Inventories of Jesuit Silver Altarware

Classifying the Shape-Shifting Substance of Colonial Theopolitics

J. Michelle Molina

ABSTRACT

This is a study of an inventory of silver altarware that adorned Jesuit churches and chapels in New Spain (colonial Mexico). Using a performative lens, it analyzes how these inventories were produced, emphasizing the role of notaries who navigated two spatial concerns: the Spanish Crown's desire to monitor the Jesuits after their exile and the need to conceptualize the sacredness of silver objects altered by divine presence. This exploration raises critical questions about how these inventories reflect processes of world-making and the interplay of human and non-human agency, as discussed by science studies scholar Andrew Pickering. I argue that these inventories reveal the complexities of colonial power, illustrating how divine presence on the altar constrained the Crown's authority. Ultimately, the study highlights the dynamic between the Crown's attempts to dismantle the Jesuit order and the enduring influence of sacramental logics that shape the exercise of power within this colonial context.

> "What constitutes the archive, what form it takes, and what systems of classification signal at specific times are the very substance of colonial politics." (STOLER 2002, 92)

A SUDDEN ARREST PROMPTED THE PRODUCTION OF THE INVENTORY OF silver under study in this essay. This was no ordinary arrest of a single person. Rather, it took place on a hemispheric scale at dawn on June 25, 1767, when Spanish American militias surrounded the colleges and professed houses owned and run by the Society of Jesus. The arrest of approximately 2,500 Jesuit missionaries and educators was a highly secretive affair that included cutting bell ropes in church towers to avoid any calls for attention. A gag order, intended to curtail protests, meant that viceregal subjects could watch the spectacle of the black-robed men marching to port towns under military escort, but they could make no comment. In port towns, the arrested men's

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wait for available ships was lengthy and disease-ridden (St. Clair Segurado 2009). When the men departed, some of the drama faded, yet there remained work to do. Notaries were tasked with sorting and documenting the things that remained behind following the almost two hundred years during which the missionaries had played key roles in colonial religious, cultural, and labor institutions. The Jesuits' new legal status, one author quips, was "death intestate", and thus their material remains were to be inventoried, a task that took many years (Manrique Figueroa 2023). The Jesuits had owned property that went beyond the colleges, churches, and mission stations they ran, including other urban buildings and businesses. For example, one inventory notes that the Jesuits owned a *tocinera*, a butcher shop specializing in pork products (Ayer 1128 1767). The society's primary income came from the haciendas that depended upon indigenous, mestizo, and enslaved laborers, thus notaries also inventoried enslaved persons as Jesuit property (Ewald 1976; Konrad 1980). Their well-stocked college libraries held books they had acquired over two hundred years. The men's own bedrooms were filled with a dizzying array of items that ranged from devotional objects to books to clocks to tableware. Further, the Jesuits were known for their stunning churches filled with paintings and elaborate baroque ornamentation that competed for attention in Puebla, a city known for its religious architecture and decoration (Burke 2021). But perhaps most important to note is that the Crown's demands and the notaries' bustling activity were not simply geared toward capturing wealth. Rather, the notaries were tasked with documenting all possible conduits of Jesuit power and influence that might remain in their absence (Molina 2021). In other words, part of the impetus behind the intense documentary enterprise was to ensure that the Society of Jesus would be "history".

