



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Almighty God, who has given your only Son to die for us: grant that we who have been united in the communion of his most precious Body and Blood may be so cleansed from our past sins and so strengthened to follow the example of his most holy life, that we may hereafter enjoy everlasting fellowship with you in heaven, through him who loved us and gave himself for us, the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Brookes Foss Westcott

Week #15: Thomas Aquinas on Transubstantiation and Eucharistic Devotion

A Traditional Realist View from the Middle Ages: Aquinas on Transubstantiation

By the middle of the second century, the Lord's supper had been detached from the context of the shared meal. By the fourth century, a variety of terms (not yet standardized) were used to describe a transformation of the elements in a way that allowed for Christ's essential presence in and through them to the Church, yet without the elements ceasing to be what they were (i.e. bread and wine). This transformation was linked in a rather vague, undefined way with the action of the Spirit upon the elements, possibly as an inference from the fact that the Spirit mediates the presence of the risen Christ to the Church after the ascension. The fact that the doctrine was not systematically clarified reflected the fact that there was no significant controversy over the Lord's Supper until the ninth century and eleventh centuries, both in the Western (Latin) Church.

The ninth century controversy arose in response to statements by Paschasius Radbertus that "though the figure of bread and wine remain, yet these are altogether a figure, and....we must believe that there is nothing else than the flesh and blood of Christ...and....this certainly is no other flesh than that which was born of Mary and suffered on the Cross and rose from the tomb."

Responses were offered by Rabanus Maurus and Ratramnus. Like Radbertus, Rabanus Maurus wanted to affirm the identity of the bread and wine with the real flesh and blood of Christ, but wanted to emphasize more strongly the spiritual nature of Christ's post-resurrection body and its presence in the elements. Ratramnus drew a more sophisticated distinction which was later to prove influential: In the sacrament what one receives "are figures in respect of visible species [=the outward appearance of bread and wine]; but in respect of invisible substance [i.e. what the sacrament really, fundamentally is], that is, the power of the divine Word, they are really the body and blood of Christ." Note the distinction here between the visible species (=what the thing initially appears to be) and the invisible substance (which is what the thing really, truly, fundamentally, actually is).

The eleventh century controversy was caused by Berengar of Tours, who attacked the approach taken by Radbertus (and which had become popularly accepted). Berengar affirmed that the elements became the real body and blood of Christ when they were consecrated, but he rejected the idea that the sacramental elements then ceased to be bread and wine. He also criticized the notion that the body of Christ is “brought down from Heaven and carnally present on the altar.”

While Berengar may have been on the losing side of the battle, the kind of criticisms he was making did lead scholastic theologians (such as William of Auvergne) to try to find some systematic way of affirming that at consecration the bread and wine really did become the body and blood of Christ, yet without falling into crudely materialistic conceptions of Christ’s presence in the sacrament. (Thus, for example, Alexander of Hales contended that reception was contingent upon the recipient's recognition of the sign value of the sacrament, the recipient's mind going beyond the sign to the reality to which the sign points, something which only occur in rational creatures who possess knowledge but not in the mouse who nibbles on the eucharistic host but can perceive and receive only the outer form of the latter. Aquinas rejects the idea that intention plays a role in accessing Christ's presence, since this would made reception accidental and contingent, rather than substantial, i.e. what the converted elements actually were--"This is my body" not "You could experience my body if you happen to have faith", although Aquinas is willing to say that one cannot derive benefit from Christ's presence if one doesn't understand the sign-value of the object)

Scholastic theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, therefore used Aristotle’s distinction between substance (what a thing is, i.e. those characteristic features or qualities which a thing must have to be that thing and will have as long as it is that thing, e.g. a human being is a rational mortal animal) and accidents (qualities which may belong to a thing but are not features which define it and must belong to it, e.g. brown skin, gray hair, laughing, etc.--a human being may have or do these things, but these are not what makes us human, since one can be a human being without having brown skin or gray hair or always laughing).

Aquinas also made an important and closely related second affirmation: Sacrifice requires the destruction or physical modification of what is offered (animals are killed, bread is broken), making it something different than what it previously was and useless for its previous purposes. The conclusion was that when the elements are consecrated (when a thing with an aptitude for signifying is joined with a form of words which makes explicit this signification declared in Christ's institution of the rite, then by divine power), there occurs a transubstantiation, i.e. a complete conversion and total change of substance (what a thing is), so that the bread and wine become wholly (in both form and matter) the body and blood of Christ and are no longer bread and wine, though they may incidentally continue to have the outward appearance of being such (i.e. the accidents or appearance to the external senses of bread and wine remain).

