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The "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist According to Roman Catholic Theology

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THE ROMAN CATHOLIC POSITION on the doctrine of the real presence was defined by the Council of Trent in its thirteenth session, especially in the first canon:

If anyone shall say that in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist there are not contained truly, really, and substantially the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ—and therefore the whole Christ, but shall say that he is only there as in a sign, or by way of figure, or in efficacy: let him be anathema.¹

Now, this definition of the Council of Trent was not the first occasion on which the Church used such clear and explicit language to define its teaching concerning the real presence. Some five centuries earlier, to mention only one other example, Pope Gregory VII in conjunction with the (non-ecumenical) sixth Council of Rome (1079) proposed to Berengarius of Tours a profession of faith in the real presence which is identical in doctrinal clarity with the definition of Trent:

I, Berengarius, believe interiorly and profess publicly that the bread and wine which are placed on the altar, through the mystery of sacred prayer and the words of our Redeemer are substantially changed into the true, proper, and life-giving flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. After the consecration it is the true body of Christ, which was born of the Virgin, and which hung on the cross as an offering for the salvation of the world, and which sits at the right hand of the Father. And it is the true blood of Christ, which was pored forth from his side. And Christ is present not merely by virtue of the sign and the power of the sacrament but in his proper nature and true substance, as is set down in this summary. . . .²

It is quite obvious that both Gregory VII and Trent use technical (even philosophical) terminology to express Roman Catholic teaching concerning the real presence. I feel that it is this fact, more than any other point, that requires comment, if the full meaning and force of this teaching is to be understood.

God's revelation comes to us through the intermediacy of a people and a culture that were singularly unphilosophical and unmetaphysical. The

1. Denzinger-Bannwart, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (11th ed., Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 1911), 883, as translated in Paul F. Palmer, *Sacraments and Worship* ("Sources of Christian Theology," Vol. I, Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1955), p. 173.

2. Denzinger-Bannwart, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, §355, as translated in Clarkson, Edwards, Kelly, Welch, *The Church Teaches* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955), p. 276.

language and the categories of thought of the Jewish people are far removed from those of Greek philosophy or Roman law. From this it follows at once that we can never hope to find in the sources of revelation *directly and explicitly* answers to questions and problems which are foreign to the Hebrew mind, but which arise quite naturally within the framework of Western philosophic thought. Thus, to give only one example, I would be unconvinced if someone were to argue for the Roman Catholic teaching on the real presence merely from the fact that the New Testament author used *estin*, and that this word can only mean real, true, and substantial presence. The argument would seem to me unconvincing, because, while *estin*, when used in a rigidly philosophical context, might very well exclude a mere figurative presence, it is by no means clear that the New Testament author ever even adverted to this, much less that he intended to use his words only in the strict and rigid meaning allowed them by some Greek treatise on logic.

However, it would not be legitimate to go one step further. It would not be legitimate, I submit, to say that, merely because the sources of revelation do not *directly and explicitly* answer our philosophical questions, they therefore do not answer these questions *in any way*. We may quite readily grant that philosophical questions, or questions stated in philosophical terms, are not directly and explicitly answered in the sources of revelation; it would, however, be quite a different matter to conclude from this that these questions can find no answer at all in the sources of revelation. It will be the primary purpose of this paper to examine this latter question, for on our answer to it hinges, as far as I can see, the very possibility of any systematic and speculative theology.

I shall begin the discussion of this point with a necessarily rather lengthy examination of one particular, concrete historical example. It is clearly and explicitly stated in the sources of revelation: (1) that there is only one God: ". . . I alone am God; there are no others to rival me" (Deut. 32:29); (2) that the Word, which was made flesh and dwelt amongst us, is God: ". . . The Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" (John 1:1 and 14); (3) that this same Word, though God, is somehow different from the One whom the New Testament calls *ho theos* and also "the Father": "On God no man ever laid his eyes; the only-begotten Son, who rests in the Father's bosom, has himself been the interpreter" (John 1:18).

Now Christians, meditating on these words, were convinced that they had before them something much more than mere empty phrases or meaningless formulae; they firmly believed that these were God's own words, that they expressed God's revelation to men, and that these words therefore contained an inexhaustible wealth of truth, "the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now clearly shown."³ Through constant meditation

3. The "mystery" to which Col. 1:26 directly refers is, of course, the divine plan to include the Gentiles in salvation; I am here using the text in an accommodated meaning, to apply to the revelation of the being of the Son.

these Christians hoped to penetrate and to understand God's revelation ever more fully; they hoped to make explicit all the wealth of truth that was implied in God's word.

