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Transforming both the gifts and the people: Eucharistic presence

by

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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Transforming both the gifts and the people: Eucharistic presence

This paper reviews the history and development of the concept of “eucharistic presence” and analyses an emerging synthesis of tradition, dogma and post-Vatican II sacramental theology that may help restore a more complete understanding of the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic species.

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Date

1. Introduction

Christians across a wide spectrum of tradition, belief and liturgical practice acknowledge that the “eucharistic meal is the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, the sacrament of his real presence”.¹ Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians also accept this statement, but writ large: Real Presence.

[These] churches believe that by the words of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and the wine of the eucharist become, in a real though mysterious manner, the body and blood of the risen Christ.²

The eucharistic presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ is still commonly (though unhelpfully) referred to today in a shorthand way as “transubstantiation” – Greek *metousiosis*, Latin *transsubstantiatio*. Although Orthodox and Roman Rite Christians have different understandings for their ‘transubstantiation’ terminology, and current church sacramental theology and Vatican II teaching combine to offer a more comprehensive, contemporary Western understanding of the term. The real presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in the Roman Catholic eucharist is understood today as much as the mystery of God’s saving grace causing the transformation wrought in the liturgical assembly, in the faithful gathered around the table, as that wrought in the substance of the bread and wine they have placed on the table.

This essay is constructed in three loose sections. Current official teaching on eucharistic presence will be reviewed, and its implications for contemporary speculative theology explored. Then we will look at some of the nodal points over the course of Western

¹ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, eucharist and ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No. 111), 1982. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission.html> (accessed 9 April 2007), 13.

² Ibid.

eucharistic history to assess how and why certain doctrinal changes occurred and positions were adopted in the church's understanding of eucharistic presence. Included in this survey will be the trends in the Middle Ages that encouraged adoration, rather than communion, at the eucharist; the contribution to systematizing our understanding of eucharistic presence made by scholastic theology and by St Thomas Aquinas; the impact of the Reformation and the canons of the Council of Trent; and the post-World War II controversies (concentrating principally on Schillebeeckx's attempts at a retrieval of authentic Thomist theology). The final section of the essay will examine attempts by contemporary theologians to establish a new synthesis of tradition, dogma and post-Vatican II theological insight to develop a workable understanding of eucharistic presence for Roman Rite Christians today.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to clarify our understanding of eucharistic presence in the context of its history and its formative factors, and to suggest ways in which the renewed interest in sacramental theology characteristic of our age could help us better understand the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic species. We will not deal directly with the other modes of the real presence outlined in contemporary church teaching, not because these modes are unimportant, but because of the historical nexus between real presence, eucharistic presence and transubstantiation, and because the church teaches that real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine is of a different order than the other modes recognized at Vatican II.

2. The theology of real presence today: The official documents

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, hereafter SC) was the first document approved at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).³ In addition to establishing a variety of new norms for Catholic liturgy,⁴ SC made several landmark statements which have guided and enriched subsequent theological investigation and pastoral activity. Principal among these is the statement in SC 7 on the presence of Christ in his church, especially in liturgical celebrations. SC 7 names five ways in which we experience (and help create) the real presence of Christ: in the sacraments, in the word, and when the church sings and prays. Within the eucharist, Christ is also present ‘in the person of his minister...and most of all in the eucharistic species’.

In his encyclical *Mysterium fidei*,⁵ Pope Paul VI added to the SC 7 list to restore several other ways in which the church has traditionally recognised the real presence: in the performance of works of mercy; in preaching; and in the work of governing the people of God.⁶ All real presences of Christ are real, said the pope, who used dynamic language to describe these restored aspects of real presence, but the eucharistic presence of the Lord is the real presence *par excellence* in the sense that Christ whole and entire, God and man, becomes present in a “privileged mode”.⁷ The pope also said that these other modes

³ Vatican II. “Sacrosanctum concilium.” In *Vatican Council II*. Vol 1, ed. A. Flannery, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), 1-36. Approved December 1963.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pars. 22-39: including a revision of the liturgical books; the development of the active participation of the assembly; increased prominence for scripture and the ministry of preaching; the use of the vernacular as the language of the eucharistic celebration; liturgical adaptation in mission lands.

