

## CHAPTER I

*Against transubstantiation*

## I THE DECLARATION AND THE DECREE

'The Spanish Armada, the Battle of Waterloo, and the doctrine of Transubstantiation': such were the three topics of conversation favoured by Ruskin when, as an awkward and inexperienced youth, he was thrown into the society of an elegant, convent-bred young lady from France. In choosing at least the third theme he was in good company. For over more than two hundred years, every English sovereign had to profess his belief that 'in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper there is not any transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever.' To those who wished to safeguard the Protestant succession to the throne, there seemed to be no more distinctively popish a doctrine for the monarch to repudiate in the presence of his first Parliament.<sup>1</sup> If times be thought to have changed, one sign of the change would be found in the 'Final Report' of a commission of Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians published in 1982. In the part of this devoted to eucharistic belief (first produced in 1971), 'substantial agreement' is claimed, and the word 'transubstantiation' is relegated to a footnote, where we are told that in contemporary (presumably this means 'recent') Catholic theology the word is not understood as explaining

<sup>1</sup> For Ruskin here, see his *Praeterita* I.x.207 (Ruskin 1983: 170). An account of the Royal Declaration is in Williams (1967), and the story of its eventual replacement is in the thirty-fifth chapter of G. Bell (1938). This is the biography of Randall Davidson, who as Archbishop of Canterbury was involved with the modification (the monarch now declares himself 'a faithful Protestant'). As I read Bell's account, the Declaration caused annoyance among Catholics, not only by its denial of their beliefs, but by its elaborate verbal safeguards. Their presence exhibited the presupposition that Romanists are allowed by the rules of their persuasion to equivocate when using plain language on solemn occasions, and to go back on their sworn word if given papal permission. I hope that this book will in places throw light on the justice of this presupposition.

Cambridge University Press

0521027330 - In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual

P. J. Fitzpatrick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

how the eucharistic change takes place (ARCIC 1982: 16, 14). And yet perhaps times have not changed so much after all. Reservations about the report were expressed in a letter from no less than the Roman Inquisition (its latest change of name is into ‘Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’). One reservation touches some expressions in the report, ‘especially some of those which attempt to express the realisation of this [real] presence’. They do not, the letter claims, ‘seem to indicate adequately what the Church understands by “transubstantiation”’ (Inquisition 1982: 1066).<sup>2</sup> And the letter goes on to explain what is understood there by the word, by citing the account given in the decree of the Council of Trent on the Eucharist. Which was, of course, a notorious origin of the association of transubstantiation with the old religion, and of its denial with the reformed. So let us start by seeing something of the decree.

The passage to which the Inquisition refers is found in the council’s decree on the Eucharist, promulgated on 11 October 1551. There will of course be more to say of Trent later on, but I set down here for convenient reference the general course of the specific claims made by the part of the decree concerning transubstantiation. The decree was cast into the form of ‘Canons’, condemnations of propositions judged to be heretical, and the canons were preceded by ‘chapters’, in which true belief was given a positive expression. The first of the canons here condemns any who deny the true, real and substantial presence of the whole Christ in the Eucharist, or who would reduce it to no more than a presence in terms of sign or figure or power (DS 1651). Then follows the canon on transubstantiation:

If anyone should say that, in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist, there remains the substance of the bread and wine together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and should deny that wondrous and unique conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood, with only the appearances of the bread and wine remaining, a change which the Catholic Church most fittingly (*aptissime*) calls transubstantiation – let him be anathema. (DS 1652)

<sup>2</sup> There appeared in December 1991 yet another statement from Rome, declining to accept that substantial agreement has been reached between Anglicans and Roman Catholics – not only in eucharistic matters, but in others. I have not investigated this document; for my purpose, what I have cited will prove amply sufficient.

