

PRIESTS & PEOPLE—JUNE 1994 (vol 8 no 6) 217–221 © 1994 The Tablet Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Eucharistic Change

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Let us begin with some misconceptions about what the Catholic tradition says happens when bread and wine are consecrated. The Council of Trent did not decree that Catholics should believe in transubstantiation: it just calls it a most appropriate (*aptissime*) way of talking about the Eucharist, presumably leaving open whether there might not be other, perhaps even more appropriate ways of talking. You could say that the Council sanctioned and recommended this theology whereas, for example, the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles are rather less liberal: they forbid it its ‘repugnant to the plain words of scripture’. It is likely, however, that the authors of that document did not quite understand the meaning of that doctrine and fairly certain that a whole lot of Catholics do not either.

Perhaps we could start with a caricature of the doctrine which I think would be taken for the real thing by a great many Christians, whether they accept or reject it. The caricature goes like this: at the consecration, the bread and wine change into a different kind of substance, flesh and blood, in fact the flesh and blood of Christ; but this is disguised from us by the fact that to all appearances the bread and wine are unchanged. This is so that we can eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ

without being disgusted by the cannibalism involved. The miracle here is a kindly deception which protects us from seeing what we are really doing. If we could only peep behind the residual appearances we would discover human flesh and human blood. (There is a famous medieval legend about a priest being confirmed in his faith in the reality of the eucharistic change when he saw the host bleed . . . and so on.)

Now this is not the doctrine of transubstantiation, at least as understood by St Thomas Aquinas. First of all, for him, the change is of a completely different kind from the change of bread and wine into another kind of stuff (which he would call a ‘substantial’ change); and secondly the appearance of bread and wine do not become the misleading appearances, the disguise, for the new stuff, so as to make it palatable. They become the signs which reveal to us the new reality. In all sacraments God shows us what he does and does what he shows us. In six of the sacraments he makes present and shows us by signs the power of Christ to save us; in the central sacrament of the Eucharist he makes present Christ himself and shows him to us by signs which indicate what he is, the unity of his faithful in charity. ‘For he is our peace who has made us one.’

Aristotle

St Thomas talks of transubstantiation in language borrowed from Aristotle: he speaks of substance and accidents. If you tell somebody *what* sort of thing something is (a horse, an electron, etc.) you are telling him of its substance. If you are giving him further information (where it is, how high it is, how intelligent it is etc.) you are telling him its

accidental characteristics. It is important to an Aristotelian that a thing may lose some accidental characteristic (it may move, shrink, grow more stupid etc.) without ceasing to be the same identical thing; whereas if it should lose its substance, its essential character, it perishes, ceases to be this thing and turns into something else (as when the horse dies, it is no longer a horse but has changed into a corpse). This seems a fairly common-sense account at least of the organic world in which it is usually fairly easy to agree on what sorts of things there are (horses, onions, human beings) and not too difficult to observe them beginning to exist (being born or whatever) and ceasing to exist (dying). It differs considerably from our modern physicist's way of talking but it seems bizarre to claim that it is unintelligible to us. Amongst the accidental characteristics of things around us are their appearances: size, colour, taste etc., by which usually we recognise them for what they are. Unlike St Thomas, Trent speaks not of accidents but of appearances (*species*), saying that to all appearances the consecrated elements are still bread and wine and no investigation of ours could tell us anything different, but we know by faith that what they are is no longer bread and wine but the sacramental presence of the body and blood of Christ.

Mystery

It is important to recognise that, in using Aristotelean language, St Thomas is not giving an 'Aristotelean' explanation of the Eucharist. He uses it because it was the common philosophical currency of the time; but he uses it to give an account of something that simply could not happen according to Aristotle. Transubstantiation, like creation or

incarnation, does not make sense within the limits of the Aristotelean world-view. St Thomas uses Aristotle's language, but it breaks down in speaking of the Eucharist. It does not break down because there is some more accurate language in which the whole thing can be explained. It breaks down because it is language. We are dealing here with something that transcends our concepts and can only be spoken of by stretching language to breaking point: we are dealing here with mystery.

Those who wish to replace talk of transubstantiation by talk of transignification are quite reasonably claiming that in our culture we are more familiar with talk of meanings than of substances, and meaning seems the obvious category in which to speak of sacramental signs and liturgy; for one thing we are less likely to imagine that the Mass turns on a specially mysterious chemical process.

There is much in this so long as it does not sound like 'Really it is only a change of meaning' (for the meaning in question has a special profundity about it) and so long as it is not taken to be saying that the bread and wine, while remaining what they were, are 'deemed' (by the Church, or even by the individual believer) to be the focus of the presence of Christ to us in his bodily humanity (For this sounds too much like 'deeming' a piece of stage furniture to be the Castle of Dunsinane). On the other hand to say that it is God who does the deeming would take us straight back to something like transubstantiation, for if God deems something to happen it must happen, and come about in the created world (for nothing can happen in the eternal immutable Godhead). Moreover not even God could deem

something both to be and not be bread and wine — except in different senses; and that takes us back to where we were before we talked of ‘deeming’.

