears that Juana's heaven is mainly comprised of delicious and varied meals, with a touch of luxury in a well laid table and a whole *atrezzo* (set of theatre props) of palatial objects and precious jewels.

Y diciendo estas palabras [Cristo], a deshora fueron aparecidas allí unas mesas, las más ricas y preciosas que nadie podría decir ni pensar, todas ordenadas de sobremesa y manteles y pañuelos tan delgados y lindos, que el oro y las piedras preciosas se traslucían por encima de los mismos manteles y sobremesas. Y todo era tan claro y resplandeciente como el sol, y así se podían ver en ellos como en espejos muy claros. Y todas las mesas estaban llenas de platos y cálices y tazas de oro llenas de vino muy oloroso y adobado, que estaba hirviendo y bulliendo dentro en los mismos cálices y tazas. (I, 339-40)

[And [Christ] having said these words, at that moment some tables appeared there, richer and more beautiful than anybody could speak or think of: they were all tidy with covers, tablecloths, and fine linen so thin and pretty that the gold and precious stones shone through these same tablecloths and covers. And everything was as clear and shining as the sun, and so they could see themselves in them as in very clear mirrors. And all the tables were full of plates and chalices and golden cups full of very fragrant and aged wine, which was boiling and bubbling inside those chalices and cups.]

Y después [...] tomaron en sus manos unos platos de oro muy grandes, llenos de roscas y tortas muy blancas y pintadas y recientes y muy olorosas, cubiertos los mismos platos con unas vestiduras y tobajas de oro muy pintadas y labradas. Y allí encima llevaban unas a manera de tazas, todas de oro y piedras preciosas, llenas de tesoros muy ricos. (I, 372)

[And, later on, they took in their hands some very large plates of gold, full of round cakes and very white or mottled scones freshly made and very fragrant. The dishes were covered with some clothes and towels of elaborately painted and carved gold. And over there they held some made in the manner of cups, all made of gold and precious jewels and full of very rich treasures.]

Y dijo el Señor, que después que él hubo servido a su preciosa Madre y Señora nuestra con muchedumbre de manjares y frutas y licores y aguas y vinos muy dulces y olorosos y suaves, y después que él hubo – él mismo – puesto delante su trono muchedumbre de mesas muy adornadas y enriquecidas y abastadas, tornaba él con aquella muchedumbre de pajes a servir a nuestra Señora, trayéndole infinitas arcas llenas de tesoros y riquezas y joyas delante de ella, y haciendo muchas reverencias y cortesías se las ofrecía [...]. (II, 945)

[And the Lord said that after he had served his precious Mother and Our Lady with a great number of fruits and delicacies and spirits and waters and wines that were very sweet and fragrant and delicate, and after he had himself set before his throne many highly adorned and enriched and full tables, he and that crowd of pageboys again served Our Lady, bringing her endless chests full of treasures and riches and jewels, and he offered them to her while making many bows and saying courtesies.]

At this well-prepared table, Christ acts like a knight who serves his lady (his mother), offering her treasures and riches “para vuestro servicio” [for your service] (945). These celestial tables with gold plates are likewise found in Mechthild of Magdeburg and we also encounter them in the third revelation of the Blessed Lucy of Narni (1476-1544), who was very influential upon the “living saints” of this era. In Lucy’s text, Christ shows her four places to sit, giving great importance to the setting on the table, which is framed by a paradise with palaces, gardens, angels, maidens holding cups, altars covered with tablecloths, and heavenly chairs (Matter, Maggi & Lehmijoki-Gardner 2001: 325; Matter 2001: 7).

I believe that to understand this imagery it is important to realise that the sixteenth century was marked by the development of a Mannerist culture of feast and meal manners, including the use of expensive utensils, decorated dishes, golden glasses or embroidered tablecloths (Jeanneret 1987: 56-57).¹⁵ As Roy Strong (1987: 75) states, during the Renaissance food became a key element of a vast theatrical production, displaying that era’s penchant for the deployment of wealth through giving banquets (138-209; Camporesi 1988: 67). This culture is found in the Iberian Peninsula in fictional texts such as the famous *Tirant lo Blanch* by Joannot Martorell, where one can find ostentatious banquets that include vessels of gold and silver (see, for example, Martorell 1990: 549); food there serves as a metaphor for social communication and erotic love (Anton Ferrús 2010: 12) in a display strikingly similar to the heavenly treats envisioned by our visionary women.

