

THE EUCHARIST:

A SHORT COMMENTARY ON SOME NEW TRENDS

INTRODUCTION

THE importance of the Eucharist in both Catholic Theology and liturgical piety needs no new stressing. This importance, maybe, together with the special dignity which has always been ascribed to this most holy Sacrament, may easily inspire an amount of unwholesome timidity in the believer who hears about new controversies, new viewpoints, or new interpretations which lead to substitute new words for the time-hallowed term: transubstantiation.

To allay similar suspicions I intended to publish a translation of Fr. E. Schillebeeckx's article: 'Transubstantiation, Transignification and Transfinalisation'. Unfortunately Fr. Schillebeeckx could not allow the publication of the translation of his article because that article no longer represents his views on transubstantiation or on the Eucharist in general. However, one feels that our local clergy, who read with pleasure *Melita Theologica* and *Pastor*, should be given some sort of introduction to this difficult subject in, at least, one of the Reviews which they consider their own.

CONTROVERSIES HAVE ALWAYS EXISTED AND WILL ALWAYS BE

It is important to note that controversies, even about the most important points of our belief, have always existed in the Church. There were various opinions on the Eucharist before Trent. And although the definitions of that Council have limited the scope of these controversies, still, many points relating to the Eucharistic dogmas have been left open.

One may recall such debated items as the 'activity' of the accidents after transubstantiation has taken place. Should this activity be explained by recurring to an atomistic or to a dynamistic theory? Again one may refer to the distinction between the annihilation theory and the conversion theory when speaking about the outgoing substance of the bread and the wine.

These diametrically opposed opinions may, perhaps, be considered

unimportant by the lay believer. To the theologian, however, they clearly show that even a General Council, does not solve completely the problems arising on the periphery of a central perception of a revealed doctrine. One should not forget, either, that it is sometimes difficult to determine with precision what really belongs to the core and what to the periphery of a Divine Truth.

As far as the Eucharist is concerned we may summarise the principal dogmas in the following two theses:

1. That in the Eucharist the Lord Jesus is wholly and really present under the species of bread and wine;
2. That this happens because the substance of the bread and the substance of the wine are terminated and the substance of the Body and Blood of Our Lord takes their place. This change is aptly called transubstantiation.

THE FIRST THESIS

The first 'thesis' or article of faith is not discussed by the new theologians except in a very limited way.

Modern catholic theologians sincerely believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They also stress the reality of this presence and reject a merely symbolic presence. Still they have some pertinent observations to make:

1. Christ's presence in the Eucharist is real. But it is not the only real presence. Jesus is *really* present amongst us in different ways. He is really present in the midst of the liturgical community; He is present in his Word; He is present in the soul of those who love Him. All these may be called real presence, but the Eucharistic presence is not only real: it is also an excellent or special one.

As Pope Paul has said: '(It) is called the real presence not in an exclusive sense, as though the other forms of presence were not 'real', but by reason of its excellence'. (*Mysterium Fidei*). In other words, although Christ's presence in the other 'events' is real, his presence in the Eucharist is not only real, but also on a different level.

2. Although Christ's presence in the Eucharist under the species is not only real but also has a special dimension, yet this sacramental presence is not an aim in itself. Jesus is not present under the species mainly to be adored or admired. He is there principally to be received – eaten. The Eucharist is not an aim in itself but a means to an end. The end is our growth in charity and the community's growth in unity.

This truth has found an echo in the recent instructions about the Eucharist issued by the Holy See. One notes that the accent is being placed where it really belongs, namely on the Mass and on Holy Communion rather than on the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. This does not mean that the reservation and adoration of the Holy Species should be discouraged. What is discouraged is the excessive stressing of the real presence as a 'static' presence to the detriment of the 'dynamic' presence during the celebration of the Sacrifice and Holy Communion. Also the stressing of the individualistic aspect to the detriment of the communal aspect.

