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THE MANNER OF CHRIST'S EUCCHARISTIC PRESENCE IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Egil Grislis

The roots of Lutheran theology are found both in the Early and the Medieval Church. Precisely because our theology is confessedly biblical, we discover its authentic beginnings wherever in the centuries preceding the Reformation the Scriptures were read, reflected upon, and devoutly followed. Admittedly, there are outsiders who, despite the dawn of an ecumenical age, are unacquainted with the ethos of the Lutheran variety of theology and imagine that we are mere followers of one Martin Luther. To them and sometimes to ourselves, when we seem to have forgotten who we are, we must confess that we are disciples of Jesus Christ — whom Martin Luther followed, and surely not alone, but in the company of that communion of saints which we confess in the Apostles' Creed, common to Western Christendom and to us.¹

At the same time, as it is appropriate to distinguish between root, stem, and flowers, so it is in order to inquire just how the earlier understanding of the eucharistic presence of Christ can be related to the theological insights of Martin Luther. In embarking upon this task we must note that the Early Church, in contrast to the Christological problem, did not settle the eucharistic question. Admittedly, even the Christological solution did not emerge at once. Rather a complex statement was made in stages in which certain issues were never exhaustively defined. Hence the result was a very difficult formulation, requiring a great deal of both time and learning for proper comprehension. Nevertheless, the Christological insights of the Early Church are essentially clear, infinitely precise, and eminently useful — despite some loud claims by modern day heretics to the contrary. The doctrine of the eucharistic presence of Christ, on the other hand, was not viewed as a controversial problem

1. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle of Luther's Reformation* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1964). Joseph A. Burgess, ed., *The Role of the Augsburg Confession: Catholic and Lutheran Views* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

and therefore did not receive a great deal of concentrated attention either by individual theologians or by church councils. As a result the eucharistic presence of Christ in the Early Church was not defined as carefully and as precisely as later during the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Jaroslav Pelikan's very sobering warning therefore ought not to be overlooked: ". . . the effort to cross-examine the fathers of the second and third century about where they stood in the controversies of the ninth or sixteenth century is both silly and futile."²

Yet it is a serious and helpful undertaking to observe the main contours of the eucharistic theology of the Early Church and to note a few of the major problems therein. While a certain selection of representative theologians will have to be in order, that is without undue regret, because, as St. Irenaeus said, one does not have to drink the entire ocean in order to know what it tastes like!

THE EARLY CHURCH

The most famed of the apostolic fathers, *St. Ignatius of Antioch*, who was martyred at the beginning of the second century, said in his letter to the Romans:

I have no pleasure in the food of corruption or in the delights of this life. I desire the 'bread of God,' which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was 'of the seed of David,' and for drink I desire his blood, which is incorruptible love. (7:2)

On the one hand, St. Ignatius identifies the eucharistic elements with the body and blood of Christ; on the other hand, he is prepared to interpret this identification in a symbolic manner. Apparently he adheres to both sides of his affirmation, without observing any tension or contradiction between them!

Consistently St. Ignatius approaches the eucharist with infinite seriousness and in deepest reverence. In a key passage he defines the eucharist as "the medicine of immortality, (*hos estin pharmakon athanasias*) the antidote that we should not die, but live for ever in Jesus Christ."³ Such are not mere occasional statements; St. Ignatius takes the eucharistic realism of the presence of Christ's body and blood rather "strictly, for he makes it the basis of his argument against the Docetists' denial of the reality of Christ's body."⁴ In other words, the reality of Christ's incarnation and the fact of His eucharistic presence are for him correlative doctrines! A stronger affirmation of a real-presence-eucharistic-theology could hardly be made. Yet, at the same time St. Ignatius succeeds in incorporating in his theology a rather definite

2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1:167. The appropriateness of his remark may be seen by consulting such thorough yet also recognizably Anglican works as by A.J. Macdonald, *The Evangelical Doctrine of Holy Communion* (London: S.P.C.K, 1936) and Darwell Stone, *The History of the Eucharist* (1909).

