

A NOTE ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

IN an article on 'St. John's Witness to the Blessed Sacrament' in a former number of *BLACKFRIARS*,¹ Fr. Vincent McNabb wrote as follows :

It was no main purpose of St. John to show that the Son of God was a worker of miracles. No evangelist records miracles so sparingly. But it remained for the last of the evangelists to remove the last of the misunderstandings about the Holy Eucharist by recording the transubstantiation of water into wine at the wedding feast (John ii, 1-11). As the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist is based on two miracles, Transubstantiation and Multiplication, and as the miracle of Multiplication had already been recorded by the three Synoptists, St. John's mention of the miracle of Transubstantiation completed the necessary proof of the possibility of the Real Presence.

This passage seems to me to be misleading on several points, and also to contain, at least implicitly, views which it is difficult to accept. In view of the importance of its subject no excuse need be offered for discussing it here. I venture, therefore, to set down as clearly as I can some of the objections which, it seems to me, can be legitimately urged against it. I will deal first with what Fr. McNabb calls the miracle of Transubstantiation, and secondly with the miracle of Multiplication.

I.

(i) In the first place, it would be difficult to justify this description of the change of water into wine at Cana as a transubstantiation.

Two well-known passages from the Council of Trent are relevant here :

This holy Synod declares that through the consecration of the bread and wine there is wrought a conversion of the

¹ July, 1926, p. 417.

A Note on the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist

whole substance of the bread into the substance of Our Lord's body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood. This conversion has, by the holy Catholic Church, been named fittingly and properly (*convenienter et proprie*) transubstantiation.

If any one . . . shall deny that wonderful and unique (*singularem*) conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood, leaving of the bread and wine only the species, a conversion which the Catholic Church most fittingly calls transubstantiation, let him be anathema.²

It is sufficient for the present to note that according to the Council the change wrought in the consecration is a unique change, that is to say, there is no other instance known of that kind of change. And its uniqueness as a change consists in this, that it is a change of the whole substance. Now it is only fitting that a special kind of change should be given a special name, and for this reason, in the Catholic Church, the change in question has been called transubstantiation. Such is clearly the mind of the Council.

(ii) It was also the mind of St. Thomas three centuries before. This is evident from the following passages of the *Summa Theologica* :

This conversion is not like natural conversions, but is absolutely supernatural, only God's power being able to effect it. . . . Every conversion that comes under the laws of nature is a formal conversion God's action extends to the whole nature of a being. He, therefore, can bring about not only a formal conversion, which consists in this that different forms succeed one another in the same subject, but also the conversion of the whole of a being, so that the whole substance of this thing here is converted into the whole substance of that other thing there. And this is what is wrought by the Divine power in this sacrament. For the whole substance of the bread is converted into the whole substance of Christ's body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ's blood. Hence this is not a formal, but a sub-

² Sess. xiii, cap. 4, and can. 2.

Blackfriars

stantial, conversion. Nor is there such a conversion among the kinds of change found in nature, but it may be given a name of its own (*proprio nomine*) and called *transubstantiation*.

In this sacrament the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole body of Christ, but in a natural transmutation the matter of one thing receives the form of another, the previous form being got rid of. . . . The word *conversion* is applicable to this sacrament, just as it is to natural transmutations. But since in the case of the sacrament it is the whole substance which is changed into the whole substance, the special name for this conversion is *transubstantiation* (*proprie transubstantiatio vocatur*).³

St. Thomas's mind is clear. It is proper to the change that takes place in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist—proper, that is, to that change as a change—that a whole substance is changed into a whole substance, and precisely for that reason that change is given a name of its own and called a transubstantiation.

(iii) On St. Thomas's principles, then, only a change is rightly called a transubstantiation in which the whole of a substance is changed. Was the change wrought at Cana of such a kind? It was not. Essentially it was nothing more than a formal conversion, which, as St. Thomas says in a passage already quoted, consists in this, that different forms succeed one another in the same subject: in the water and wine the same subject or matter remained, and the change consisted in this, that the form which had made that subject to be water was succeeded by a form which made it to be wine. Essentially, therefore, the change wrought at Cana belonged to a kind of which nature supplies innumerable examples—though, of course, nature works these changes in her own way, and not in Jesus Christ's way.

³ *Tertia Pars*, qu. lxxv, arts. 4 and 8.

