

Recall that what was called RCIA (for those becoming Catholic) is now called OCIA – Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. In this pastorate there are 8 adults and 4 kids preparing to be received into the Church this year at the Easter Vigil. In absolute terms, 12 people may not be a large number but for rural areas in South Dakota, it is far more than usual. A priest in Sioux Falls said their number for OCIA is also up. I do believe our Lord Himself is “stirring the pot” – sending out His Spirit to gather in His sons and daughters. Please pray for those in OCIA as they approach the big step, lifelong commitment, of becoming Catholic. They will experience temptations against it; it is our duty to help them with prayer and encouragement.

A big part of OCIA is simply coming to classes on the faith. Usually there are a number of parishioners that come as well, and this year is no exception. The topic being currently covered is the Eucharist, which included a discussion on what’s called transubstantiation. One of the parishioners suggested that transubstantiation be explained in a homily sometime. I’m certainly not opposed to that but a homily would be a harder setting in which to present this topic. So it will be offered as a bulletin article for those who might be interested.

Transubstantiation is what occurs at the moment of consecration. It describes the changing of the bread & wine into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ – the bread & wine becoming the person of Jesus. What is it that occurs at that moment? It is transubstantiation. But what does that mean?

The place to start is with the word itself. The prefix ‘trans’ just means change. The root of the rest of the word – substantiation – is substance. So transubstantiation means: change of substance. What happens at the moment of consecration? The substance of bread & wine is changed, it becomes the person of Jesus.

But what does that mean? What is meant by substance? The meaning of substance goes back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived about 3 to 4 hundred years BC. Now of course Aristotle, as a Greek, knew nothing of the faith and probably little if anything about Revelation (the Old Testament) or Judaism. As a philosopher, Aristotle’s goal was to know truth, understand reality, just using what could be observed in the natural world. Philosophy could be called a study of Natural Revelation since God is the Creator/Author of the natural/material world. Philosophy has long been called the handmaiden of theology, theology’s helper in understanding what God has revealed. As just one example of philosophical thought, Aristotle, who lived in a pagan world that worshipped many “gods,” was able to reason out that there has to be just one God.

Through various circumstances of history, Aristotle’s work was largely lost to the Western world until the 1100’s. St Albert the Great (1200-1280 AD), Doctor of the Church, was one of the first Catholic theologians to make use of the philosophy of Aristotle. It was, however, one of Albert’s students – St Thomas Aquinas – who really took up the philosophy of Aristotle and used it to gain a deeper understanding of various aspects of the faith. Aquinas did not just blindly accept everything Aristotle said but rather used those things that were clearly true and consistent with Revelation. The Church, in turn, has commended the philosophy and theology of St Thomas Aquinas for centuries, giving us confidence in Thomas’ explanation of what happens at consecration.

This will seem quite irrelevant initially but before coming to the question of what is transubstantiation, let us recall one aspect of learning. Suppose a mother is out with her young child who is just learning to talk and they see a dog. The mother points to the dog and says: dog. And the little kid repeats it: dog. Then they go along a little further and see a different dog and the little kid points and says: dog. Yes!, says the mother. How did he know to say dog? Now they might see a cat next and the little kid might point at the cat and say dog, and the mother says NO, not dog, cat! So the child might have to refine his concept of dog some but the fact is that he didn’t have to see every dog in the world in order to be able to recognize a dog when he sees one. How? Why? Well, the ancient philosophers realized, it’s because the human mind is capable of abstracting the essence of a thing and storing it in their mind. When the child saw a dog, his mind abstracted the essence of “dogness,” if you will, and stored that concept. This is how he is able to point to a different dog and say: dog.

With that little bit of background, we come back, now, to the question of: what does transubstantiation (change of substance) mean? The key to understanding this is what Aristotle (& Aquinas) mean by the word **substance**.

What is meant by substance? Well, Aristotle's reasoning went something like this. Suppose (God forbid) a guy named Fred gets his right hand cut off. Would you look at Fred and say that's not Fred now, Fred has 2 hands? Or would you say Fred is not human because human beings have 2 hands? Of course not. But why, how can you say that's still Fred – is it not true that Fred had 2 hands and that human beings have 2 hands? Think about even bigger physical changes. Suppose you had a picture of yourself from when you were just an embryo. Would you look at that picture and say, no that's not me, I have a mouth, hands, feet, and so on? No, of course not – it's you! So, Aristotle said, what all of that means is that there has to be *something* – whatever exactly it is – underlying all of the physical characteristics of a thing or person that makes it what it is or who it is. That *something*, whatever exactly it is, I'll call substance. All of the other characteristics of a thing or individual could change but as long as the substance remains, it remains what it is regardless of those changes. Aristotle called all of the other characteristics that a thing or person can have – like color, mass, and so on – “accidents.” So his distinction is between substance – that which makes the thing what it is – and accidents or incidental characteristics. Why do you say it's still Fred and that Fred is still a human being even if he loses a hand? Aristotle (& Aquinas) say it's because the substance of Fred and of humanity is still there, only the incidental characteristic of “2 hands” has changed. Why would you say that embryo is you, in spite of huge physical changes? Because the substance of you has remained even in spite of all of the big physical changes.

What exactly is substance? Is it something tangible or intangible or a combination of the two? First, whatever else we say, substance is that which make the individual the individual – who or what they are – regardless of any changes in incidental characteristics. The point is that as we think about changes in physical characteristics, we have to agree – as Aristotle and Aquinas said – that there is *something* that underlies everything else that makes the thing or person what it is, and that something we're just going to call substance. Beyond that, and allowing for the possibility that there is an intangible element to substance, perhaps we could say that substance is, at least *in part*, a combination of “form and matter.” What does that mean? Well suppose you're building a house and you have all the materials needed laid out in piles at the location where you're going to build. Would you look at the piles of materials and say that's a house? No. But yet, you can't build the house without these materials (matter). Now when you put all of the materials together in the form of a house, you say: that's a house, those materials now form a house. It now has houseness. Is this something ridiculous? If so, then how is that the child was able to say dog when he saw a new dog?

Now think about making bread. Suppose you have all the ingredients you need set out on a table, each ingredient in its own separate bowl. Do you look at all of those separate ingredients and say: that's bread? No. Suppose you combine them all into one big bowl. Do you now say: that's bread? No, it lacks breadness. Now you bake it at the right temperature and for the right amount time. When you pull it out you say: that's bread. But why didn't you say it was bread when you had all the elements mixed together – chemically, it's the same as it is after you bake it? Somehow or other it just lacks breadness, the substance was not bread.

What happens at the time of consecration? All of the visible characteristics of the bread (what Aristotle called accidents) remain the same but the breadness is gone, the substance has changed. The substance of bread – that which made it bread – is no longer there. The substance, that underlying thing that makes it what it is, has changed from bread to the person of Jesus. The substance is no longer bread but the person of Jesus.

There is nothing else like this in nature. What we are used to seeing is changes in physical characteristics (“accidents”) while the substance of a thing remains what it is. With the Holy Eucharist, it's the opposite – the substance changes while the incidental characteristics of bread & wine remain. We should never refer to consecrated hosts or wine as bread or wine; they are not, they are no longer bread & wine. The substance of bread and wine are gone, they are now the person of Jesus.

For 1200 years – i.e., before Aquinas – people knew, with certitude, that consecrated hosts and wine are the person of Jesus, the Eucharist. That is all that is necessary. Transubstantiation is just an explanation of what actually occurs at consecration, something that might help us understand the Eucharist even more, an understanding that can help protect against attacks on the faith.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn