

Identity, Being, and Eucharist¹

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Over the last fifty years ecumenical progress on the Eucharist has been accompanied by widespread disregard for semantic and metaphysical questions about how Christ is, and comes to be, present in the Eucharist. This paper argues that these questions must be faced, and that Christ's Eucharistic words ("This is my body," "This is my blood") should be understood semantically as genuine identity statements. They were taken this way by Christians from the earliest times, and this is the most natural way to take them. Christians also insisted early on that Christ's Eucharistic presence comes to be by way of a radical conversion of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. The Council of Trent's teaching on transubstantiation is meant to insist that this ancient conviction about Eucharistic conversion is normative doctrine. Thomas Aquinas's application of the idea that God is the auctor entis can aid in an understanding of Trent's teaching on the Eucharist. At the same time, the arguments of Scotus and Ockham make the ecumenically helpful point that this conversion is not metaphysically necessary for Christ's Eucharistic presence, though it is, of course, the way this presence actually comes about.

The Present Situation

Over the last fifty years or so the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist has become an ecumenical commonplace. Since the sixteenth century the Christian world had seemed divided between two sharply opposed convictions about Christ's Eucharistic presence. On the one hand there were those Christian communities, mostly Catholic and Orthodox, which affirmed that Christ's actual body and blood are mysteriously but truly present where the consecrated elements of the Eucharist are present. On the other hand there were those communities, mostly Protestant, which denied any such presence and regarded the earthly elements of the Eucharist as a sign or reminder of Christ's body and blood really present elsewhere, in heaven at the right hand of God. Now these communities typically hold that they are a good deal closer on the Eucharist than they had once thought.

Protestants will now often say that their historic insistence on the "spiritual" rather than "carnal" or "physical" character of Christ's Eucharist presence was never meant to deny the reality of that presence. Catholics will now often grant that the traditional Protestant antipathy towards transubstantiation should not be equated with a denial of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. Protestant theologians are now less likely to defend a purely memorialist or symbolic understanding of the Lord's Supper than they were a generation or two ago, and in traditions

¹ The original version of this essay, different in part from the one presented here, will appear under the title "The Eucharistic Presence of Christ," in *What Does it Mean to "Do This"?*, ed. James J. Buckley & Michael Root (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books).

where such views were once common, authoritative figures—Calvin, for example—are now interpreted as opposed to any such understanding.

With this has gone a noticeable shift in piety. At the Methodist theology school where I teach, for example, few students are willing to deny outright that what the communicant receives in the Lord's Supper is really the body and blood of Christ, and the memorialist character of historic American Methodist piety is seen as a betrayal of the Eucharistic realism of the Wesleys, a virus unfortunately contracted from the Reformed when Methodism emigrated to America. At least in those traditions whose attitudes toward the Eucharist were shaped by substantive theological debate with traditions assumed to oppose their own, the real presence is now widely assumed.

Yet growth in agreement about the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist has been accompanied by a striking loss of interest in how to understand that reality. The fact of Christ's presence is now affirmed across old lines of division, but speculation on the way in which Christ is present, on just how it is that this remarkable fact obtains, is not only far less common than it once was, but is often viewed as an obstacle to ecumenical agreement about the fact itself. As it is often put, *that* Christ is present is one thing, *how* he is present another. Ecumenical agreement obtains on the fact, but not on how to understand it. This, however, is generally seen as no great loss: agreement on the "how" is not necessary for genuine agreement on the fact, so we need not linger in search of it.

The American Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue, for example, in an early and influential agreed statement of the Eucharist from 1967, characterizes the result of its discussions like this: "[T]here is agreement on the 'that,' the full reality of Christ's presence. What has been disputed is a particular way of stating the 'how,' the manner in which he becomes present." The "particular way" of understanding Christ's presence to which the dialogue refers in the Catholic teaching on transubstantiation. But discussion with their Catholic partners and a reading of "contemporary Catholic theologians" (specifically the Rahner and Schillebeeckx of the immediate post-conciliar period) has convinced the Lutheran members of the dialogue that "the dogma of transubstantiation intends to affirm the fact of Christ's presence...and is not an attempt to explain how Christ becomes present." So understood, Lutherans "must acknowledge that it is a legitimate way of attempting to express the mystery," even though it is one they themselves have good reasons for "prefer[ring] to avoid."²

Some years later the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in Germany (more properly the *Ökumenischer Arbeitskreis evangelischer und katholischer Theologen*, which includes Reformed as well as Lutheran Protestants) reached a conclusion quite similar to its American counterpart. "[T]he emphasis is on the fact of the personal presence of the living Lord in the event of the

² "The Eucharist: A Lutheran-Roman Catholic Statement," in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue III: The Eucharist as Sacrifice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, n.d. [1967]), p. 196.

memorial and fellowship meal, not on the question as to how this real presence, the ‘is,’ is to be explained.”³

The approach of these Lutheran/Catholic dialogues is not, I think, exceptional, but has become the typical pattern for thinking about Eucharistic presence both within and across the various Western traditions. Regarding the precise manner of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist a legitimate plurality of views are on offer, and to insist that one of these, or some of them, are preferable to the others is to threaten the hard-won and far more important agreement on the real presence itself. Christ’s being in the Eucharist we emphatically affirm, but the manner of his being there—what “is” means here—we best leave alone. Indeed it seems pointless to pursue a detailed theological understanding of the way in which Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine, if one already knows in advance that the results of one’s labors will in principle be no better than the quite different, even contradictory, results someone else may obtain.

This eclipse of interest in a theologically normative account of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist has relegated one theological idea above all to the deep shadows: the Roman Catholic understanding of the real presence in terms of transubstantiation. This is often assumed, by Catholics at least as much as by Protestants and Orthodox, to be a needless rationalization of the mystery of Christ’s Eucharistic presence, implausibly based on an outmoded Greek metaphysics, and, as Luther argued at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, an idea illicitly imposed upon the Church by an overreaching Roman authority which ought simply to have encouraged faith in the truth of Christ’s words, “This is my body.”

In 1965, before the Second Vatican Council had yet concluded and a generation of ecumenical dialogue on the Eucharist begun, Pope Paul VI warned Catholics against the perils of ignoring what the Council of Trent had taught about transubstantiation, and of supposing that Trent’s formulas regarding the Eucharist are time-bound artifacts for which contemporary substitutes should be found, or upon which substantive improvements need to be made.⁴ The “new wave of Eucharistic devotion” that Paul VI hoped would “sweep over the Church” as a result of the Council’s “restoration of the sacred liturgy” depended, he argued, on a continued vigorous adherence to the doctrinal and pastoral teaching of the Council of Trent on the

³ Karl Lehmann & Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 92; cf. p. 101, which contrasts “the clear and unambiguous confession of the real presence of Jesus Christ” with the “explanatory models” used to account for it, especially the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of ubiquity (I have modified the translations in light of the German original: K. Lehmann und W. Pannenberg, eds., *Lehrverurteilungen, kirchentrennend?* [Freiburg: Herder; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986]). Like its American predecessor, this dialogue appeals to the ecumenical fruitfulness of the notion of “transignification”; cf. pp. 99-100.

⁴ See his Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965), §§11, 24. The Pope has in mind notions like “transignification” and “transfinalization,” which Schillebeeckx and others had begun to employ as interpretations of Catholic teaching. While correct as far as they go, these cannot, Paul VI insists, be the basis of an adequate interpretation of Trent’s Eucharistic doctrine. See especially §46. I follow here the English text of *Mysterium Fidei* on the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium_en.html; the Latin typica of the Encyclical may also be found there.

