

**“Your Caridad del Cobre is not my Guadalupe, but Let Us Share La Leche:
A Look at Latina/o Theological Roots in Images of Breast Milk”
Dr. Neomi DeAnda**

Abstract

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, as Patroness of the Americas, has been used sometimes as a way of homogenizing Latinas and Latin Americans. While probably not the intention of Pope Pius XII in 1945, this single Marian image many times becomes associated with every Latino community from Canadian to Salvadoran, Cuban to Peruvian, Tejana to Puerto Rican, Argentine to Costa Rican, etc. Yet, the members of these various groups know very well that each nation and many times each region has devotions to its own distinct Marian images, most of which carry their own local stories of apparition and miracles, such as Caridad del Cobre of Cubans and Nuestra Señora de Chiquinquirá of Colombians.

One Marian image, however, does have roots across various Latin American communities and their histories. Nursing and Lactating Madonnas can be found throughout what we now call the Americas from Peru to Mexico; Puerto Rico to Florida with confirmed dates from the early seventeenth century but may have arrived earlier in the Americas. Members of the Spanish Monarchy had various devotions to these Madonnas, sometimes named María de La Leche y Buen Parto and other times named Nuestra Señora de Belén. Spanish Queens prayed for intercessions through this Mary for assistance in childbirth and child rearing.

These Marian images were brought to the Americas to also watch over the childbearing and rearing of those living in the region as well as a way of union with God. One nun, Sor María Anna de Águeda de San Ignacio, wrote an entire theological treatise on El Camino de La Leche outlining the path toward God through Mary's milk. Yet, images of divine lactating and nursing breasts are not exclusive to the Spanish or to Christianity. Various deities and images of lactating and nursing breasts can be found in indigenous cosmologies of the Americas. So, these Marian images seem to have been easily accepted by various native communities.

Today, at least two of these Marian images are found in active chapels within the boundaries of the USA. One, a Nuestra Señora de Belén hangs in the Cathedral in Viejo San Juan. Two, a statue of Nuestra Señora de La Leche y Buen Parto sits in her dedicated chapel on Misión Nombre de Dios in St. Augustine, Florida in what has been called “America's Most Sacred Acre.” This historical study of the breast and lactation through images considered divine and sacred by various communities allows Latina theologies to reclaim the breast as a complex image of life and divinity.

Bio

Neomi De Anda, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Dayton University, holds a PhD in Constructive Theology from Loyola University Chicago. Dr. De Anda serves as the Treasurer for the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS). Her scholarly interests include: Latina Theologies, Breast Milk and Divinity, Latin American Women 1500-1900, pedagogy, as well as Religion and Popular Culture. She is presently funded through the Louisville Institute First Book Grant for Minority Scholars for her book-length manuscript, *A Theology of Breast Milk: A Latina Perspective*.