⁵ Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei*, 1965. <http://www.adoremus.org/MysteriumFidei.html> (accessed 14 February 2007).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

of Christ's presence outside of the eucharist are different in that they admit varying degrees of presence, which is an advance on traditional neoscholastic teaching.⁸

SC does not mention the doctrine of transubstantiation, nor does it attempt a definition of "real presence" or of "eucharistic presence". In *Mysterium fidei*, Paul VI likewise attempts no definition of "presence" or "transubstantiation", simply repeating the doctrine proclaimed by the Council of Trent. He was at pains to point out that, while the ancient truths of faith could be clarified and made "more obvious", beliefs that had been part of orthodox faith could not simply be changed "under the pretext of new knowledge".⁹ With particular regard to transubstantiation, the pope goes on to say:

... [T]he way in which Christ becomes present in this sacrament [of the eucharist] is through the conversion of the whole substance of the bread into his body and the whole substance of the wine into his blood...that the Catholic church fittingly...calls transubstantiation.¹⁰

Similarly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is circumspect when dealing with real presence and transubstantiation,¹¹ reinforcing the teaching of SC 7 with regard to the presence of Christ¹² and Trent with regard to transubstantiation.¹³ The *Catechism* adds a sentence to emphasise the role of the church in the eucharistic assembly in the creation of the real presence: the faith of the church "in the efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit" brings about the conversion of the bread and wine into the body

⁸ M. S. Driscoll, "The cantor and the presence of Christ in the singing assembly," in *The many presences of Christ*, ed. T. Fitzgerald and D. A. Lysik (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 55-6.

⁹ *Mysterium fidei* 24, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹ F. Kerr, "Transubstantiation after Wittgenstein," *Modern Theology*, 15, (1999): 117. The *Catechism* "makes no appeal to a metaphysics of substance" in its discussion of real presence.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 1373.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1374, 1376 and 1381.

and blood to make Christ present in the sacrament.¹⁴ The reference to the power of the Holy Spirit in this act of conversion is a significant correction of its omission in the Tridentine Catechism of 1566.¹⁵ Similarly, the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* follows the *Catechism*, confirming that Christ is also made present “by that interior disposition and outward expression of supreme reverence” in which the assembly participates in the eucharistic liturgy.¹⁶

It would seem, therefore, that defending the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic bread and wine is no longer an issue that requires anathemas or other intemperate statements from the official magisterium of the church. The word “transubstantiation”, while evidently not widely understood, even in its anathematic Tridentine context (or possibly not thought to be important by the faithful today),¹⁷ still functions as a sort of litmus test that somehow sets Roman Catholics apart from other Christian groups, and acts as a rallying call for true believers to stand up for the faith against heresy.¹⁸ The secondary literature under discussion in this essay will largely support the thesis that the church continues to argue that transubstantiation is still an official dogma, but that the

¹⁴ Ibid., 1375, quoting both St John Chrysostom and St Ambrose.

¹⁵ N. D. Mitchell, *Real presence: The work of eucharist*. (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2000), 30. Mitchell also points out that the 1994 *Catechism* contextualizes these issues differently. It deals with sacraments within the section on the nature of the liturgy, and places discussion of the real presence after the now post-Vatican II normative role of the assembly in the eucharist. See Mitchell, *Real presence*, 21.

¹⁶ US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Washington DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), 3, reinforcing *Catechism* 1375.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Real presence*, 3.

¹⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, “The dogma of the Council of Trent on transubstantiation: Its development and the categories in which it is expressed,” in *Primary readings on the eucharist*, ed. T. J. Fisch, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), 87. Transubstantiation became for Trent “a political banner of the orthodox faith”. Some of that populist ideology still persists today. See also T. F. Koernke, “The many presences of Christ: Recovering the tradition, renewing the churches,” in *The many presences of Christ*, ed. T. Fitzgerald and D. A. Lysik, (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1999), 122.

way in which this particular truth of the faith and its role as part of the eucharistic real presence in the economy of salvation is proved or demonstrated has been clarified.