A guiding principle in our thinking about this matter must surely be that anything which seems to take the scandal or mystery out of the Eucharist must be wrong, whether it be couched in terms of substance or of meaning.

Signs and appearances

If we are to understand what the notion of transubstantiation is saying, or trying to say, we need to reflect on the difference between the way appearances tell us something and the way in which signs tell us something. It is only in a metaphorical sense that, in English, we can say, for example, ‘The smell of bitter almonds tells you that it is cyanide’; but, of course, smelling of bitter almonds is not part of telling you anything. It is simply a physical reality and it is you who tell yourself it is due to cyanide because you have read enough detective stories to know this.

It is not literally true that ‘appearances are deceptive’; they are just there; it is people who may use them to deceive you, or you may deceive yourself by jumping to conclusions. On the other hand signs, conventional signs, like words, for example or flags, are part of language and as such they are part of telling. (We even have a special name for deceiving by the use of conventional signs: we call it lying.) When Bruce Kent, let us say, wears a CND badge he is saying something, and something that is true, a statement that might be translated as ‘I believe in unilateral nuclear disarmament’. In the unlikely event of Michael

Heseltine wearing one he would presumably be either joking or lying.

There is, then, a lot of difference between the appearance which simply shows you a thing and signs which are part of telling you something about it. I labour this point because it is an important part of St Thomas’s teaching on the Eucharist that the accidents of bread and wine cease to be the appearances of bread and wine, but this is not because they become the misleading appearances of something else. They cease to function as appearances at all, they have become signs, sacramental signs through which what is signified is made real.

Before the consecration the appearances were there because the bread was there, they were just the appearances of the bread. After the consecration it is the other way round, the body of Christ is sacramentally there because what were the appearances of bread (and are now sacramental signs), are there. So with unconsecrated bread the accidents can remain (and vary) so long as the bread still exists: how very bizarre if they were to stay on (like the Cheshire cat’s grin) when what they are accidents of is not there. But after the consecration the body of Christ is sacramentally present just so long as the signs are there. The important consequence of this is that these signs are not the appearances of Christ’s body: they are no longer the appearances of anything. The colour and shape of the host is not the colour and shape of Christ’s body, the location of the host, its being on the altar does not mean that Christ’s body is located on the altar; the fact that the host is moved about, say in procession, does not mean that Christ’s body is being moved about. When we do things to the host, such as eating it, we are not doing anything to Christ’s

body. What we are doing is completing the significance of the signs. For bread and wine are meant to be eaten and drunk, to be our food; and food, eating and drinking together is, even in our secular lives, a sign expressing friendship and unity. This is why Jesus chose it to be the sign which would tell us of the real sacramental presence of his body given for us and his blood poured out for us — the body of Christ which is more deeply our food our ‘bread and wine I than is the ordinary bread and wine with which we began.

Believing in creation

I have said that St Thomas uses Aristotelean language to propound what Aristotle would have found unintelligible; because, of course, the whole biblical teaching of creation, the incarnation and Christ’s humanity as the sacrament of God’s love for us, and the sacraments of the Church are utterly outside his ken. For Aristotle when bread becomes human flesh (as when you eat it) it is because a ‘substantial change’ (cf. ‘chemical change’) has taken place. This means that matter which at one time had the substantial form of bread now has the form of flesh. It is by such changes that old things perish and new things come into existence — by being made out of some predecessor. Aristotle did not think that everything *does* come into existence: he thought there were imperishable beings that could never have started to exist. Coming into existence belongs only to those inferior parts of the universe which have to be made out of a predecessor and which perish by being turned into a successor. So, for him, the entire universe itself could not have come into existence — there would be nothing for it to be made out of. So

Aristotle gives us an interesting analysis of coming into existence by substantial change, but had no notion of creation. St Thomas, however, believing in creation, believed in a new and different kind of bringing into existence. He thought there was a kind of cause which did not merely give a new form to the matter of already existing perishable things, but simply brought things into being when there was nothing there before. The creative act of God does not just deal in the forms of things — making one kind of thing into an individual of another kind with a different form, it gives sheer existence to the whole thing. Causes within nature give things the form by which they have existence; God gives things existence itself. God is the reason why there is a world of natural causality; and every natural cause can only give existence because it is an instrument of the creator, the source of all existence.

Now it is this depth of divine causality that (without using any natural causes) is going on, says St Thomas, in the eucharistic consecration. The bread does not turn into the body by acquiring a new form in its matter; the whole existence of the bread becomes the existence of the living body of Christ. The body is not made out of the bread, as ashes are made out of paper by burning it (a chemical change). Something has happened as profoundly different from chemical change as creation is. It is not that the bread has become a new kind of thing in this world: it now belongs to a new world. As far as this world is concerned, nothing seems to have happened, but in fact what we have is not part of this world, it is the Kingdom impinging on our history and showing itself not by appearing in the world but by signs speaking to this world.

