

What Does Transubstantiation Explain?*

During the past decade, at least three books have been published dealing with the specifically Catholic affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. *The Real Presence Through the Ages* by Michael Gaudoin-Parker and *In the Presence of Our Lord* by Benedict Groeschel and James Monti are both by Catholic priests who are theological conservatives and who defend traditional Eucharistic beliefs (e.g., transubstantiation) and practices (e.g., Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament).¹ *Christ's Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine* by Paul H. Jones presents a more impartial account of the dialectic between various descriptions and explanations of the real presence from the early church through the twentieth century.² Unlike the first two books mentioned, and unlike works by Catholic theologians in the decades following the Second Vatican Council, this work by a Protestant professor at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, takes no position on the matter but attempts to catalog the variety of positions that have been taken by Catholics and Protestants on the matter of Eucharistic presence.

In one important respect, however, Jones' book does take a position, and it is the assumption that the referent of the various explanations is a doctrine, and indeed the Catholic authors of the two other books make somewhat the same assumption in defending Catholic Eucharistic beliefs and practices.

What I wish to ask, however, is: What lies behind the doctrine? What, in other words, is the doctrine about? More specifically, what does the explanation known as transubstantiation explain? Does it simply explain a belief or doctrine, or is there something more? My contention is that there is indeed something more, and it is this "something more" that accounts to some extent for differences in theological interpretations of Eucharistic presence.

Before examining transubstantiation, however, let me first talk about language, and about various functions of language. Language as it is used by Europeans and by those who speak European languages has been extensively analyzed by British linguistic analysts and by French deconstructionists, not to mention those who write not from the perspective of philosophy but from the perspective of the social sciences such as language theory, semeiotics, etc. I am not going to get into the intricacies of such analyses, but instead I want to point to a simple but important distinction between two uses or functions of language that can be understood and affirmed even by non-specialists such as ourselves. I make no claim that these two functions are the only functions of language, or that they are the most important functions of language. I ask only that you affirm with me that we actually use language in these two ways, and if we make the assumption that speakers of Greek, Latin and other European languages also use language in these two ways, then we

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can go a long way toward understanding what has been written about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and about explanations of that presence, such as transubstantiation.

The two functions of language are what we might call the expressive use of language and the heuristic use of language. Language is used expressively when we talk about what we have experienced or what we have understood. Here I am making the assumption that it is possible to distinguish between an experience or an insight on the one hand and its expression in words on the other hand. Although there are some scholars who deny that this is possible, I am following Bernard Lonergan's analysis here, not because Lonergan is a respected authority but because I have found that his descriptions of mental processes square with my own experiences of those same mental processes. In other words, I have verified for myself that what Lonergan says is actually the case as far as my own experiencing, thinking and speaking are concerned.

In contrast to the expressive use of language is what can be called the heuristic use of language. Language is used heuristically when we are trying to figure out what is being talked about. We hear what someone is saying, for example, but we are aware that, to a greater or lesser extent, we do not understand what is being said or expressed. I can remember, for example, that when I first read about John Calvin's *magnum opus*, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I wondered what was meant by the word, "institutes"? You may have had similar experiences with other words or phrases.

Now, when language is used expressively, it may or may not provide a description of something that is being talked about. More often than not, it simply names a reality, and as long as the speaker and the listener know the referent of the term being used, there is no communication problem. For example, if an electrician tells me I ought to replace the fuses in my house with circuit breakers, if I am familiar with these objects, there is no problem. But if I am not familiar with them, I have a number of alternatives. I can pretend that I know what he's talking about because I don't want to appear ignorant. I may admit my ignorance but make a decision based on faith, saying, "Do whatever you think is best." Or, I may ask, "What's the difference between a fuse and a circuit breaker?" using those terms in a heuristic fashion to discover what the electrician is talking about. I might even go to a hardware store and ask, "Where are your fuses and circuit breakers?" and physically search for the referents of those terms in order to understand what it is that the electrician is talking about.