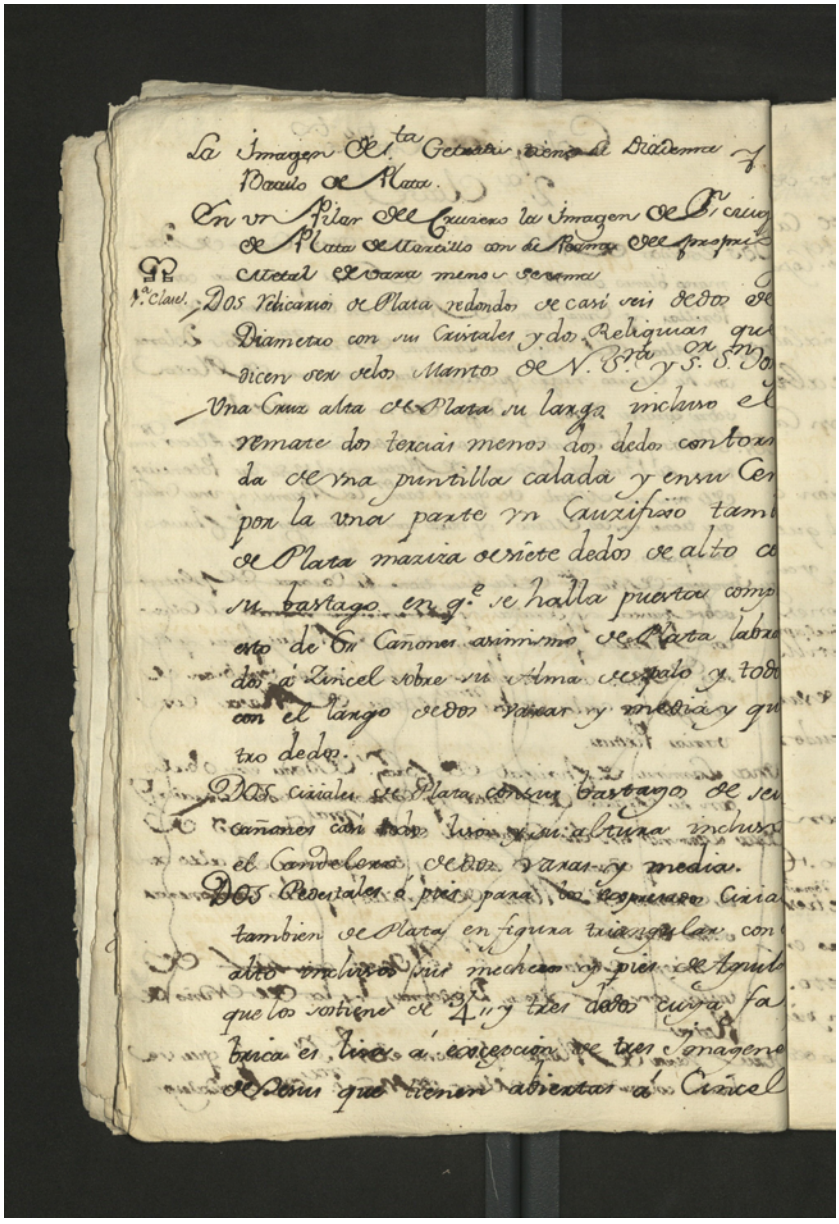
The resulting inventories of books and liturgical items have become historical sources that scholars have utilized to various ends. The eminent art historian Clara Bargellini has put inventories to work to undergird her *longue durée* history of the aesthetic impact of the Jesuits' missionary enterprise in northern Mexico (Bargellini 2013). She has studied various items in the inventories to better understand how Jesuit missionary efforts impacted aesthetic and religious sensibilities. Other scholars of Jesuit inventories have been guided by a bibliographic sensibility. Manrique Figueroa takes this approach in his study of the inventories of Jesuit books and libraries in New Spain to study the contents of certain college library collections (Manrique Figueroa 2023). He wants to know what the Jesuits read. Specific studies of Jesuit silver altarware are few, but a good example would be Alma Montero Alarcón's essay that takes a cultural

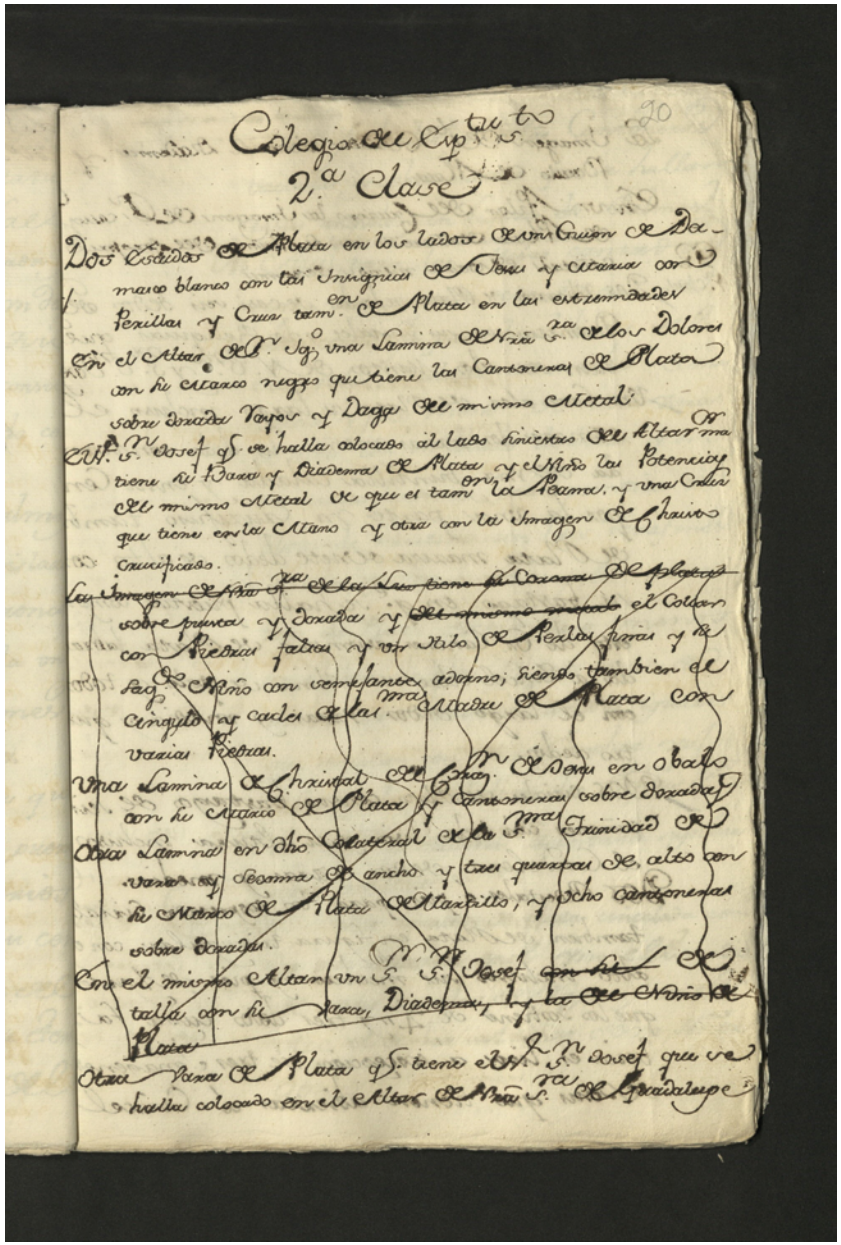
heritage approach to Jesuit inventories. She evaluates the importance of these catalogues within the framework of historical patrimony. She wants to know what happened to Jesuit things, lamenting that much ecclesiastical material history disappeared amid the tumult of the nineteenth century (Alarcón 2017).