However, the men who tried to come to this fuller and more complete understanding of God's revealed word were not Semites; they were men who had been educated and trained in a Western and Greek culture. It is therefore not surprising that their questions reflected their own cultural background. It is not surprising that they sought for answers which, at least to some extent, would be couched in a language and in categories of thought proper to their own cultural background, rather than in the language and in the categories of thought of the Jews.

Now it is quite obvious that, if these people had been looking in the Bible and trying to find *there* non-biblical terms and categories, their search would have been absurd and doomed to failure. But that is not what they were trying to do; they were trying to express in their own language, and in their own categories of thought, the *same* truths that were taught, explicitly or implicitly, by God's revelation, but expressed therein the language and in the categories of thought of the Jewish people. Granted the supracultural and the supranational character of God's revelation—granted, in other words, that his revelation cannot be tied to any one culture or language—this endeavour necessarily had every hope of success. For just as the Bible can be translated into any moderately developed language, so the truths contained in revelation can be expressed within the framework of any culture, even that of Greek philosophy.

This is not to deny, of course, that one cultural framework might be more suited than another to the expression of this or that particular aspect of God's revelation, just as some particular language might capture better than another the exact meaning of this or that Hebrew phrase. What the above is intended to deny is that God's revelation is tied to any one culture; we deny that its truths can be exclusively, or even best, expressed within the framework of biblical categories. It may quite well be that the biblical language and its categories of thought, while admirably suited to introduce God's life-giving message of salvation into the concrete reality of history, would not be as suitable as the Greek categories of thought for a systematic and scientific study and exposition of the truth-content of God's word.

To return to our example: As Christians continued to meditate on the revelation given us of the being of the Son, they arrived at different, even contradictory conclusions. Some concluded that revelation affirmed the divinity of the Son in the same absolute and strict sense in which it also affirmed the divinity of the Father. Others, on the contrary, interpreted revelation as teaching that the Son, while the first and highest of all creatures, was still merely a creature, and so infinitely inferior to, and distant from, the Creator. In accord with this they held that the Son could be called God only in a transferred and analogous sense, at best. They denied that he was God in the complete, absolute, and unqualified sense in which the Father is God.

It is evident to us, and it was evident to the Christians of the time, that one of these positions had to be true, and the other false; they could not both be true, and they could not both be false. Moreover, to try to reconcile these two positions, by saying that perhaps they might both contain a portion or an element of truth, cannot even be contemplated by anyone who takes religious doctrines seriously, and for whom theology is more than an entertaining parlour game of juggling words. This was quite obvious to the Christians (Arians, as well as orthodox) of the fourth century.

The Council of Nicaea met to determine which of these two positions expressed the true and genuine meaning of revelation. At Nicaea the Church examined how it itself had from the beginning understood God's revelation, and then proceeded to express this understanding in language that would state Catholic doctrine unequivocally and unambiguously. The Son (the Council affirmed) is "of the substance of the Father" (*ek tēs ousias tou patros*) and "of one substance with the Father" (*homoousion tō patri*). It is obvious that the expressions of the Fathers of Nicaea are not biblical. Moreover, it is clear from historical evidence that these formulae were deliberately chosen, precisely because they were technical. Biblical terms had been tried, but each of them, St. Athanasius tells us in the fifth chapter of his *Epistle in Defence of the Nicene Definition of the Homoousion*, was interpreted by the Arians in their own way. The Church realized that what was needed was a terminology that was beyond all ambiguity, and which could not possibly be twisted by the Arians to mean what they wanted it to mean.

At the same time it cannot be overstressed that the Fathers of the Council of Nicaea were not trying to invent some new doctrine. They were convinced that the doctrine they had defined was truly contained in revelation, and that it had been taught by the Church all along, though not in the exact and technical language in which it had now been defined. St. Athanasius brings out this double point—the identity of doctrine, together with the non-scriptural character of the language: "Anyone who cares to inquire may easily ascertain, granting that the terms employed by the Council are not absolutely in Scripture, still, as I have said before, they contain the sense of Scripture."⁴

Now this procedure, employed possibly for the first time at Nicaea, has been used by the Church ever since in meeting the many doctrinal problems that subsequent centuries brought. At Ephesus, at Chalcedon, at Constantinople, it was always a question of discovering what God's revelation was, what precisely it was that the Church had held and taught from the very beginning, and then of expressing that very same doctrine in the terms that were best suited to meet the challenge of the particular time. It was never a question of either discovering or inventing some radically new

4. St. Athanasius, *Epistle in Defense of the Nicene Definition of the Homoousion*, V, 31, as translated in J. H. Newman, *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians* (7th ed., London: Longmans, 1897), Vol. I, p. 40.

doctrine; it was always a question of expressing more clearly and more explicitly a doctrine that had been held all along at least implicitly.