Cambridge University Press

0521027330 - In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual

P. J. Fitzpatrick

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Against transubstantiation*

3

The fourth of the chapters goes with this canon, and it runs thus:

Because Christ our redeemer said that what he offered under the appearance of bread was truly his body [see Matt. xxvi 26f.; Mark xiv 22f.; Luke xxii 19f.; 1 Cor. xi 24f.], it has always been believed in the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares it again: – that by the consecration of the bread and wine there is effected 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 has been suitably and properly [*convenienter et proprie*] called transubstantiation by the holy Catholic Church. (DS 1642)

So much for the texts of the canon and the chapter. I offer some preliminary observations. We can notice first that the Council allots to belief in transubstantiation a canon and a chapter to itself, over and above what was allotted to belief in the real, true and substantial presence of Christ asserted in the first canon and chapter. What more is involved can be seen in the greater elaboration of the terminology: we have ‘substance’, ‘conversion of the whole substance’, and ‘the appearance alone remaining’. But we can now notice something about this more elaborate terminology – its resemblance to what Aquinas writes of transubstantiation in his *Summa Theologiae*:

The whole substance of the bread is converted into the whole substance of the body of Christ, and the whole substance of the wine is converted into the whole substance of the blood of Christ. Consequently, this conversion is not formal but substantial. Nor does it fall under any of the kinds of natural change, but can be given its own name of transubstantiation. (*ST* 3.75.4)

Here the terminology is richer still, with ‘formal’ and ‘substantial’ distinguished from each other, and the latter linked with transubstantiation in its apartness from all natural change. But the resemblance is still worthy of note, and it becomes still more worthy when we consider the place which Aquinas then held in theological speculation in the Church of Rome, and which until recently he held in the training of the clergy there. The history and interpretation of the expressions used at Trent, like the place of Aquinas in theology, will turn out to harbour unsuspected complications. But the presence of terms common to his account and to the council’s decree demands that we examine what he makes of the terms and how he uses them in the account he offers. To examine Aquinas’ account will give some background to the formulation used by the Council, and some idea of the theological reflexion on the Eucharist there has been in the Church

of Rome. I go for the account to the *Summa Theologiae*, reminding the reader that I cite it, and other works by Aquinas, according to the conventions explained at pp. xxi–xxiii where I also say something of the general form into which Aquinas casts what he writes.

Aquinas devoted eleven questions to the Eucharist in the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*. That part (left unfinished by him at his death in 1274) deals with the Incarnation, the life of Christ, and the sacraments by which that life is shared with us. After two questions on the Eucharist in general and on the material for it (73, 74), four consider the eucharistic conversion: the conversion itself (75); Christ's manner of existence in the Eucharist (76); the accidents or appearances of the elements after the consecration (77); and the formula to be used in the eucharistic celebration (78). From the conversion, the questions pass to the consequences and setting of the conversion: the effects of the sacrament upon recipients (79); the right use of it (80), and the first use of it at the Last Supper (81); the minister of the Eucharist (82). A final question examines the whole eucharistic rite as practised in the Church, and here Aquinas also asks whether Christ can be said to be immolated in the Eucharist (83). The last five among these questions, touching the institution, the use and the sacrificial character of the Eucharist, I shall consider later on. It is the questions to do with the eucharistic conversion that we must start to examine here and now.

But as soon as we go to the first of them, question 75, we find that we need to travel still further afield. We saw that the passage I cited from it sets transubstantiation apart from all natural changes. Earlier in the same question Aquinas states where the distinction lies – natural changes touch the *form* of things, transubstantiation touches the *whole reality* (*totius entis*) of what is converted. So we must first see what Aquinas makes of natural changes in the terminology he uses, for only in this way shall we be able to see what he has in mind when he insists upon the 'apartness' of transubstantiation. And to his account of natural change we turn in the next section.

## 2 AQUINAS' ACCOUNT OF NATURAL CHANGE

Aquinas wrote as he did within the part of medieval tradition that welcomed and built upon Aristotle's speculations, which had become known in the West since the whole *corpus* of his writings and the commentaries on them began to be translated towards the end of the

*Against transubstantiation*

5

twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> I go to the Commentary of Aquinas on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* for texts in which the account of change can be found. The fidelity of Aquinas as a commentator does not concern us here, and there are other texts to which I might have gone, but the Commentary by its nature abstains from the theological applications we shall be meeting in the next section. Moreover, what we meet in the Commentary touches something that is going to be one of the preoccupations of this book. Aquinas, like the author on whom he is commenting, is writing about change, but the concerns and the limitations of what he writes stand apart from what we ourselves would ask on the subject. Not wholly apart, of course; but the gap between past and present is real, and coming to appreciate it will be an important part of what this chapter can help us to see.