"The complete substance of the bread is converted into the complete substance of Christ's body, and the complete substance of the wine into the complete substance of Christ's blood" (ST 3a.75.4)

Question: Does this really make any sense? In Aristotle accidents have to inhere in a substance. Here, however,

(1) the substance of bread and wine has been wholly converted (so is no longer available) and

(2a) the substance of Christ's body after the resurrection no longer undergoes corruption so cannot have accidents and

(2b) these accidents "are certainly not the accidents of Christ, for he does not look or taste like bread or wine" (Davies, p. 368).

Aquinas' answer--in this unique and mysterious case, we must suppose that the accidents inhere in dimensive quantity (=definite and limited extension in three-dimensional space)

Aquinas' argument: qualities are not divisible in themselves but may inhere in a subject that is divisible; extension in three-dimensional space is divisible (i.e. I can mentally divide a figure conceived as existing in three-dimensional space, even apart from matter) so that it can be a subject in which accidents can properly inhere. Thus the bread can appear to be broken and separated upon the altar.

Criticism of Aquinas' position--this makes no sense, since both quantity and location in space are accidental predicates, not a substance. If the accidents of bread and wine adhere in another accident (dimensive quantity), then what does the latter accident inhere in? We need another subject, i.e. a substance (i.e. some matter plus a form that has certain essential properties).for dimensive quantity to adhere in.

Aquinas' response--no, accidents are defined in terms of inhering in a subject but rather by having a nature suited to existing in a subject. In this case, God just keeps the accidents in existence miraculously, apart from any subject, so that people might not be repulsed by the appearance of Christ's flesh and blood.

Aquinas' Doctrine of Transubstantiation as an Attempt to Present in a More Systematic and Formal Manner Aspects of Contemporary Eucharistic Devotion

It should be noted that Aquinas' doctrine of transubstantiation was not a purely speculative doctrine, but was clearly connected with how Aquinas understood and approached the Lord's Supper devotionally. The Christian faith is not a discarnate faith for disembodied beings. Because God understands our bodily nature and its limitations, he presents himself and all his grace to us through the person of Jesus (the incarnate Lord) in concrete, tangible ways that may be grasped by the bodily senses. The sacraments which Christ instituted were intended to draw believers into communion with him so that we might share directly in the benefits of his Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection and this is fitting, since love and friendship involve an active sharing of all good things for the benefit of the other.

(1) The signs of the new covenant were to be celebrated in a tangible way, which was most appropriate for embodied creatures like ourselves who can readily understand the distinction of body and soul. The distinction between the latter is analogous to the distinction between the sensible sign and the grace there conferred by the Spirit of Christ which communicates to believers the benefits and power of new life won for us by Christ through his death on the Cross and Resurrection, conforming our life to Christ's life by that power of divine grace which attaches to Christ's sacrifice and strengthening us to live and proclaim the Gospel).

(a) Sign (Calls Forth the Idea of the Thing): A sacrament is a sensible sign (i.e. a sign perceived by the bodily senses--sight, taste, touch, etc.) of some

sacred thing which is not observable by the bodily senses. Thus, for example, in baptism God makes use of water (the sign observed by the senses) to extend a grace arising from Christ's saving work that is invisible to the body's external senses and therefore not openly perceived. (Note here the "appropriateness" [=aptitude to signify in a publicly intelligible manner] of the physical sign selected by Christ--the washing with water shows forth the cleansing from sin that is experienced in baptism.)

--It is "characteristic of divine providence that it provides for each being in a manner corresponding to its own particular way of functioning. Hence it is appropriate that in bestowing certain aids to salvation upon us the divine wisdom should make use of certain physical and sensible signs called the sacraments" (ST 3a,61,1)

--"For if they [people used to focusing upon physical objects] were to be confronted with spiritual realities pure and unalloyed, their minds, absorbed as they are in physical things], would be incapable of accepting them (ST 3a,61,1)

(b) Bestowing of Grace (Extends the Sanctifying Grace of Christ in Accordance with His Promise and Our Union with Him in His Life, Death and Resurrection): By the power of God, the sensible sign is therefore able to be a means of grace which affects and brings about change in the person who receives it in faith, healing the soul and producing a greater and more selfless love (charity) for God and one's neighbor which leads one through conversion forward into eternal life as a child of God.