My approach differs in that I am keen to trace the *process* of inventorying. Specifically, I want to understand how theological concerns guided the hands-on bureaucratic work of the notaries. From this massive eighteenth-century bureaucratic effort to document the holdings and influence of the Jesuits, I draw our attention to a single inventory of silver altarware (see Figs. 1 and 2, below) that decorated altars at the churches, colleges, and haciendas belonging to the Society of Jesus in Puebla de Los Angeles, the second largest city in the viceroyalty of New Spain. The Puebla inventory shows how notaries grappled with the fact that some silver items had been touched by the body of Christ and thereby had been transformed into power objects. I argue that paying attention to notarial practices of inventorying sacred altarware tells us less about sacred aesthetics and more about how human understandings of a god truly present subtended colonial politics. In particular, this text sheds light on how the work that notaries undertook to create lists of material culture offers a vivid example of the coexistence of enchantment and rationality, because these bureaucrats were documenting and tracing the appearances of the shape-shifting power of a divinity (Palmié 2024). Clearly, this conforms to what Robert Orsi has argued scholars ought to be trying to explain to understand how religion has played out in history:

> The study of religion is or ought to be the study of what human beings do to, for, and against the gods really present — using "gods" as a synecdoche for all the special suprahuman beings with whom humans have been in relationship in different times and places — and what the gods really present do with, for, and against humans. (Orsi 2016, 4)

But the Catholic god transformed not only people, but also *things* (Bynum 2020). Here I rely upon James Gentry's conceptualization of "power objects" as a way to "understand how human interactions with certain kinds of objects encourage the flow of power and charisma between personal and objective elements, and what the effects of such dynamics are in the lives of the ritual specialists and communities for whom such objects matter" (Gentry 2017). But here the ritual specialists are not priests, but notaries. Thus, at stake in this essay are questions about the





Figures 1–2. These pages are from an inventory of "second-class" silver that had belonged to the Jesuit Colegio de Espíritu Santo in Puebla de Los Angeles. On the first page, note the cross-outs indicating that these items do not belong in this inventory. On the second page, there is a marginal note, signaling that the reliquaries are mislabeled and should be in the inventory of silver belonging to the first class.

world-making that is evoked, discussed, and re-instantiated in the process of inventorying god-touched matter. I hew closely to the text at hand to follow bureaucratic notarial processes, as they determine which of the silver objects were sacred. Specifically, I argue that in inventorying Jesuit silver altarware, notaries engaged in an object-oriented practice because they had been assigned the task of documenting the material impact of the Catholic god's appearances on earth. They drew their conclusions by taking into account spatial relations among the silver objects and Christ's body, whose intermittent appearances took place according to the rhythms of liturgical time. Their spatiotemporal theorizing of materiality drives my own thinking about how Catholic place-making made the mystical concrete and, in so doing, transformed the matter of colonial theopolitics in Mexico.

The Actors: Notaries and the Mystical Body of Christ

Because the notaries are key actors in this action-oriented account of the production of these inventories, a few words about these men are in order. By trade, a notary recorded actions and transactions in formulaic language. As Kathryn Burns has summarized the scribe's role: "They made legible countless transactions people might eventually want the state itself to see, judge, adjudicate, or that the state might want to see" (Burns 2005, 351). She calls notaries "truth's alchemists", by which she means that they transformed singular events into formulaic language "in accordance with prescribed recipes to produce the written, duly witnessed, and certified truth. Their truth was recognizable not by its singularity, but by its very regularity. It was truth by template — la *verdad hecha de molde*" (Burns 2005; Herzog 1996).

