

Some Thoughts on the Eucharistic Presence: 1

by G. Egner¹

One of the words we learned at school about the Eucharist was ‘transubstantiation’: we were given to understand, quite rightly, that the use of this word marked off Roman Catholic belief here from what had traditionally been Protestantism, and that the Council of Trent had declared the word to be used very suitably by the Church. Another thing we learned at school was that a consecrated host looks like bread, tastes like bread, but is not: we are sometimes told, again quite properly, that this phrase puts into popular form what Trent asserted.

I reject what Trent said. I don’t believe in transubstantiation and I think that a consecrated host is still bread, bread in precisely the way that an unconsecrated host is bread. I want to show you why I hold these views. What I have to say is derived from a book I am writing, and I obviously can do no more than give you a brief glimpse of some of its contents. I have not written my book to deny the eucharistic presence: but I have written it to try to persuade people that the ways we talk about it are misleading and empty; and to suggest some better ways. It will be on the negative part of the book that I shall be dwelling for a good part of the paper, expounding and criticizing first the views found in Trent, then the views found in certain authors today, particularly in Holland. As you will know, one of the many bickerings between the Dutch and the Vatican concerns the eucharistic presence: my contention is that both sides are saying basically the same thing and that both sides are wrong.

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First for the older view—the view of which we learned a simplified form at school. One of the objections made in our time to transubstantiation is that it ties Catholic belief too closely to an outmoded tradition in philosophy. To believe in the eucharistic presence, we are told, ought not to oblige us to talk in terms like ‘substance’ and ‘accidents’ invented by Aristotle. I do not accept this objection. Transubstantiation is not expressed in Aristotelian terms. What Aristotle—or Thomas Aquinas—wrote about change may or may not be acceptable; but what Trent (following Aquinas) wrote about transubstantiation is only a nonsensical abuse of Aristotelian ideas.

¹I am nearing the end of a book, *In the Breaking of the Bread*, about the eucharistic presence. The Editor asked me for a chapter to print in *New Blackfriars*, but all resisted abbreviation. Here instead is the script of a paper I have read to various societies on the subject. It reads (as it should) more like a talk than an article; I have shortened it, but not attempted to change its original character. *Quod scripsi, dixi.*—P. J. F.

To show this I shall first read out two passages from the Council of Trent. These will state the official doctrine, and will let us see the terms in their theological use. I shall then show how the terms were originally used philosophically by Aristotle and by Aquinas; I shall then show how they were adapted—misleadingly adapted—to the theology of the eucharistic change. The first passage from Trent runs thus:

‘Since Christ our Redeemer said that what he offered under the appearance of bread was truly his body, it has always been believed in the Church of God, and is once more declared by this Council: that by the consecration of the bread and wine 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. This conversion is fittingly and suitably called by the holy catholic Church transubstantiation.’

Now for the second:

‘If anyone asserts that the substance of the bread and wine persists with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, and denies that wonderful and unique conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood, the appearances alone of bread and wine remaining, a conversion which the catholic Church most aptly calls transubstantiation, let him be anathema.’

Now for the philosophical origin of the terms. The formulae of Trent keep close to the writings of Aquinas. He shared Aristotle’s philosophical account of change, an account inside which terms like ‘substance’ and ‘accident’ were devised. Let us see what meaning Aristotle’s account gives them. For Aristotle, the basic distinction in things is between act and potentiality: being tall, and being able to be tall; being actually cold, but being able to be hot—it is not difficult to think of other examples. Change for Aristotle is to be expressed in these concepts. Suppose (to take his example) that a blacksmith is hammering out a brass ball: we say that the block of brass he began with was *actually* (say) cubic. It was *potentially* spherical, and this potentiality has been actualized by what the blacksmith does. A word of warning here—Aristotle’s account of change will strike us as odd because its aim is so different from what aims we have in talking about it. If we are looking for an account of what processes go on during the blacksmith’s work, or why brass can be hammered into a ball and glass cannot, Aristotle’s theory can give us no answer. We may think it idle or not as we please: that is its general pattern. Aristotle has special names for the potential and actual elements in a change like this. The brass is first cubic and then spherical: the potential element, the brass, is the *substance*; the actualities, its various shapes, the *accidents*. The change in question

is *accidental*; the substance, the potential element, is determined first by this accidental actuality, then by the other.