Aquinas follows Aristotle in finding it easiest to discuss change in terms of the fashioning of an artefact, and the working of bronze into a statue or ball is an example (VII 2; 1277. VII 7; 1418). I will take something more manageable and suppose that I have a cube of plasticine in my hand. If I rotate it gently between my palms, I shall get what the geography primers used to call an oblate spheroid – a ball flattened at the poles. For Aquinas, we are to distinguish in such examples between the subject of the change and the two extremes of it (VIII 1; 1688): that is to say, we began with one shape and ended with another, but we still have the kind of stuff with which we started, namely plasticine. The plasticine is the *matter* or *subject* of the change, while the shapes are the successive *forms* of the matter (VII 2; 1277). I notice at once a limitation in this account: it does not furnish the very kind of information we ourselves like, namely *how* the change takes place – why for instance reversing the direction in which I revolve the palms of my hands will not restore to the plasticine its original shape. But I also notice an implicit danger in the account: it

<sup>3</sup> For the advent of Aristotle's works in the West, and for the different responses to them, van Steenberghen 1966 is a detailed and masterly account – his earlier work of 1955 gives a usefully brief survey of a complicated topic. Knowles 1962 is a helpful presentation of the 'academic machinery' of medieval thought – what it inherited from the past, how universities worked and so on. The tone of the book is at times tediously pious, but readers should persevere. Those who would like to go to Aristotle for themselves will find close translations of parts of his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* in the 'Clarendon Aristotle' series, with commentaries on the translation. Ackrill 1981 is a lucid introduction to Aristotle's thought, and gives further references. Aquinas had no Greek, and used a translation by William Moerbeke, who rendered the Greek into Latin word for word, to so odd an effect that learning Greek seems a minor chore compared with deciphering so hermetic a crib. It is a tribute to the power of Aquinas that he was able to achieve what he did in this commentary.

Cambridge University Press

0521027330 - In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual

P. J. Fitzpatrick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

may tempt us to make *things* out of matter and form, to *reify* them. We might, for example, fall into asking what shape the plasticine was all the time; answer that it was no particular shape all the time; and conclude that the plasticine in itself inhabits some topological limbo, and is given a shape only by the forms that successively characterise it, rather as a piece of stuff might be given different colours by the successive application of different dyes.

Aquinas, like Aristotle, was aware of the dangers in reification, as is easily seen from his insistence that what changes, what comes to be such or such, is ‘the composite’, the object composed of matter and form, and that neither the matter nor the form can be so spoken of (VII 7; 1419–21, 1431). The whole context of those paragraphs elaborates the point. Replacing the work of Aristotle’s coppersmith with my moulding the plasticine, we must say that I make a ball out of plasticine, not that I make the plasticine or that I make its shape. That I do not make the plasticine is obvious – what I achieve by rotating my palms presupposes that there is something for them to work on (1419). But neither do I make the form – I make the plasticine be of such a form. The distinction between matter and form is drawn as part of construing all change in terms of matter that is first of all of one form and then of another form; so if I now make the *form* change as well, I must make the same distinction there, and have a matter and form of the form itself; and so shall be involved in an infinite regress (1420).<sup>4</sup>

Let us supplement this account by seeing (still in the same *lectio* of the Commentary) two errors that Aquinas points to as consequences of confusion here. We have seen him insist that forms do not change or come into being, but that it is the composite, the individual object,

<sup>4</sup> This is a suitable point at which to remind ourselves that Aristotle’s vocabulary here – where *hylé* is ‘matter’ and *eidós* or *morphé* is ‘form’ – was given a Latin dress by writers like Lucretius and Cicero into *materia* and *forma*, from which our own words are derived. ‘Materia’ has the associations of ‘wood’ that *hylé* has; ‘form’ echoes as *eidós* does the Platonic vocabulary. If we find the use of ‘wood’ here eccentric, we must bear in mind that every language needs a word to indicate in a non-specific way that of which something is composed, be it an artefact or a living being, and that the notion of composition here can be extended from objects to things like discussions or pieces of writing. Just so, a word doing that job will be naturally complemented by another type of word. This other word will record the distinction between one object and another when the ingredients are the same – will distinguish our ball of plasticine from the cube with which we started, or distinguish words arranged in one way from the same words arranged in another. ‘Matter’ and ‘form’ are only one such pair; ‘stuff’ was used in the main text, but ‘stuff’ is no less odd in its origin than ‘matter’ – it is simply the Italian *stoffa*, ‘cloth’. We need such pieces of verbal *passerpartout*, and Aristotle’s creations have long outlasted their original setting.