Eucharist.⁵ This, it has to be said, belongs among those teachings of the ordinary papal Magisterium which have yet to be received in the Church, perhaps especially by theologians. For the most part subsequent Catholic theology and ecumenical dialogue have completely ignored the admonitions of Paul VI, and have regarded traditional Catholic teaching on transubstantiation as at best one alternative among others that might be employed in the task of explaining the “how” of the Eucharist, should one wish to undertake that secondary and perhaps questionable project.⁶

It is surely legitimate and necessary to distinguish between the fact of Christ’s Eucharistic presence and the way in which that presence obtains. We need to distinguish, in other words, between Christ’s being in the Eucharist and the no doubt extraordinary metaphysical state of affairs in which that presence consists. These are two different matters. Beyond that, we need to distinguish between the metaphysical manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist and how it is that Christ comes to be present in just that manner. This is a third matter.⁷

Nevertheless it is a mistake, with potentially grave consequences, to play the fact off against the “how,” or to suppose that there are no telling choices to be made between different ways of understanding how Christ is present, and comes to be present, for our salvation in the Eucharist. Paul VI was right, I think, to insist that not every way of understanding the real presence is equally correct, adequate, or helpful.

Like all the mysteries of the faith, the fact of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist elicits the believing mind’s effort to understand it, to grasp, insofar as the light available in this life allows, how it comes to be. To insist that we cling to the fact while suspending judgment on how the fact may rightly be understood is self-defeating. We can’t help yearning for the light shed upon what we believe by having reasons that help us understand it. If we become convinced that we can’t have these reasons, that there simply is no light by which the fact may be seen more clearly, eventually we are likely to give up believing in the fact itself. This is the mind’s natural response, it would seem, to truth claims that come to it on good authority, but that it finds it can make no headway in understanding.

⁵ The quoted phrases are from *Mysterium Fidei* §§13 and 6.

⁶ At the time of its appearance *Mysterium Fidei* was greeted in some quarters with relief and gratitude. Asked by Paul VI to comment on a draft of the Encyclical a month before it was issued, Charles Cardinal Journet offered the Pope a number of comments, and said in his cover letter, “This is one of the great joys of my life. The agony which weighed on us has vanished. The faith of the Church is saved.” *Journet Maritain Correspondance, Volume VI: 1965-1973* (Éditions Saint-Augustin, 2008), p. 795. Journet was in the minority, and theological criticism of the Encyclical set in soon after it was issued. A generation later, though, *Mysterium Fidei* would be cited to telling effect in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See §§1374 and 1378.

⁷ In Aquinas’s terms, the topic of Eucharistic change or conversion (how Christ comes to be present; III, 75, 2-8) is rightly distinguished from that of the manner or mode of Christ’s existence in the Eucharist (the metaphysical state of affairs in which his presence consists; III, 76), and consideration of these two topics depends on the prior assertion that Christ is present here “in truth, and not only as in a figure or sign” (the fact of his Eucharistic presence; III, 75, 1—on which more below).

I will offer here a series of thoughts on how Christ's Eucharistic presence might not only be believed in, but understood. As I hope will be easily apparent, I intend these thoughts to follow closely what I take to be the logic of established Catholic teaching on transubstantiation as the "most apt" way to understand the "how" of Christ's presence on the altar.⁸ But I will not develop these thoughts, except in passing, by way of an exegesis of the Council of Trent or other authoritative Catholic teaching on the Eucharist. My hope is to clarify, if only in a preliminary way, both the value and the limits of metaphysical argument in giving a theological account of this central Catholic teaching.

Entity and Identity

To believe in the real presence is to accept the truth of two statements as spoken by Jesus, and by those whom he has authorized to say them in his stead. The first statement is "This is my body," the second, "This is the chalice of my blood." Both of these are identity statements. Or, more precisely, believing in the real presence requires recognizing that, as spoken by Jesus and those whom he has authorized, they are both identity statements.

We make an identity statement when we say that one thing is the same as another. "Sandra Marshall's husband is Nancy Marshall's firstborn son" is an identity statement. It asserts that the two descriptions, "Sandra Marshall's husband" and "Nancy Marshall's firstborn son" refer to the same individual, namely me. "The evening star is the morning star" is an identity statement in just the same way, a philosophically famous test case for how to understand identity statements. Asserting the identity of one thing with another is among the irreducibly basic uses of the term "is."

To think of identity in terms of two things being the same is, to be sure, imprecise and potentially misleading. If two items are really (that is, numerically) distinct, then they are not the same—not identical—and if they are the same, then they are not really two distinct items in the first place. It is surely right to think that identity extends as far as being—no entity without identity, in Quine's phrase—but to look on identity only as a mental or conceptual relation every entity has to itself, the relation of being the same as itself, isn't very illuminating. Thomas Aquinas, like Aristotle before him, offers a more informative notion of identity, or more precisely of the "is" of identity. "Things are the same, when whatever is predicated of one is predicated of the other."⁹ Identity is not first of all a relation of objects to themselves, but of words and objects. We have one and the same object when we apply the same predicates to it, regardless of how it is named. Or as Quine suggests, we have the same object when two different

⁸ In the phrase of canon 2 of Trent's Decree on the Eucharist, DH 1652 (DH = Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church* (Latin-English), 43rd edn, ed. Peter Hünermann [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012]). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁹ *Summa theologiae* I, 40, 1, ob 3: "[Q]uaecumque sunt idem, ita se habent, quod quidquid praedicatur de uno, praedicatur et de alio." Cf. *In I Sent.* 33, 1, 4, ob 1: "Quaecumque enim sunt idem secundum rem, quidquid de uno dicitur, et de altero videtur dici." As Aquinas well knows, this rule is easier to enunciate than to apply in a consistently satisfying way, not least in the Trinitarian context in which he brings it up.

singular terms have the same referent.¹⁰ This accounts for the often informative character of identity statements: we learn something when we realize that terms with different descriptive contents, like “Sandra Marshall’s husband” and “Nancy Marshall’s firstborn son,” refer to the same individual. This may also account for our sense that we’ve even learned something when we simply assert the identity of an object with itself, as in “Sandra Marshall’s husband is Sandra Marshall’s husband.”

The suggestion that St. Thomas and W. V. Quine have similar views on identity and its logic may come as a surprise, perhaps because it may seem unlikely that Thomas and Quine, who look at the world so differently, would have a common view on any matter of philosophical importance. Quine himself thinks he agrees with St. Thomas on this issue, but this unexpected valorization of the medieval master by the analytic philosopher may not strike Thomists as reassuring.¹¹

On the face of it I find Quine’s claim to agree with St. Thomas plausible, but whether Quine is right about this is debatable, and raises the larger question of the relation between medieval and modern semantic theories. Here I will simply make two observations about this complex matter, which may help forestall unneeded worries about the argument that follows.

(1) The explicit semantic claims of a speaker or author, if he makes any, need not be accepted in order to arrive at a correct interpretation of what he says. It is obviously possible, in other words, to reject assumptions an author makes about the philosophy of language and still understand him, that is, interpret his words correctly. One need not, for example, accept Thomas Aquinas’s own basically Aristotelian semantics in order to interpret rightly what he says about the Eucharist, any more than one needs to accept Quine’s own post-Fregean semantics to understand what he says about the dogmas of empiricism. There could, of course, be exceptions to this generalization. An exception would require, though, that a specific statement Aquinas makes about the Eucharist (for example) meet two conditions. (i) The statement about the Eucharist would have to depend logically on a specific semantic claim Aquinas makes (such that the Eucharistic statement can be true only if the semantic claim is true). (ii) The semantic claim itself would have to be such that it can be made only with the theoretical tools Aquinas uses, and has (indeed can have) no equivalents in any other semantic theory (Quine’s, for example). Some of what Aquinas says about the Eucharist may meet these requirements, but it is a high bar to get over. It seems unlikely, *prima facie*, that much of what St. Thomas says about the Eucharist can be understood correctly only if these stringent theoretical requirements are met—not least because, as he himself stresses, Christ’s Eucharistic presence is at the heart of every Christian’s faith, whatever their semantic commitments, if any (see below, note 15).

¹⁰ “[S]tatements of identity that are true and not idle consist of unlike singular terms that refer to the same thing.” W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 117.

