

## **From Bread and Wine to True Presence**

Recently I've taken to reading the works of an English Dominican, Herbert McCabe. Being that he is in the Dominican Order, he writes from the perspective of the great "Doctor of the Church," St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas applies categories of human reason to help explain how it could possibly be that ordinary bread and wine could be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. In what sense can we reasonably assert that this is true? In what follows, I am quoting extensively from McCabe from a collection of essays entitled *God Still Matters*:

### **The caricature of the Doctrine of**

**Transubstantiation:** *"at the consecration, the bread and wine change into a different kind of substance, flesh and blood, in fact the flesh and blood of Christ; but this is disguised from us by the fact that, to all appearances, the bread and the wine are unchanged. This is so that we can eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ without being disgusted by the cannibalism involved."*

*The change is of a completely different kind from the change of bread and wine into another kind of stuff.*

### **Appearances vs Signs:**

*If we are to understand what the notion of transubstantiation is saying, or trying to say, we need to reflect on the difference between the way appearances tell us something and the way in which signs tell us something.*

*. . . Appearance. . . simply shows you a thing, and signs are part of telling you something about it . . . (characteristics) of bread and wine cease to be the appearances of bread and wine, but this is not because they become misleading appearances of something else. They cease to function as appearances at all, they have become signs, sacramental signs through which what is signified is made real. Before the consecration the appearances were there because the bread was there; they were just the appearances of bread. After the consecration it is the other way round; the Body of Christ is sacramentally there because what were the appearances of bread (and are now sacramental signs), are there . . . The important consequence of this is that these signs are not the*

*appearances of Christ's body: they are no longer the appearances of anything. The color and shape of the host is not the color and shape of Christ's body; the location of the host, its being on the altar, does not mean that Christ's body is located on the altar. . . When we do things to the host, such as eating it, we are not doing anything to Christ's body. What we are doing is completing the significance of the signs.*

*For bread and wine are meant to be eaten and drunk, to be our food; and food, eating and drinking together is. . . a sign expressing friendship and unity. This is why Jesus chose it to be the sign which would tell us of the real sacramental presence of his body given for us and his blood poured out for us--- the body of Christ which is more deeply our food than 'bread and wine', than is the ordinary bread and wine with which we began.*



### **Creation out of nothing:**

*The bread does not turn into the body by acquiring a new form in its matter; the whole existence of the bread becomes the existence of the living body of Christ . . . It is not that the bread has become a new kind of thing in this world: it now belongs to a new world. As far as this world is concerned, nothing seems to have happened, but in fact what we have is not part of this world. It is the Kingdom impinging on our history and showing itself not by appearing in the world but by signs speaking to it . . . it belongs to what is beyond our universe, beyond space and history . . . Transubstantiation is not a change, just as Creation is not a change.*

*. . . The glorified body of Christ is not something that could be seen within our world as part of our world; if it is to be manifest among us it can only be by signs, by sacramental signs. And this is just what the Eucharist is . . . [The characteristics of bread and wine, which we can still see after the consecration] belong to a new language. [The elements still look just like plain bread and wine but, by faith, we know better.]*

*My comparison is not intended as an explanation of the Eucharistic miracle. It is intended merely as an attempt to show that it does not involve a sheer contradiction.*