3. Real presence, eucharistic presence, physical realism

This essay does not provide the scope or opportunity for any detailed review of the development of eucharistic theology and practices in the churches of the Middle Ages, but it is appropriate, nevertheless, to sketch in some trends and to revisit certain key controversies. After the Constantinian settlement in 313, the celebration of the eucharist was irrevocably cut from the community “house church” arrangements that had been characteristic of the church under persecution. In major Christian centres, there were now multiple celebrations of the eucharist on any one Lord’s Day, and on other feast days, to accommodate the pastoral needs of the faithful in larger numbers. This process of “disengagement”¹⁹ of the eucharistic celebration from its community setting had begun, and, with it, a shift in emphasis from an active community meal to a ritual meal with more exaggerated reverence for the species themselves.²⁰

In the patristic era, the sacramental system remained closed. The bread and the wine became the body and blood of Christ with the words of institution. The bread and wine were visual symbols of the invisible Christ, appearing as the eucharistic gifts of his body and blood.²¹ The use of the *Sancta* and the *fermentum* in Rome around this time²² arose

¹⁹ N. D. Mitchell, *Cult and controversy: The worship of the eucharist outside mass*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 39.

²⁰ G. J. C. Snoek, “The process of independence of the eucharist,” in *Primary readings on the eucharist*, ed. T. J. Fisch, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42, referring to Ambrose and Augustine.

²² Mitchell, *Cult and controversy*, 58.

out of pastoral considerations, but also served to increase the reverence shown to the consecrated species. Over time, the sacred species began to serve more as allegorical symbols: a way of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins; as a symbol of the unity of this church with the local bishop. The faithful became more focused on the developing allegorical frame of reference for communion than on receiving the body and blood of Christ in communion.

In the Middle Ages, the allegorisation of the eucharistic rite became dominant. Reverence for the eucharistic species was paramount, and the gifts of the eucharist became fully uncoupled from the liturgy and its sacramental context. The eucharistic species were seen as the embodiment of Christ. The priest was now not just the only person in the church who could understand the sacred texts; he became the only person who was holy enough to touch the eucharist.²³ Increased eucharistic scrupulosity led to the cup being withdrawn from the people and the use of unleavened bread.²⁴ The duty to attend mass regularly was fully uncoupled from the obligation to take communion regularly. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) insisted on a minimum annual communion, but there is no evidence to show that people complied. Of course, laws regarding confession and penance also inhibited the faithful from receiving communion more frequently during this era.

The rise of the cult of eucharistic adoration around this time²⁵ built on the phenomenon of ocular communion that had widely become a devotional high-point in the eucharist, with ever exaggerated *elevatio* after the prayer of consecration. Adoration became the usual

²³ Snoek, "Eucharist", 37 and 45.

²⁴ Because it did not create crumbs. Ibid., 46.

²⁵ For example, the feast of Corpus Christi was instituted in 1246.

personal encounter with Christ.²⁶ These devotional practices themselves led to an increase in eucharistic piety and, ultimately, to a fully-fledged suite of eucharistic cults outside of mass.²⁷

Finally, a brief word on the ninth and eleventh century eucharistic controversies about the eucharistic presence. These controversies were a contributing factor in the shift in the church's teaching on the real presence from traditional mystagogy to an independently-articulated theological statement that served to differentiate the sacramental signs of the eucharistic sacrifice from the things signed. It was a debate between the realists and the sacramentalists.²⁸ Paschasius Radbertus²⁹ developed a theology of the real eucharistic presence that insisted on utter realism: after the words of consecration, Jesus's earthly body and blood was literally present on the altar, masked by the bread and the wine. Christ's sacramental body was literally his historical body. Ratramnus³⁰ argued against the graphic realism of Radbertus: Christ was truly present on the altar, but in his sacramental presence through the bread and wine, rather than in any crudely materialistic way. Radbertus's position was upheld.³¹

In the eleventh century, the controversy about the real eucharistic presence flared once again. Berengar³² argued that the body and blood of Christ were present at the eucharist

²⁶ Snoek, "Eucharist", 65.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Cult and controversy*, 66, describes this process as the final "estrangement" of the faithful from the eucharist.

²⁸ N. D. Mitchell, "Worship of the eucharist outside mass," in *Handbook of liturgical studies: The eucharist*. Vol. 3, ed. A. J. Chupungco, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 271.

²⁹ Benedictine Abbot of Corbie, died ?860.

³⁰ Also a Benedictine monk from Corbie, died after 868.

³¹ Mitchell, *Cult and controversy*, 73-86; Snoek, "Eucharist", 44.