¹¹ See the passage from *Word and Object* cited in the previous note, where Quine alludes to *Summa theologiae* I, 40, 1, ob 3 (quoted in note 9) as expressing view of identity the same as his own.

(2) A viable semantic theory ought, as far as possible, to be ontologically neutral. It should, in other words, allow people who accept the theory to disagree about what exists, and it should allow people who agree about what there is to differ over the merits of the theory itself. Quine doesn't think the world is made up of substances and accidents, and doubts that there is any useful way to distinguish the essential properties of an object from the rest of its characteristics, but his semantics fully allows one to hold that there are substances, accidents, and essences (allows for these to be values of variables of existential quantification, in his terminology). Aquinas's semantic assumptions admit of similar ontological neutrality, I think, though I will not attempt to show that here. If the semantic commitments of St. Thomas and Quine are alike ontologically neutral, then it should be possible to articulate Aquinas's account of what the Eucharist is in Quinian (or other post-Fregean) semantic terms, and, for that matter, to articulate Quine's arid ontology in Thomas's semantic terms.

To return to the senses of "is": we should note that not every use of the term "is" asserts identity. We often use "is" to attribute a property or characteristic to something, to say of this or that thing that it has a feature which also belongs, or could belong, to others. The statement "Sandra Marshall's husband is going bald" uses "is" in this attributive way. It doesn't assert that the descriptions "Sandra Marshall's husband" and "going bald" are co-extensive. Sandra Marshall's husband has other features besides going bald, and lots of people are going bald besides Sandra Marshall's husband. Thus philosophers distinguish between the "is" of identity, used to assert that one thing is the same as another, and the "is" of predication, used to assert that a thing or class of things has a given feature, but the thing or class and the feature are not the same.¹²

At the heart of Christian faith lies a sequence of three identity statements, or perhaps better, three families of identity statements linked in a certain order, and linked also to equally important denials of identity.

- (1) "Jesus Christ [is] true God from true God." This creedal identity statement asserts that Jesus Christ is the same as God, by proposing that "Jesus Christ" and "true God" have the same referent. It follows another creedal identity statement: "[The] one God [is] the Father almighty." This latter statement asserts that the one God is the same as the Father. By saying that Jesus Christ is "true God from true God," that is, God from the Father, the Creed further asserts that Jesus Christ is not the same as the Father. If he were identical with the Father, he would not be from him. The Creed thus makes two identity statements, and denies a third: "The Father is the same as the one true God," and "Jesus Christ is the same as the one true God," but "Jesus Christ is not the same as the Father." The Creed makes (or implies) a cognate series of identity statements about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is "the Lord and giver of life," and so is the same as

¹² This is not, to be sure, a full taxonomy of the uses of "is." We use the "is" of predication to sort or classify particulars into kinds, and not only to attribute characteristics to the particulars or kinds thus sorted; thus, "Socrates is a human being." Identity and characterization are, however, the two uses of "is" most pertinent to our present concern.

the one true God, but the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and so is not the same as either. To believe in the Holy Trinity is to hold true these assertions and denials of identity, as a great many Christians do explicitly in the liturgy each Sunday.¹³

Upon this first family of identity statements depends a second:

- (2) “Our Lord Jesus Christ...begotten of the Father from eternity, is the same as the one begotten of the Virgin Mary, the God-bearer, in these last days.” This statement of the Council of Chalcedon asserts the identity, the sameness, of the Father’s Son and Mary’s Son, of the one born of the Father before all time with the one born of the Virgin Mary in time. The one who is “complete in divinity” on account of his eternal origination from the Father is the same as the one who is “complete in humanity” on account of his origination in time from the Virgin Mary. But divinity is not the same as humanity. Rather the two are united in one and the same Lord Jesus Christ “without confusion, without change.” To believe in the incarnation of the Son of God is to hold true these assertions and denials of identity.¹⁴

On this second family of identity statements depends a third:

- (3) “This is my body,” “This is my blood,” said by Jesus and his authorized representatives of the bread and wine before them when they begin to speak. These statements assert the identity, the sameness, of what is on the altar when each utterance is complete with the body and blood of Jesus. They also imply a pair of denials. What is on the altar after these statements are made perceptibly retains the characteristics of bread and wine, and does not take on the perceptible characteristics of Jesus’ body and blood. So what is on the altar, the host and what the chalice holds, are the same Jesus’ body and blood, but the characteristics of what is on the altar are not the characteristics of Jesus’ body and blood. To believe in the real presence is, once again, to hold true these two assertions of identity, and the correlative denials they imply.

In Christian history each of these three sorts of identity statement, those necessary for faith in the Trinity, the incarnation, and the real presence respectively, has been vehemently contested, and the truth of each denied, sometimes blatantly, sometimes more subtly. It is not hard to understand why. Unlike, for example, “Sandra Marshall’s husband is Nancy Marshall’s firstborn son,” it is less than obvious how the singular terms joined by the “is” of identity in these three types of statement can in fact refer to the same thing. Each of Christianity’s core identity statements asserts what does not seem possible to the human mind untutored by divine teaching. We believe them to be true by relying in faith on the truthfulness of God who teaches

¹³ The quoted phrases are from the Creed of 381, DH 150.

¹⁴ The quoted phrases are from the Definition of Chalcedon, DH 301-2.

them to us. As Thomas Aquinas's hymn "*Adoro te devote*" says of the real presence—the statement "This is my body"—in particular, "I believe whatever the Son of God has said: there is nothing more true than this word of the one who is the Truth."¹⁵

Each of the identity statements at the heart of Christian faith poses its own deep problem for human understanding, not quite the same as that posed by the other two. In each case, though, if we would obtain some measure of understanding we need to make some progress in saying how two things can be the same which don't seem to be the same, or whose identity with one another seems inconceivable. When it comes to "This is my body" and "This is my blood," the problem is especially obvious. How can a small piece of baked goods and a cup of fermented liquid be the same as the body and blood, indeed the total reality, of a human being? How can, for example, the whole body of a human being be present exactly where a tiny wafer is present, occupying precisely the space taken up by the little piece of bread?

Daunting as this sort of difficulty is, it is surely no more daunting than the difficulty posed by believing that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not the same as each other, yet each is the same as the one God, or the difficulty posed by believing that the human being Jesus is the same as God the Son. The precise sort of identity involved in each of these religiously basic cases is different—identity of nature, for example, in the case of Father, Son, and Spirit, identity of person in the case of God's Son and Mary's Son. But faith in the Trinity, the incarnation, and the real presence involves basically the same kind of claim in each case, and poses basically the same kind of difficulty. To disbelieve all three of these, for more or less the same sort of reason, would be understandable enough. It is more difficult to understand how one could believe in the Trinity and the incarnation, and yet disbelieve in the real presence. Nicene Christians have often contested the real presence on the grounds that the identity statements on which it is predicated make no sense—it is impossible to understand how what is on the altar could be the same as the body and blood of Jesus. But this seems inconsistent. The same kind of argument, easily adjusted to the different cases, could be made against the Trinity and the incarnation. These core Christian convictions come as a trio, and if a lack of understanding is a barrier to one, it is a barrier to all three. This underlines, of course, the importance of seeking an understanding of each.

Reasons for the Real Presence

It is striking to observe that Christians took "This is my body" and "This is my blood" to be genuine identity statements from the first, despite obvious cognitive difficulties posed by doing so. They insisted on it well before conceptual means began to be devised for understanding how these identity statements could be true.