3. The real presence should never be considered in an almost materialistic or mechanistic manner. For example there is no theological basis for the belief that certain corporals have been stained by the Blood of Our Lord. If a miraculous element is admitted in certain cases, the miracle must be explained as a simple *appearance*: never as the real shedding of blood. The real presence should not be identified with a materialistic presence. That is the reason why it has often been called in ancient times a 'spiritual presence' and even a 'mystic presence' and Christ's Body in this Sacrament used to be called the 'Mystical Body' by some Fathers (*Pere De Lubac*).

One should never forget that Christ's Body, now, is a glorious resurrected Body, or as Saint Paul would have put it 'a spiritual Body'. We must therefore avoid the attraction of an exaggerated realism.

Traces of an exaggerated realism are found not only in almost all the sermons preached on the Holy Eucharist, but also in the writings of many theologians. It is to avoid this exaggeration that the new theologians have tried to rethink the whole doctrine behind the word transubstantiation.

THE SECOND THESIS OF TRENT

The second thesis or article of Faith quoted above dealt with the alteration which takes place in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It is not enough for the true believer to hold that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. He must also admit that this real presence brings about a change in the bread and in the wine. The heart of the modern controversy on the Eucharist lies here, in the difficult question: What kind of change is it that takes place?

Until recently, all catholic theologians admitted that bread (like all created things) was made up of a substance (which does not fall within

the range of our sense perception) and of accidents (which we perceive through the senses). They also had to admit that substance and accidents are really distinct from each other. The change which takes place at the consecration was described as a complete and total change of substance (one substance receding and another taking its place) with the accidents remaining. We repeat that there are within orthodox catholic theology different explanations of the permanence of the accidents.

The change of substance was admitted by one and all. Some years ago, however, the first 'modern' controversy arose between Fr Selvaggi and Fr (now Bishop) Carlo Colombo. *This* controversy may be described in the following terms: granted that at the consecration the substance of the bread and the wine are completely changed, shall we call this change a 'physical' or a 'metaphysical' change.

Fr Selvaggi opted for a physical change, Fr Colombo stood for a metaphysical one. Although this was the first explicit discussion of the problem, I think that St Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae* envisaged the whole controversy and solved it in a negative way – denying, that is, the existence of a physical change. In fact he says: This alteration '*non est formalis nec continetur inter species motus naturalis*' (for *motus* read *change*, for *naturalis* read *physical* since *natura* = *phusis*. S.Th. III, 3.75.4 in corp).

Consequently there takes place an 'ontological' change, or a 'substantial' change, while physically and chemically nothing is changed. In other words, the change which takes place is 'so deep' that not only it cannot be reached by scientific investigation, but also it is beyond the scientific domain, taking place at a different level – the ontological plane.

The polemic which took place between Selvaggi and Colombo remained undiscovered by the ordinary catholic. It was limited to a few theological reviews and never reached the general public. Moreover although the dispute was very modern, it remained within the precincts of the traditional theological framework. It took as its starting point the '*mutatio substantialis*' and the distinction between the substance and the accidents. It was on the same level, if we may use an analogy, as the controversy between the promoters of '*annihilatio*' and '*reductio*'.

TRANSIGNIFICATION AND TRANSFINALIZATION

More recently, certain catholic theologians, especially Dutch theologians, have gone a step further. They started to doubt the inevitability

of the distinction between substance and accidents. Indeed they have questioned the very meaning of substance. Do material objects, like bread, really contain a substance? Are we in duty bound to hold on to the notion of substance, a notion which has come down to us from Aristotle, a pagan philosopher? Is it really binding to hold that substance and accidents are really distinct?

It is true that Trent made use of this terminology, but already, in the nineteenth century, Palmieri noted that the Fathers at Trent, did not intend to define the philosophy of Aristotle, even though their mental categories were aristotelian. This same observation has been recently made by Schillibeeckx and Rahner. It seems that the only truth the Fathers of Trent intended to define was the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and, as a consequence, an essential change in the Bread and Wine.

It is true that the Council of Trent defines in a most clear manner that all christians must believe that at the Consecration there is a change in the substance, even though the accidents remain intact. But perhaps these words should not be taken too literally, or rather, too philosophically. We should try to find the fundamental idea behind those words. The fundamental idea is this: a change takes place in the Bread and Wine.

But if this change is not explained as a change of substance (in the thomistic or aristotelian sense) in what does it consist?

The new theologians reply: the aim for which bread is ordinarily and naturally made is changed. The bread no longer exists as a bodily nourishment only, but begins to exist for the nourishment of the soul with the Body and Blood of the Lord. It takes on a new 'finis'. Hence we have a *transfinalizatio*.

We can also say that the bread changes its profound meaning. It no longer means what it meant before. It signifies something new, a new Presence: the real presence of the Lord.

SOME ANALOGIES

Exempla claudicant. And it is the examples or analogies brought forward by the new theologians which have given some scope to the misinterpretations of their view on transfinalization and transignification. Yet an analogy, if interpreted correctly, can help bring about the true meaning of a theological stance.

One such analogy is the 'gift' analogy. Let us examine it briefly.

When I look at a bar of chocolate which I have bought in a confectionary, I perceive an object delicious to my palate. But when I look on a bar of chocolate presented to me by a loved and loving person I perceive, not merely an edible object, but a 'gift', a 'sign' of friendship or love. This is only an analogy, and the trouble is that some have run away with it and proclaimed that the Dutch have reduced Christ's presence in the Eucharist to a 'symbol'. The analogy was only intended to bring out the idea of a new meaning inherent in the gift chocolate; its new aim.

In the case of the Eucharist the gift of the Bread and the Wine take on a new meaning and a new aim both of which are much more real, because the new element behind the gift is not an act of love but a Divine Love made man for us. It is Christ himself who is behind the gift.

BREAD, WINE, WATER

I would rather draw my analogy from what happens in the other sacraments, especially from what takes place in the sacrament of Baptism.

Every sacrament is a *sign* that signifies and causes grace. From this it follows that every sacrament must *contain* grace, and, therefore, that the sacramental elements receive a new (supernatural) entity. One can therefore say that when a sacrament is taking place the form-matter dyad really changes. Thus, while Baptism is being administered, water takes on a new 'energy'. It is no longer 'common water' although physically and chemically it is not affected at all. There is no apparent change, yet a real change takes place in the ultimate *meaning* and *aim* of the water. 'Gratia non tollit *naturam*'. The physical nature or reality of the water is not destroyed or taken away. But a new supernatural dimension (a fourth dimension, almost) is added.

I cannot see why the real presence cannot be explained along the same lines; provided, of course that certain essential reservations are made, namely:

1. In the case of Baptism the supernatural 'virtue' of 'fourth dimension' is transitory; in the Eucharist it is permanent.
2. In the case of Baptism the new dimension is a 'thing' – grace; in the Eucharist the new dimension is a Personal Presence, a human-divine presence: the presence of Christ.

But if above we called grace a thing, we did so only with reservation, hence the inverted commas. For is not grace itself a presence? But we must distinguish somehow between one presence and another.

IS THIS VIEW AN ORTHODOX ONE?

One may object: this is an unorthodox view. The Church, in fact, has never spoken of a transubstantiation of water but only of bread and wine.

This is certainly true as far as solemn definitions of Doctrine go. But if we take a look at the Liturgy we find an expression which comes near to the idea of transubstantiation. At the Blessing of the Baptismal Font the celebrant invokes the coming of the Holy Ghost so that with his power 'totam *substantiam* (aquae) regenerandi *fecundet* effectu'.

But, what is more important, we should never forget that solemn definitions are always conditioned by the position held by some adversary. Now the same heresies which were spread about the Eucharist did not arise, and could not arise in the case of the other sacraments.

Again, the fact that what we have called 'a new dimension' exists as a permanent element in the Eucharist and as a transitory element in Baptism, must have led to different manners of expressing the coming into being of those two 'dimensions'.