In the chapter on interpretation in *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan distinguishes between understanding the meaning of words and understanding what the words are about.³ That which the words are about is what I am calling the referent. Lonergan, in one of his recorded lectures on *Insight*, also calls it the meant. A good example of this for me is the gift of tongues or speaking in tongues, mentioned in both the Book of Acts (e.g., 10:46) and in some of the Pauline epistles (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:10). For years, when I heard or read those words, I certainly understood their meaning, but it never occurred to me that I did not really understand what they meant. It was only after I became involved in the charismatic renewal movement in the 1970s, and heard people speaking in tongues, that I suddenly

realized what those words were referring to, and these texts took on a whole new dimension of meaning for me.

I am convinced that a dynamic similar to this lies behind much of what has been said and written about the Eucharist, and especially about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, during the twenty centuries of Christian theological reflection. The New Testament authors of the institution narratives in the synoptic gospels and the Bread of Life discourse in the fourth gospel may or may not have had an experiential referent in mind when they wrote those passages. That those passages do not necessarily have to be taken as referring to an experience of divine presence is clear from the fact that there are many Christians in the Protestant tradition who take the scriptures seriously and perhaps even literally, but who do not for that matter believe that those passages refer to what Catholics have traditionally claimed they refer to, namely, a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

We can ask, then, where did the traditional Catholic belief come from? In general, we can say that it derives historically from the early liturgical practice of referring to the bread and wine used in the communion ritual as the body and blood of Christ. By the second and third centuries, Christian communities (and Christian writers following their lead) were taking certain passages of the gospels and interpreting them literally to mean that what looked like bread and wine in their Sunday worship were, or became, the body and blood of Christ, so that what was received in the act of taking communion could be properly called Christ's body and blood and not mere bread and wine.

At this point we can ask a further question, which is one that is not usually asked by church historians and historical theologians, namely, when Christians during the patristic era were talking about the body and blood of Christ, what were they referring to? Did those words have any experiential referent for them other than certain visible objects in the Eucharistic liturgy? I believe that they did, for two reasons.

First, the strength of the conviction with which they spoke is an indication that they were speaking not just about a meaning but about a meant. While it is true that biblical literalists can argue vehemently for something that cannot possibly be experienced (for instance, the creation of the world in six days), a community's reading of a text in one sense rather than another (in this case, taking Eucharistic accounts in the gospels to refer to the presence of the risen Christ among the community at worship, rather than in some other sense) gives some indication that the words of those texts were found to be convenient symbols for naming something in the community's experience.

Second, most patristic writings on the Eucharist can be understood as referring to something that is perceived as real in the imagination or that is affirmed to be real because it is believed to be true. There are, for example, any number of patristic sermons that argue, "God said these are the body and blood of Christ; therefore, we believe it." But in some cases it is more plausible to assume that the writer is referring to something in his experience and not just in his imagination. For example, John of Damascus, around the turn of the eighth century, writes, "Let us approach with ardent desire and receive the Body

of the Crucified with our hands held in the form of a cross; taking it to our eyes and lips and foreheads, let us partake of the Divine Coal . . . in order that we may be inflamed and divinized by a share in the divine fire."⁴ When reading this text, one gets the distinct impression that the author knows from his own experience what he is talking about and is encouraging his listeners to have the same experience of divine transformation.

The Eastern fathers are generally better at this than the Western fathers, although none of them provide us with many texts, if any, that demand an experiential interpretation. Some are close, however. Clement of Alexandria, around the turn of the third century, writes, "The blood of the Lord is two-fold: one is corporeal, redeeming us from corruption; the other is spiritual, and it is with this that we are anointed. To drink the blood of Jesus is to participate in his incorruption."⁵ What is the spiritual anointing of which Clement speaks? I believe it is best understood as a spiritual experience, that is, an alteration in one's mental and emotional state, which Clement is attempting to name and describe without having on hand a well-developed psychological or phenomenological vocabulary.