¹⁵ It sounds better, and the thought is clearer, in the original: *Credo, quidquid dixit Dei Filius: / Nil hoc verbo Veritatis verius.*

Early in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch is already clear that the eucharistized bread and wine are the same as the body and blood of Christ. “The Eucharist,” he writes to the Church at Smyrna, “is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, that flesh which [not just ‘who’] suffered for our sins but which the Father raised in his kindness.”¹⁶ Justin Martyr, in the earliest detailed description we have of the Church’s Eucharist (about 160 A.D.), explains that as result of the presider’s prayer of thanksgiving, “the food which has been made Eucharist is both the flesh and the blood of the Jesus who was made flesh.”¹⁷

This early unselfconscious insistence that the Eucharistic food is the same as the one body and blood of Christ stems, no doubt, from already established apostolic tradition that this is how the Lord’s words in the upper room are to be taken, whatever the evidence of the senses. As Cyril of Alexandria would later write, “When the Lord says, ‘This is my body, which will be given up for you,’ doubt not whether this is true, but rather receive the words of the savior in faith, for he does not lie.”¹⁸ Later still Thomas Aquinas follows this ancient tradition when he writes, citing this very text of Cyril, “That the true body and blood of Christ are in this sacrament cannot be grasped by the senses, but only by faith (*sola fide*), which relies upon the authority of God himself.”¹⁹ That the Eucharist is the same as Christ’s body and blood, and thus that the words of Jesus solemnly uttered by the Eucharistic celebrant are genuine identity statements, was evidently embraced as an irreducibly basic element of the apostolic faith from the earliest times.

It is also, I think, the natural way to take the words, and was clearly recognized as such from the early Church to the end of the Middle Ages. The controversies that arose about this in the ninth century and again in the eleventh served to reinforce, rather than to weaken, the sense of Christians that this is what the words mean. They assert the sameness of the elements they consecrate with the body and blood of Christ, so to hold them true—as we must, since God incarnate speaks them—is to believe that this identity of the one with the other obtains.

In fact this would have to be the natural way to take the words, their plain or literal sense. Otherwise Christians from the beginning, and for centuries, would have taken them differently. Not until the high Middle Ages did they have available sophisticated semantic theories that might have provided a motive, independent of their natural sense, for interpreting the Eucharistic words differently than had long been assumed.²⁰ In order briefly to see way it’s natural, and not

¹⁶ Smyrnans 7:1. That there is only one flesh of Christ, present in every Eucharist, is the basis, Ignatius insists, of the unity of the Church: “So be diligent to use one Eucharist for there is [only] one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup for unity in his blood. There is one altar as there is one bishop” (Philadelphians 4). The translations are those of Kenneth J. Howell, *Ignatius of Antioch: A New Translation and Theological Commentary* (Zanesville, OH: CHResources, 2008), pp. 113, 104. See also Howell’s helpful essay, “The Eucharist in the Theology of Ignatius,” pp. 47-52.

¹⁷ *I Apology* 66. “Made” (Eucharist) here clearly means “changed into” (*metabole*). On this more later.

¹⁸ *In Lucam* 22:19 (PG 72, 912A-B).

¹⁹ *Summa theologiae* III, 75, 1, c.

²⁰ This in fact seems to have been a good part of what led Berengar, in the eleventh century, to question the identity of what is on the altar with the body of Christ. On the role of semantic theories in medieval Eucharistic theology, see Irène Rosier-Catach, *La parole efficace: Signe, rituel, sacré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004).

forced, to see “This is my body” as an identity statement, it will be helpful to recall the distinction between the “is” identity and the “is” of predication.

How do we tell, when it comes to cases, whether to take two terms joined by “is” as identified, or not? We can’t simply choose to take each case as seems best to us. It depends, rather, on what sort of terms are joined in the statement. Recall the example: we take “Sandra Marshall’s husband is Nancy Marshall’s firstborn son” as an identity statement, a case of the “is” of identity, because the statement joins one particular to another. The subject of the sentence is a term referring to a particular, which is standard, but the predicate is a different term that also refers to a particular. When we say one particular or individual “is” another, we can only be saying that they are not two particular things, but one and the same particular thing, though described differently by the subject and by the predicate. The statement is true just in case the particular thing referred to by the subject and that referred to by the predicate are in fact one and the same, and false if they are not. Either way, though, we can tell whether we are dealing with an identity statement by seeing whether one particular is predicated of another.

Going bald, by contrast, is not a particular, but a characteristic possessed by some particulars and not by others. When we attribute to a person a term referring to this characteristic, we are precisely not saying that what’s referred to by the subject of the sentence is one and the same as the characteristic referred to by the predicate. We’re saying that this subject has this characteristic, and our sentence is true just in case he does, and false if he doesn’t. The proposition “Sandra Marshall’s husband is going bald” doesn’t say that being Sandra Marshall’s husband and going bald are one and the same thing, but that this particular and this characteristic are two distinct things, which could exist apart from one another, though as it happens they don’t. We can tell when we have a case of the “is” of predication, as opposed to the “is” of identity, when “is” joins not two particulars, but a particular, which can exist on its own, and a property or characteristic, which cannot, but must belong to some particular.

Seen in this light, to take the words of Jesus repeated in each Eucharist as an identity statement is to take them in their natural or plain sense. The demonstrative “this,” referring to the bread and cup on the table before him, and “my body,” are both terms referring to particulars. The copula “is,” therefore, identifies them.

Now consider the following case: “This is a sign of my body.” Being a sign of someone’s body looks like a characteristic something has, in the manner of going bald, and not like a particular, in the manner of some bread or a cup. When “this” refers to the bread and cup of the Eucharist, then, it seems natural to take “This is a sign of my body” as a case of the “is” of predication, in which the characteristic of being a sign of Jesus’ body is attributed to the bread and cup on the altar or table. Interpreted in its natural sense this statement thus differs fundamentally from the statement Jesus makes at the last supper, since Jesus makes an identity statement, and “This is a sign of my body” is not that kind of statement. The two statements are not interchangeable; they do not say the same thing, and one cannot be taken as an interpretation or explanation of the other.

Furthermore, being a sign of someone's body, unlike going bald, is a relational characteristic. When correctly asserted it links two distinct things in a certain way. Signs are normally quite distinct from what they signify: stop signs from the law requiring the driver to stop, words from the things to which they refer, and so forth. By attributing to the bread and cup before the assembly the characteristic of being a sign of Jesus' body and blood, which remain quite distinct from them, the statement "This is a sign of my body" seems doubly forced and unnatural as an interpretation of Jesus' words at the last supper. Both the form of the statement and the content of the predicate belie the identity statement made by Jesus.

All of this was long intuitively obvious in the tradition, and it was often made explicit. In a particularly direct passage, Theodore of Mopsuestia writes (expressing, as Paul VI observes, the faith of the Church on this matter): "The Lord did not say: 'This is symbol of my body, and this is a symbol of my blood,' but rather: 'This is my body and my blood.' He teaches us not to look at the nature of what lies before us, for the giving of thanks over it has changed it into flesh and blood."²¹ That Christ is not present in the Eucharist only in the manner in which the symbolized is "in" the symbol, or the thing signified "in" the sign, is a commonplace of belief in the real presence from the ancient Church on.²²

By this point the objection will no doubt already have come to mind that the Fathers do often speak of the Eucharist as a sign or "figure," as do the Western doctors after them. In fact Thomas Aquinas, among others, argues that the sacraments belong first of all in "the genus of signs," although they are signs of a distinctive sort, namely those which effect or bring about what they signify.²³ The statement, "This is a sign of my body," referring to the bread and cup of the Eucharist, cannot therefore simply be false.

Exactly so, and I think the foregoing reflections on different kinds of statements help us understand the sense in which the Eucharist is a sign or symbol. Especially in the West from the Middle Ages on, the Eucharist has been seen to have a twofold signification, or sign value. The consecrated bread and wine (or more precisely their species, evident to the senses) are material signs of the body and blood of Christ, and the body and blood of Christ are themselves signs of the unity of the Church, of incorporation into Christ's one mystical body, which the communion of his body and blood effects. Our present concern is with the first of these.

That the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist are genuine signs is indispensable to our apprehension of the real presence. Seen with faith in the truth of Christ's words we have heard spoken in the Eucharist, they are the needed means by which we creatures of sense are able to know precisely *where* Christ is really present, and thereby are also able to know that he is

²¹ *In Matthaeum fragmenta* (on Mt. 26:26); PG 66, 713B. Cited (from the Latin version) in *Mysterium Fidei*, §44.

