

- 43 *The Church and the Future* (London 1903), p. 157.
44 TSC pp. 4–5.
45 As found, for example, in Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*, Preface, ii. See O. Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman. The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge 1957), pp. 5–13.
46 *Ibid.* pp. 8–9.
47 *Ibid.* pp. 9–10.
48 *Ibid.* pp. 139–154.
49 *Ibid.* p. 10.
50 *Ibid.* p. 11
51 See N. Sagovsky, *Between Two Worlds. George Tyrrell's Relationship to the Thought of Matthew Arnold* (Cambridge 1983).
52 Cf. A Gardeil, *Le donné révélé et la théologie* (Paris 1909; 1932), p. 358.
53 C. Geffré, *Le Christianisme au risque de l'interprétation* (Paris 1983).

Transubstantiation for Beginners

Gareth Moore OP

It is a Catholic teaching that when bread is consecrated in the eucharist it becomes the body of Christ, and that when wine is consecrated it becomes the blood of Christ. People have always had difficulty with this. The difficulty is basically a very simple one: what we call and share as the body of Christ bears no resemblance to what we should ordinarily call a body, and what we drink as the blood of Christ has at best a very superficial resemblance to blood.

This difficulty, of matching our words with what lies plainly before our eyes, has led some Christians, before, during, and after the Reformation, to deny that the consecrated bread is the body of Christ and the consecrated wine his blood. Rather, they are to be seen as symbols of his body and blood: they are not the body and blood of Christ, but signify them. This mainstream Christianity has always rejected. Though much of our activity in the eucharist is symbolic, and though the consecrated bread and wine are clearly signs and symbols in some sense, they are not to be understood as *mere* symbols, symbolically the body and blood of Christ *as opposed* to the reality. To quote Theodore of Mopsuestia as representative of early tradition:

Christ did not say: 'This is the *symbolum* of my blood,' but: 'This is my blood.' A *change* of the wine takes place¹.

And according to Trent:

Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly His body that He was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now again declares, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of wine into the substance of his blood. This change the Holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly named transubstantiation².

Put simply, to say what a thing's substance is, in the aristotelian sense, is to say what that thing is. It is an answer to the question: 'What is that?' Thus, if you are confronted with a brown furry thing with a tail and ask: 'What is that?', you are asking for an answer in the category of substance. And the answer: 'It's a dog' is such an answer. The doctrine of transubstantiation is the doctrine that in the consecration there takes place a change of substance; consecration effects a change in the appropriate answer to the question: 'What is it?' If you are confronted with a host before the consecration and ask: 'What is it?', the appropriate answer is: 'It is bread.' If you ask the same question of the same host after the consecration, the appropriate answer is: 'It is the body of Christ.'

What the doctrine of transubstantiation rules out is saying that the appropriate answer to the question 'What is it?' after the consecration is still: 'It is bread.' So we cannot say: 'It is bread, which now functions as a symbol of the body of Christ.' But we still have the problem that what obviously lies before our eyes is bread and wine. A compromise of sorts, a solution that might do justice both to our senses and to our faith, might be to say that though the consecrated host is indeed the body of Christ, it is also still bread: it is two things at once, containing both the substance of bread and the substance of the body of Christ. But this idea of 'consubstantiation' was also rejected by Trent, in canon 2:

If anyone says that in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist the substance of bread and wine remains together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denies that wonderful and unique change of the whole substance of the bread into His body and of the whole substance of the wine into His blood while only the species of bread and wine remain, a change which the Catholic Church very fittingly calls transubstantiation, *anathema sit*.³

If the answer to the question 'What is it?' asked of a consecrated host is: 'The body of Christ', then it cannot also be an appropriate answer to

say: 'It is bread'. Schillebeeckx comments:

It was essential and fundamental to the dogma of faith that there should be no *reality* bread after the consecration, since, if the ultimate *reality* present in the Eucharist were to be called bread, there would be simply bread (a reality cannot at the same time be two realities!) and the eucharistic presence could only be conceived symbolically⁴.