But not all changes are accidental. Suppose the blacksmith goes home for lunch. The food he eats is absorbed into his body. We said that the brass was actually cubic and potentially spherical, but is now actually spherical. But here we cannot say that the steak-and-kidney pudding was actually lunch-ish and potentially blacksmith-ish but is now actually the latter. The pudding, after all, is not there any more. In changes of this sort, we do not have a substance actualized first by one accidental quality and then by another. Rather, the end-points of the change are two different substances—here, the pudding and the blacksmith. The change is *substantial*, to use the technical term. Aristotle wants to extend his distinction between act and potentiality to substantial change. The potential element here is *pure* potentiality; it has no distinctive qualities of its own at all; it simply is actualized first by the actuality of the pudding, then by the actuality of the blacksmith. Aristotle calls this potential element *prime matter*, and the determining actualities he calls *substantial forms*.

You may well wonder whether such a way of talking does not do more harm than good: I think you are quite right to wonder. Is it not all too easy to imagine these distinctions Aristotle has drawn as the results of some armchair physics, some mysterious dissection of the object into substance and accident, and then—at a deeper level—into matter and form? But once we start to treat prime matter and form as if they were things, even though rather mysterious things, we are (as Aquinas warns us) faced with the distinction between act and potentiality all over again. We first introduced the distinction to express how things change; if we now regard prime matter and its forms (or substance and its accidents) as things themselves, must we not say that they change too, and so must in *their* turn consist of act and potentiality? Shall we not need a super-prime matter or something, and so on *ad infinitum*?

There are, then, real dangers bound up with talking about change in the way Aristotle and Aquinas do. But to adapt the terminology to the Eucharist makes matters far worse. How it does, I shew in two stages:

(a) The adaptation obliges us to misuse Aristotle's ideas in such a way that they cease to have meaning.

(b) The only way we can make the adaptation plausible is to take the terminology in the sense of armchair physics, the sense I have just been attacking.

For the first stage I follow the line of argument used by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*. He asks how we can classify the eucharistic change in Aristotle's terminology. Can it be accidental? Surely not—it would be no more radical than, say, warming up the bread or moving it about; we should simply have bread first in one state and then in another. What of substantial change, where the potential

element is the prime matter, and the actual elements are the forms of what is there before and after the change? Things look more promising here—after all, we should be starting with bread and ending up with Christ. But in fact this will not do either, and the example we gave of the blacksmith's lunch shows why. To make the eucharistic change substantial is tantamount to making Christ out of bread, to letting the unconsecrated host bear the same relation to his body as was borne to it by the bread and other food which he ate during his earthly life. So all that is left, submits Aquinas, is to say that there is *no potential element at all* linking the host and Christ's body. The change is one of the whole substance of the bread, form and matter, into the whole substance of the body of Christ. It is neither accidental nor substantial, it is *transubstantial*. It is transubstantiation.

It is here that the damage is done. Notice, not done because Aquinas admits that the eucharistic change is unlike any other—we should be justifiably alarmed if he did *not* admit this! No, the damage comes from the positive content of what he writes: or rather, from the impression of content misleadingly conveyed by words that have lost their bearings. For better or worse, Aristotle and Aquinas have chosen to describe change in terms of potentialities that are actuated first in one way then in another by successive actualities. What possible sense inside that tradition can we make of a change in which, as Aquinas puts it, there is no potential element? How can terms which have been devised for use in a system that calls for actuality and potentiality in all changes be used to claim that there is a change where no potential element is to be found?

Notice at once that appeals to God's omnipotence are not in order here. As Aquinas reminds us elsewhere, it makes no sense to invoke the power of God when what is in question is the intelligibility of the event he is supposed to bring about. And it is just this unintelligibility which faces us here. Refuse to talk in Aristotelian terms about change by all means; but, having chosen to talk that way, do not use its terms while simultaneously denying that they are to be used according to their meaning.

It is true that technical terms have been usefully extended in the past—'Atom' and 'Square Root' for instance. But such extensions were part of a whole new set of rules and procedures, they were not simply the juxtaposition of words that do not fit. It is not possible to take Aristotle's account of change, to remove a crucial part of it, and then to expect without more ado that words and expressions of the original account will still make sense. One might as well take the mathematical term 'prime number', meaning 'number divisible by itself and 1 only', and go on to say that some primes have the surprising property of being divisible by fourteen different numbers. One can, of course, *say* such things: but to utter such phrases is not to give them any sense. The eucharistic adaptation of Aristotle's

account is just as lacking in intent. 'Transubstantiation', for all its appearance of meaning, conveys no more than 'dry water' or 'the floor of the bottomless pit'.

