

# THE THING IS TRANSUBSTANTIATION

---

Latin word meaning “change of substance”: the change, through the Eucharistic words of consecration, of the substance of bread and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ, with the appearances (“accidents”) of bread and wine remaining.

The Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 used this word in its profession of faith. At the Reformation the Swiss reformer Zwingli took a purely *symbolic* view of the Eucharist, denying that any change took place at all. Luther thought that, while the substances of bread and wine remain unchanged, the Body and Blood of Christ do become truly present *for the believer*. This view came to be called “consubstantiation”.

The Council of Trent came in like the Seventh Cavalry to restate the belief that by their consecration the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ, and the only appropriate attitude in their presence is then worship.

The Greek Orthodox Church uses the word *metabole* (“change”) or *metousiosis* (“change of essence”) instead of the Latin transubstantiation. But there is no essential difference there.

The terminology is from Greek, Aristotelian, philosophy, via St Thomas Aquinas.

*Substance* is what remains the same under change: George may grow up, bad-tempered, or old, but he’s still the same (old) George.

*Accidents* are the characteristics that change - George’s height, spare tyre, and increasingly perennial scowl. Accidents are things which have no independent existence: they have to live in a substance (such as George).

Such a way of thinking is philosophical, and should not be confused with the scientific analyses of Chemistry or Physics.

It is arguable that the only thing the Council of Trent wanted to assert was the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They were afraid that the Reformers would call the presence of Christ *merely* spiritual or symbolic, thus “volatilizing” it away. This was certainly one of the Council’s aims: but it also tried to speak positively about the change which made the Real Presence possible.

We do not think much in Aristotelian terms these days, and the definition begins to recede into the thought-forms of an earlier time. We have to replace the thought-form which gives rise to the definition, without losing what it tries to embody. People today are used to thinking of matter in *atomic* terms. Bread and wine are the last stage of a formulation of atoms, molecules, and forces. It does not seem a good idea to attempt a definition of Eucharistic change in these terms.

Also, it is difficult to understand how the accidents - which cannot exist without their substance - continue to endure if the substance they refer to has been changed (so radically).

Furthermore, we feel that this whole discourse is too impersonal. It seems to take us too far away both from the Last Supper - and the action of Jesus in breaking the bread, passing the cup, and commanding the disciples to *do this in memory* of him: and also

from the reality of the Eucharist as we celebrate it, when the Risen Lord feeds us as his family gathered around his table. Theologians interested in this personalistic way of discussing the Eucharist have coined new terms to attempt a definition.

**Transfinalization** (Latin “change of purpose”) avoids looking at substance and accidents, which define subrational realities as well as persons. This word tries to express what happens to human experience under change. When something assumes a radically new purpose, our human experience changes. A further term, **transignification** (Latin “change of meaning”) sees the bread and wine undergoing a deep change of meaning which brings them to express Christ’s giving of himself to us.

Pope Paul VI wasn’t so sure that these words could *replace* the traditional terms. Do they carry sufficient force to enable us to confess the Real Presence of Christ?

One of the things at stake is the promise of Jesus to “be with you always, until the end of time”. This leads us on to various important currents in the Gospel, where Jesus speaks of his presence in the human family as the most vital of all human realities (see the writings of John, *passim*). When we speak of the presence of Christ in the Church, it is in multitudinous ways: he is present in the Christian soul, in the gathering of Christians, in those who minister to others in whatever way, in the needy who are helped, in those who teach or lead, in the various Sacraments. About the Eucharist, however, there has always been a quite special belief in, and consciousness of, the presence of the Lord (see the Easter stories associated with the table, where *the disciples knew him in the breaking of the bread*). This faith is at its fulness in the Catholic and Orthodox communities, where the Church’s understanding demands that the Incarnation (the mystery whereby God becomes flesh) is expressed in the physical identity between Christ and the bread and wine (“This is my body...this is the cup of my blood”). This prolongation of the Incarnation of Christ seems to demand the Real Presence *in the physical fabric of the cosmos*, so that Christ’s communion with us may embrace our *bodily* truth.

This has echoes of the original adoption of Aristotelian forms instead of Platonic ones; Aristotle organized all material realities into two complementary principles: the underlying stuff, or pure potentiality - which he called *matter* - and the determining principle - called *form* - which determines the nature of things. Aristotle said that the human soul is the form of the human body - whereas Plato unromantically said the soul is *imprisoned* in the body (and wants to be let out for good). The trouble with the symbolic view of the Eucharist is that it seems to want to leave behind the physical world as if it were unsaveable, and revert to the spiritual. This echoes a good deal of feeling in the sixteenth century (and elsewhere) that the body is to some extent evil and subhuman. A theory to which we do not subscribe!