However, though rejecting the idea of consubstantiation, canon 2 does begin to cater for our difficulty. It recognises that, as far as our senses go, what we see before us after the consecration is bread and wine. Though the *substance* of the bread and of the wine is changed into the body and blood of Christ, the *species* of bread and wine remain. The term 'species' can be translated 'appearance'⁵, but it does not carry the connotation that 'appearance' sometimes does in English of *deceptive* or *illusory* appearance. As Schillebeeckx points out, the word 'species' in this canon came very close to being changed to 'accident' in the course of drafting⁶. 'Accident', like 'substance', is a piece of aristotelian terminology. The accidents of a thing are, roughly, its properties. They are what is given in a description of something. If the question 'What is it?' is answered by a sentence giving a substance, a sentence giving accidents is an answer to the question 'What is it like?' If 'It's a dog' is a sentence about substance, a sentence about accidents might be: 'It has four legs, brown fur, with white paws and a wet nose.'

So the teaching of Trent says that, while the consecrated host is the body of Christ, it has all the physical properties of bread. If we ask of it 'What is it like?' a correct answer would be one giving the properties of bread, just as if we were describing a piece of bread. This is actually the *correct* answer. It is not that we are being deluded, that the consecrated host only appears to have these properties but in reality does not. What it looks like, its texture, its taste, the results we would get from a chemical analysis, all these are perfectly genuine. (Indeed, if they were not, the host would lose all value as symbol. It could not be food for us if it were not really as it appears, having all the properties of bread.) This puts our initial difficulty in a different light. It is not an objection against the Catholic doctrine that what we are taught is the body of Christ looks and tastes just like ordinary bread. It just *is* the Catholic doctrine. In Catholic doctrine, the species or 'appearances' of bread and wine are a constitutive part of the sacrament, vital to its being a sacrament. They are not embarrassing empirical evidence that the consecrated host and wine are other than they are claimed to be. Our problem, then, is not one of whether we can believe the Church's teaching in spite of appearances, but a more fundamental one of understanding the doctrine, of understanding how to make sense of the idea that the substances of the body and blood of Christ might go together with the species of bread and wine.

The difficulty appears to be a formidable one. It comes from a close connection between saying what something is and saying what it is like, giving its substance and giving its accidents. For it is natural to think that we determine what something is by determining what it is like. It is by perceiving, and if necessary investigating, the properties of things that we find out what they are. If a piece of metal has all the properties of gold and has no properties that are not the properties of gold, then it *is* gold. If you tell me you have a dog and in answer to my question 'What is it like?' tell me it has golden wings, eleven legs with cloven hooves, blue external gills and a red beak, I will conclude not that it is a very strange dog but that it is not a dog at all. So, by analogy, we may want to say that if what is called the body of Christ has none of the properties of a body and all the properties of bread, then it is not anyone's body, but bread; and if what is called the blood of Christ has all the properties of wine, then wine is what it is.

I want to suggest that this difficulty is not as great as it looks, and to propose a simple model for transubstantiation which overcomes it and which is familiar to us from our everyday experience.

The Catholic doctrine is that the species of bread and wine remain. All empirical qualities of bread⁷, all those properties that might be investigated by looking at it, remain unaffected by consecration. As far as these are concerned what we still have is bread: since it has the qualities of bread, it *is* bread. The non-believer or Protestant or Catholic sceptic who says that it is just what it is is not making a mistake. He is not failing to observe some property of the consecrated host that differentiates it from bread. The believing Catholic does not perceive any more than anybody else does. The difference between the believer and the unbeliever is rather that for the believer those empirical properties that are freely perceptible by everybody no longer constitute the thing what it *is*, whereas for the unbeliever they do. He says: What this stuff is, because it has bready properties, is bread. The believer, by contrast, says: What this bready stuff is is the body of Christ. For him the breadiness of the bread is no longer substantial. If for unconsecrated bread it is just its physical properties that determine what it is, that is no longer true of consecrated bread.

This is not a difficult notion. We are in fact quite familiar with the fact that for some things their physical properties do not define their substance, do not determine what they are. We find out or determine what some things are by looking not only *at* them, but also *around* them. As a simple example, take a five-pound note. A five-pound note has a particular distinctive design, is made of a special kind of paper, is printed in particular colours with certain inks, has a metal strip running through it, etc. All these things go towards making a five-pound note what it is. It is partly because something has these properties that we call it a five-

pound note, and they are made deliberately distinctive so that we can easily recognise a five-pound note when we see one. It might appear, then, that a five-pound note is a good case of something whose substance is determined by its qualities. But a moment's thought is enough to show that this is not so.