Colonial archives are filled with notarial documents. But Burns also pushes against the historian's persistent reading of notarial documents as offering access to historical truths, lured as we are by first-person statements marked with place names and stamped with dates — the illusion, she adds, artfully sustained by metaphors that paint archives as "windows". Even amid poststructuralist doubts about authorship, historians nonetheless persist: "Metaphors of the visual, or the aural predominate: we see the past through a window, or in a mirror; we hear voices. We let our mind's ear enjoy the seduction of the archival first person, the 'I' created through notarial mediation" (Burns 2010, 124). I turn up the volume on Burns's admonitions because, working with inventories of books and objects in the wake of the "material turn", I wonder if the study of material culture

evokes old siren songs that posit texts as open windows through which we can reach out to *touch* the past (Olivier 2015).[1] This would be mistaken. Historians do not touch the past; we hold artifacts from a different time, but in our own present. This essay does not afford tangible access to silver items from the past. Rather, what we do see here is how "touch" animated colonial politics in the eighteenth century, when the tangibility of the sacred became subject to governmental accounting processes.

So just as we require a historical understanding of the realms in which notaries could take action in the world, so too do we require some historically specific explanation about the capacity of the mystical body of Christ to act in the world. When the priest exhibited and elevated the consecrated host, this was — as Richard Kieckhefer makes clear in his study of the mystical presence of Christ in late medieval Europe — "the manifestation of the breakthrough of eternity into time" (Kieckhefer 2022, 179). In the sixteenth century, Tridentine Catholic theological reforms reaffirmed the doctrine of transubstantiation, the latter made highly controversial when Protestant Reformers reduced the Eucharist to a mere symbol. The Catholic Church insisted that Christ's actual body and blood were corporeally present in the consecrated bread and wine. Tridentine reformers sought to promote eucharistic piety while also constraining ritualized miraculous action with its newly published liturgical missals and catechisms that were intended to ensure global orthodoxy on every Catholic altar (Larkin 2010, 54). There were even new regulations controlling the production of chalices, the vessels that would hold the consecrated wine. These should be made of precious metals, preferably gold, but also silver (Katzew 2022).

These are the vessels and containers that appear in the inventories of silver altarware under study here. Spanish colonizers brought the body of Christ to the Americas and enforced a habitus in which Indigenous lives were structured around the parish (Hanks 2010), thus imposing a sacramental culture whose rituals called for Christ to appear as bread and wine on elaborately decorated church altars (Scheper Hughes 2021).[2]

1. Laurent Olivier complicates our sense of "having" the past; rather, his attention is given to archaeology as actively creating ruins in a present that is ephemeral and disintegrating. With Olivier, we see a relationship to time that is simultaneously a melancholic, even anxiety-filled experience of having, losing, and indeed, participating in the loss.
2. Scheper-Hughes demonstrates how indigenous communities built a future-oriented vision of how autonomy might be gained via the new religion, demanding, for example, that their churches be properly attended and cared for in the wake of the late sixteenth-century epidemics.

Brian Larkin describes church interiors in New Spain as an "ornate staging grounds for the liturgy" and documents how *novohispanos* from all walks of life "poured wealth into ornamentation of sacred space" (Larkin 2010).

Scholars have studied the popularity of saints' relics and images in New Spain (Rubial García 2009). Bones and likenesses could open a unique portal to heavenly power because saints' bones and their likenesses served as conduits. Things that had touched the bodies of the saints were called "touch relics". The Council of Trent was clear on this: images were not holy in themselves. Rather, they were effective sites of mediation that enabled one to "connect" with the saints in heaven, who could then intercede with god on one's behalf (Larkin 2010, 34). In practice, the notion of a touch relic extended to the dirt around a holy person's buried body, as well as their clothing, again reflecting a tactile and spatial orientation guiding the creation of Catholicism's sacred objects.

But the most sacred object was Christ's body, which, as will shortly become clear, also functioned like a contact relic (Bynum 2011, 139). Accordingly, Trent's edicts established the correct veneration of the sacramental presence, emphasizing universal orthodox practices that reinforced priestly authority. These reforms affected all Catholics, including New Spaniards, where devotion to the host, relics, and images was widespread (Larkin 2010, 37). The widespread adoption of eucharistic devotion is evident not only in the theatrical productions that commemorated the passion and death of Christ (Burkhart 2023), but also in in the last wills and testaments written by a broad swath of Catholic Mexicans who bequeathed cash to local churches, with instructions that the funds be used to enhance the ornamentation of church altars, that is, the place where the Catholic god could most reliably be found. But even more telling about the centrality of eucharistic devotion in New Spain are the testamentary gifts that included wax, candles, and oil that were bequeathed to illuminate the Eucharist. As Larkin's scholarship makes clear, "[T]he central mystery of the Catholic faith, the eucharist, depended on the notion that symbolic human performances could invoke God into the world [. . .] This real presence was physically approachable, and baroque Catholics often made contact with it in and through their bodies" (Larkin 2010, 69).