³² Scholar, teacher and theologian from Tours, under the patronage of the court of Anjou, died 1088.

under the eucharistic signs of bread and wine. Humans needed signs that were intelligible and open to faith, he argued. He was also concerned that Christ's glorified humanity not be lost in the material reality interpretation of the eucharist elements that was more popularly held as the doctrine of the real presence. Berengar's theological opponent, Lanfranc,³³ supported the carnal, materialistic interpretation of Christ's eucharistic presence arguing, in essence, that God's power far exceeded man's intellect, and God's capacity in the eucharist should not be restricted by man's limitations. Berengar was ultimately forced to recant, and the literal material theology was officially confirmed.³⁴

4. Trent's use of the Scholastic synthesis

By the thirteenth century the word "transubstantiation" had become the accepted term to describe the conversion of the elements of the bread and wine into the eucharistic body and blood of Christ. The church had always believed and the faithful had always confessed that the presence of the glorified Christ on the altar at the eucharist was real.³⁵ This had been part of the church's mystagogical teaching (that is, liturgising the mystery of the incarnate God) and sacramental practice (that is, enacting this mystery) since the days of the Fathers. The rise of Scholastic theology,³⁶ its propositional logic and its rediscovery of the categories and taxonomies of the ancient Greek philosophers, the focus for concentrated analysis and learning provided by the nascent schools and then

³³ Abbot of St Stephen's in Caen, under the patronage of the Norman court. Died 1089.

³⁴ In 1059. Mitchell points out (*Cult and controversy*, 149-51) that, in the ninth century, Radbertus was not censured for his theology of eucharistic presence, while two hundred years later Berengar was. But Berengar was in part unlucky, because he was also on the losing side in national political maneuverings, as the pope supported the Normans against the Anjou in their territorial and political ambitions at this time.

³⁵ E. Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 73.

³⁶ Generally dated from the time of Peter Lombard, died 1160s.

universities of theology - all these factors contributed to a re-examination of the theology of the eucharistic presence.

Thomas Aquinas, Albert and Bonaventure³⁷ all worked to develop a philosophically more respectable theory to explain the real presence than the “butcher-shop theology”³⁸ that had officially prevailed since Berengar’s recantation two centuries earlier, and that governed popular eucharistic practice and piety throughout Western Christendom.

Aquinas’s revision of the materialistic interpretation of the real presence was initially not well-received beyond the academy.³⁹ Aquinas was essentially seeking a non-sensual way of understanding the real presence at the eucharist to downplay the unsophisticated gross realism of the common people.⁴⁰ The reality of the change in the bread and wine was not at issue: this had been a deeply-held view of both Western and Eastern Fathers. Thomas had nothing to say that contradicted this belief – he proceeded from a position of faith. What was required, the scholastics proposed (and disputed quite strongly amongst themselves) was a “modern” synthesis of this age-old belief with the tenets of natural philosophy as rediscovered from Aristotle.

Aquinas maintained that there were three levels of understanding the real presence in the eucharist: the unique real presence (understood at the level of faith); the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (understood at the ontological level);

³⁷ All of whom wrote in the mid 13th century.

³⁸ Mitchell, *Cult and controversy*, 138, referring to Augustine’s description of this position.

³⁹ Aquinas’s theorising was regarded in some quarters as “shocking”, and his proposals to explain transubstantiation disturbing. See E. Schillebeeckx, “Transubstantiation, transfinalisation, transignification,” in *Living bread, saving cup: Readings on the eucharist*, ed. R. K. Seasoltz, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 175.

⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, 15.

and the theory of substance and accidents (understood from the level of natural philosophy).⁴¹ There is a vast literature on Aquinas's use of the categories of "substance" and "accidents" to explain the eucharistic conversion and the eucharistic presence. These arguments will not be rehearsed here, save to comment, however, that it is worth remembering that for Aquinas "substance" meant a stable reality, not (as we would understand) a precise physical compound.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) first discussed draft canons on the eucharistic presence (which they believed had been denied by the reformers – but which had possibly not been denied by Luther and Calvin) in May 1547, and the final texts were approved in October 1551. It is worth quoting the 1551 canons in full.