3. Eph. 20.3. Cf. Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers, A Translation and Commentary: IV, Ignatius of Antioch*, p. 53

4. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958), p. 197, cf. *Smyrn.* 7.1

symbolic perspective, as he repeatedly identifies the blood of Christ with the love of Christ.⁵

Whether St. Ignatius recognized it or not, he thereby avoided two pitfalls. Anyone who speaks merely about the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, affirming this presence literally and without any qualifications, has thereby affirmed a bodily eating and should incur the charge of cannibalism and theophagy. Anyone, however, who centers his attention exclusively on the symbolic dimensions of the eucharist, may be in the danger of succumbing to a mere memorial theory, where the experience is merely subjective, without any presently active input from Christ.⁶

St. Justin Martyr from the middle of the second century presents a similar tension in which the thrust on the real presence also appears to predominate:

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.⁷

In this statement the accent on the flesh and blood of Christ is an outstanding feature. Even more important perhaps is Justin Martyr's introduction of an explicit idea of change. He teaches that as the prayer "of His Word" is said, an authentic encounter with Jesus Christ is taking place. Several serious questions remain. Does Justin mean that the eucharistic elements have now been changed into the actual body of Christ, or into the sacramental body of Christ? Or does he mean that the bread and the wine, now metabolized in our bodies, serve to join us with Christ in a spiritual manner? Justin Martyr does not answer such inquiries. Yet, the significance of what he does say ought not to be brushed aside. Clearly, in the eucharist, a miracle of change does occur and the real presence of Christ is encountered. While the symbolic dimension is not ruled out, St. Justin Martyr has heavily underscored a sense of eucharistic realism. This is an important and valuable insight.

To St. Irenaeus, a theologian of major stature from the end of the second century, eucharistic realism appears to be the ordinary mode of thinking theologically. The context of his thought is his intense opposition to the Gnostics — Christian heretics with strong dualistic leanings, who denied creation, incarnation, and resurrection of the flesh, i.e., saw salvation exclusively in terms of the spirit. St. Irenaeus writes:

. . . He took that created thing, bread, and gave thanks, and said, 'This is my body.' And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we

5. *Smyrn.* 7.1; *Tral.* 8.1; *Rom.* 7.3

6. It is my conviction that the realist and symbolist motifs can be found in every theologian of the Early Church. Certainly, clusters of theologians among these two motifs can also be arranged. The traditional view, I am convinced, distanced the two motifs too artificially from each other, e.g. Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), p. 31.

7. J.N.D. Kelly, offers two divergent translations: (1) "the food which has been eucharistized by the word of prayer from Him is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus", and (2) "that food which by process of assimilation nourishes our flesh and blood is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus." p. 198

belong, He confessed to be His blood . . .

In another key passage St. Irenaeus notes:

Then, again, how can they say that the flesh, which is nourished with the body of the Lord and with His blood, goes to corruption, and does not partake of life . . . ?⁸

This statement is a powerful affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. Yet as St. Irenaeus continues, and acknowledges the great miracle of eucharistic change, he proceeds to speak in a manner which leaves room for both realist and symbolic dimensions:

For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.⁹

Here St. Irenaeus fails to inform us of the nature of the “heavenly” reality. It is the body of Christ, but what kind of a body — physical, undefined heavenly in a spiritual modality, or a mystical participation in the body of Christ? Nevertheless, St. Irenaeus clearly appreciates the redemptive dynamic of the real presence and powerfully declares:

When, therefore, the mingled cup and the manufactured bread receives the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the blood and the body of Christ is made, from which things the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they affirm that the flesh is incapable of receiving the gift of God, which is life eternal, which [flesh] is nourished from the body and blood of the Lord, and is a member of Him?¹⁰

Although the symbolic dimension is rather slight, it should not be completely ruled out.

Tertullian, in the third century, continues this by now familiar thrust. He “regularly describes the bread as ‘the Lord’s body.’ ”¹¹ Yet Tertullian is also prepared to distinguish between physical and sacramental eating, without, however, too closely defining the latter: “. . . the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God.”¹² In another passage Tertullian acknowledges the symbolic dimension of the eucharistic event even more explicitly:

Then, having taken the bread and given it to His disciples, He made it His own body, by saying, ‘This is my body,’ that is, the figure of my body. A figure, however, there could not have been, unless there were first a veritable body.¹³

This was a good argument against the docetism of Marcion. Though not questioning the reality of the body of Christ during His lifetime, in the eucharist, Tertul-

8. *Against Heresies*, 4. 17. 5; A N F, 1:484

9. *ibid.*, 4. 18. 5; A N F, 1:486

10. *ibid.*, 5. 2. 3; A N F, 1:528

11. J.N.D. Kelly, p. 211, referring to *On Prayer*, 19; A N F, 3:687; *On Idolatry*, 7; A N F, 3:64; *On Modesty*, 9; A N F, 4:83

12. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 8; A N F, 3:551

13. *Against Marcion*, 4.40; A N F, 3:418; cf. 3.19; A N F, 3:337

lian observes the more symbolically expressed term "figure" and on another occasion speaks of "the bread by which He represents His own proper body."¹⁴

The symbolic side of the eucharistic presence comes to surface even more prominently in the writings of Clement and Origen from Alexandria.¹⁵ Yet even here we do not find an explicit denial of real presence. Instead we have a re-statement of the same in Platonic categories and hence in highly symbolic language. *Clement* writes in his well known statement "On Drinking":

And the blood of the Lord is twofold. For there is the blood of His flesh, by which we are redeemed from corruption; and the spiritual, that by which we are anointed. And to drink the blood of Jesus, is to become partaker of the Lord's immortality; the Spirit being the energetic principle of the Word, as blood is of flesh.¹⁶

Origen's position is similar. Generally, however, the belief in the real presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the eucharist remains the dominant motif of the Early Church. Such a situation prevails not by accident, but in the conviction that thereby the *Wholy Writ* is being faithfully followed. *St. Cyril of Jerusalem* explains:

Since then He Himself has declared and said of the Bread, *This is My Body*, who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He has affirmed and said, *This is My Blood*, who shall ever hesitate, saying, that it is not His blood?¹⁷

Without seeking to subject the Bible to human scrutiny and to accept only those statements which agree with reason, *St. Cyril* does not hesitate to show that the eucharistic miracle fits congruously in a larger divinely established pattern of operation. He writes:

He once turned water into wine, in Cana in Galilee, at His own will, and is it incredible that He should have turned wine into blood? That wonderful work He miraculously wrought, when called to an earthly marriage; and shall He not much rather be acknowledged to have bestowed the fruition of His Body and Blood on the children of the bridechamber?¹⁸

That is to say, if Christ regarded miracles as fitting already at an earthly marriage, were they not far more appropriate for the celebration of the union between the believers and their Lord? Yet, like all other early fathers, *St. Cyril* knows that the eucharistic bread and wine after consecration continues to taste like ordinary bread and wine. Hence he counsels: "Judge not the matter from taste, but from faith be fully assured without misgiving, that thou hast been vouchsafed the Body and Blood of Christ."¹⁹ There is no doubt in *St. Cyril's* mind that despite outward evidence, the essential content of the eucharist is the true body and blood of Christ: "what seems bread is not bread, though bread by taste, but the Body of Christ; and that what seems wine is not wine, though the taste will have it so, but the Blood of Christ . . ."²⁰ The miraculous change follows upon the *epiklesis*:

14. *ibid.*, 1.14; *A N F*, 3:281

15. *J.N.D. Kelly*, p. 213

16. *The Instructor*, 2.2; *A N F*, 2:242

17. "Mystagogical Catechesis, 4.1: On the Eucharistic Food", in *Lectures on Christian Sacraments*, ed. by F.L. Cross (London: S.P.C.K., 1951), p. 68

18. *ibid.*, 4.2; p. 68

19. *ibid.*, 4.6; p. 68

20. *ibid.*, 4.9; pp. 70-71

we call upon the merciful God to send forth His Holy Spirit upon the gifts lying before Him; that He may make the Bread the Body of Christ, and the Wine the Blood of Christ; for whatsoever the Holy Ghost has touched, is sanctified and changed.²¹

Once more St. Cyril reminds his readers not to trust sense perception, but to rely instead on faith. It is important to note that the direction in which St. Cyril is pointing is that broad and powerful affirmation of the true partaking of the real body and blood of Christ — without saying that this is physical body and blood. St. Cyril seems concerned to introduce at least some references to a symbolic perspective, having excluded a crass bodily eating:

Christ on a certain occasion discoursing with the Jews said, 'Except ye eat My flesh and drink My blood, ye have no life in you.' (Jn. 6:53) They not receiving His saying spiritually were offended, and went backward, supposing that He was inviting them to eat flesh.²²

Soon after this comment St. Cyril refers to the eucharistic service as the "bloodless service" where "the spiritual sacrifice is perfected."²³

To sum up, in the Early Church the dominant motif of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist was ordinarily expressed by making use of such expressive imagery as the body and the blood of Christ. The intent, however, was not to proclaim theophagy/cannibalism but a most intimate encounter and saving union with Christ. The Early Church accomplished its goal, negatively, by denying that Christ was being partaken of in a Capernaïtical manner, and, positively, by introducing a consistent but definitely subordinate symbolic motif.