In the absence of such a vocabulary, the only way that Christian writers could describe their experiences of sacred presence and divine reality was to use the more objective language found in the scriptures and in everyday speech. Such at least is my hypothesis, and I will be the first to admit that the textual evidence is not nearly sufficient to build an overwhelmingly convincing case. It is sufficient, however, to build a very plausible case, especially if one is speaking in the company of people who have had similar experiences. Thus, speaking about the gift of tongues with those who have had the experience, one can argue quite plausibly that Paul in First Corinthians was referring to something that the listeners have experienced, in contrast to speaking with people who have not had the experience, who may not be as easily persuaded, and I believe that the case here is quite analogous. People who listen to this talk (or read these words) and who have experienced something that they call the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist will probably find what I say more persuasive than will those who have not had that experience.

I myself received most of my spiritual formation prior to the Second Vatican Council, and part of that formation having to do with the Eucharist encouraged us to do things that led to what can be called experiences of divine presence. We were taught that when the priest said the words of consecration at Mass, Christ became present on the altar. We were instructed to receive Holy Communion with great devotion, thanking Jesus for coming into our soul. We were told to adore God in the Blessed Sacrament, not only during Benediction but also any time that we could make a church visit and pray to Christ in the tabernacle. In the seminary, which I attended for a number of years, we were given time every day to meditate, and in some of those meditative practices we would focus on the divine presence in the Eucharist. In time, it became quite natural to look at the consecrated elements, especially the host, and to perceive something personal, spiritual and divine rather than a passive material object.

Having attended Eastern Orthodox liturgies, and knowing that even Western liturgies from the fourth through the sixth centuries were more like that than like the Roman liturgy today (or even the Tridentine Mass that it replaced), it is quite plausible to me that the experience

of devout Christians during the patristic period was not unlike my own experience of the real presence of Christ. Having grown up with the Tridentine Mass, especially the low Mass that first appeared in the Middle Ages, it is quite plausible to me that the ritual elements of that liturgy — the silence, the bells, the elevation of the consecrated elements, etc. — conspired to give Catholics from the seventh to the twentieth century a sense of divine presence that could be spatially located on the altar and chronologically determined to begin when the words of consecration were spoken by the priest. Recall too that all of the medieval theologians were priests who celebrated a low Mass every day, held the host in their hands as they said the words, "This is My Body," then knelt to worship Christ in the sacrament, and held him up for all to see. It is quite plausible to me that all of the theologians who wrote about the Eucharist in the Middle Ages had a daily experience of looking at the host as bread at the beginning of Mass, but then perceiving it as Christ once the words of consecration were spoken.

Perceiving something *as* something is quite a common experience in our everyday lives, and has been amply described by phenomenologists. Any object that we perceive is, at one level, a shaped patch of color, but as soon as we perceive it *as* something (which is, more often than not, immediately) we do not see it as a shaped patch of color but as an object for which we have a name. If you want a good example of this in everyday life, compare the experience of looking under the hood of a car, done on the one hand by someone with little knowledge of car engines and on the other hand by an experienced mechanic. Both individuals see, if you will, the same shaped patches of color, but the mechanic sees a motor, an alternator, a radiator, and so on, whereas the uninitiated person sees an undifferentiated cluster of mysterious metal parts. In fact, if the mechanic is well trained, he (or she) will even perceive systems (the electrical system, the fuel system, the cooling system, etc.) comprised of individual parts that are functionally interrelated. In other words, the trained eye (as we say) can perceive much more than the untrained eye, the trained ear (such as that of a musician) can hear much more than the untrained ear, and so on for the rest of the senses.