This same procedure was therefore followed by the Church at Trent, as well as on earlier occasions, in explaining and defining its teaching with regard to the real presence of our Lord in the Eucharist. The Church examined the sources of revelation; it examined how it itself, the depository of revealed truth, had from the beginning understood these sources; and finally, it stated the content of this understanding in terms that would meet head on the challenge of that particular time.

Beginning, therefore, with the Gospel accounts of the institution of the Eucharist, the Church found that these, to say the least, do not offer any argument that would militate against a strict and literal understanding of the doctrine of our Lord's presence in the Eucharist. This conclusion is reinforced by an examination of the eucharistic discourse, found in John 6:24-71. Here we are told that some of the disciples, taking our Lord's command to eat his body and drink his blood literally, were shocked, and "went back to their old ways, and walked no more in his company" (John 6:67). Our Lord does not correct their impression, as he surely would have done, had he intended to be understood figuratively; on the contrary, he turns to his apostles, and asks whether they also will go away.

Going further in its examination of revelation, the Church took note of St. Paul's strong language about those who would partake unworthily of the Eucharist: "Consequently, whoever eats this bread or drinks the chalice of the Lord unworthily, will be held responsible for a sin against the body and blood of the Lord . . . because he that eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks to his own condemnation."⁵

Evidence of the interpretation placed on these words by the primitive Church can be found in their echo in the writings of St. Cyprian:

Returning from the altars of devils, with polluted hands that reek of burnt-offerings, they [i.e. those who in time of persecution had lapsed and denied the faith] approach the "holies" of the Lord. And all but in the act of belching forth that deadly idol-food, even now with a foul breath that betrays their crime and is deadly contagious, they lay hands on the Lord's body . . . not waiting for an angry and threatening God to be appeased, violence is done to his body and blood. And *yet greater is the crime they now commit by hand and mouth against the Lord, than when they denied the Lord.*⁶

Anyone who recalls how grave a crime the primitive Church judged apostasy to be—some even went to the extreme of denying that this sin could be forgiven—will readily see the force of St. Cyprian's words. Sacrilegious reception of Communion by the unworthy he judges to be an even more heinous crime than apostasy; it would be hard to see the reason for this, except on the supposition that St. Cyprian regards it as a sin against the

5. I Cor. 11:27-9.

6. St. Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 15-16, as translated in Palmer, *Sacraments and Worship*, p. 136.

body and blood of Christ, really and truly present, in the literal sense of the term.

Coming to the way that this doctrine of the real presence was understood and taken by the Church, especially the primitive Church, we shall merely cite three or four passages by way of illustration and example. In none of these passages do we find the technical terminology coined by later theologians; yet all of them, if interpreted in their obvious meaning, express a belief in the doctrine of Trent:

They [the Docetists] abstain from the Eucharist and prayer because they do not admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, which the Father in his goodness raised up.⁷

This food is called with us the Eucharist, and of it none is allowed to partake but he that believes that our teachings are true, and has been washed with the washing for the remission of sins and unto regeneration, and who so lives as Christ directed. For we do not receive them as ordinary food or ordinary drink; but as by the word of God, Jesus Christ our Saviour took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we are taught, the food blessed by the prayer of the word which we received from him, by which, through its transformation, our blood and flesh is nourished, this food is the flesh and blood of Jesus who was made flesh.⁸

Could there be a more clear testimony to St. Justin's belief in the real presence than this parallel between the reality of the Incarnation and the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist?

Our third text is particularly interesting, for in it St. Irenaeus does not even trouble to prove the reality of our Lord's presence in the Eucharist; rather he takes it for granted, and uses it as a spring-board to prove a further joint, the reality of the future resurrection of our own bodies:

Since we are his members, and because we are nourished by created foods, he who makes his sun to rise and his rain to fall as he wills holds out to us foods of his creation: this chalice, which is of creation, he has confessed to be his very own blood, which was shed and which nourishes our blood; this bread, which is of creation, he has confessed to be his very own body, which nourishes our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed chalice and the bread that is made, receive the word of God and become a Eucharist, the body of Christ, by which the substance of our flesh grows and subsists, how can they [the Docetists] deny that the flesh is capable of the gift of God, which is life eternal, seeing that it is nourished with the body and blood of Christ, and is his member? For when the blessed Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians "that we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones" (5:30), he is not speaking of spiritual and invisible man—"for the Spirit has neither bones nor flesh" (Luke 24:39)—but of a truly human organism that is made of flesh, and nerves, and bones. It is this which is nourished by the cup, which is his blood, and by the bread, which is his body. And just as a cutting from the vine, planted in the earth, bears fruit in due season, and a grain of wheat, falling on the ground therein

7. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epist. ad Smyrn.*, 6, as translated in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 104.