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The Middle Ages inherited the devotional sincerity and the theological ambiguities of the eucharistic presence of Christ. While the most popular statements ordinarily served to assert the real presence of Christ, there were also numerous theological attempts to interpret this presence more precisely. Of this complex, large, and interesting landscape we can report no more than two brief glimpses and then undertake two somewhat longer inquiries.

First, we shall acknowledge that the contribution of St. Augustine is both seminal and stimulating. He adheres to the belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist.²⁴ The outward sacramental sign, the *signum*, is no mere illustration, but an effective vehicle for the transmission of the inner *res*, the actual reality of Christ's presence.²⁵ To be salvifically appropriated, the eucharist needs to be approached in faith: "To what purpose do you make ready teeth and stomach? Believe and you have eaten already."²⁶ Although St. Augustine distinguishes between what the faith

21. *ibid.*, 5.7; p. 74

22. *ibid.*, 4.4; pp. 68-69

23. *ibid.*, 5.8; p. 74

24. e.g., *On Trinity*, 3. 10. 21; *F O C*, 45:118. This observation, however, is ordinarily emphasized far more by Roman Catholic theologians and is very often denied by many Protestants.

25. cf. *Letter 98*; *F O C*, 18:137-138

26. *On the Gospel of John*, Tractate 25.12; revised, *N P N F*, 1st series, 7:164

could obtain generally and what it gained in a eucharistic setting, he has no doubts that the obtained reality was the very same. Consequently St. Augustine appears to end up with a dynamic existentialist perspective that is saved from mere subjectivism only because his ecclesiology provides an objective framework within which the celebration of the eucharist could be demanded of all members.

St. Augustine's complex and sophisticated perspective is anything but easy to follow. Hence the theological confusion inherited from the Early Church continues rather widely throughout the Early Middle Ages, as assertions of real presence and bodily eating are balanced with symbolic and spiritual references. There is no doubt, however, that as far as Medieval Christianity is concerned, the eucharist is approached with the utmost reverence, due to its exalted status. Witnesses Jaroslav Pelikan:

Except for certain heretics, there was general agreement that the proper celebration of the Eucharist and the proper understanding of it lay at the center of the Christian faith. Among all the actions of the church, the Mass was 'the supreme sacrament.'²⁷

The second brief glance to the medieval scene occurs in the eleventh century, when some theologians explicitly identify the "body of Christ" as he lived on earth with the "body of Christ" as received in the eucharist.²⁸ Berengar of Tours, a devout man with a clear and cantankerous mind, notices the problem, hastens to correct it, and incurs much contemporary and later criticism (spoken also by St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther). Berengar's point is that in the Early Church a distinction was maintained between the body of Christ as during the Lord's earthly life, and the body of Christ as received in the eucharist.

The subsequent debate is prolonged and rather complex. On the one hand, it is admitted that a mouse nibbling away at the consecrated host is not chewing the body of Christ. On the other hand, Berengar is handed a statement in 1059, most likely written by Cardinal Humbert. The statement is included in the confession of faith by the Roman Synod under Pope Nicholas II, and, in part, asserts "that the bread and wine placed on the altar are after consecration not only a sacrament but also the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and that these are sensibly handled and broken by the hands of priests and crushed by the teeth of the faithful, not only sacramentally but in reality . . ." ²⁹ Clarity had thereby been reached at the price of superficiality, as eucharistic partaking of the body of Christ is now being described as a simple theophagy and cannibalism in one. After having confessed this, Berengar, understandably, soon lapses, and by 1079 is forced under Pope Gregory VII to make yet another confession. A far more thoughtful statement, it is worthy of preservation as an account asserting though not explaining the doctrine of the real presence. It reads as follows:

I, Berengarius, believe with my heart and confess with my mouth that the bread and wine which are placed upon the altar are by the mystery of the

27. *The Christian Tradition: The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3:184-185

28. cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *ibid.*, 3:191

29. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. H. Denzinger & A. Schoenmetzer, 25th ed. (Barcinone: Herder, 1973), nr. 690, p. 227; Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 210

sacred prayer and the words of our Redeemer substantially changed into the true and real and life-giving flesh and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord, and that after the consecration there is the true body of Christ which was born of the Virgin and which hung on the cross as a sacrifice for the salvation of the world and which sits at the right hand of the Father, and the true blood of Christ which flowed from his side, not just by the sign and virtue of the sacrament but in its real nature and true substance . . .³⁰

By 1215 at the IV Lateran Council under Innocent III the term “transubstantiation” receives official mention. Its clearest definition is provided by *St. Thomas Aquinas* (c. 1225-1274), the great Angelic Doctor who deserves our longest look. What St. Thomas said about the eucharistic presence of Christ is not the only insightful theological statement that could be made about it, nor should we necessarily follow it. It is, however, quite useful to remember that his wisdom has continuously received wide acclaim and application, including the great theologians of the Lutheran orthodoxy from the seventeenth century. In any case, in an ecumenical age it might be appropriate to review how a great church in the Middle Ages finally clarified the problems that had been present throughout the Early Church.

Since the statement of St. Thomas is lengthy, we shall not venture to discuss his entire eucharistic theology, but will continue to limit our attention strictly to the eucharistic presence of Christ.

St. Thomas is basically not an innovator but a clarifier. Having taken over the major motifs from the tradition that preceded him, he now makes every effort to speak meaningfully and with precision. St. Thomas clearly sides with the traditionally dominant motif and affirms the presence of “the real body of Christ and his blood in this sacrament”. At the same time St. Thomas is not in the mood to accept a literal, Capernaïtic eating as it had been discarded already by the Early Church. While making use of the traditional language of “real presence”, St. Thomas hastens to exclude unworthy notions which no sensible Christian would want to affirm. Thus, observes St. Thomas, the real presence of Christ in the eucharist cannot be detected and known “by our senses.”³¹ Since ordinarily physical objects can be noticed by our sense of perception, it is clear that the eucharistic body and blood of Christ must be present in a different modality than a physical object. Suggests St. Thomas: the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist is known “only by our faith [sola fide] which is based on the authority of God”,³² i.e., the Bible, as correctly interpreted by the Church. (We should note: this faith is not a blind and thoughtless trust, but a grace guided and hence wise insight.³³)

Similarly, although Christ is “contained” in the eucharist “not merely as a sign or figure, but in the actual reality as well,”³⁴ it must not be imagined that we are

30. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, nr. 700, p. 230; Karl Rahner, ed., *The Teachings of the Catholic Church* (N.Y.: Alba House, 1966), nr. 474/700, p. 281

31. *Summa Theologiae*, Latin text and English translation. Blackfriars ed. (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Book Co., n.d.) vol. 58, subsequently abbreviated as *ST* and *B* respectively, 3a.75.1; *B* 58:54-55

32. *ST*, 3a. 75. 1; *B* 58:54-57

33. *ST*, 3a. 76. 7; *B* 58:116-119 and Joseph Peter Wawrykow, *The Role of Faith in the Eucharistic Doctrine of Thomas Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae*, unpublished, (it is published as a microfilm), M.A. thesis, The University of Manitoba, 1980, 242 pp., supervised by Egil Grislis

34. *ST*, 3a. 75. 1 ; *B*, 58:56-57

speaking about the presence of a physical object: "The body of Christ is not in this sacrament in the way a body is in place. The dimensions of a body in place correspond with the dimensions of the place that contains it." Clearly, this is a common sense insight, yet one which was often lacking in many of the previous reflections on the eucharistic problem. St. Thomas' point is that if the reality of the eucharistic presence of Christ were physical, it would be measurable. But no scientific analysis — ancient or modern — can produce the slightest evidence for a literal presence. Hence St. Thomas continues with caution and reverence: "Christ's body is here in a special way that is proper to this sacrament. For this reason we say that the body of Christ is on different altars, not as in different places, but as in the sacrament." Of course, physical objects can be only in one place at one time; yet real presence takes place wherever the holy eucharist is celebrated, not only in one but in many churches and at once.