Now we are in the position to appreciate that what notarial actors worked to bring under the purview and judgment of the imperial state was the shape-shifting power of the god-man. Adopting an action-oriented approach, I read the inventories for clues as to the way its authors organized and edited the text. That is, I follow their actions to understand how they approached the task of inventorying the holy items wrought of

Christ's transformative actions. The methodology that I have in mind is in part inspired by Alessandra Russo, whose study of the gifts that Hernán Cortés sent back to Castille suggests a novel way to study inventories. Russo argues that, in gift exchange, the conquerors and the conquered were engaged in episodes of creative thinking. The inventorying process (naming items gifted and received) was a set of object-oriented practices that, Russo argues, show how *inventorying* (a verb) did spatial work. That is, in the process of listing, new worlds were shaped and amplified, creating "complex dynamics where territories are redefined through the concrete presence of the travelled object" (Russo 2011, 241).[3]

I also borrow from Andrew Pickering, who takes a different but complementary approach to action-oriented hermeneutics. He insists that to study the way that humans work in the world, scholars should take account of the way human action takes place in a "performative idiom". He writes:

> We act in the world, and the world acts on us, to and fro, in a dynamic process I call the "dance of agency", in which all the partners are unpredictably and emergently transformed [. . .] There is nothing mysterious about this. It is just how things go in science and, indeed, everywhere else. (Pickering 2017, 136)

Taking cues from both Russo and Pickering, my study of inventories of silver altarware takes up this performative idiom. Instead of discussing the items "represented" in the various inventories, I argue that what we find in the act of bureaucratic list-making is, in fact, a dance of state agencies with a more-than-human power. Two sets of spatial concerns have informed this dynamic dance. The most obvious is the imperial problem of distance: the Spanish Crown's relatively straightforward motivation was to keep tabs on the effort to arrest the Jesuits and limit their influence in the aftermath of their departure. This was an early modern "everything, everywhere, all at once" undertaking, because notarial action unfolded simultaneously across

3. For decades, science studies scholars have provided useful avenues for approaching the study of inventories that are similarly dynamic, making clear how rational ordering was intertwined with affective experience, as early modern knowledge production held within it a desire to be moved by the experience of "wonder", which motivated both the act of collection and the mode display of natural and cultural objects. See Daston 1988.

Spain's global empire. But the most pressing issue in the process of inventorying silver altarware — and the one I find most intriguing — was the notarial concern to account for how precious metal objects could be altered by divine touch. Accordingly, notaries scrupulously documented which pieces of silver altarware had been touched by god. Bruno Latour's language is helpful here for understanding how sacred objects enable (or disable) points of connection, because his work insists that we study "actants" as those things that "authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour 2005, 68–74). Thus, we see that notaries did not assign worth according to the weight of the silver, nor were they guided by aesthetic logics. Rather, the inventories make clear that notaries operated according to spatio-temporal logics that placed the mystical body of Christ as the key nodal point in a sacramental network of powerful silver altarware.

An important aspect that I want to draw our attention to is how Christ's divinity made him a shape-shifter. Note the spatiotemporal language that Kieckhefer utilizes to describe how Christ "is not bound to the particularities of time and place as a historical person must be" (Kieckhefer 2022, 77):

> He was present in various modes: sacramentally, in the consecrated bread and wine; ecclesially, in the Church as his mystical body; vicariously, in the needy whose care or neglect was the criterion for distinguishing the sheep from the goats; morally, by grace; mystically, as the bridegroom in relationship with his brides. *He might be present in one mode but not others. He might be* experienced *in one mode but not others.* In any case, it was because he was divine that he was necessarily ubiquitous and thus guaranteed present even when his presence was hidden. (Kieckhefer 2022, 33)

This created a problem that compelled state agents to ascertain with some specificity as to which silver altarware served as conduits of sacramentality. Which objects had maintained that connectivity and had remained functionally "live" conduits of sacred power? In this dance of agencies, Christ's appearance transformed and enlivened silver. Or, more precisely, the god-man made *some* silver more lively than others. In following the archival grain of these post-arrest inventories, we see how notaries, working within a baroque culture that put a high premium on sacred immanence, labored to catalogue with great precision *which* silver ornamentation had been transformed.

Counting the Silver

To appreciate how notarial agents engaged bureaucratic methods to account for a god-present in the enlivened material world of baroque immanence, I present one example of the process of sorting and inventorying that is evident in a document titled "List of the Gold and Silver Adornments, divided by class, belonging to the Five Colleges occupied in this City, 1774" (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774).[4] The city in question is Puebla de Los Angeles, and the items listed included simple and ornate altarware that had belonged to the colleges, individual Jesuits, Jesuit churches, Jesuit-sponsored confraternities, and the haciendas affiliated with the Puebla colleges. The Colegio Espíritu Santo is the "top" college in this city, so its holdings are listed first. The resulting inventory of the Puebla silver appears to have been compiled by different notaries in a process that took approximately nine years to complete, as the document is marked with final signatures on August 29, 1781 (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 45v).