Now if, as phenomenologists point out, our perception is always perception of understood objects, the perception of things *as* things, or the perception of interpreted data — these are three different ways of trying to name the same perceptual process — then when our perception of something changes, we would say in ordinary language that there has been a change in that object. In other words, when we move from the perception of an object as something to the perception of that same object as something else, we would normally say, not that our perception has changed, but that the object has changed. Or again, when we shuffle from one interpretation of a shaped patch of color to a different interpretation of a shaped patch of color, in ordinary speech we describe what is going on as a change in what we are looking at, not as a change in our looking, even though, from a psychological perspective, that same mental activity would be described as a change in our perception.

Take, for example, our perception of a woman in uniform. Someone unfamiliar with military dress and insignia might see her as a woman in military service. Someone who is in the military, on the other hand, might be able to see that she is a lieutenant in the Air Force. And a womanizer might neglect all the military trappings and perceive her only as a

sex object. If we attend a court of honor or a military awards ceremony, we might look at a person and see a corporal at the beginning of the ceremony and a sergeant at its conclusion. Likewise, if we attend a wedding, we see two single people at the beginning and a married couple at the end. And if we view a presidential inauguration, we see a private citizen at the beginning and the President of the United States when the inaugural address is delivered. In all of these cases, the ordinary person would say that a real change has taken place in the people they were looking at.

If we were scholastic theologians in the Middle Ages, we would be using Aristotelian categories to name and understand changes in the world around us. We would interpret changes in color, size, location, and so on as *accidental changes*, that is, changes in the qualities attached to things, or changes in the appearances (the shaped patches of color) of what we perceive to be perduring objects. Thus, leaves change their color and they are still leaves, children grow to adulthood and they are still the same individuals, we move a vase from the table to the dresser and it is still the same vase. In our medieval experience, however, there would be some changes that could not be called accidental or changes in appearances alone. A tree is chopped down and its wood is burned, turning it into ashes. What goes into our mouths as food comes out of our bodies as excrement. A caterpillar goes into a cocoon and comes out as a butterfly. A human being dies and what was once a living person is now a corpse. In all these cases, appearances change but so also do the things understood to subsist beneath those appearances. And since their underlying reality (or substance) changes, as good scholastics following Aristotle, we say that in these cases a substantial change has taken place.

As Christians in the Middle Ages, however, and especially as clerics who say the Mass every day, we experience one type of change that does not fit into either of the above categories. When I say the words of consecration and perceive that I am holding Christ in my hands, there is no change in the appearance of what I am looking at, so I cannot name what I experience an accidental change. There is a real change in the reality that I perceive, for I now perceive what I am looking at as Christ himself. But I cannot call this transformation of the object a substantial change in the Aristotelian sense of that term, for substantial change in every other instance always entails a change in appearances or accidents as well as a change in reality or substance. Here, however, the appearances do not change. As a theologian, I am forced to explain what has happened using categories other than those of accidental change and substantial change.

Scholastics in the early Middle Ages in fact came up with not one but three explanations for this phenomenon. Some said that when the words of consecration were spoken, the bread disappears and the living Christ takes its place, and what once looked like bread is now the body of Christ. In other words, the appearances that were once signs of bread are now a sacrament of the living Lord. This so-called substitution theory or replacement theory acknowledged the miraculous element of the perceived change in the Eucharistic bread, but it was not intellectually sophisticated enough for thinkers who wanted to have an explanation that was more consistent with Aristotelian metaphysics.

Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and others were among the latter group who preferred an explanation that they called transubstantiation, using a term first introduced into Catholic teaching at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The council used the verb “transubstantiate” to say that what was once really bread (the reality or substance of bread) becomes really Christ (the reality or substance of Christ), that the appearances of bread remain throughout this transformation (there is no change in the accidents), and that, after the words of consecration are spoken, the accidents of bread inhere in the substance of Christ. In phenomenological terms, the appearance of bread manifests or symbolizes the reality of Christ.