In the heavenly table contemplated by Juana de la Cruz, sweet foods are especially common. Even from the branches of the Cross, “frutos muy dulces y suaves” [very sweet and delicate fruits] (Juana de la Cruz 1999: II, 1160) flow, and on one occasion the blessed see the following things in the sun:

una masa muy grande y blanca [...] de la cual [...] salieron a deshora infinitas hostias y rosquillas y panecicos más dulces y blancos y sabrosos que de alfeñique y azúcar y alcorzas, y más olorosos y preciosos que todos los olores y preciosidades del mundo ni del cielo, por cuanto eran manjares divinales que procedían del poderoso y eterno Dios. Las cuales hostias y rosquillas y panecitos tan sobreexcelentes manaban y procedían de la suavísima y purísima masa, y caían a las bocas de todos los Bienaventurados de la corte del cielo, desde Nuestra Señora, la Virgen María, hasta el más pequeño. (II, 839-40)

[a very large white dough from which at that moment endless communion wafers and little pastries and little loaves sweeter and whiter and tastier than nougat or sugar or icings, and more odorous and precious than all the smells and platters in the world or heaven, because they were divine delicacies that came from the Almighty and eternal God. These more than excellent hosts and pastries and little breads flowed and came from that most gentle and pure dough, and they fell into the mouths of all the blessed from the court of heaven, from Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, even to the least of the blessed.]¹⁶

This predilection for sweetness, evident in this allegorical representation of the Holy Trinity, is very typical of the recipes of Juana’s time. According to Javier Martínez Monzó’s (2011: 26) discussion of the massive presence of sugar in this century, when reading the texts of the sixteenth-century kitchen one can infer that the dominant taste was sweet, even though one cannot forget that this ingredient could be an element of social distinction. Indeed, according to studies dealing with food in its diachronic dimension, in the Renaissance there was a growing taste for sugar (Strong 2003: 84).¹⁷ And if cane sugar replaced honey as a sweetener in the Western world at the end of the fifteenth century, and sweets made with sugar were no longer exotic luxury items at the beginning of the following century but became an everyday product, it is not surprising that foods such as bread, wine, water, fish, meat or eggs are likely to be dusted with this substance, which is employed in this period for flavouring as much as salt (Fernandez-Armesto 2009: 190 & 239).¹⁸

Neither should we feel wonder at realising that epistolaries from the early seventeenth century proved that conventual sweets were all made of sugar.¹⁹ However, in Juana’s culinary paradise chocolate is not yet mentioned: we must await the seventeenth century to find this food in abundance, as we see in many poems and colloquies composed by the visionary Francisca de Santa Teresa (1654-1709) or in Christmas carols.²⁰ In conventual songs, chocolate constituted a constant presence, and we can also run into round cakes (Francisca de Santa Teresa 2007: 125), though not framed in the heavenly treat as Juana had envisioned, who undoubtedly is the visionary woman who developed the most original vision of the sacred banquet.²¹

Finally, I must say that Juana de la Cruz was not the only Spanish visionary and fasting woman that imagined celestial treats with pleasure: María Vela y Cueto (1561-1614), who made food abstinence a major focus in her life, has the heavenly *agape* meal in mind as well.²² On the Day of the Dead, as told in her *Libro de las mercedes*, she prays for the soul of a companion to rise to the heights, and to gather together with her in heaven, “en aquella eterna mesa. Representóseme que esta mesa era redonda, que es el ser de Dios que no tiene principio ni fin, y que los manjares eran sus divinas perfecciones” [at that eternal table. I envisioned that this table was round, which is the being of God who has no beginning nor end, and that the dishes were his divine perfections] (Vela y Cueto 1961: 257).

I believe the interesting thing about all this is that these heavenly banquets where food is shared fomented the joy of conviviality against the lonely and elitist practice of fasting (which sometimes gave rise to the deceiving of others with the simulation of eating, as in Vela y Cueto 1961: 218-19). Precisely for this reason, it is most striking to find these heavenly rich meals in the writings of extreme fasters (near to starving) such as Juana de la Cruz and María Vela y Cueto rather than in women who practiced moderate food abstinence like Teresa of Avila. But perhaps it all makes sense, since food in Juana’s texts is mostly read as a reward given to the blessed to reinforce the idea that penance in the world will be offset by the Saviour with delicacies in heaven (Luengo Balbás 2012: 230).

In this sense, we can assume that Juana would identify fully with Christ in this passage that recounts his fasting in the desert, or perhaps I should say that Christ utters these words precisely because they are pronounced through a fasting Juana (the instrument of God’s voice):

Y cuando había hambre y sed y desmayo, contemplaba en las harturas y manjares celestiales, y así luego me parecía en espíritu que veía allí, en el mismo desierto, puestas mesas muy adornadas y llenas de manjares de diversas maneras de sabores – y hasta pan reciente y mojado en leche me parecía veía en las mesas –, que el olor de ellos me parecía me hartaba y conhortaba en mi necesidad, y el gusto y sabor me daba esfuerzo para poder ayunar tantos días y noches sin comer ninguna cosa. [...]