8. St. Justin, *Apology I*, 66, as translated in Bettenson, *Documents*, pp. 93f.

dissolves, and rises again with large increase by the Spirit of God who sustains all things, and thereafter, by the Wisdom of God, becomes fit for man's food, and at last receives the Word of God and becomes a Eucharist, which is Christ's body and blood, so too our bodies, nourished by the Eucharist, and laid in the earth there to suffer dissolution, will in due season rise again.⁹

The fourth and final text that I should like to cite is from St. Cyril of Jerusalem. It is noteworthy and interesting, because it shows that as early as the fourth century we already have a foreshadowing of the thoughts expressed some thousand years later by St. Thomas Aquinas in his famous hymn, *Adoro te devote*. Here are St. Thomas' words:

Sight, touch, and taste in Thee are each deceived
 The ear alone most safely is believed.
 I believe all the Son of God has spoken;
 Than truth's own word there is no truer token.

This is surely an echo of St. Cyril's discussion of the Eucharist in his twenty-second Lecture (the fourth *On the Mysteries*):

Of old in Cana of Galilee, he changed water into wine of his own will. Is he less worthy of credence when he changes wine into blood? . . . Therefore, look not upon the bread and wine as bare elements, for they happen to be, according to the Lord's assurance, the body and blood of Christ; for even though the senses suggest this to you, let faith make you certain and steadfast. Do not judge the matter by taste, but by faith rest assured without any misgivings that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ . . . Having learned all this and fully assured that what appears to be bread is not bread—though it appears such to your taste—but the body of Christ, and what appears to be wine is not wine—though taste will have it so—but the blood of Christ . . . strengthen your own heart by partaking thereof. . . .¹⁰

One further point in this passage from St. Cyril might be noted. At the very beginning, Cyril (and he is not the only ancient writer to draw attention to the parallel) makes a comparison between this change from wine into the blood of Christ, and the change effected by our Lord in Cana, when he changed water into wine. This parallelism suggests a further argument to indicate that the primitive Church understood the change wrought through the words of consecration to be real change, just as real as the change of water into wine, and that consequently our Lord's presence is to be taken in the full and literal sense.

Examples such as the above could be multiplied to show that the Church, from the beginning and through its whole history, did actually believe that our Lord is present in the Eucharist in the full and literal sense of the term. This conclusion is further reinforced by the universal practice of the faithful. The adoration and reverence shown by them towards the Eucharist was always such as could not have been shown towards a mere symbol. Thus

9. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, V, 2, 2-3, as translated in Palmer, *Sacraments and Worship*, pp. 133f.

10. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *On the Mysteries*, IV, 2, 6, and 9, as translated in Palmer, *Sacraments and Worship*, p. 137.

the doctrine of the real presence is not merely a theologians' theory; the constant practice of the faithful shows that they fully believed and accepted this doctrine in the absolute and literal sense, even though they would be at a loss to explain it in technical or philosophical terms.

Basing themselves on this cumulative evidence, the Fathers of Trent defined the exact meaning of a doctrine that had always been held. They defined this doctrine in terms that were perhaps new (certainly not biblical), technical, and philosophical, but which for that very reason were better suited to state Roman Catholic doctrine against the minimizing tendencies of the Reformers.

One final point must be considered. The Italians have a proverb: *Traduttori, traditori*—translators are traitors. If this is true of one who tries to translate a work of literature from one *language* into a different *language*, how much more is it true of one who tries to translate from one *category of thought* into a different *category of thought*, from the categories of thought of the Bible into those of Greek philosophy! The question therefore quite naturally arises just to what extent these definitions, in technical and philosophical terms, remain faithful to the content and meaning of the revelation that had originally been given to men in very different categories of thought.

It is in answer to this question that the Roman Catholic points to the infallibility that has been guaranteed by our Lord to his Church in the final and definitive exercise of its teaching office. Private theologians can (and, alas, do) make mistakes. They at times think that some point is implicitly contained in revelation, when, as a matter of fact, it is not part of revelation, but merely the personal opinion of this or that private theologian. Private theologians occasionally err in "translating" the content of revelation into philosophical (or, for that matter, any other) categories of thought.

The Roman Catholic believes, however, that the charism of infallibility, the Holy Spirit's special, thought negative protection, will prevent the *Church* (as opposed to any private person within the Church) from ever making such a mistake when it is definitively and finally exercising the teaching office entrusted to it by Christ, by defining some particular point of doctrine. It seems to me, therefore, quite consistent and logical, that those who do not admit the Church's infallibility will feel uneasy, and will tend to shy away from the attempt to express the content of God's revelation in categories of thought that are not biblical.