In his bodily presence

So what we have in the Eucharist is first a perfectly ordinary ritual religious meal, symbolising our friendship and unity, then it begins to belong to what is beyond our universe, beyond space and history. What was hitherto just a religious word spoken by people has become the Word spoken by God, the Word made flesh that dwells amongst us.

We begin with a ceremony in a church and find ourselves in the Kingdom; no longer simply talking or thinking about Christ but in his bodily presence.

The change is so tremendous that it is quite imperceptible. In fact, St Thomas says it is not a change (*mutatio*) at all, for such a change means a re-adjustment of our world — as when one thing is altered or changes into something else: this clearly makes a perceptible difference. But transubstantiation is not a change, just as creation is not a change. What the bread has become is the body of Christ, which is to say the Kingdom itself — for Christ does not inhabit the Kingdom, he, his body, his human way of communicating with other humans, is the Kingdom of God. It is by the union of his body and ours that we belong to the Kingdom. Now the Kingdom, the glorified body of Christ, is not something that could be seen within our world as part of our world; if it is to be manifest amongst us it can only be by signs, by sacramental signs: and this is just what the Eucharist is.

What happens in the Eucharist is not, of course, happening to Christ. He does not literally ‘come down’ on altar after altar. What happens occurs to the symbolic meal which

we share in expression of our faith and love. But nor is this happening an event within the parameters of our creaturely world, to be monitored by scientific or historical investigation. It is the event, the advent, of grace; indeed the Eucharist with its satellite sacraments is the paradigm source of all grace; by it the Church participates in the divine life by sharing in the grace of the one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus.

‘The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ’ Because there is one bread we who are many are one body . . . ’ Bread is not the name of a chemical substance, although certain such substances have to be there for it to be bread. Bread is stuff we eat, a particular stuff we eat, but still, primarily, to call it bread is to speak of it as what we have for meals. To be bread is to be nourishment, to play a part in human life. Bread and wine in any circumstances are potentially symbols of human community, of being one. Now in the Eucharist this meaning is deepened and what was common bread becomes the sign, the sacramental sign, the sign in God’s language, proclaiming that our human community is a community in God’s life; what was our bread has become the bread of heaven and it would now be sacrilegious to see it and treat it as ordinary bread. To say, as Trent does, that in the consecrated host ‘the substance of bread does not remain’ is not like saying that zinc or wool is not bread. If we think the consecrated host is ordinary bread we are not making the same kind of mistake as we would if we thought a model of a slice of bread in fibreglass was ordinary bread. Our mistake lies in not recognising that it is so much bread in the symbolic sense, as far as the human meaning of bread is concerned, that to

call it ordinary bread is to misdescribe it. In St Thomas's language it would be to treat the appearances as accidents of bread when really they are the divine sacramental signs of Christ's body. They belong to a new language.

Miracle

To say that the appearances of the host are not in truth accidents of bread but only mistaken for such accidents by one lacking faith, may seem less odd if we notice other quite different contexts in which we make the same kind of mistake. Until fairly recently nearly everybody thought that arching over us is a large vault which is blue unless obscured by clouds. This is what Genesis calls 'the vault of heaven'. Common speech retains this picture and we ask 'What colour is the sky?' But just as in the Eucharist we know better by having faith, so in this case we know better by having physics. We know, when we think about it, that what is causing our sensation of blue is not that there is a blue object called the sky. The sensation is not due to the reflection of blue light from a surface but to the refraction of light so that we are only affected by the blue end of the spectrum of white light. We over-hastily assume that the blue is an accident of the vault of heaven, but there is no such thing. The blue of the sky is nothing so nonsensical as an accident without anything to be accident of (cf. the Cheshire cat's grin), it is only what might easily be mistaken for an accident. Similarly the colour and shape of the host are nothing so nonsensical as accidents which are not the accidents of anything; they are just what easily might be mistaken for accidents of something and would certainly be so mistaken if we did not have faith that they are no such thing, but signs of the presence of

Christ. It is, of course, miraculous that these signs, these appearances, should remain when they have ceased to be accidents. It is not a natural phenomenon like the apparent blue of the sky. My comparison is not intended as an explanation of the eucharistic miracle, merely an attempt to show that it does not involve sheer contradiction. And this is the most that can be done with any miracle.

What happens, then, when we consecrate is that the body and blood of Christ become present as our food and drink to constitute our sharing in the coming banquet of the Kingdom. This happens not by any change in Christ himself but by a miracle, comparable to creation, in which the whole existence of our bread and wine becomes the existence of Christ. The bread which was present naturally is converted not by any substantial change but by the creative power of God, into the body of Christ which is present not naturally but sacramentally.

Instead, therefore, of the body of Christ manifesting itself to us in his own accidents, in his glory, it is manifested to us, not in any accidents at all but in sacramental signs. What had been the appearances of bread and wine become, through this miracle, the signs in which Christ shows himself, his presence to us. They become the language in which God speaks to us and which we hear only in faith; they become the Word of God, they become Christ, that Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us.