Cambridge University Press

0521027330 - In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual

P. J. Fitzpatrick

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Against transubstantiation*

7

which comes to be of such a form. Suppose we reject his warning, and want the forms themselves to come into existence. If so, we must give them an origin. So either there will have to be a special creation of them (God creates the roundness just as I stop rotating my palms); or the forms will in some way have to pre-exist or lurk in the matter – the various shapes of the plasticine are in some fashion tucked away in it (1430). Aristotle excludes both these errors, says Aquinas, by making the composite, not the form, come to be. The forms are not themselves caused by some external source, nor do they pre-exist in the matter. They are potentially there, and they are brought out from the potentiality of the matter – that is, the matter was originally only *potentially* of such or such a form, and is now *actually* of that form (1431, 1423).

We noted earlier that talking in terms of matter and form did not explain *how* the change takes place. We must now note the same limitation in these warnings against saying that the forms themselves come to be. If we follow Aquinas and exclude ‘Where does the shape come from?’ as an improper question, we are not thereby prohibited from asking in mechanics why an unladen clothes-line assumes the shape we call a catenary, or indeed why I end with an oblate spheroid of plasticine rather than with a sphere. The exclusion is a matter of logic and language: express change in terms of matter and form, and you cannot consistently make those in their turn change in the same way. You can, of course, say things like ‘the shape (form, if you prefer) has changed’; but this is only a paraphrase (by synecdoche, I suppose) of saying that the plasticine was cubic and is now spherical. The oddness of the accounts rejected by Aquinas – the special creation of forms, or their lurkingness (*latitatio*) – come from *reifying* forms and then asking of them the questions asked of the plasticine. Just so, we avoid these odd accounts, not by suggesting some third origin for the form (as we might suggest another origin for some natural phenomenon), but by rejecting reification, and so the vocabulary of ‘origin’, altogether. We saw in the preceding paragraph how Aquinas writes that forms are ‘brought out from the potentiality of the matter’ (1423). But when he does so, he is not offering yet another starting-point for them – and he shews he is not, by at once elucidating the phrase he has used: ‘in as much as the matter, which was potentially of such a form, becomes actually of it; and this is to make the composite’. We are, in other words, being sent back to our plasticine and to our manipulation of it; we are forbidden

to treat its successive shapes as if they were independent things; we are forbidden to pass from admitting the capacity of the cube to be moulded into a ball to believing that the spherical shape is in some fashion already inside the cube. The error may seem too recondite to need attacking, and indeed is of an age other than ours. However, readers acquainted with wilder flights of fancy in recent speculations over ‘possible worlds’ may feel that the warning is not wholly out of date even now.

I have spelt out laboriously something (only something) of how Aquinas introduces the terms Matter and Form. The labour has been necessary, because there is another setting for their use, and to this we must now turn.

The account so far has been concerned with changes of a limited sort, changes where we end up with the same kind of stuff as that with which we began. Not all changes are so limited, some are more profound. What if we burn the plasticine? Presumably we end up with something charred and unpleasant – let us call it ‘residue’. What are we to say if we want to apply to this more profound change the distinction between matter and form, in terms of which was expressed the moulding of the cube of plasticine into a sphere? The application will at all events have to be cautious, because the dangers of misunderstanding are so much greater. ‘What shape is the plasticine all the time?’ we rejected as a badly put question, but there was at least something identifiable for the question to be wrong about. ‘What is it that is first plasticine and then residue?’ has not even that much. (If we prefer a culinary example, we can consider a carafe of wine that has turned to vinegar and ask what was in the carafe all the time.) But there is now yet another danger, if we still decide to say of the new change that matter is qualified first by one form (that of plasticine) and then by another (that of residue). Logic teaches us to beware of confusing the order of words like ‘some’ and ‘every’, it warns us against passing from ‘every journey has *an end*’ to ‘there is *one end* to all our journeyings’. Such confusion of order can entrap us here. Our present claim is that, in every change of the profounder sort, matter is qualified first by one form (such as that of plasticine, or of wine) and then by another (such as that of residue or of vinegar). This claim is no more than our decision to extend the distinction between matter and form, first drawn about moulding the plasticine, to profounder changes like burning it. But it is all too easy to rearrange the order of words, and so slip from this claim into