A Note on the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist

Fortunately, on this very point, we have St. Thomas's own explicit testimony :

God is said to act outside the course of nature (*praeter naturam*), when He brings about an effect which nature can bring about, but brings it about in a way nature cannot. This happens, for instance, when use is not made of the means nature makes use of. It was thus Christ changed water into wine (John ii). Nature can do this in her own way, for water absorbed by the vine for nourishment is by digestion turned, in course of time, into the juice of the grape.⁴

The effect, therefore, produced at Cana nature can produce, though not in the same way. To use St. Thomas's terminology, the mode is beyond her power, but not the substance of the fact. And thus essentially the conversion there effected comes under a species of natural change. Transubstantiation, on the other hand, is absolutely supernatural (*omnino supernaturalis*), utterly beyond nature's power, not only as to the mode, but as to the substance of the fact as well. And it is precisely because 'there is no such conversion among the kinds of change found in nature' that a special name is given to it.

There is then, I submit, no warrant for calling the miracle of Cana a miracle of Transubstantiation.

But it seems to me that, if this is true, not much force is left in the argument that follows. Having spoken of the miracle of Cana as 'the transubstantiation of water into wine,' Fr. McNabb continues : 'As the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist is based on two miracles, Transubstantiation and Multiplication, . . . St. John's mention of the miracle of Transubstantiation completed the necessary proof of the possibility of the Real Presence.' The argument seems to run thus : The possibility of the Real Presence depends on Transubstantiation. Now we have an instance of Transubstantiation in the miracle of Cana.

⁴ *Quaestiones Disputatae: De Potentia*, qu. vi, art. 2, ad 3^{um}.

Blackfriars

Therefore the Real Presence is possible. The truth is, of course, that we have not an instance of Transubstantiation in the miracle of Cana. We have in it merely an instance of what is, in substance, a natural species of conversion.

In other words, the change wrought at Cana differs from transubstantiation just on those points which constitute the peculiar difficulty of transubstantiation. In a natural change the thing which is changed and the thing into which it is changed do not *both* exist before the change. Of two already existing things nature cannot change the whole substance of the one into the whole substance of the other. When water is turned into wine, it is only with the passing away of the water that the wine comes into being, and the process is this: The same subject or matter remains throughout, and the wine comes into being in so far as that same subject loses one form and acquires another. But in the case of the Holy Eucharist the body of Christ is already in existence before the change, and what happens is this: the whole substance of the bread is changed to the already existing body of Christ, *i.e.*, the matter of the bread does not remain throughout, losing one form and acquiring another, but both the matter and the form which together make up the substance of the bread, are changed into the matter and form of the already existing body of Christ. And this, of course, is what constitutes for us one of the great difficulties of Transubstantiation.

In what I have here written concerning the miracle of Cana I have no intention of denying that it may be a symbol of the Holy Eucharist. That is not what is said in the passage I am discussing.

II.

We now come to the miracle of Multiplication. Fr. McNabb thinks that 'the Catholic doctrine of the

A Note on the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist

Holy Eucharist is based on two miracles, Transubstantiation and Multiplication,' and that the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the miracle of Cana together supply the necessary proof of the possibility of the Real Presence.

One would naturally conclude from his words that a miracle is worked in the Holy Eucharist similar to that worked in the multiplication of the loaves. But what took place in this latter miracle? According to St. Thomas, 'it was not by way of creation that the multiplication of the loaves was effected, but by the addition of extraneous matter and its conversion into loaves.'⁵ Again, a transformation which, as to the substance of the fact, is a species of natural change. It is needless to point out that nothing resembling this is to be found in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

But I think that, if we are to follow St. Thomas, we must go farther back and definitely deny the assertion that 'the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist is based on two miracles, Transubstantiation and Multiplication.' I say 'if we are to follow St. Thomas,' for I readily allow that support for that assertion is to be found in more modern theologians. But none, I think, is to be found in St. Thomas. According to him the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist is based on one miracle, Transubstantiation—Transubstantiation, that is, understood as the conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the body of Christ, the accidents of the bread, however, remaining. Given the miracle of Transubstantiation thus defined, there is no need to appeal to a miracle of Multiplication. Nor does St. Thomas ever appeal to such a miracle.

LUKE WALKER, O.P.

⁵*Summa Theologica*, IIIa qu. xliv, art 4, ad 4^{um}. Cf. also Ia qu. xcii, art. 3, ad 1^{um}, and his commentary on St. Matthew, ch. xiv.