1a. A five-pound note is a form of money. Its being that depends on there being the institution of money. It depends on people regularly exchanging goods for notes and coins, or being prepared to. A five-pound note is money only in so far as it has a use as part of that institution, in so far as it plays a particular role or group of roles in people's lives. Take away that institution, that use, and we are left only with a brightly-coloured piece of paper. Money can cease to be money through the collapse of governments or simply through alterations to the currency systems. Pre-revolutionary roubles are no longer money, and neither are farthings. They look like money and were once used as such; in that rather limited sense it is perfectly all right to refer to them as money in certain contexts. But to say that they *are* money, just like that, would be misleading, for they have no *use* as money.

2a. A five-pound note gets value as money by being introduced into the monetary system by an authority recognised as competent. With enough skill and equipment I might manufacture pieces of paper indistinguishable from five-pound notes. But I would not thereby be producing five-pound notes, but forgeries. No matter how skilful I became, I could never succeed in producing genuine five-pound notes. This shows again that being a five-pound note is not just a matter of having particular qualities. One of my productions and a genuine five-pound note might be physically identical in all relevant respects, yet the question 'What is it?' has a different appropriate answer in each case. In one case the answer is: 'It's a five-pound note' or: 'It's money', but in the other it is: 'It's a forged five-pound note' or: 'It's a piece of paper got up to look like money.' Though physically identical, the two things are *substantially* different. Of course, it might be impossible to tell by examining them which is the appropriate answer to the question in each case, but then that is the point of the forgery. If we can tell the difference between the two, it is, then, not by looking *at* them but by looking *around* them, at the contexts in which the two were produced. The two are made different things by having different origins and different histories, not by having different qualities. While the one was produced under government authority the other was made in my garden shed without the authority or (I hope) knowledge of the government. So this further point emerges: my inability to produce five-pound notes is nothing to do with my lack of skill or, say, want of magical power, but is a matter of my lacking the authority to do so. A piece of paper becomes a five-pound note not through a magical process but by being

authoritatively declared to be so.

3a. While a piece of money might be physically indistinguishable from a piece of paper that is not money (e.g. a forgery), it would for the reasons given above, be generally wrong to call it a piece of coloured paper. If in normal circumstances you showed me a five-pound note and asked me what it was and I answered: 'It's a piece of coloured paper', you would conclude that I was unfamiliar with the look of British currency or was, more radically, ignorant of the institution of money. Then I would have to be taught about money, and thereby taught that what you showed me was not a piece of coloured paper but a five-pound note. (There is one other possibility here: I might be perfectly familiar with five-pound notes as items of currency, and my saying 'It's a piece of coloured paper' might be a way of rejecting the competence of the British government to issue banknotes—I support a rebel organisation that is issuing its own currency—or of rejecting the whole institution of money, as part of my advocacy of a return to a more primitive life-style.) However, though it would be generally inappropriate to call a five-pound note a piece of paper, it might be appropriate in some contexts and for some purposes. We speak of paper money as opposed to coin, and may want to point out that our five-pound currency item is paper rather than coin.

4a. Though it is its use that makes it what it is, and not its physical properties, it nevertheless makes obvious sense that a five-pound note should have very distinctive qualities, should look quite special, unmistakable in use and difficult to copy. A perfectly plain piece of paper would do the job just as well, except that it would be impossible, once they had gone into circulation, to tell five-pound notes from pieces of plain paper that had not been authoritatively declared to be of that value. People would too easily lose track of how much money they had and forgery would become immensely easy. In practice, then, in order to be able to bear the kind of importance that money has for us, a five-pound note has to look and feel unlike ordinary bits of paper.

It is this example of the five-pound note that I want to suggest as a model for understanding transubstantiation.

1b. Just as a piece of paper becomes something different, becomes money, by being taken up into an institution, a range of practices, and just as the possibility of its being so depends on the existence of that institution and those practices, so a piece of bread becomes something different, becomes the body of Christ, by being taken up into the life of the Church. Principally, it becomes what is to be eaten in the sacrament of the eucharist, the central act of the liturgical life of the Church. It also becomes an object of veneration in a way that an unconsecrated host is not. The importance of the consecrated host and of what we do with it in the life of the Church is the subject of eucharistic theology and I want to say nothing about it, just as I have not described the uses and importance

of money in the money economy. I here only make the point that just as a five-pound note differs from a (perhaps identical) piece of coloured paper through its being embedded in an institution and having uses there, so does a consecrated host differ from a (perhaps identical) piece of bread. Just as we cannot say what a five-pound note *is* without describing what goes on *around* it, so we cannot say what a consecrated host *is* without reference to the life of the Church. To describe what it is we have to look not only *at* it but *around* it. Its *substance* is linked to its role.