1. If anyone should deny that the most holy sacrament of the eucharist truly, really and substantially contains the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and thus the whole Christ, but should say that they are only present as in a sign or figure or only by their efficacy, let him be excommunicated.
2. Should anyone maintain that, in the most holy sacrament of the eucharist, the substance of the bread and wine remains in existence together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and should deny this wonderful and unique changing of the whole substance of bread into the body and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood, while the species of bread and wine nonetheless remain, which change the Catholic Church very suitably calls transubstantiation, let him be excommunicated.⁴²

Both canons say essentially the same thing, with the second supplying the "suitable" name for the change. The canons make it clear that Trent affirmed the real presence at the eucharist. Trent said that Christ's presence in the eucharist was qualitatively different to

⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴² Ibid., 37-38.

his presence in the other sacraments – it was a distinctive and substantial mode of reality. It did not define the change process *per se*: this remains an accepted part of Catholic faith. Neither did Trent provide a detailed analysis of the word “transubstantiation”, whether according to high Scholastic theology or to some other standard.⁴³ The second canon simply confirmed that this was what the conversion process was properly called. From his reading of the preliminary Trent documents, Schillebeeckx points out that there was even some disagreement among the Fathers as to the wisdom of using the word “transubstantiation” in the second canon, but the final consensus was that this was necessary to refute the theology of Zwingli and Oecolampadius, and rebut the challenge from Luther with regard to the term (if not the theology).⁴⁴

The Council Fathers at Trent had, in fact, little alternative but to use the term “transubstantiation” in their canon.⁴⁵ Their unconscious but all-encompassing frame of reference was the Aristotelian philosophy of being taught by Scholasticism. Because of Luther’s invective against the term “transubstantiation”, and his contrary teaching of “companionation”, they must have felt obliged to defend the Catholic terminology (“transubstantiation”), without necessarily endorsing the full explanation for the term available via Aristotelian logic. Aquinas also argued that natural philosophy was one particular way of understanding transubstantiation (at a theoretical level, as distinct from

⁴³ Nor did they adjudicate between the different schools of Scholastic thought on the topic. See E. Schillebeeckx, “The dogma of the Council of Trent on transubstantiation: Its development and the categories in which it is expressed,” in *Primary readings on the eucharist*, ed. T. J. Fisch, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), 96.

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, 52-53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 59. It was impossible for Trent “to safeguard the distinctively Catholic character of Christ’s real presence in the eucharist without affirming transubstantiation”.

ecclesial and faith levels). The term had “suggestive force”.⁴⁶ It had neither widespread understanding among pastors and the faithful, nor a long theological pedigree.

Schillebeeckx also makes the point⁴⁷ that, for the late medieval mind, the word used to express the dogma was as important as the dogma itself. But Trent’s theological approval of the Scholastic philosophical theory that supported the real presence through transubstantiation was at best only partial.⁴⁸

5. Post World War II controversies: Scientism; rediscovering Thomas

The Catholic church continued to hold to its position on the eucharistic real presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ and to the term “transubstantiation” as the most fitting description of the conversion from bread and wine for several centuries after Trent.

“Transubstantiation” was confirmed in Catholic faith and folk law as one of the badges of true belief⁴⁹ that helped to nurture the cults of eucharistic adoration outside the eucharist that were a feature of the Catholic reformation and that marked a clear line of demarcation with the protestant churches.⁵⁰ Theological reputations were won and lost in seminaries worldwide through the neoscholastic manuals’ application⁵¹ of Aquinas’s arguments to prove the conversion process described by transubstantiation.

⁴⁶ Schillebeeckx, “The dogma of the Council of Trent on transubstantiation”, 87.

⁴⁷ Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, 26.

⁴⁸ E. J. Kilmartin, *The eucharist in the West*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 169.

⁴⁹ Although Mitchell (in *Real presence*, 3) claims that personal adherence to this belief has eroded significantly over time, especially during the second half of the twentieth century.

⁵⁰ Kilmartin, *The eucharist in the West*, 170 maintains that Trent attempted to de-emphasise adoration of the eucharistic species in favour of increased “reception by the faithful” of the real presence at the eucharist.

⁵¹ Some would say “mis-application”.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) neither spoke in anathemas to condemn heretical theologies or practices, nor made pronouncements and judgments on particular or controversial issues in church teaching. Rather, it outlined in its four major constitutional documents⁵² an encompassing and largely encouraging framework for the church to re-form its view of itself and its mission, and for its ongoing engagement with the world. So Vatican II⁵³ outlined a fundamental belief in the real presence of Christ in a number of modes, rather than mounted a defence of any particular descriptive or analytical system of that presence. As part of the process of drawing the Council to a productive conclusion in 1965, Paul VI issued a number of encyclicals, in part written to nuance the Council documents, to provide more specific instruction on the implementation of Council decisions (as the Council itself had requested) and also (one suspects) to mollify some of the dissenters and to encourage some of the waverers among the Council bishops to ensure a handsome near-unanimous vote in favour of the remaining Council documents. One such encyclical promulgated by Paul VI was *Mysterium fidei*, issued in September 1965, just before the conclusion of the Council.⁵⁴ In *Mysterium fidei*, the pope addressed several issues that some may have felt were not adequately covered in the Council documents.⁵⁵ He argued that the continuity and unassailability of orthodox faith was paramount in any theological debate that aimed to clarify the church's teaching.