--"If there is one key idea which lies at the very roots of St. Thomas's treatise as a whole it is the idea that the new life of the redemption wrought by God in the incarnate Word is communicated to man through created media, physical things, or acts combined with words" (intro to Blackfriars ed. of Thomas' works, vol. 56, q'd in Davies, p. 350)

--Since "through his Passion he also inaugurated the rites of the Christian religion by offering himself as an oblation and sacrifice to God...it is manifest that in a special way the sacraments of the Church derive their power from the Passion of Christ, and that it is through the reception of the sacraments that the power flowing from this becomes, in a certain way, conjoined to us" so that our sins are forgiven by the merits of Christ's passion and our souls are healed by his grace (ST 3a,60,3)

--"In divine worship it is necessary to make use of corporeal things...so that our minds may be aroused to the spiritual acts [i.e. faith, hope and love] which join us to God," restoring the likeness to God that had previously been weakened and diminished through sin (ST 2a2ae,81,7)

(c) Tokens of Love Exchanged: It is normal within the development of a relationship that tokens of love are exchanged and this is part of what is ordinarily required for a love to grow deeper.

--Since we are physical creatures, it is natural that Christ should share with his followers something that is physical, yet also contains something intangible of himself that attaches to the gift and renders it special.

--To partake without a living faith (i.e. a faith that works itself out in love for God and neighbor) is to fail to discern the body and bring down judgment upon oneself, since a failure to love who one ought and as one ought shows a hardened heart which resists grace and is an impediment to the reception of grace.

(2) Aquinas emphasizes the tension between what the senses report and what faith knows, a tension which is characteristic of this present life:

"We could never know by our senses that the real body of Christ and his blood are in this sacrament, but only by our faith which is based on the authority of God...do not doubt the truth of this, but take our Saviour's word in faith: he is truth itself, he does not lie" (ST 3a.75.1-2)

Note the similar emphasis in Aquinas' prayer "Adoro te devote, latens deitas" ("Devoutly I Adore You, Hidden Divinity") on not trusting the outward appearance available to the senses, but instead seeking with faith the inward, spiritual reality of the sacrament, which remains hidden from carnally-minded persons (whose concern is only with their immediate material circumstances):

Devoutly I adore you, hidden Divinity,
Under these appearances concealed.
To you my heart surrenders self
For, seeing you all else must yield.

Sight and touch and taste here fail;
Hearing only can be believed.
I trust what God's own Son has said.
Truth from truth is best received

In Aquinas' hymns from the Office of Corpus Christi one can also see the same thing

The Word in flesh makes true bread flesh,
The Blood of Christ then comes from wine.
Though senses fail to see this truth,
Faith will make pure hearts incline.

So great a sacrament, therefore,
Let us revere while kneeling down.
Let old laws yield to this new rite.
Let faith, not sense, conviction ground
(from "Pange, lingua, gloriosi"="Acclaim, my tongue, this mystery")

What you can neither grasp nor see,
A lively faith will yet affirm

Beyond this world's design.

Under different guises there
--Which act as signs not things--
Wondrous matters are enshrined.

(from "Laud, Sion, Salvatorem"="Praise, O Zion, Your Redeemer")

There one also sees Aquinas' appreciation of the consecrated elements as a means for tangibly receiving Christ and his benefits under the guise of a mundane physical form:

To them [sc. the disciples] beneath a twofold guise
He flesh and blood distributed;
Thus in corporeal substances
The entire man he justly fed.

(from "Verbum supernum prodiens"="The Word from Heaven Now Proceeding")

The Doctrine of Transubstantiation after Aquinas

In the Counter-Reformation period, the Council of Trent decisively affirmed the position taken by Aquinas, declaring that "by the consecration of the bread and wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood, only the species [=appearances] of the bread and wine remaining, which conversion is, by the holy Catholic Church, suitably and properly called transubstantiation." (According to the doctrine of concomitance developed by scholastic theologians and affirmed by the Councils of Basle, Constance and Trent, the substance of the body of Christ includes Christ's whole human and divine nature (body, blood, soul and divinity), all of which are in and throughout the consecrated elements.)

The Adorable Presence (On Rational Knowledge and Spiritual Sight)

With peeping pace and silent step
They pass the sleepy nest of books
Imprisoned under lock and key
Beneath the ever-watchful gaze

Of two-faced time.

Soon touched with holy awe they cross
Themselves and see with wakened eyes
Christ himself gazing lovingly
Surrounded by his Mother blest

And the heavenly company.

They yearn to utter the splendor
Of heaven's everlasting joy
They yearn to quench their thirsty souls
Upon the tears of Christ divine

Such yearning is also mine.

--T.J. Rhidian Jones