Having said this, St. Thomas is apparently aware that his use of the term "real presence" could be in danger of sounding like merely a symbolic or illustrative category. Hence he hastens to add: "In saying this we do not mean that Christ is only symbolically there, although it is true that every sacrament is a sign, but we understand that Christ's body is there, as we have said in a way that is proper to this sacrament."³⁵ Thus, St. Thomas has thought of three rather different modes of presence: 1) physical presence, 2) symbolic presence, and 3) sacramental presence. It is the last one of these three, sacramental presence, which now engages his attention as the proper mode for Christ in the eucharist, namely as the most fitting way of the real presence.

How then does St. Thomas seek to interpret this sacramental presence of Christ? He notes that all interpreters agree that Christ's "body is not there before the consecration." St. Thomas continues: "But a thing cannot be where it was not before, except" in one of the following ways. Either that thing is "brought in" by local motion, or "by something already there being changed into it." Now to make use of local motion to explain the beginning of Christ's eucharistic presence is clearly not very useful at all. Should Christ arrive by way of local motion he would "cease to be in heaven" and would actually need to traverse the space between his former and present location.³⁶ Local motion, therefore cannot describe the arrival of real presence, because the eucharistic real presence cannot take place in all directions at once and simultaneously approach many altars. Concludes St. Thomas: "For these reasons it remains that there is no other way in which the body of Christ can begin to be in this sacrament except through the substance of the bread being changed into it."³⁷ In other words, St. Thomas finds transubstantiation to be the most appropriate way to explain the arrival of the sacramental presence in the eucharist.³⁸

Before we discuss the meaning of the "change", let us first define the meaning of "substance". By substance St. Thomas does not mean a material object about which — when it happens to be a grain of sand, we could rightly exclaim in some discomfort: I have a foreign substance in my eye! It is not a thing which could be weighed,

35. *S T*, 3a. 75. 2. ad 3; *B*, 58:58-59

36. *S T*, 3a. 75. 2; *B*, 58:60-61

37. *S T*, 3a. 75. 2; *B*, 58:62-63

38. *S T*, 3a. 75. 4; *B*, 58:72-73

measured, handled. Nor does St. Thomas mean a mere concept which is a purely imaginary construct, like a unicorn, or a meaningful idea like a square root. A substance, clearly, is not just a thought about an object. Rather, a "substance" is "a definable essence or form of a thing."³⁹ In other words, a substance then is something like a correct and permanent label that designates and catalogues reality. Hence a substance is not an account of surface impressions and characteristics, but of being in depth, of character and of basic existence.

Thus in the miracle of "change", occurring at the consecration, what has been previously identified as bread and wine, now truly becomes the body and blood of Christ. The outward appearance, such as taste and fragrance, as well as the inward chemical make-up, remain the same and unchanged, because in the miracle of transubstantiation the "accidents" remain intact. Of course, neither Aristotle — from whom St. Thomas borrows the definition of "substance" — nor St. Thomas himself knew anything about the chemistry of bread and wine. To them being and use were inseparable concepts. Hence to St. Thomas transubstantiation meant that in the consecration God himself brings about a creative transformation of reality. What before had served as only bread and wine for the nourishment of our bodies, has now undergone essential, i.e., "substantive" change and now indeed is Christ's body and blood, present for our salvation. But the presence is by way of substance, not a physical reality. Hence we partake of Christ really and substantially, but not in a Capernaitic fashion engaging in the theophagy and cannibalism.

A contemporary interpreter of St. Thomas, *Piet Schoonenberg*, S.J., has sought to define "presence" as "a self-communicating from a person".⁴⁰ Applied to the eucharist, suggests Schoonenberg, it means that

Through this consecration, Christ is not dragged out of heaven, in a spatial way, nor is there a physical or chemical change in the bread and wine. What happens is a change of signs; the transubstantiation is a transfinalization or a transignification, but this takes place in the depths which only Christ, in his most real self-giving, reaches. Bread and wine (accompanied by the word) become the sign which actualizes this deepest self-giving.⁴¹

In this way, as before, the "change" is not merely a subjective shift in our perception, a movement from ordinary to religious experience (or, from the bread to the body of Christ), but essentially a faithful participation in an objectively new situation, in which the living Christ is authentically encountered as Savior.

Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., similarly, notes that since the risen and glorified Christ does not show himself to us in his own flesh, then he can make himself visibly present to and for us earthbound men only by taking up earthly non-glorified realities into his glorified saving activity. This earthly element replaces for us the invisibility of his bodily life in heaven. This is precisely what the sacraments are: the face of redemption turned visibly toward us, so that

39. Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1955), 1:305 and Salvatore Bonano, *The Concept of Substance and the Development of Eucharistic Theology to the Thirteenth Century*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1960).