⁵² These are *Lumen gentium*, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, *Dei verbum* and *Gaudium et spes*. See Vatican II, *Vatican Council II*. Vol 1, ed. A. Flannery, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998).

⁵³ In SC 7.

⁵⁴ And the vital final voting on *Gaudium et spes* and on *Dei verbum*.

⁵⁵ For instance, eucharist as mystery, as sacrifice; real presence (particularly in the eucharist through transubstantiation); and eucharistic devotion.

One of the reasons for the pope's concern about orthodoxy and continuity could well have been the mid-twentieth century debates (particularly in Holland) that had attempted a re-assessment of traditional Scholastic teaching on transubstantiation (some would say an attempt to retrieve genuine Thomist theology from the depredations of the manualists in the intervening centuries). Discoveries and new theories in twentieth-century physics called for a scientific re-assessment⁵⁶ of transubstantiation, some believed, in the light of new knowledge about quantum theory and matter. The scholastic metaphysical scheme was now seen to be manifestly deficient in providing workable, credible "explanations" of physical events. Disputes arose between "dogmatic physicists"⁵⁷ in Europe about distinctions that needed to be made between physical and ontological interpretations of the real presence in the eucharistic liturgy.^{58 59}

In addition to this marginal area of enquiry, the Dutch Dominican scholar Edward Schillebeeckx was arguing in the 1960s⁶⁰ that Catholic theology needed a new starting point for an authentic understanding of the real presence at the eucharist: a renewed

⁵⁶ J. M. Kubicki, "Perception, presence and sacramentality in a post modern context." *Studia Liturgica*, 35, (2005): 226. Liturgy deals with a kind of knowing that is nonscientific. Liturgy is a symbolic activity, "primarily non-discursive and exhibitivite". It is not a vehicle for propositional content.

⁵⁷ Some of this disputation was part of the discredited racial classification "science" encouraged by the National Socialist government in Germany (for example, the work of the German physicist J. Stark).

⁵⁸ Scientific reductionism in the name of "rationalist" theological argument did not help clarify matters. Philosophy does not need to explain something that only needs to be described. See F. Kerr, "Transubstantiation after Wittgenstein," *Modern Theology*, 15, (1999): 116, quoting Wittgenstein. This appears also to be the view held by the Council of Trent.

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that Benedict XVI, in his February 2007 encyclical also chooses a scientific metaphor to describe the conversion of the bread and wine at the eucharist. See Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 2007. <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=104416> (accessed 14 March 2007), 11. "The substantial conversion of bread and wine into [Christ's] body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of 'nuclear fission' ... which penetrates to the heart of all being, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all."

⁶⁰ See Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, and elsewhere.

anthropological perspective.⁶¹ This revived anthropological perspective would focus on sacramental realities, rather than physical realities. The human body was the visible presence of the Holy Spirit in the church,⁶² an aspect of the sacramental reality that scholastic teaching had largely ignored. Aquinas himself had argued that sacraments were a “sign”. What “sign” language could contemporary theology therefore draw from the fundamental Catholic belief of the eucharistic presence? The new lines of theological enquiry were Christological. “The ultimate reality of things is not what they are for our senses or for the scientific analysis that is based on this, but what they are for Christ”.⁶³

The new theology (which Paul VI was referring to in *Mysterium fidei*) was more existentialist and phenomenological than metaphysical. The ultimate “transfinalisation” and “transignification” that occurred at the eucharist depended on the encounter that occurs between Christ and ourselves. The eucharistic presence has to be made “real” through changes in the believers around the altar. Reading Paul VI carefully, he did not invoke the magisterium against this theology. He incorporated into his encyclical precisely what the Council of Trent taught about transubstantiation as the most fitting term to describe the conversion of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. He went on to say⁶⁴ that the consecrated species “undoubtedly take on a new signification

⁶¹ Ibid., 93. The influence of this anthropological perspective can be found in Vatican II and in the writings of other mainstream theologians of world renown in the second half of the twentieth century.