²² Thus, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, 75, 1, c: "[Q]uidam...posuerunt corpus et sanguinem Christi non esse in hoc sacramento nisi sicut in signo. Quod est tanquam haereticum abiiciendum, utpote verbis Christi contrarium." Aquinas refers to Berengar in particular.

²³ *Summa theologiae* III, 73, 2, ob 2: "signum est genus sacramenti"; cf. 60, 1 for a fuller statement of the point.

really present. His whole body, and all that belongs to his body, are present just where the material sign of consecrated bread is present, and his blood, and all that belongs to his blood, are present just where the material sign of the consecrated cup of wine is present.²⁴ To say this, however, is already to suggest that these are signs unique in all creation. For unlike any other sign, these signs fully contain the reality they signify. The body and blood of Christ are not to be sought apart from these signs, but in them. In his total reality—body, blood, soul, and divinity, as Catholics like to say—Jesus Christ is just where they are.²⁵

Another look at the statement “This is a sign of my body” may help here. The relational predicate “a sign of” is most readily taken to designate a characteristic or property. But a sign can also be taken simply as a thing, a particular. Read in that way, “This is a sign of my body” now makes sense as an identity statement: the bread is the same as a sign; the cup of wine is the same as a sign. And that, as we have just seen, is clearly true—as long as we take the predicates “sign of my body,” “sign of my blood” in the otherwise unexampled sense of a sign used by what is signified to make itself wholly present exactly where the sign is.

Presence, Conversion, and the *Auctor Entis*

I have already pointed out two patristic passages, one from Justin Martyr and one from Theodore of Mopsuestia, which tie belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist to a radical change that takes place in the elements of bread and wine. Both say that this change is brought about by the words spoken at the Eucharist over the elements. Many further patristic texts could be cited to this effect—Ambrose in particular comes to mind—to say nothing of later writers.²⁶ I’ll conclude by reflecting briefly on Eucharistic conversion and its relationship to

²⁴ Standard Catholic theological teaching takes this Eucharistic presence of “the whole Christ” in a strong sense. Thus Thomas Aquinas: “According to the Catholic faith, it is entirely necessary to confess that the whole Christ is in this sacrament” (III, 76, 1, c: *[O]mnino necesse est confiteri secundum fidem Catholicam quod totus Christus sit in hoc sacramento*). “With respect to the species of the bread” in particular, “there is contained under this sign, by the power of the sacrament itself, not only the flesh of Christ but his whole body, that is, the bones, nerves, and so forth. This is evident from the form of the sacrament, which does not say, ‘This is my flesh,’ but ‘This is my body’” (III, 76, 1, ad 2: *[E]x vi sacramenti sub hoc sacramento continetur, quantum ad species panis, non solum caro, sed totum corpus Christi, idest ossa et nervi et alia huiusmodi. Et hoc apparet ex forma huius sacramenti, in qua non dicitur, ‘haec est caro mea,’ sed, ‘hoc est corpus meum’*). All the parts of Christ’s body are present in the consecrated elements “ex vi sacramenti,” as the direct result, in other words, of the Eucharistic consecration itself; all the intrinsic accidents of Christ’s body are likewise present, but “in virtue of a real concomitance” rather than as the immediate result of the Eucharistic conversion: “ex vi realis concomitantiae, est in hoc sacramento tota quantitas dimensiva corporis Christi, et omnia alia accidentia eius” (III, 76, 4, c; on the restriction of this natural concomitance to “intrinsic” accidents, with the purpose of excluding place [and thus “local” presence] from what makes up “the whole Christ” present in the Eucharist, see 76, 5, ad 3).

²⁵ For Aquinas’s way of putting the first point—that the Eucharistized elements are signs of Christ’s body and blood (they are the *sacramentum tantum* of the Eucharist, in his technical terminology)—see *Summa theologiae* III, 73, 6, c and especially 80, 4, c. On the Eucharist as fully containing the reality it signifies, see III, 73, 1, ad 3; 73, 5, ad 2; 78, 1, c.

²⁶ E.g., Ambrose, *The Mysteries*, 9.52: “Cannot the words of Christ, which were able to make what was not out of nothing, change those things that are into the things that were not?”; *The Sacraments* IV.iv.19: “From bread the body of Christ is made. And what is wine, water? It is put in the cup, but it becomes blood by heavenly consecration.”

Christ's presence in the Eucharist—to the truth, in other words, of his statement, “This is my body.” It will be worthwhile to think in particular about how the terms in which we have posed the issue of Christ's presence in the Eucharist can help us understand the conversion by which this presence comes to be, and about the limits of our understanding in this matter.

The reality of this utterly singular change is surely the core doctrinal content of the Council of Trent's teaching on transubstantiation. What is presented at the offertory is mere bread and wine, but by the power of Christ's words on the lips of his minister, these are changed into something quite different, his own body and blood. In Trent's words: “By the consecration of bread and wine there takes place the conversion 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. It is this conversion,” the Council adds, “that is suitably and rightly called ‘transubstantiation’ by the holy Catholic Church.”²⁷ As the wording of both this passage and the coordinated canon 2 makes clear, “conversion,” the change of one thing into another, is the basic concept here. “Transubstantiation” is another “suitable” term for this conversion, naturally so, since both the thing changed and that into which it is changed are substances (on which more momentarily). In Trent's teaching on the Eucharist, “conversion” thus explains the meaning of “transubstantiation,” rather than the other way around.²⁸

If this conversion is the normative content of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, then as the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe observes, any five year old who's reasonably attentive at Mass can get the point of the doctrine of transubstantiation, though it seems to elude

Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), pp. 25, 304.

²⁷ Decree on the Eucharist, ch. 4: “[P]er consecrationem panis et vini conversionem fieri totius substantiae panis in substantiam corporis Christi Domini nostri, et totius substantiae vini in substantiam sanguinis eius. Quae conversio convenienter et proprie a sancta catholica Ecclesia transsubstantiatio est appellata” (DH 1642). As we have observed (above, n. 8), the relevant canon strengthens the last clause a bit: the Church “most aptly” (*aptissime*) calls the Eucharistic conversion “transubstantiation” (DH 1652).

²⁸ The theological debates at Trent that led up to the canons and decree on the Eucharist in Session XIII underline this point. In an influential *votum* of February, 1547, while the Council was meeting in Bologna, the Franciscan theologian Johannes Consilii replied to Calvin's repudiation of the term “transubstantiation” as a medieval scholastic novelty. He observed that this word added nothing to what was already meant by the terms common among various Church Fathers, such as “mutatio,” “conversio,” and “transformatio.” “While the word is more recent, the faith and the thing are nonetheless most ancient” (*Concilium Tridentinum...nova collectio* [Freiburg: Herder, 1901-], vol. V, p. 945.50).