- Porque el mundo se puede comparar y partir en dos partes. A los buenos y contemplativos les es paraíso y refrigerio muy grande, porque, ayunando y nunca comiendo sino poco, pueden contemplar y gustar y tener delante de sí presentes todos los manjares y dulcedumbres divinales; y pueden gustar y comer y hartarse y embriagarse de Dios y de sus excelentes gustos y suavidades que son más sabrosos al gusto del ánima que puede ser, al gusto del cuerpo, pan reciente mojado en leche. Así, por semejante, los manjares celestiales hartan y gobiernan y esfuerzan al espíritu y el ánima de todos los contemplativos que, por amor de mí, ayunan y dan sus cuerpos a muchas penitencias y abstinencias y vigiliass. (Juana de la Cruz 1999: I, 548 & 549)

[And when I was hungry and thirsty and fainting, I used to contemplate heavenly abundance and delicacies, and so, after that, it seemed to me that my spirit saw displayed in that same desert very ornate tables, filled with dishes with many different types of flavours – I even saw fresh bread dipped in milk on the tables – and it seemed that the smell of them filled me up and comforted me in my need, and the taste and flavour gave me the strength to be able to fast for so many days and nights without eating anything. [...]

- Because the world can be split into two parts and be compared. To good people and to contemplatives it is paradise and a great refreshment, because, fasting and only ever eating but little, they can see and taste and have before them all the divine platters and sweets; and they can taste and eat and gorge themselves and overindulge in God and his excellent tastes and delicacies that are tastier to the soul than fresh bread dipped in milk may be to the body. Thus, for such people, the heavenly platters satisfy and govern and reinforce the spirit and the soul of all contemplatives who, for love of me, fast and inflict many penances and abstinences and vigils on their bodies.]

Perhaps the most poignant of the arguments of the Franciscan tertiary, who promises to others a great feast in the afterlife after abstaining in the earthly life from rich foods, is precisely this penchant revealed by the visionary for fresh bread dipped in milk. After reading this fragment of her book of sermons, one can conclude that a sweets-filled heaven was indeed a utopian place for extreme fasters like this visionary woman from the early fifteen-hundreds.²³

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Notes

1. This article is an adaptation, expansion, and re-writing of sections 1.3 and of 1.4 in Sanmartín Bastida 2015: 18-28 & 32-35; I thank Macdonald Daly (editor of CCCP, SPLASH) for letting me translate whole passages of this book. This work is framed in the research project "La conformación de la autoridad espiritual femenina en Castilla" (Ref. FFI2015-63625-C2-2-P; 2016-2019), financed by the Spanish Government and the FEDER funds.
2. I should clarify that at first Juana lived with her companions in the *beaterio* of Cubas de la Sagra, so they were all originally tertiaries, and could not be considered technically nuns because they had not taken vows. But eventually they joined the Clarisan order under Juana's leadership and became nuns. At the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth Spanish visionary women with fame of "living saints" were mainly tertiaries who ended up their lives as nuns.
3. Roy Strong (2003: 55) stresses how Christianity affected the secular table because the Bible offered many examples (from the wedding at Cana to the miracle of the five loaves and two fish) of eating together as a profound expression of love, communion and fellowship.
4. The Gospel of Matthew, which repeatedly describes feasts occurring in the kingdom of heaven, in one reference conceives the banquet as including the company of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac (Matthew 8:11).
5. Rustic shepherds in Encina's theater are presented as indulging the vice of gluttony while dedicated to joyous dance. This is especially seen in the *Égloga* representada la misma noche de Antruejo (Encina 1991: 151-60), where there is an invitation to eat ravenously before the fasting season.
6. Faced with this poverty, Camporesi says, hell is for starving people, among other things, to get tremendously hungry and then reach cannibalistic excess. Camporesi highlights how popular imagination places the joy of delighting the senses, so repressed and absent in the earthly life, in heaven (1988: 254-55). On the other hand, Paradise in the quotation above makes us remember Camporesi's description of the fantastic land of Jauja (1986: 83).
7. For an extensive study of holy anorexia in Catherine of Siena, see Bell (1985: 22-53).