⁶² Ibid., 68, 97, 100.

⁶³ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁴ *Mysterium fidei*, 46.

and a new finality”, which at least acknowledged the terminology used by the more recent theological speculation.⁶⁵

The eucharistic presence controversy in Holland in the 1960s was an echo of the “material reality” controversy generated by Paschasius Radbertus in 831. The Dutch controversialists were seeking an understanding of eucharistic presence within contemporary theology and human insight.⁶⁶ The Dutch Jesuit scholar Piet Schoonenberg was one of these post-World War II theologians who attempted a new analysis of the eucharistic presence. He argued that Christ’s presence at the eucharist was a “personal” presence, and, as such needed to be received as a gift (not simply offered or made available) to become fully “real” in the sense of traditional Catholic teaching.⁶⁷ The real presence of Christ exists, he argued, of itself in the eucharist, but the consecrated species of bread and wine become fully signs and so are a more complete “transignification” of the real presence of Christ. Schoonenberg moved away from a concentration solely on the real presence of Christ in the consecrated species, seeing this as deriving as much from Christ’s real and personal presence in his church, particularly in the proclamation of the Word and in the community.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Schillebeeckx, in Seasoltz, *Living bread*, 189, argued that this new significance and new finality becomes significant because the consecrated bread and wine contain a new reality which can properly be termed “ontological”.

⁶⁶Radbertus essentially posed four questions. 1. The relationship between the historical body of Jesus and the eucharistic body of Christ. 2. How can the real presence in the eucharist be in many places at the one time? 3. What is the difference in the bread and wine before and after consecration? 4. What is the relationship between the sign and the realities they signify? (See Mitchell, *Cult and controversy*, 74-75. The Dutch controversialists also had four issues. 1. Eucharistic real presence, as distinct from the real presence in other sacraments. 2. The signs of the bread and wine and what they signified/symbolized/meant in reality. 3. How to describe this change in theological language. 4. What exactly constitutes the real presence after the consecration? (See Schillebeeckx in Seasoltz, *Living bread*, 182-183.

⁶⁷ See Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, 117-22, for a summary of Schoonenberg’s real presence theology.

⁶⁸ See also J. M. Kubicki, “Recognising the presence of Christ in the liturgical assembly.” *Theological Studies*, 65, (2004): 822, summarising Schoonenberg’s position.

Schillebeeckx's own position during this 1960s controversy, while true to his aim to retrieve a more authentic Thomist theology of eucharistic presence, prefigures what we will see below is a touchstone for late twentieth-century post-metaphysical sacramental theology and for a new understanding of the real presence. The transubstantiation of the bread and the wine in the eucharist is a human "establishment of meaning"⁶⁹ that enables us to receive God's gift of Christ himself, not in some form of changed being, but as a "changing" being that changes us for the service of the kingdom.⁷⁰ There is a "reciprocity" of presence. The real presence of Christ to the faithful receiving the eucharist also, in return, brings about the real presence of the church to Christ.⁷¹ Schillebeeckx strikes a new balance, moving from a Christological to an ecclesiological (rather than a physical) "explanation" of the real presence. "The Body of the Lord in the Christological sense is the body of the Lord in the ecclesiological sense".⁷²

The real presence of Christ in the eucharist can therefore only be approached by allowing the form of the bread and wine experienced phenomenally to refer to this presence (of Christ and of his church) in a projective act of faith which is an element of and in faith in Christ's eucharistic presence.⁷³

6. Towards a new theology of real presence

Although metaphysics as a school of philosophy receded in importance over the second half of the twentieth century, Aquinas's philosophical position was still very prevalent (known or unknown) and widely used in twentieth-century thinking, within and without

⁶⁹ Schillebeeckx, *The eucharist*, 134.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 150.

the church, particularly with regard to the nature of the human person. Aquinas claimed that, while human beings were limited, they nevertheless participated in the infinite being of God. The state of human existence is an analogous way for humans to approach the infinite being of God. The human person, while possessing both rational and spiritual natures, is a unified creation, not a body with a soul. There is a fundamental unity to human existence. Through the application of the intellect and the will, the human person can attain the two orders of knowledge, faith and reason. The human person is by nature directed towards ultimate fulfillment and completeness in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Human beings also attain proximate full self-realisation because they are social animals, drawn to participate in the collective life of society.⁷⁴

But Aristotelian metaphysics as a total philosophical system adopted in the Middle Ages and adapted over the centuries by the Western (Catholic) church no longer appears sufficiently robust to deal (as the only or the preferred system for philosophical discourse) with the wider range of theological and pastoral issues in which the church is properly engaged today. It is seen as fatally self-referential, anti-process, focusing on unattainable goals (stability, equilibrium, completeness, permanence), and prone to over-objectification, over-reductivity and utilitarianism.⁷⁵

A contemporary theological understanding of the real presence has to be able to deal with degrees of presence, with the capacity humans have for self-transcendence, and with the

⁷⁴ See J. L. Allard, *Education for freedom: The philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, (Notre Dame: NDU Press, 1982), 15; 17.