Beginning in the middle of the thirteenth century, many scholastic theologians took the Lateran Council’s statement referring to transubstantiation as a statement of Catholic doctrine, and so the theory of transubstantiation gradually displaced the substitution theory. But as Gary Macy has shown, many of the scholastics who wrote about transubstantiation were actually crypto-substitutionists, that is, they used the word “transubstantiation” but they wrote about it in such a way as to show that they were thinking of the Eucharistic change as a miraculous substitution of the body and blood of Christ for the sacramental bread and wine⁶. In other words, most scholastics in the Middle Ages and afterward did not have a very sophisticated grasp of Aristotelian metaphysics, and so their explanations of Eucharistic change were not consistent with it. Aquinas’ transubstantiation theory was more consistent with it, but not completely, and in that gap between Christian faith and Aristotelian philosophy was located the mystery of the Eucharist.

What I have been saying for the last few minutes is directly related to the title of this presentation. I have been arguing that what transubstantiation explained in the Middle Ages was not the *doctrine* of the real presence but the *experience* of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. The doctrine itself functioned both expressively and heuristically. Heuristically, it told devout Christians that when they looked at the consecrated elements, what they should perceive was not bread and wine but Christ himself. Expressively, the doctrine named the experience of divine presence.

Now, there were some scholastics who, after the words of consecration were spoken, looked at the elements on the altar and perceived both bread and wine and the living Christ, as though they alternated back and forth from one perception to the other. For these theologians, neither the substitution theory nor the transubstantiation theory made sense. In order to be honest about their perceptions, they had to say that the Eucharist was both bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ. The theory that they held was labeled consubstantiation, meaning that after the consecration both the reality of bread and wine and the reality of the living Christ were present on the altar. Under pressure, however, both from the Catholic tradition that consistently named the consecrated elements the body and blood of Christ (*lex orandi, lex credendi*), and from the prevalent but historically mistaken belief that the Fourth Lateran Council had defined transubstantiation as a dogma,⁷ Catholic theologians abandoned consubstantiation as an acceptable explanation of Eucharistic change. It was not until the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther felt no longer bound by scholastic doctrine, that the theory of consubstantiation reappeared. For Luther, it was much easier to believe that when the elements were consecrated, bread and wine coexisted

with Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. One can only surmise that the reason why Luther so strongly defended this view was that it was true to his perception.

In conclusion, I would suggest that whenever there is a discussion of the Eucharist, especially a discussion of Eucharistic change, theologians both Catholic and Protestant, conservative and liberal, ought to stop and ask themselves, What are we really talking about? Are we talking about beliefs that we have? Are we talking about things in our imagination (i.e., what we imagine takes place in a Eucharistic liturgy)? Or are we talking about our experience of Eucharistic change? I would submit that if our theologizing is to be grounded in reality, then we need to be talking about what we really experience. Otherwise, we will be talking about ideas, which in themselves are not real, or about reality as we imagine it to be, which may or may not be reality the way it actually is. And if we make the effort to work through the epistemological difficulties of figuring out precisely what it is that we are talking about, then more often than not, if we are honest with ourselves and true to our perceptions, we will discover that differences in Eucharistic theology can be traced to differences in Eucharistic experience.

¹ Gaudoin-Parker, Michael, *In the Presence of Our Lord* (New York: Alba House, 1993); Groeschel, Benedict, and James Monti, *In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology, and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997).

² Jones, Paul H., *Christ's Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

³ Lonergan, Bernard J. F., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 158ff.

⁴ *De Fide Orthodoxa*, cited in Groeschel and Monti, p. 43.

⁵ *The Pedagogue II*, cited in Gaudoin-Parker, p. 23.

⁶ Macy, Gary, "The Dogma of Transubstantiation in the Middle Ages" in *Treasures from the Medieval Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 81-120.

⁷ For the historical development of this mistake, see McCue, James, "The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar through the Council of Trent," in Empie, Paul C. and T. Austin Murphy, *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue III: The Eucharist as Sacrifice* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), pp. 89-124.