8. See Sánchez Martínez de Pinillos 2000: 102 and Gómez Redondo 2012: I. 793, 118. Ecclesiasticus or Sirach 37:29-31: “Don’t feel that you just have to have all sorts of fancy food, and don’t be a glutton over any food. If you eat too much, you’ll get sick; if you do it all the time, you’ll always have stomach trouble. Gluttony has been the death of many people. Avoid it and live longer”. For medieval texts about moderation in food and drink, see a good summary in Sánchez Martínez de Pinillos 2000: 232-39.
9. See Mazzoni 2005 for European visionary women and the enjoyment of food, often employed as a metaphor for devotional pleasures.
10. On the vicissitudes of the process, see García de Andrés 1999: 43-53; for an overview of the problems of the beatification of Juana, despite the discovering of her incorrupted body, see Giles 1999: 288-89. Juana’s fame in the century after her death is brought by her life taken to the stage by Tirso de Molina, Francisco Bernaldo de Quirós and José de Cañizares (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries). As for the judgment made about her work, controversial passages were found, such as the appearance of a feminized Jesus (e. g., when the Lord tells to little girls: “Y también soy niña como vosotras, pues soy hijo de mujer”) [And I am also a girl like you, because I am the son of a woman] (Juana de la Cruz 1999: I, 401; see García de Andrés 1999: 92). On Jesus claiming to be a woman in Juana’s text, see Graña Cid 2009: 499; Boon 2018: 279-81.
11. From now on, all translations of the Spanish quotations are mine. I quote here from the unpublished manuscript of her life preserved in the library of El Escorial (see bibliography), respecting the spellings and only punctuating and accentuating the text. For an English translation of six sermons of Juana, see Boon & Surtz 2016; unfortunately, the sermons quoted here have not been translated in this work.
12. Noting the importance of food in the life and spirituality of Juana de la Cruz, one can remember Noëlle Châtelet’s conception of the cooking space as the allegorical figure of the universe that needs nothing else to express itself (1985: 202). We can also be reminded of the words of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): “Entended que, si es en la cocina, entre los pucheros anda el Señor” [You should understand that, if you are in the kitchen, God dwells among the pots] (Teresa de Jesús 2004: 898).
13. Christ commands them to stand up because they have fallen (as if) asleep due to all the delicious food.
14. We can find a similar passage at Juana de la Cruz 1999: I, 740, in which Christ stands at the beautiful table and fills it with delicacies coming from his wounds onto the plates and golden chalices. Also from the wound of his sacred side a stream flows with clear and fragrant water and delicate and precious liquor (more than all the liquors and flavored wines in this world, Juana says). The blessed eat and drink them with a growing desire. On this passage, see Cortés Timoner 2005: 621, who relates it to the use of food in John of the Cross.
15. For the culture of feasting in this period, see also Strong 2003. The growing interest in food abundance contrasts with the overall pictures drawn by Piero Camporesi’s studies (1986, 1988), which show us a population dealing with hunger and times of famine.
16. This episode reminds us of the manna rained from heaven, alluded to above. Juana continues this passage asserting that the more the blessed ate, the more sweet and precious delicacies flowed from that very soft dough into their mouths. This dough was the Holy Trinity, which was united and kneaded with human nature. Juana once again presents here the blessed eating and enjoying and gorging themselves with great hunger and thirst for God, receiving such great delights that they forget themselves and get drunk (II, 840).
17. Sugar (and chocolate) discovered in America produced an entire industry, something which had not previously occurred when this substance came from India. Fernandez Armesto (2009: 188) highlights the possible Arab influence in this taste for sugar from the thirteenth century onwards, because in medieval Muslim courts sugar was already a favorite ingredient. However, until the end of the fourteenth century in the Christian world sugar had been used mainly in medicine and only sparingly for cooking, more as a spice than as an ingredient. Strong (2003: 85) points out that in the sixteenth century, “The fashion for sugar in food echoed the fashion for sweet wines in drink”, and a desire to give shape and color to the food intervened in the wish to produce that particular sweet taste.
18. See Fernandez-Armesto 2009: 190-91. For this scholar, the renunciation of the exoticism found in Muslim food meant that the food of kings and aristocrats became more accessible to *bourgeois* diners.
19. See, for example, Ana de San Bartolomé [1550-1626] 1998: 1505.
20. Sánchez Hernández (2011: 99) shows that chocolate was also given as a remedy for upset stomach, according to an Augustinian nun’s letter. For the study of the growing taste for chocolate see Schivelbusch 1993: 85-95.
21. References to chocolate are found in several of her colloquia, along with cocoa, biscuits and wine (Francisca de Santa Teresa 2007: 131-32), but also in her poetry, along with other sweet food like buns and French toast. For the presence of chocolate in carols sung by nuns in Madrid on Christmas Eve, see BNE, sign. R. 34988.
22. For a reading of her extreme fast as a sort of holy anorexia see Sanmartín Bastida 2015: 109-29.
23. I thank Maria Luísa Malato for encouraging me to work on the heavenly banquet for this volume and Jessica Boon for aiding with the translation into English.