So much for my first stage. The second stage is devoted to showing how, at a grievous cost, an appearance of content can be given to the doctrine. We saw that there is a temptation to make Aristotle's theory of change into a kind of armchair physics, a dissection of the object into a number of rather mysterious entities called 'matter', 'form', 'substance' and 'accidents'. The temptation, in other words, is to make *things* out of actuality and potentiality, to *hypostatize* them, if I may use a technical but convenient word, and hypostatization provides the apparent content of which I have been speaking. Transubstantiation now becomes the replacing of one substance by another (each in turn composed of matter and form) under the unaltered veil or surface of the accidents. It is as if one parcel had been substituted for another without our having to unwrap the brown paper. No longer is transubstantiation a philosophical solecism, but an admittedly miraculous re-arrangement of the elements out of which things are composed. *How* the change takes place by which matter as well as form is converted, while the accidents remain, we do not know. But *what* takes place we are able to state in terms of our hypostatizing version of Aristotelian philosophy. The reshuffling of the actual and potential elements raises a problem of technique, not of intelligibility. Indeed, transubstantiation provides us with the incidental bonus of vindicating the philosophical distinctions Aristotle made, for here their terms have been, not just distinguished, but separated.

We should not underestimate the attractions of such a silly account. It would be easy enough to show from examples how kindly theologians take to an account of substance that makes it into some mysterious kernel or heart of the object, something which the physical sciences, supposedly dealing only with phenomena, can never attain. So many desires seem satisfied at once by the account: our legitimate wish to distinguish between appearance and reality, or between the properties an object happens to have and those which it must have; and the theologian's wish (a good deal less legitimate) to emancipate his assertions from outside interference. How convenient for all if substance becomes an unknown X removed from what our sense and understanding tell us about things! The one context in which substance is essentially involved turns out to be the Eucharist. For such a view of substance, if transubstantiation did not exist it would be necessary to invent it.

I think such a view of substance is nonsensical, and no part of what Aristotle or Aquinas wrote about change. But it can all too easily be part of attempts to expound the eucharistic employment, abuse rather, of that piece of philosophy. Where else is the content of the abused theory to come from? Not from its original philosophi-

cal context: that has been robbed of its structure by the theological adaptation. It is only this travesty of Aristotelianism, this hypostatization of actuality and potentiality, of substance and accident, that gives the traditional theology of the eucharistic change whatever content it appears to have. The hypostatizing account is indeed a travesty, but it at least offers a picture. The supposedly respectable account does not even do that. It is bankrupt; it can survive only by living off the immoral earnings of a disowned relation.

(The second part of this article will appear next month)

Collusion Course

by Denis Rice

The recent coadjutor appointment in Nottingham diocese met with some criticism. I could sympathize with the critics—and with the chosen candidate. However, the situation was more than an example of non-consultation about episcopal selection.¹ Clouds of debate and confusion around the freshly-embroidered mitre obscured something deeper, farther back in time.

For some years, the Ordinary of the diocese has been a target of comment for allegedly rigid views and activities.² In particular, his stance on *Humanae Vitae* (*H.V.*) was strict in its expectations of what priests should teach about the encyclical. Five priests were suspended on the issue. In 1968 and 1969, widely-reported arguments and public meetings were held in the diocese about *H.V.* and its aftermath.

I chaired one of these meetings in March 1969. It was attended by four hundred people. Many of them were *for* liberal interpretations of *H.V.* and *against* the Bishop's sanctions on priests who did not accept his line.³ Some in the audience were supporters of the growing Renewal Movement. Many more people were concerned about the need for an articulate but critical lay voice in the Church. I directed part of my summing up at the meeting to these groups. I suggested that, perhaps, enough had been said and done locally about *H.V.*; that attention should be turned to more important, if less exciting, issues. The example I offered was the manner of appointment of Bishops. I said that, in Nottingham, discussions or protests about this would be too late after a retiral or death. As far as I am aware, nothing was done from that time in 1969. Yet when Mgr McGuinness was appointed in 1972, the protest was strident.

I believe that one way of understanding and learning from this situation is to see it as an example of collusion. By three years'

¹*The Nottingham Consultation*, by Patrick Tierney & George Towler. Pastoral Development Booklets, 1972.

²See, e.g. *Irish Times*, 6-8 January, 1969.

³*Four Honest Men*, by the Committee of the Nottingham Catholic Renewal Group, 1969.