When the Council resumed back in Trent in the fall of 1551, after a hiatus of four years, the Dominican theologian Melchior Cano made the same point in a still more forceful way. While it employs the term “transsubstantiatio,” the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) should not be read, Cano argues, as though it made the term itself essential to Catholic faith in the Eucharist. Lateran IV “mentions transubstantiation, but this does not appear to belong to the faith.” In this matter the heretic is not the person who doubts the usefulness of this relatively recent term, “but the one who asserts that the bread is not converted into the body of Christ” (*Concilium Tridentinum*, vol. VII/1, p. 125.9-13). The final formulation of Trent's canon 2 on the Eucharist follows Cano closely on this point, as Hubert Jedin observes in his detailed analysis of the theological discussions on the Eucharist at the Council (*Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, vol. 3: *Bologneser Tagung (1547/48) — Zweite Trienter Tagungsperiode (1551/52)* [Freiburg: Herder, 1970], p. 271). Jedin also shows (p. 48) that the Council clearly meant to maintain a distinction, evident *inter alia* in the *vota* of Consilii and Cano, between the doctrinal truths it was teaching and the language in which they were taught.

many theologians.²⁹ A wondrous event has taken place in our midst, a stupendous act of divine power that exceeds even creation *ex nihilo* in its unfathomable reach. At a precise point in time, and by ordinary human words, what was bread and wine has become something totally different. It is no longer bread and wine—though it still looks like those ordinary objects—it is Christ’s body and his blood. It is Jesus himself, whole and entire, present to us in a manner far more wonderful, in fact, than if we could see him with our eyes and touch him with our hands, a manner, as Trent says, that words can scarcely begin to express.³⁰ He is present to us in this way out of love, so that we may do what we could never do if our eyes could see him and our hands could touch him: eat him, and live because of him (Jn. 6:58).³¹ He is present in this way so that we can be joined to him far more intimately than sight and touch would allow, as our very food, that food which truly gives life because it turns us into what it is, rather than being turned by us into what we are: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Unlike bodily food, Aquinas comments (following a long tradition), “spiritual food is not transformed into the one who eats it, but transforms him into itself. Hence the proper effect of this sacrament is the transformation (*conversio*) of the human being into Christ.”³²

As I suggested at the outset, three distinct claims are in play here: one concerning the fact of Christ’s Eucharistic presence, one concerning the “how” of Christ’s presence, and one concerning the “way” in which that presence comes to be. Catholic teaching, in other words, affirms (1) that Christ is “truly, really, and substantially” present after the consecration (the fact); (2) that “the whole and complete Christ” is “contained” in the Eucharist “under the species of

²⁹ G.E.M. Anscombe, “On Transubstantiation,” *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2008), pp. 84-91 (originally published 1974). Anscombe tells of a three year old whom she saw ask his mother, as she returned from communion, “Is he in you?” “Yes,” the mother replied, “and to her amazement the child prostrated itself before her.” Anscombe comments: “I once told the story to one of those theologians who unhappily (as it seems) strive to alter and to water down our faith, and he deplored it: he wished to say, and hoped the Vatican Council would say, something that would show the child’s idea to be wrong. I guessed that the poor wretch was losing the faith and indeed so, sadly, did it turn out” (p. 86).

³⁰ “[I]pse Salvator noster... multis nihilominus aliis in locis sacramentaliter praesens sua substantia nobis adsit, ea existendi ratione, quam etsi verbis exprimere vix possumus, possibilem tamen esse Deo.” Decree on the Eucharist, ch. 1 (DH 1636).

³¹ Thus Trent’s Decree on the Eucharist, ch. 2: “Salvator noster... [s]umi autem voluit sacramentum hoc tamquam spirituale animarum cibum, quo alantur et confortentur viventes vita illius, qui dixit: ‘Qui manducat me, et ipse vivet propter me’” (DH 1638). It is just for the sake of this intimate union, in which Christ becomes our food, that divine providence sees to the continuing existence of the accidents of bread and wine in the Eucharist. We could never eat Christ’s body and blood if they were presented to us in their natural, rather than sacramental, mode of substantial existence. On this see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, 75, 5. Anscombe reflects, in this vein, on how strange it is that Christians should eat and drink the body and blood of their Lord (in obedience, of course, to his command)—on “the mysterious fact that he wanted to nourish us with himself” (“On Transubstantiation,” pp. 87-91; the quoted phrase is from p. 87). As she observes, the traditional idea that the eating and drinking is itself a sign of sharing in the divine life that unifies the mystical body of Christ ameliorates the oddity of the gesture.

³² “[S]piritualis cibus non convertitur in manducantem, sed eum ad se convertit. Unde proprius effectus huius sacramenti est conversio hominis in Christum, ut dicat cum apostolo, Galat. 2:20: ‘vivo ego, jam non ego; vivit vero in me Christus.’” *In IV Sent.* d. 12, q. 2, a. 1, q. 1, sol. (= *Scriptum super Sententiis*, vol. 4, ed. M. F. Moos, O.P. [Paris: Lethielleux, 1947], p. 524, §§165-66); cf. *Summa theologiae* III, 73, 3, ad 2 and Augustine, *Confessions* VII.x.16: “nec tu me in te mutabis sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me.”

sensible things,” so that “our Savior himself...is sacramentally present to us in his own substance” (the “how”); and (3) that “by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place the conversion 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” (the “way” the presence comes to be).³³

In Catholic Eucharistic doctrine the term “substance” figures in the articulation of all three claims. Perhaps for this reason the whole package of teaching is sometimes called “the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation,” although properly speaking transubstantiation concerns only the last of the three, the conversion of bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood. In recent Eucharistic theology not only the long-disputed term “transubstantiation,” but the more basic term “substance,” has often come to seem at best unfortunate in this context, prompting Catholic theologians to search for happier substitutes. This effort, as we saw, has met with considerable resistance from the Church’s Magisterium.

The basic worry about “substance” seems to be twofold. The term belongs in the realm of metaphysics, and its use loads Catholic Eucharistic doctrine with philosophical technicalities precisely at a point of unsurpassable practical and pastoral significance. Still worse, the “substantialist” metaphysics with which Trent’s language burdens Catholic doctrine is at best markedly problematic, if not simply flawed and outmoded beyond recovery.

Rumors of the death of “substance metaphysics” are, I think, exaggerated. Recognizably Aristotelian metaphysical accounts of substances and their qualities continue to find sophisticated defenders, not least among analytic philosophers. But in any case Trent’s chapters and canons on the Eucharist do not use the term “substance” in a technical way, nor do they mandate, or even invoke, any particular metaphysical construal of the concept of substance. The same goes, *a fortiori*, for their use of the derivative term “transubstantiation.”

This interpretation of Trent’s teaching on the Eucharist is not a contemporary gloss (prompted, one might suppose, by typically modern metaphysical squeamishness), but was clearly evident at the Council itself. Making a point often reiterated at Trent, one Benedictine abbot urged the Council Fathers to “remember that we are here to make laws not for the learned and expert, but for uneducated people, who are beset by so many liars and opponents.” This required the clearest possible demarcation of Catholic teaching from newly-arisen heresies, but it did not require the resolution of school differences among theologians. In fact it was frequently urged at Trent, from Cardinal-Presidents on down, that the Council’s business was to condemn heresy, not to settle theological, let alone philosophical, debates within the Catholic fold. As the

³³ The quoted phrases from Trent’s decree and canons on the Eucharist are in (1) ch. 1 (DH 1636) & canon 1 (DH 1651); (2) ch. 3 (DH 1641), ch. 1 (DH 1636) & canon 1 (DH 1651); (3) ch. 4 (DH 1642) and canon 2 (DH 1652). More broadly speaking, we can say that ch. 1 deals with the fact of Christ’s presence, ch. 3 with its precise manner, and ch. 4 with the way it comes about. Ch. 2 concerns the reasons Christ instituted the Eucharist; we have touched on this above.

same Benedictine abbot observed, questions should be settled in such a way that “we do not excite disturbances in the schools and sow causes of dissension among scholars.”³⁴

The Council of Trent evidently uses the term “substance” not in a way you have to have mastered Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* to understand, but in a simple and basic sense, what could be called an ordinary language meaning of the term. “Substance” is what a thing is. Or a bit more precisely, substance is a thing of a definite kind that exists independently, or on its own. Catholic teaching holds that Christ is not only “truly and really,” but “substantially,” present in the Eucharist, and that he is present “in his own substance.” This means that Christ himself is what the (consecrated) thing on the altar is, and that he is present on the altar in his own reality—as the sort of thing that exists independently—and not as a part or feature of something else. Catholic teaching also holds that the Eucharistic consecration changes one whole substance into another, this bread and this wine into Christ’s body and blood (the doctrine of transubstantiation strictly speaking). It thereby claims, radically but quite simply, that a thing of one kind is entirely changed into a thing of another kind. By the power of Christ’s own words, what was one thing, existing on its own, has become another, quite different, thing, existing on its own. To deny *this* is not to eschew a needless and misleading metaphysical technicality, but to deny the Eucharistic conversion itself.

