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Allegory of the Eucharist with the Virgin Mary and Saints

Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos (1638-1711)

Colombia, Bogotá

C. 1670s

Oil on canvas

46 ½ x 36 ½ inches

Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos (1638-1711) was one of the most important South American painters of his time. He was born in Santa Fe de Bogotá to a family with Sevillian roots and entered the busy workshop of the Figueroa family of artists (also originally from Seville) as an apprentice at some unknown date.ⁱ We know that he had his own workshop by 1657, when he was already signing paintings. Vásquez was a prolific artist, with around 500 extant works attributed to him. He must have maintained an efficient workshop to be so productive. The influences on Vásquez's style are varied. He definitely used prints as compositional sources, and this sometimes lend his work an archaizing flavor, but he must also have been familiar with at least some European paintings. Vásquez's style is elegant, restrained rather than dynamic, with warm coloring and soft contours. His oeuvre reminds us that *mestizaje*, the blending of cultures reflected in art, did not affect all artistic production in Iberoamerica. Vásquez's style is as European as he could make it at such a long remove from Seville. He was a creole who worked for a clientele of creoles and *peninsulares*, who continued to come to South America from Spain. Archbishops, for example, were always appointed from Spain to American archbishoprics. Thus, there continued to be a market in the new world for painting in a European style alongside the enormous market for mestizo paintings from the indigenous artists of Cuzco. Artists such as Vásquez supplied that demand.

The Eucharist is a theme that appears often in South American painting in a variety of images, such as the *Defense of the Eucharist* (1997.009) where it is symbolized by the monstrance protected from heretics by the Spanish king. Following the Council of Trent (1546-1563), when the Last Supper became institutionalized as the narrative moment of the institution

of the Eucharist, this scene became the most common way of picturing the sacrament. Vásquez himself painted an enormous *Last Supper* for the Capilla del Sagrario in Bogotá.

The Council of Trent met at that city in northern Italy to address the threats posed to the Catholic Church by the rise of Protestantism, and to address disputes within its own body. In its published decisions, the Council affirmed the celebration of saints, their martyrdoms and miracles. It affirmed the role of Virgin Mary in the prayers of the faithful. It also:

reaffirmed the centrality of the sacraments as administered by the church's representatives in establishing the real presence of Christ. This doctrine of transubstantiation meant that during mass, in the words that only a priest sharing Christ's sacerdotal power could speak—"Hoc est enim corpus meum," "For this is my body," and "Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei," "For this is the chalice of my blood"—the bread and wine of the sacrament became the actual body and blood of Christ. The doctrine verified the medieval argument that at each mass "Jesus Christ himself is both priest and sacrifice" and that at each mass Christ suffers his Crucifixion anew.ⁱⁱ

Besides the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, the sacrament could also be evoked symbolically in a number of images such as the paschal lamb, the sun (the basis for the great silver and gold monstrances by colonial artisans), or the pelican, which, according to legend, opened its breast to feed its young on its own blood.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Thoma painting pictures the Eucharist as the blood of Christ, fountain of life.^{iv} In European painting as early as the fourteenth century one finds images of Christ Crucified accompanied by angels who catch in chalices the blood spouting from His wounds. During the early modern era an infinite number of variations on this theme developed: Christ embracing the cross and pressing the blood from his side wound into a chalice, or, as in the Thoma painting, Christ accompanied by saints. Sometimes Christ is pictured upon a fountain – the Fountain of Life – that fills with the blood from his wounds. In an oft-repeated composition, Christ is the "mystic winepress" (2019.071). This metaphor in South American paintings is most often based on an engraving by Jean de Courbes in the influential *Psalmodia Eucarística* by the Mercedarian Melchor Prieto published in Antwerp in 1622. The source is a commentary written by Saint Bonaventure in the thirteenth century: "the wine is the image of the blood extracted from the cluster [of grapes], that is to say, from the body of Christ, pressed by the Jews in the winepress of the cross."^v

In other depictions, as in the Thoma painting, He is literally the fountain of life, giving freely of his Most Precious Blood – the *Santísimo Sacramento* to which so many confraternities throughout the Viceroyalty of Peru were dedicated.

In Vásquez's composition, Christ gazes heavenward toward God the Father and the dove of the Holy Spirit, these three figures forming the Trinity. On either side of the dove are angels bearing symbols of the Passion of Christ: the column to which he was tied and scourged; the whip; the hammer and nails with which he was crucified; a sack holding the forty pieces of silver for which Christ was betrayed by Judas; and the lance that pierced his side, allowing his blood to flow freely into the chalice in the center of the composition. To either side of Christ, the Virgin Mary and a gathering of the faithful also look up to God the Father at the center top of the composition. Below is a row of four saints. To the left are Saint John of God, identified by the crown of thorns and the heart (or pomegranate) he holds, and the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier, holding the flaming heart that is his symbol. To the right are Saint Francis of Assisi, showing

the stigmata, and another Jesuit saint holding three nails, symbolizing the three Jesuit Martyrs of Nagasaki.^{vi}

Vázquez's bearded male figures, like the individualized saints in the Thoma painting, are always somewhat rugged and unidealized. His female figures, on the other hand, including his many images of the Virgin Mary, all have perfectly oval faces with small, delicate features. The artist's style changed little over the years, so it is difficult to precisely date the Thoma painting.

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ⁱ Roberto Pizano Restrepo, *Gregorio Vázquez de Arce y Ceballos*, 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Siglo Dieciseis, 1985) is the basic study of the artist's life and work.

ⁱⁱ Miles Richardson, *Being-in-Christ and putting death in its place: an anthropologist's account of Christian performance in Spanish America and the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 57.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a compendium of Eucharistic imagery in Spanish art, see Rosario Anguita Herrador, *Arte y culto: el tema de la Eucaristía en la provincia de Jaén* (Jaén: Universidad de Jaén, 1996), 103-108.

^{iv} For discussion of this iconography, see Asunción Alejos Morán, *La Eucaristía en el arte valenciano*, vol. 1 (Valencia: Servicio de Estudios Artísticos, Institución Alfonso El Magnánimo, Diputación Provincial, Patronato José M.a Quadrado, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1977), 397-404, which is the source for the following discussion.

^v "el vino es la imagen de la sangre que extrae el racimo, es decir, del cuerpo de Cristo, prensado por los judíos en el lagar de la cruz." Quoted from Ramón Mujica Pinilla, "Identidades alegóricas: lecturas iconográficas del barroco al neoclásico," in *El Barroco Peruano*, vol. 2 (Lima: Banco de Crédito del Perú, 2003), 267.

^{vi} Juan Goto, Diego Kisai, and Pablo Miki were three Jesuits, along with twenty-three Franciscans, who were crucified and pierced with lances in Japan in 1597. Pope Pius IX canonized the martyrs of Nagasaki in 1862; however, they are represented in the art of the Viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain long before they officially became saints.