

Transubstantiation, Wheat Allergies and Cannibalism

By Greg Witherow

During Mass we sometimes see people approach the Altar to receive only wine, while the remaining laity receives only the host. This is done to accommodate people who have wheat allergies, lest they have a severe reaction to the wheat based host. But this raises an interesting question. The doctrine of Transubstantiation states the bread and wine of the Eucharist are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. If so, how is it there is any wheat to react to? To put it more severely, doesn't this accommodation prove (as some evangelicals assert) the Church is admitting Transubstantiation is a sham? This is a fair question on a difficult topic. Some are satisfied with, "Who can know these things?" Others require an explanation. Forced to respond, the Church makes use of Philosophy¹ and the great Doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Substance and Accidents

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (3rd century B.C.) surmised that everything that exists has two parts to its "being" – Substance and Accidents. Substance is the core of what an object is; its essence. It is invisible to the eye. In contrast, Accidents are the objects physical appearance and characteristics. **Substance is the cause of the Accidents.** As an example, a person's soul is their Substance (sometimes the word "Form" is used) while the person's body is the Accidents (sometimes the word "Matter" is used). The two form a unity and comprise a Human Being.

The Catholic Church has adopted Aristotelian language in describing Man in the Catechism.

365 The unity of the soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "Form" of the body: i.e. it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of Matter becomes a living human body; spirit and Matter, in Man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.

Aquinas and Transubstantiation

Aquinas adopted the Aristotelian distinctions as he sought to explain the Mystery of the Eucharist. According to Aquinas, after the prayers of consecration the Substance of the bread is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. This physically alters the host. Yet the Accidents **maintain the appearance** of bread, even as no bread remains. The result: the host in its entirety is Christ. This is called Transubstantiation (note: **substance** is at its root)².

But when taking communion we "experience" bread. Why? It is because the Accidents have *not informed the body of the change*, still **appearing** as bread. When eating the host the senses are

¹ Protestants (for the most part) don't "do philosophy" and are highly skeptical of its use in theology. But God is the God of all creation, including philosophy. **While revealed truth is necessary to know God,** the sciences of any ilk can unveil His truth.

² There are two miracles with Transubstantiation. First, the substance of bread is changed into Christ. Second, the accidents continue to appear as bread when in fact they are not. In contrast, Eucharistic miracles take place when the appearance of flesh and blood is observable. You could make the case that Eucharistic miracles are less miraculous than normal Transubstantiation. How? A Eucharistic miracle only involves one miracle, not two. In such a case we see the host as it really is; Christ's bloody flesh. Like the Trinity, all this can be explained only to a point; a mystery requiring faith. **Like all miracles,** it defies the possible.

informed of bread, not flesh. This is how God fulfills the words of Christ (“This is my body”) without requiring his people to commit cannibalism³. *Therefore informed of bread, the body continues to act as if infused with bread.* If allergic to wheat, the body reacts. In contrast, the soul (properly informed) senses the infusion of Christ and is affected accordingly. To conclude, **the soul is informed, the body is not.** And with faith we are required to inform our intellect.

On the Road to Emmaus, the travelers gazed at Christ but had no clue he was there. Christ was physically present – but they would have insisted he was not⁴. Today, Christ has veiled his appearance in the host. Many gaze upon him and insist he is not physically there. But he is. And Christ is not merely in the host. Rather, **Christ is the host.** He is the Substance and the Accidents. Christ said, “This is my body” not “This contains my body”. The Church has always believed this. The Romans accused the early Christians of cannibalism⁵. But in our times, nobody has ever accused Baptists of cannibalism. Why? It is because Baptists make no claim the crackers and grape juice of their Table is flesh and blood. Yet today, Catholics are still accused of it⁶. This demonstrates the consistency of Church teaching through the centuries. Only with Catholics (not Baptists) can it be said, “It is a hard saying. Who can understand it?”⁷

Soul and Divinity

Someone with a sharp eye may have noticed no mention of the “soul and divinity” in our topic thus far. There is a reason for this. Transubstantiation directly makes Christ’s body and blood present. In contrast, the soul and divinity of Christ become present by means of the Hypostatic Union⁸. This happens all at once on the Altar. In the end, we have the **whole person** of Christ in the Eucharist via Transubstantiation and the Hypostatic Union; body, blood, soul and divinity.