How, though, should we understand the point that any five year old can get? Theologians have often observed that Eucharistic conversion or transubstantiation is *sui generis*. No other change, of whatever sort, has all of its essential features. In common both with all genuine change and with creation *ex nihilo* (which is not a change, since without the act of creation there is nothing to be changed), Eucharistic conversion exhibits a sequence or order: first one state of affairs, then another. As opposed to creation *ex nihilo*, and in common with genuine change, Eucharistic conversion involves actually existing objects or substances at both ends: first those that are changed (the bread and wine), then those that are the product or outcome of the change (the body and blood of Christ). Transubstantiation is thus similar, in an important way, to familiar transformations such as that by which a pink wall, through the action of painting, becomes grey, or that by which air (in Aquinas’s physics), through the action of heating, becomes fire (what the scholastics called accidental and substantial change, respectively). But it differs from all such changes, and thus is like creation *ex nihilo*, in that there is no subject of the change, no underlying substance or matter that takes on different qualities or becomes a different kind of thing. A subject or substance is changed, of course (bread or wine), but it’s the “whole substance” of bread and wine, the total reality of each, that is changed into the “whole substance” of Christ’s body and blood (to recall Trent’s Decree on the Eucharist).³⁵ Nothing of the bread or

³⁴ The quotations are from *Concilium Tridentinum*, vol. VI/2, p. 11.32-3, 40-1; the speaker was Chrysostom, abbot of the monastery of the Holy Trinity in Gaeta. For the deployment in the Eucharistic debates of the principle that the Council would not settle scholastic disputes, see Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, vol. 3, pp. 51, 273-4, 282.

³⁵ See above, note 27. On the aptness of the term “total reality” here, in spite of the fact that the accidents of the previously existing bread and wine remain, cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, 75, 8, ad 3: “[I]n hac conversione...hoc totum convertitur in illud totum, ita quod nihil prioris remaneat.” For the examples of accidental and substantial change invoked here, see the *corpus* of the same article.

wine endures to support the change, as a wall or underlying prime matter remain to support the sorts of change with which we are familiar. Something does remain, indeed, namely the bare features or characteristics of bread and wine, which as such cannot support a total change of subject, but themselves have to be supported in spite of it.³⁶

Eucharistic conversion thus has enough in common with ordinary sorts of change that we have something to go on in understanding it, and the difference of transubstantiation from another *sui generis* divine act, creation from nothing, sheds a certain light of its own. But the light only reaches so far. Nature affords no instance of one total reality changing into another, with nothing of the one enduring to support the transformation that brings the other to be. Still less does nature afford any example of one total reality being transformed into another that already existed before the change took place. It is not clear that we can even imagine such a change, without our mind surreptitiously supplying some temporal or spatial substrate that sustains the change.³⁷ To bring about a change like this seems to be beyond the power of nature, that is, of any creature. Only the power of God can produce it.

An appeal to divine power at this point goes back to some of the earliest Christian reflection on Eucharistic conversion. This need not, however, be simply an argument from silence, or ignorance—God can do this, we know not how. God, in Aquinas’s phrase, is the *auctor entis*, the source or author of being. As a result his power, his capacity to act, extends not only to a particular (very narrow) range or aspect of being, as does that of any creature, but to the whole of being. God’s power reaches not just to this or that entity or type of entity, but to existence as such, to what Aquinas calls “the whole nature of being.”³⁸ So God must be able to change not just this or that aspect of an object or entity, its quality or form (as creatures can also do), but the whole of it. In virtue of just this power God creates out of nothing, donating existence to what otherwise simply is not. And in virtue of the same power God can convert not just some aspect of bread and wine, but the whole being of bread and wine, into the whole being of Christ’s body and blood, all that belongs to the being of one into all that belongs to the being of the other. Thus Aquinas argues: “That which there is of being in the one the author of being can change into that which there is of being in the other, taking away that which made the one to be distinct from the other.”³⁹ As the *auctor entis* God can, in other words, undertake an action that makes true Christ’s identity statements, spoken of the bread and wine before him, “This is my body,” “This is the chalice of my blood.”⁴⁰

As St. Thomas sees it, Christ’s words can be true only by way of this conversion of one whole substance into another. Transubstantiation, in other words, is more than simply the fact of

³⁶ For one classic account of these similarities and differences, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, 75, 8.

³⁷ Recall Newman: “It is difficult, impossible, to imagine, I grant; — but how is it difficult to believe?” *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 215.

³⁸ “[E]ius actio se extendit ad totam naturam entis” (*Summa theologiae* III, 75, 4, c).

³⁹ “[I]d quod est entitatis in una, potest auctor entis convertere ad id quod est entitatis in altera, sublato eo per quod ab illa distinguebatur” (*Summa theologiae* III, 75, 4, ad 3).

⁴⁰ More precisely: as true God, Christ can speak these words so that they effect what they signify, and can employ his words on the lips of his ministers as instruments for the same purpose.

the matter as to how Christ's real presence in the Eucharist comes about. It is necessary for the real presence; there are no coherent alternatives.⁴¹ As students of medieval theology know, however, many scholastic theologians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries disagreed with Aquinas on this, some quite explicitly. That is: after Lateran IV, and especially by the end of the thirteenth century, it was very widely agreed that the real presence *in fact* comes about by way of substantial conversion or transubstantiation, and this idea was subjected to increasingly detailed analysis. But it was widely disputed whether substantial conversion is the only *possible* way the real presence could come about, or whether God could have willed to bring it about in a different way than, in fact, he has.

John Duns Scotus is an especially clear case in point. On this matter, as on many others, Scotus thinks Aquinas finds too much necessity in the ways and works of God, and too hastily rules out genuinely plausible alternatives to what God has actually done as though they were simply impossible. Somewhat unusually, in fact, he argues at length against Thomas's claim that the only possible way for Christ to be present on the altar is by transubstantiation, and in support of the view that the other two standard alternatives—impanation and annihilation—would also save the truth of Christ's words.⁴²

To take only the first alternative, Scotus argues that Christ's substantial presence in the Eucharist might have come about (though in fact it has not), by impanation or "embreading." Not coincidentally, this position was widely held in eleventh and twelfth century Eucharistic theology, and versions of it also recur in Protestant theology from the sixteenth century on (often called "consubstantiation" rather than "impanation"). On this view, the substance of the bread and wine remain what they were, and where they were, after the consecration. But Christ's body is now exactly where the consecrated bread is, though bread and body are not one and the same thing, and Christ's blood is now exactly where the consecrated wine are, though wine and blood are not the same thing. Rather the substance of Christ's body is contained under the substance of the bread, and his blood under the substance of the wine, in a manner not unlike that in which the doctrine of transubstantiation sees Christ's body and blood to be contained under the species or accidents of bread and wine. Nothing happens to the bread and wine as such; they are not transformed or converted into something else. Yet what is on the altar is radically different from what was there before the consecration. It is now true to say "This is Christ's body," though not, of course, "This bread is Christ's body."

Scotus holds that a position like the one just described is a coherent and plausible alternative to transubstantiation, as does William of Ockham a generation after him. It would be possible for the real, substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the presence in which Catholics believe on the basis of Christ's own words, to come about in this way. Or more precisely it would have *been* possible for Christ's substantial presence in the Eucharist to come

⁴¹ "[N]ecesse est dicere quod [corpus Christi] ibi incipiat esse per conversionem substantiae panis in ipsum" (*Summa theologiae* III, 75, 4, c; cf. 75, 2).