40. "Presence and the Eucharistic Presence," *Cross Currents*, 12,1 (1967):42

41. *ibid.*, p. 54

in them we are truly able to encounter the living Christ.⁴²

More conservative Catholic churchmen have resisted such attempts at re-formulation, since they regard the metaphysical category of "substance" as a fully adequate abstraction for the understanding of being, and therefore a most useful category for explaining the nature of the essential change that occurs in the miracle of consecration. As St. Thomas puts it:

. . . it is clear that the dimensions of the bread and wine are not changed into the dimensions of Christ's body; it is substance that is changed into substance.⁴³

In this way the presence of the savior is assessed by identity and quality, and not by weight and taste. Helpfully, an absurdity is also avoided — since one consecrated host supplies the partaker with as "much" of the body of Christ as would a thousand hosts!

While the basic intent of St. Thomas' explanation remains alive throughout the Middle Ages, and the real presence of Christ in the eucharist continues to be celebrated, there soon appears an alternative theological explanation.

William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) realizes that the idea of the change of substance or transubstantiation cannot be defended by Scriptures:

Although it is expressly set forth in the canonical Scriptures that the body of Christ is to be offered to the faithful under the species of bread, yet that the substance of bread is really converted or transubstantiated into the body of Christ is not found expressed in the canon of the Bible.⁴⁴

While noting the patristic roots of the doctrine of transubstantiation and acknowledging that it has been defended with Scriptures, Ockham calls attention to an alternative position which he holds — "that the substance of the bread and the wine remains there and the body of Christ is in the same place under the same species."⁴⁵ Although his own attitude toward his proposal, eventually labelled consubstantiation, remains filled with at least outward caution,⁴⁶ he soon appeals to the omnipotence of God as a way of assuring his listeners that what in this case is logically possible is also actually taking place:

For a Christian ought not to say that God might not through His absolute power be able to make some substance to coexist with something corporeal, so that the whole may coexist with that whole body and with each part of it . . .⁴⁷

As Ockham's ideas spread, his followers included not only Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), whose name Luther invoked in his writings, but also Gabriel Biel (c. 1420-1495),⁴⁸ whose writings on the eucharist Luther read and utilized. Thus even

42. *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 43-44

43. *S T*, 3a. 76. 2; *B*, 58:96-97

44. William of Ockham, *The De Sacramento Altaris*, ed. by T. Bruce Birch, English Translation (Burlington: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1930), p. 87:1-6

45. *ibid.*, p. 93:7-9

46. *ibid.*, p. 94:16-21

47. *ibid.*, p. 96:32-97:4

48. Heiko A. Oberman et William J. Courtenay, *Gabrielis Biel Canonis Missae Expositio* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1963-1967); Gabriel N. Buescher, *The Eucharistic Teaching of William Ockham*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press), 1950; Erwin Iserloh, *Gnade und*

though the Middle Ages as they drew to a close did not succeed in retaining a single formulation of eucharistic doctrine, it did accomplish a distinctive advance over the theologians of the Early Church. Namely, as the real presence of Christ in the eucharist was affirmed with intense religious conviction and acknowledged to be an authentic miracle, a theologically thoughtful explanation was provided. Though divergent in details, it nevertheless guarded against two common and unworthy notions: (1) the eucharistic presence of Christ is not to be thought of as a primitivistic devouring of the flesh of the divine-human Christ; and (2) the eucharistic presence is not to be defined by the use of such vague categories as "symbolic" or "spiritual presence" which can lead to the evaporation of both religious meaning and devotion. Instead, the miraculous presence of Christ can be clearly referred to and confessed by the category of "substance". With the assistance of the idea of "substance" it was now possible to affirm with cogency that the real presence of Christ in the eucharist is neither crassly Capernaïtic nor merely symbolic and wind-blown of reality, but an authentic real presence. This was not a minor accomplishment in the history of Christian doctrine, whose task in all ages is to facilitate and not to encumber the rise of a serious faith.

Eucharistie in der Philosophischen Theologie des Wilhelm von Ockham (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1956); Rudolf Damerou, Die Abendmahlslehre des Nominalismus, insbesondere die des Gabriel Biel (Giessen: Wilhelm Schmidt, 1963).

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