The Witness of the East

It should be noted the Eastern Orthodox do not make use of Aristotelian philosophy nor the word Transubstantiation to describe the Eucharist. But in explaining their beliefs differently, Catholics and Orthodox recognize they have the same Sacrament. While useful, Aristotle is not required.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

1375 It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament. The Church Fathers strongly affirmed the faith of the Church in the efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit to bring about this conversion. Thus St. John Chrysostom declares:

³ Unless informed our senses are incapable of sensing flesh and blood. Our experience is a sacramental eating, not cannibalism.

⁴ Interestingly, they only saw Christ in Eucharistic context of breaking of bread. Luke describes the meal using *Eucharistic language* (“He took the bread, blessed it and gave it...”). Their meal had the “Real Presence”, but they needed faith to see it.

⁵ Minucius Felix, Octavius, R. E. Wallis translation of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, pp. 177-178 documents such views. Additionally, in the 2nd century Pliny the Younger (62-115 A.D.) was a Roman governor who made this charge against Catholics.

⁶ Loraine Boettner’s book “Roman Catholicism”, page 176 He claims the Catholic “sacrament is a form of cannibalism”.

⁷ John 6:60. Many of his disciples when they heard it said, “This is a hard saying, who can understand it?” RSV translation

⁸ Defined at the Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD It defined Christ as one person with (uniquely) two natures; human and divine.

It is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, in the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God's. This is my body, he says. This word transforms the things offered.

And St. Ambrose says about this conversion:

Be convinced that this is not what nature has formed, but what the blessing has consecrated. The power of the blessing prevails over that of nature, because by the blessing nature itself is changed. . . . Could not Christ's word, which can make from nothing what did not exist, change existing things into what they were not before? It is no less a feat to give things their original nature than to change their nature.

1378 *Worship of the Eucharist.* In the liturgy of the Mass we express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine by, among other ways, genuflecting or bowing deeply as a sign of adoration of the Lord. "The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist **the cult of adoration**, not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and carrying them in procession."

1381 "That in this sacrament are the true Body of Christ and his true Blood is something that 'cannot be apprehended by the senses,' says St. Thomas, 'but *only by faith*, which relies on divine authority.' For this reason, in a commentary on *Luke 22:19* ('This is my body which is given for you. '), St. Cyril says: 'Do not doubt whether this is true, but rather receive the words of the Savior in faith, for since he is the truth, he cannot lie.'"

Summary

Saint Thomas Aquinas used Aristotelian philosophy to explain the Real Presence of Christ. He did this to aid those weak in their faith and to refute those who said it was madness. But even to the critics, it must be acknowledged the Church has always believed in the Real Presence.

"...I turn to Christ, because it is He whom I seek here; and I discover how the earth is adored without impiety, how without impiety the footstool of His feet is adored. For He received earth from earth; because flesh is from the earth, and He took flesh from the flesh of Mary. He walked here in the same flesh, **AND GAVE US THE SAME FLESH TO BE EATEN UNTO SALVATION. BUT NO ONE EATS THAT FLESH UNLESS FIRST HE ADORES IT**; and thus it is discovered how such a footstool of the Lord's feet is adored; **AND NOT ONLY DO WE NOT SIN BY ADORING, WE DO SIN BY NOT ADORING.**" (Saint Augustine on Psalms 98:9)

No Protestant would dare utter such words. Even Lutherans draw the line at Eucharistic adoration. But there is a down side to these truths. Saint Paul tells us God imposed punishments on the Corinthian church over this matter. How so? In approaching the Table, some did not recognize the body of Christ⁹. Lesson: When in the presence of a King, it is best to behave as if it were so. To consume the host with a cavalier attitude is to risk bringing God's wrath upon our heads. Our choice is therefore this; will it be a Table of Grace or a Table of Judgment? Choose.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:29-31