⁴² *Ordinatio* IV, d. 11, p. 1, a. 2, q. 1, nos. 98-132 (Vat. edn., vol. 12, pp. 212-218). Usually Henry of Ghent, not Aquinas, receives this kind of treatment.

about by impanation rather than by substantial conversion, had God so willed. Scotus and Ockham alike are emphatic that God has in fact willed to bring about Christ's Eucharistic presence by substantial conversion, and not in any other way. In this they are at one with virtually all scholastic theologians from the mid-thirteenth century on, not least in view of Lateran IV's use of the language of transubstantiation.⁴³

It is sometimes supposed, erroneously, that in arguing for the possibility of the real presence without substantial conversion Scotus, Ockham, and their many followers hold that the real presence actually comes about by impanation, or at least that it would be better to think of the real presence in such terms than to invoke substantial conversion. Were that the case, Trent's later insistence on transubstantiation could be seen as, in effect, the *post factum* condemnation of a large swath of medieval Eucharistic theology. As Scotus and Ockham actually see it, however, Lateran IV has already established that transubstantiation is *de fide*, and both offer elaborate, though quite different, accounts of how to understand this essential Catholic teaching and defend it against objections.⁴⁴

Their defense of alternative possibilities is a bit more subtle. If transubstantiation is the only possible way for the real, substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist to come about (as Thomas holds), then to reject transubstantiation is to reject the real presence as such. To say that you believe in the real presence but not in transubstantiation is simply inconsistent. If you understood what you were saying, you would recognize that you had to choose between accepting transubstantiation and rejecting the real presence. But if, as Scotus and Ockham hold, transubstantiation is not the only way the real, substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist could conceivably come about, then to reject transubstantiation is to be mistaken about a matter of grave importance. But it is not to reject the real, substantial presence of Christ as such.

For the moment I will not try to sort out Scotus's arguments against Aquinas, by which he seeks to decouple the agreed fact of transubstantiation from the claim that it is the only way the real presence could be. The alternative Scotus proposes bears, however, on two matters with which we have been concerned, namely the extent to which we understand the real presence, and the ecumenical situation with which we began.

⁴³ DH 802: "[T]he body and blood of [Jesus Christ himself] are truly contained under the species of bread and wine in the sacrament of the altar, the bread having been transubstantiated into his body, and the wine into his blood, by divine power."

⁴⁴ Both Scotus and Ockham appeal to the text of Lateran IV cited in the previous note as establishing that Christ's Eucharistic presence comes about by transubstantiation, though it is only one witness in a dossier of patristic and medieval authorities that decide the issue. See Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d. 11, p. 1, a. 2, q. 1, no. 135 (Vat. edn., vol. 12, p. 219); Ockham, *Tractatus de corpore Christi*, c. 4, in *Guillelmi de Ockham Opera Theologica*, vol. 10, ed. Charles A. Grassi (St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University Press, 1986), p. 96. The content of this dossier of authorities was largely established for scholastic authors from the thirteenth century on by Peter Lombard in Bk. IV of his *Sentences*, dist. 10-11. Thomas Aquinas, by contrast, does not appeal to the teaching of Lateran IV in order to defend the claim that Christ's Eucharistic presence comes about by substantial conversion. He seems to think of transubstantiation as a rationally compelling inference from Christ's Eucharistic words, once we apprehend their truth by faith.

(1) For Aquinas, it seems that we have necessary reasons, in a sense, for believing in transubstantiation. Given the truth of “Hoc est enim corpus meum,” as spoken by Christ, we can show that the conversion of one whole substance into another must take place. To have necessary reasons (*secundum quid*, to be sure) is to have chinned a high bar of intelligibility. Substantial conversion by the power of God, to the extent that we understand it, conveys a necessary truth about the Eucharistic presence of Christ, the latter so central to Catholic faith.

For Scotus we understand less about Christ’s Eucharistic presence. We know how that presence comes about, namely by substantial conversion, but we know this, as we know about his presence itself, by divine faith. As far as our present epistemic condition enables us to tell, the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Eucharist might have come about differently, had God so willed. As a result we can have no necessary reasons for it; it is not, for us, a necessary truth about the real presence. Lacking the clarity of necessary reasons at this basic point, we understand less about the real presence than Aquinas would have us suppose. The mystery of Christ’s Eucharistic presence is only faintly illuminated by our knowledge that it comes about by a conversion that calls upon God’s power over “the whole nature of being,” since God might have deployed that power otherwise than he has. Other things being equal, it is wise, I think, to accept such limitations on our understanding of divine things.

(2) Scotus argues, against Aquinas, that someone who believes in the real presence yet denies that a substantial conversion takes place in the Eucharist is wrong, but not inconsistent. His belief represents a genuine, though counterfactual, possibility.

The Council of Trent is more explicit than Lateran IV about the fact that Eucharistic conversion is essential to Catholic faith, and that it is mistaken to suppose the real presence actually comes about in any other way. But so far as I can see, Trent’s teaching on transubstantiation does not touch this particular disagreement between Scotus and Aquinas at all. It requires one to believe that the real presence actually comes about by transubstantiation, but it does not require one to believe that this is the only possible way the real presence could come about. This is precisely the sort of argument between opposing schools of Catholic theologians that the Council repeatedly disavows any intention of settling.⁴⁵ Over time the real presence and transubstantiation generally came to be seen, by Protestants and Catholics alike, as a package that has to be accepted or rejected as a whole (historic Lutheran teaching is the obvious exception to this generalization). The tendency of both sides to highlight their differences no doubt encouraged this perception. But seen against its broader medieval background Trent seems to leave open a modest but genuine ecumenical possibility on the real presence.

Normative Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist, as laid down at the Council of Trent, seemingly allows Catholics to hold that Christians who reject the doctrine of transubstantiation may nonetheless genuinely, and without inconsistency, believe in the real presence. To suppose

⁴⁵ In fact so far as my own admittedly incomplete study of the *acta* has been able to discern, this question was never even discussed at Trent, let alone settled.

that the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist comes about in some other way than by substantial conversion, or in some way unknown to us, is mistaken, and the mistake is not trivial. Nonetheless, Catholics need not take Protestant doubts about transubstantiation as tantamount to a denial of the real presence. If so, the way is open for Catholics to regard Protestant convictions about the real presence as not only sincere but, as far as they go, true. Thus Cardinal Ratzinger, as he then was, could argue that ecumenically, "the question of the Eucharist cannot be restricted to the problem of 'validity.' Even a theology oriented to the concept of succession, as the Catholic and Orthodox Church maintains, must in no way deny a salvation-creating presence of the Lord in the Protestant Lord's Supper."⁴⁶

At the same time, the ecumenical train presumably runs in both directions. It may be possible (that is, consistent and coherent) to believe in the real presence without believing in substantial conversion, the radical change of one thing into another. But *ought* one to do so? This is a question which, perhaps understandably, the ecumenical consensus of the last several generations has preferred not to ask. Yet if the days are largely past when Protestantism thought that, unable to believe in this change, it could not believe in the real presence, perhaps this question once again calls for an answer.

Rather than taking as basic our historic disagreement over transubstantiation, Catholics and Protestants might, as we think about this question, take as our point of departure the shared affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist brought to light by the ecumenical dialogues of the last half-century. Our faith in the real presence might encourage us to look anew at the ancient idea of the conversion of the elements, so long seen by Christians as profoundly bound up with their confidence in the reality of Christ's gift of himself in the Eucharist. Does not our trust in Jesus' promise to be present when we obey his command, "Do this," urge us to embrace nothing less than the radical change of one substance into another, of mere bread and wine into the true body and blood of the one who made this promise, and gave this command?

⁴⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephen Otto Horn & Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 248. I have modified the translation, especially the last clause, in light of the German original in *Una Sancta* (Meitingen) 48 (1993), a series of answers Cardinal Ratzinger gave to questions posed to him by the Lutheran bishop of Bavaria, Johannes Hanselmann: "Auch eine am Sukzessionsbegriff orientierte Theologie... muß keinesweges Heil schaffende Gegenwart des Herrn im evangelischen Abendmahl leugnen" (p. 348).