But the greatest difficulty against the above explanations is raised by the words of Trent. In fact, the Council was very imperative in excluding a 'bread substance' alongside the substance of the Body of the Lord. 'Si quis dixerit, in sacrosancto Eucharistiae sacramento remanere substantiam panis et vini una cum corpore et sanguine Domini nostri Jesu Christi, negaveritque mirabilem illam et singularem conversionem totius substantiae panis in corpus et totius substantiae vini in sanguinem, manentibus dumtaxat speciebus pani et vini, quam quidem conversionem catholica Ecclesia aptissime transubstantiationem appellat: anathema sit. (Denz. ed 33, 1652).

These words seem to mean that the bread (and wine) not only receive a new supernatural entity, but also that some natural element (the substance) melts away. But is this the only logical interpretation? Believing, as we do, that the words of the above quoted canon are infallible, we can still hold that they are human words and, as such, must be explained according to the rules of hermeneutics. One of these rules must answer the question: what should we mean, in the above context, by *substantia*? As we have already said there is no absolute need to take *substantia* in an arsitotelian or thomistic sense. I would suggest as an equivalent term in the context the latin words *dispositio intima* as distinguished from *dispositio externa* which are the *species*.

The sense of the second canon of Trent would be: After the consecration the external disposition of the bread remains the same; but the

internal disposition is changed since a new element is added – the real presence of Christ. What the Council really wants to stress is not the miraculous element but the importance of the New Presence which absorbs the purely natural importance of the bread and wine in a higher existence. The aim of the definition, then, is to show that when we look, eat or adore the Eucharistic Bread, we must set aside everything that is natural, visible, and sensible, and concentrate on the invisible profound reality: the presence of Jesus.

Thinking, as they did, within the framework of a scholastic philosophy, the Fathers of Trent found no better way to express the diminished importance of the species than by saying that their substance had been taken away from them.

They also intended to avoid a certain dichotomy under the species. To assert that there are two substances (the bread and the Body of the Lord) under the same species would be to put the Body of the Lord on the same footing as the bread. This too had to be avoided, and they found no other way of doing this than by saying that one substance has to make room for the other. Hence transubstantiation.

But, in our case, we may easily avoid this fallacy by looking at the whole process from a different perspective. We have on the one hand the natural, visible external element; on the other hand the new, invisible and supernatural element. The second element does not exist alongside the first in the sense that it is on the same plane. They exist together in a special sense, that is because the second is signified and caused by the first. We have therefore, a case of sacramental causality – even if a very special and ineffable case.

CONCLUSION

I would like to summarise the last part of this article by using excerpts from the *Summa Theologiae* of St Thomas. These excerpts have been culled from different articles and should be thought of as a mosaic rather than as an organic thomistic view. Their authority therefore is necessarily limited. They do not give the complete 'mens Sancti Thomae', but they show that my interpretation is not against the style of the *Summa*. Need I repeat that they are taken faithfully and word for word from the *Summa*?

Sacramentum ponitur in genere signi. Quando investitur canonicus per librum, liber est quoddam signum quo designatur traditio canonicatus. Sed iste modus (significandi) non transcendit rationem signi. Sac-

ramenta novae legis *simul* sunt causae et signa.

Sacramentum ergo continet gratiam, uno modo sicut in signo, alio modo sicut in causa.

Necesse est ergo ponere quod in sacramento sit aliqua virtus. In aqua (baptismi) est quaedam sanctificationis virtus, non permanens sed fluens. Augustinus dicit: Quae tanta vis aquae ut corpus tangat et cor abluat. E contra sacramenta veteris legis non habebant in se aliquam virtutem sed solum significabant.

Sicut autem se habet virtus Spiritus Sancti ad aquam baptismi, ita se habet Corpus Christi verum ad species panis et vini.

Haec est differentia: Eucharistia continet aliquid sacrum absolute scilicet ipsum Christum, aqua vero baptismi continet aliquid in ordine ad aliud scilicet virtutem. In aliis sacramentis continetur quaedam virtus participata a Christo. In Eucharistia continetur ipse Christus substantialiter (hos est) non per participationem.

Christus fit praesens in Eucharistia non sicut in loco sed sicut in sacramento.

L. CACHIA.

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