2b. If a piece of paper becomes a five-pound note by being introduced into the money system by a competent authority, in the same way does a piece of bread become the body of Christ. In order to be able to consecrate hosts it is necessary to have been commissioned to do so by the Church (which at present means having been ordained priest). And the Church has authority to do this only because of what it has been commissioned to do by Christ himself. The Church could not have set itself up as an authority competent to have hosts consecrated in the same way that a government could set itself up as an authority competent to issue banknotes. But Christ has not passed on to the Church magical or alchemical powers to transmute one physical thing into another. He has given *authority* to the Church to change the substance of bread into his body. So it is not possible for somebody outside the Church (say, a practitioner of black magic) to acquire the power, in any sense distinct from authority, to consecrate hosts: there is no such power. And if those not given authority were to go through the right ceremony and say all the right words, they could not succeed in consecrating a host. A consecrated host becomes the body of Christ not through a magical process, but by being authoritatively declared to be so.

3b. While a consecrated host might be physically indistinguishable from a piece of bread that is not the body of Christ, it would generally be wrong to call it a piece of bread. If you showed me a consecrated host and asked me what it was and I answered: 'A piece of bread', you would be entitled to conclude that I did not know that it had been consecrated or, more radically, that I was ignorant of the institution of the eucharist, that is, of the Church. I would have to be taught about the institution, the practice, of the eucharist in the Church, and thereby that this host was *not* a piece of bread but the body of Christ. (But it might be that I was perfectly familiar with the Church and knew the host had been consecrated, but was expressing my rejection of the competence of the Church as a whole to consecrate hosts—I support a rival church whose competence I do accept—or was rejecting Christianity.) However, there are contexts where it might be appropriate to speak of the consecrated host as bread. We might, for instance, want to distinguish it from consecrated wine⁸.

4b. Unlike a five-pound note, the body of Christ does not look at all distinctive, but just like bread that has not been consecrated. Unlike five-pound notes, consecrated hosts do not circulate in places where they might become confused with ordinary bits of bread. They are normally eaten during the eucharist at which they are consecrated, and if they are not great care is taken to store them securely in a place where confusion with ordinary bread is impossible. Apart from having no need to look special, it is actually important that they look and taste ordinary. That the host has the qualities of ordinary food is not what makes it what it is. Christ could have declared caviar to be his body, but then he could not have been food for the poor. He could have declared stone to be his body, but then he could not have been food at all. In practice, in order to be able to bear the kind of importance it does for us, the body of Christ has to be ordinary.

There is then, no great mystery about transubstantiation: no mystery, that is, in the sense of an intellectual puzzle about how one thing can become something else while continuing to look exactly the same. If we can understand how there can be paper money we can understand how bread can become something else when consecrated.

It is possible to understand the possibility of paper money without believing in it, accepting it. To believe in it means living in a money economy and partaking in other activities linked with the institution of money, and it is possible to reject all that, to go off to a desert island or live in a barter economy. Similarly, it is possible to understand the possibility of transubstantiation without accepting it, believing in it. To believe in it means to live as part of the Church, to live the life of the Church centred around the eucharist. Transubstantiation is a reality of faith, and that means not something that we believe in on insufficient grounds or even against the evidence of our senses, but something we can understand and believe because we understand and accept the central role of the eucharist in our lives.

1 Schillebeeckx: *The Eucharist*, p. 67.

2 Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist, chapter 4; Neuner and Dupuis no. 1519.

3 Neuner and Dupuis no. 1527.

4 *The Eucharist*, p. 74.

5 It is so translated in Neuner and Dupuis no. 1513, where the Latin *sub specie illarum rerum sensibilibus* becomes 'under the appearances of those perceptible realities'.

6 *The Eucharist*, p. 74.

7 From now on, for the sake of simplicity, I confine myself to talking about bread. The comments apply equally, *mutatis mutandis*, to the wine.

8 There are also instances in the liturgy. For example, the consecration acclamation: 'When we eat this bread and drink this cup...' and the words of Eucharistic Prayer 4: 'Gather all who share this bread and wine...'