Helen Hills has described how colonialism, refinement, and salvation were inscribed into the silver that decorated early modern churches. Hills has suggested that we understand silver in its overlapping potentialities: profit and salvation (Hills 2016, 446–47, and Chapter 10). In the next section, we see how the Crown sees silver precisely in this way, asking what can be melted and what is untouchable. In the years following the arrest and exile of the Jesuits, all silver adornments belonging to their churches, chapels, colleges, haciendas, and mission stations were meticulously evaluated, with some silver marked as an asset to be "liquidated", while other silver items, although counted and evaluated, could remain in use on or near a church altar. Detailed instructions had been written by the Conde de Aranda, the president of the Council of Castile and a very close advisor to the king. These "providential instructions" had been printed in Madrid and distributed to commissioners assigned with the arrest of the Jesuits and to the notaries whom they hired to carry out the legal documentation of the arrest and the compilation of the inventories. They were to be observed "to the letter" (Colección general 1767, 15). But as notaries began to document the goods, they ran into problems, and not only with silver objects. Certainly, their books posed issues because some contained "morally lax" Jesuit theological notions about human agency (Van Kley 2018, Vizute Mendoza 2011). Such books were to be removed

4. For art historical studies of silver altarware in New Spain generally, and for Puebla in particular, see Esteras Martín, 1981, 1984.

from circulation. Notaries examined the account books to see who owed money to the Jesuits, or who might call upon them for payment owed.

But a few years into the sorting process, the body of Christ emerged as a management issue that the Crown deemed important enough to address in an amended set of sorting instructions, and in 1773, an addendum to Aranda's *Instrucción* was issued (Colección general 1767). Silver items that had touched or held Christ's flesh and blood would be documented, but not assigned a monetary value (which would have been determined by its weight). Exempted from the rules that governed the circulation of silver, these items remained to be rationally ordered. The inventory of silver items includes a handwritten copy of Aranda's new instructions for how to sort silver altarware. As these 1773 amended instructions make clear, Christ incarnate was the decisive organizing principle for sorting silver — that is, silver items were described in accordance with the "degrees" of proximity to the body of Christ: "The first degree pertains to those items that made immediate contact with the divine cult." These are silver objects that had immediate physical contact with the body of Christ and constituted "the most sacred of the Religion", such as the chalice, patens, and the monstrance, as well as the reliquaries holding saints' bones (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 6). The second degree includes silver items that made no physical contact with the divine body, but were items proximate to it that "daily serve the Sacrament" in a supportive role, such as the vinegar jar and its plate, altar candle holders, and lamps, as well as silver that "touches" images of saints, such as crowns, diadems, "and other similar items that in a certain mode surround the Sacred" (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 6–7). In the third degree are items that have "no physical contact with the sacred", but only serve to augment "its magnificence and greater pomp, such as vases and bouquets" (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 9). The Crown would allow itself the silver of the third degree.

The process of inventorying according to the Crown's categories of "degrees" or "classes" of silver items was not straightforward. Care went into the classification process, as evidenced in notes indicating deliberation over items. Clues as to the nature of these deliberations can be found in the queries and corrections that notaries made in the margins. Saints' relics are also categorized following a logic of "degrees", with the first degree being the saint's body itself, the second the saint's clothing or objects used by the living saint, and the third a touch relic, that is, something that has touched a first-degree relic. As will become clear, the logic of "touch" is what guides this network of silver divinity. So, while familiar, the inventories nonetheless illuminate some of the head-scratching that

went into the sorting process and, in examining some of the issues that were ironed out, it becomes apparent that proper classification of silver altarware was a matter of great concern: those involved want to get it "right". Simple corrections here include a marginal note reminding scribes to please indicate the height of the silver jars (*xarras*); another marginal note indicates that the jar with Christ's shield (*el escudo de Jesús*) is on the wrong list. One might assume that the "correct" distribution is one in which the Crown gathers the maximum amount unto itself. But this supposition is dismantled relatively quickly when the notes in the file make clear the number of items categorized as "third degree". The third-class items consist predominantly of lamps, candelabras, and chandeliers (*lámparas, blandones, y arañas*), as well as jars, vases, and silver flowers. All items in this class fall within the purview of the Crown, but the document states outright that the total of third-degree items is numerous, large, and unwieldy. Specifically, the chandeliers, lamps, and candlestick holders are described as ultimately too costly to remit to Spain.