Cambridge University Press

0521027330 - In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual

P. J. Fitzpatrick

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Against transubstantiation*

9

another and much stronger claim: that there is *one matter* which, in every change of the profounder sort, is qualified first by one form (such as that of plasticine or of wine) and then by another (such as that of residue or of vinegar). And once we do *that*, we are claiming that there is some indefinitely adaptable substratum that can be plasticine, residue, wine or vinegar. And whatever we make of such a claim, it goes much further than the distinction we originally drew between form and matter.

I have already prescinded from estimating the fidelity of Aquinas as a commentator on Aristotle. I now prescind further from deciding how far Aquinas, let alone Aristotle, was affected by these confusions. It is enough for my purpose to notice that he does accept what I have just called ‘one matter’. He calls it *materia prima* – ‘prime matter’ – and its place in his account of change must now be stated.

He holds that the way to understanding it lies through what, following Aristotle, he calls generation and corruption. We have just seen an example in the burning of the plasticine. Generation and corruption are the sort of change in which what we end with is a different *kind of thing* from what we started with, changes that are in *substance* (VIII 1; 1688–9). ‘Substance’ can mean either an individual object or the nature of something (X 3; 1979). The latter answers the question ‘What is this?’, and that question cannot be answered by naming properties that the object happens to have. You may be educated, but ‘educated’ is not an answer to such a question; the question calls for a reply that states what you are *as such* – a human being, an animal, and the rest (VII 3; 1309–10). And it is to change touching the ‘What is it?’ of things – substantial change – that Aquinas, in his talk of *materia prima*, extends the distinction between matter and form. The distinction embodies the principle already laid down: that in all changes there is a subject common to the two extremes, which is qualified first by one and then by the other. The principle which was applied in the first place to *accidental* change, where ‘accident’ lacks the associations of fortuitousness or calamity, and simply means an attribute that something can have. Accidental changes include change in place and growth as well as alteration, and in each of these a subject is first such and then such. Aquinas, we have seen, extends the principle to *substantial* change, where we end with a different kind of thing from that with which we began: here too there must be a subject common to the two extremes. This common subject, this matter, is *prime matter*, and the nature of substantial

changes shews that prime matter must be *purely potential*. That is to say, prime matter must have no form of its own, distinct from the forms which characterise the origin and the terminus of a substantial change (such as the burning of the plasticine). Because if prime matter did have such a form of its own, it would be ‘something in its own right’, independently of the end-points of the change. And if this were so, the change would no longer be substantial, no longer be a change that begins with one kind of thing and ends with another. All we should have would be an ‘independent’ prime matter, having first one form and then another (VIII 1; 1688–9) – just as our plasticine was, while still remaining plasticine, first cubic and then spherical.

It is no part of my concern at this point to ask whether the extension to substantial change of the distinction between matter and form is worth the complications it brings with it. What counts for us is the extension itself, and the claim by Aquinas that it is substantial change that provides the way of understanding the rôle of prime matter. There is more to say about the terms in which Aquinas talks about change. But this much will do for the present, and we can turn to the eucharistic employment of the terms.

### 3 HIS ACCOUNT APPLIED TO THE EUCHARIST

An account of change in terms of a matter or subject that is successively qualified by different forms; the account illustrated by an analogy drawn from the making of an artefact; the analogy extended to changes of a more profound sort, and so the introduction of prime matter: all this we have seen in what Aquinas writes about natural changes, and we have also seen how, following Aristotle, he persistently warns against reifying the distinctions drawn, warns against treating matter and form as so many things. Let us keep that much in mind as we move to the use made in eucharistic theology of this broadly Aristotelian speculation.

I write ‘broadly Aristotelian’, not only because I believe the description justified, but because it can serve to place my general contention about what Aquinas writes here and to enable us to keep a sense of proportion. There is no question (how could there be?) of Aquinas (or of anyone else) finding adequate expression for a mystery of the Christian religion in the speculations of a Greek philosopher who had been dead three centuries when Christ was born. Still less is it my intention to blame (how could I blame?) the speculations of