The list of silver items belonging to the first class bears fewer corrections and notations. This makes sense: a chalice or ciborium would *always* belong to the first class, having touched the blood or body of Christ. Wherever found, the purpose is expressed in these objects themselves. But silver lamps and candlestick holders are situational objects. If they are on an altar, they are deemed second-class silver. An example is a set of six plain silver candle holders with roman feet (*pies romanos*) of three-quarters height, with lettering at the foot that says "Nuestra Señora de Loreto" (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 21v). The implication of the engraved marker is that these silver candlestick holders adorned a holy image of this Jesuit-sponsored Marian devotion or were on an altar (likely both), and thus are second-degree silver. But sometimes a silver lamp on the list of second-degree items is corrected, marked as truly belonging to the first-class list, as in the following description:

> An old silver lamp, five palms high, including the Cross with a Weathervane (*una veletas*) as a finishing touch, which they said, at the time of forming the inventory, corresponds to the Altar of Señor San Josef, and since this is the one where the Divinisimo was placed, the described lamp seems to correspond to [that] class. (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, ff 23–23v)

Similarly, a reliquary of plain silver holding the signature of San Ignacio, "topped with a silver Jesus", is noted as belonging to the "*primera clase*"

list (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 25). In both cases, notaries are concerned with elevating lamps and candlestick holders to a higher status when necessary, as in this case of the signature of Ignatius. The handwritten name of the saint — itself a touch relic — is considered a surrogate for his sainted body, and so the silver reliquary's status was elevated. Thus, the body and blood of Christ are not the only way to measure "proximity" to the sacred. Here the notaries are concerned with related or overlapping notions of sacrality (the saint's image or body) as another proximate object that can touch and change the order of silver things.

The amount of silver does not appear to matter. The silver corners of an ebony frame, for example, are listed on the inventory of second-class silver. The silver gilt corners adorn an image of the Holy Family, implying that the image of the Holy Family holds sacred qualities (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 26v). It is simply a matter of these small corners of silver being proximate to the object adorned. Sometimes the adorned object is unknown, as is prevalent with jewelry. While there are a few pearl chokers and bracelets that are described as adornments for the arms and neck of the Christ child (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, 28v),[5] most of these items have no place-markers. Prominent among these are the belts, necklaces, chokers, bracelets, pendants, and earrings, some with emeralds or garnets, many more made of pearl. But the notary's assumption is that they were made to decorate holy images and statues, thus they are all considered second-degree.

Sometimes a few silver items stand apart, as if surrogates for a holy image or sculpture itself. Among these are "las potencias de Nuestro Señor Crucificado" (the "powers" of Christ), represented by hammered silver decorative "rays" that are attached to the head of Christ in some sculptures and paintings. In this instance, however, Christ's potency is linked neither to flesh and blood nor to his human representation. Rather, this is a family portrait, as Christ's *potencias* are shown together with silver items that also function as surrogates for any literal representation of his holy and suffering mother. That is, the *potencias* are displayed in a niche alongside the silver rays of a halo that would usually be seen glowing behind the tear-stained face of Nuestra Señora de Dolores. In the same niche is a little silver dagger, referring to Mary's pierced and sorrowful heart. The three sets of silver items decorate a side altar for Saint Joseph, and together comprise a distinctive representation of the Holy Family (BHJML, Legajo

5. Larkin also notes the testamentary gifts of jewelry to particular Marian images (Larkin 2010, 45–46).

139 1774, f 27). Similarly, there is a display of sacred hearts belonging to Mary and Jesus standing side by side in another niche (BHJML, Legajo 139 1774, ff 27–27v). The inventory lists yet another set of *potencias* and describes them as corresponding to a Niño Jesus, but unlike the *potencias* displayed in the niche on the side altar, there is no location marked, and they appear to be "floating" without any specific anchor in this network of sacramental power. Yet in the process of sorting, the notaries return them to their proper status. Thus, these moments of puzzlement about proper location confirm a sacramental network that makes sense of the silver objects according to how they have been "positioned" around the altar. Notaries likely based their judgment upon prior existential experience of sacred settings. That is, their knowledge of the status or importance of each silver object and its likely proximity or distance from a divinity is situational knowledge. Stated another way, it appears that the Crown's directives were making explicit what had been an operational yet unstated doxa about the organizational power of the incarnate god. "Lived religion" here includes the daily experiences of local Catholic notaries who toiled to account for the ways in which transubstantiation touched and transformed some silver into sacred altarware, while marking others as playing a largely aesthetic supporting role.

Conclusion

The Catholic divinity was sometimes experienced as absent or hidden, but this is not because the *divinismo* was ethereal. In the colonial Mexican culture of baroque immanence, the sacred was tangible because their god was reliably present on the altar, having sacramentally transformed the substances of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Thus, *novohispanos* actively decorated the space where he most often appeared, adored his body, and illuminated his presence with their testamentary gifts of wax and oil to ensure that his silver adornments would blaze with appropriate glory.

The Crown put its notaries to the work of theorizing materiality according to these sacramental logics. Paying careful attention to how silver objects had been organized spatially, these state agents took precise notes on how a god's power could extend into human-made objects. Some objects were deemed sacred due to their use as containers of divinity; others drew their specialness from their emplacement near those divine containers. In accounting for the extension of the mystical into the concrete,

they followed a sacramental logic, removing silver from networks of value marked as "economic" or "aesthetic". In fact, "value" was not an operative criterion. Rather, sacred power was the condition to be marked, and the power was determined by the object's position within a material network that became sacramentally charged during the Catholic liturgy. In their work to categorize objects as alternatively "sacred" or "decorative", these bureaucrats demonstrated a shared conviction not only that god appeared in a tangible form, but also that Christ's appearances changed the nature of things. The transformation of silver altarware is part of a *longue durée* history of Christian materiality that, as Caroline Walker Bynum states so elegantly: "Miraculous matter was simultaneously — hence paradoxically — the changeable stuff of not-God and the locus of a God revealed" (Bynum 2011, 35). Notably, this iterative quality to Christ's presence posed a problem of *duration* that was implied but not directly addressed in the resulting notarial documentation. The Eucharist appeared during the liturgy and disappeared when consumed by both priest and laity, but by contrast, the silver objects had been permanently transformed, made eternally sacred, and remained visible even when Christ was not making an appearance. And that made those sacramental objects powerful.

When read along Stoler's archival grain, the inventories offer a new appreciation of how god-centered epistemological practices were the very substance of colonial politics (Stoler 2002, 100). Note that the Crown formally acknowledged the limits to its own power in relation to the ecclesiastical objects that had been enlivened by the real yet flickering presence of Christ's body on the altar. This is especially interesting when we consider the context: the Crown had been able to enact the termination of a powerful and popular order of religious men, while also commanding the public's silence on the topic. Yet this same sovereign power was *unable* to touch sacramental silver, let alone weigh it, melt it, or ship it to Spain. This ought to reframe our appreciation of the unruly terrain of colonial sovereignty, because the god-present in the Eucharist had put limits on the Crown's power to fully impose its sovereign will. In fact, the king and his subordinates are themselves subject to unstable sacramental logic by which the shape-shifting body of Christ enables *and* disrupts flows of power.

The body of Christ was, indeed, a very complicated substance. I have drawn our attention to how Christ's divinity made him a shape-shifter. As we have seen, the notaries' evaluation of silver altarware took account of the ritual *time* of a liturgical calendar that marked the *space* of the altar as the place with the greatest potential to host a divine presence. But I am

intrigued by the semantics of "possibility" that informs the theology of the mystical body of Christ: recalling Kieckhefer's description, he *might be* present here, but not there; he *might be* experienced in this mode, but not that. The gods are complicated dance partners. The inherent *ambiguity* in the human capacity to perceive this god ought to prod scholars to think carefully about the new terrain charted in the work that these notaries were doing to disambiguate a sacramental network in this eighteenth-century Mexican moment.

So, what are the implications of state agents making explicit which silver objects belonged to this network of sacramental power? Perhaps most uncontroversially, the notaries labor to establish in a state-certified language what baroque Catholics already understood quite well: Christ appeared on the regular and he could alter their world, spiritually and materially. This is surely the most basic takeaway.

But notarial labor was markedly different from the way that the human–divine relation was regulated by the Church through liturgical practice. The priests are offstage; the notaries are the ritual specialists, serving as masters of this state-run ceremony of documentation. Their inventories produce — for both local government and the more distant Crown — what a state might see, judge, and adjudicate. Burns and Stoler would look to the ways that inventorial practices demonstrate a relation between writing and power, and we would find this relation not only in the documentary evidence produced, but also in the fact that notaries, pens in hand, had been present during the initial moments of the arrest of the Jesuits, lending authority to this state action with their *active labor* of observing and pausing to take notes.

The attempt to both utilize and restrain power objects has long been part of Catholicism's approach to the miraculous (Bynum 2011). Such concerns were key to the way the Council of Trent defended and promoted the theology of divine presence in the Eucharist, while simultaneously bringing order to sacramental ritual practice, legislating how god's appearance would be managed and contained by a reformed priesthood. But the shift in the dance at the end of the eighteenth century resides in the fact that the management of Christ's body was codified not by church agents, but by the notaries who acted on behalf of the imperial state. The bureaucratic labor of inventorying sacramental silver stands out as a very peculiar "ordered" genre. On the one hand, notarial documentation performed the conceit of authority and mastery, while the notarial project also demarcated sacramental spaces where state power could *not* take appropriative action. I contend that this dance of agency among the Crown

and Christ contributed — as Pickering suggests these dances often do — to emergent transformations in the realm of state power. Thus, a second and perhaps more provocative argument can be made that in foregrounding inventorying as a process, we see a mechanism of capture in action. The inventories not only put limits on the state, but they also sought to *define* and *delimit* where Christ might be expected to be present, thus pointing toward a not-so-distant secularizing future in which increasing limits determined where the god-man could appear in the world.[6]

Northwestern University

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6. Only with benefit of hindsight can we see that the state will become the leading partner in the dance. Looking ahead in time, the liberalizing Mexican state demarcated, regulated, and transformed the mobility of sacramental power with nineteenth-century reforms and twentieth-century post-revolutionary state consolidation. The inventories under study here bear witness to a transitional moment of clearing" the space around the altar. Recent books — with great bibliographies and adequate attention to the highly contested nature of secularization in on-the-ground forms of state formation in independent and post-revolutionary Mexico, respectively — are (Voekel 2022) (Chowning 2023; Kloppe-Santamaría 2020).

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