⁷⁵ To paraphrase N. D. Mitchell, "Mystery and manners: Eucharist in post-modern theology," *Worship*, 79, (2005): 136-9.

fact that, while humans are “beings”, human existence “is” in fact only in an embodied state.⁷⁶ In SC the theology of the real presence becomes reciprocal:⁷⁷ the effect of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist is contingent on us accepting this gift.⁷⁸ In the balance of this essay we will look at the current theological debate about the real presence set within the wider context of sacramental theology. This discussion will draw heavily on the many recent publications of Nathan Mitchell on real presence, with more than a nod to debates in Europe that are proposing a new philosophical/theological synthesis, perhaps to move the debate beyond residual scholasticism.

A detailed discussion of the impetus, and the outcomes from this impetus, given by SC to liturgical reform are beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the scope of the reform envisaged by SC was vast, although some of the items for reform were not unexpected. The principal new liturgical norm and the driving force behind much of the remaining reform agenda was the move to full, conscious and active participation by the assembly in the liturgy.⁷⁹ The reforms were in large part practical measures grounded in a theology of pastoral inevitability, the ground for which had been prepared over many decades by activists in the Liturgical Movement in Europe and the US, and which had received some “in principle” support from papal teaching. While changes and developments in sacramental theology can be deduced from SC and from the other major Vatican II documents, the Council bishops themselves did not (perhaps could not have

⁷⁶ Mitchell, “Mystery and manners”, 139.

⁷⁷ Schillebeeckx, in Seasoltz, *Living bread*, 188.

⁷⁸ US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the eucharist*, (Washington DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001), question 1. “The food and drink at the eucharist unite us with the humanity and the divinity of Christ. These gifts are an expression of God’s love for us. ‘We are brought up into the inner life of God’ in accepting these gifts.”

⁷⁹ SC 14 and elsewhere.

been expected to) produce a detailed theological underpinning for the reformed liturgy of the church. Of course, in the forty and more years that have elapsed since the implementation of the liturgical reforms, the social, ecclesial and theological agenda has also changed significantly. Some of the reforms have therefore been successful, others less so.⁸⁰ The renewal of the liturgy is clearly a work in progress.

The juxtaposition, the placing of old and new, tradition and progress, side by side can be discerned as the consistent structural principle of all Council texts, including the Constitution on the Liturgy...If we get to the bottom of all the basic renewal concerns of the Council, we see one continuing piece of work. The Council has called the church and also the liturgy to be *semper reformanda*.⁸¹

One of the reasons for the uneven pace of reform, it is suggested, is the need for the church to develop and agree on new post-Vatican II parameters for sacramental theology. The development of a contemporary and theologically workable understanding of the real presence is inhibited, for instance, by a sacramental theology that is still based on neo-Platonic cosmology, where “all creatures are ordered by their being, and can thus be located on a continuum flowing from God and returning to God”.⁸² Sacraments are signs that point to “a more real and more intelligible reality remaining beyond the world”.⁸³

⁸⁰ Lucien Deiss points out the irony of the church’s post-Vatican II commitment to and preoccupation with active participation. The liturgical reformers of the first half of the twentieth century got almost everything they argued for at Vatican II, Deiss says. The liturgy is positively transformed in so many ritual and participatory dimensions, and yet attendance at liturgies has dropped off alarmingly in most Western countries in recent years. Active participation (as implemented, or as a guiding principle) would appear, therefore, to be failing as a vehicle for church renewal. (See L. Deiss, “Participation: Is it worth the effort?” in *The singing assembly*, ed. V. C. Funk, (Washington DC: The Pastoral Press, 1991), 43.)

⁸¹ E. Jaschinski, *Musica sacra oder Musik im Gottesdienst?* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1990), 295. (My translation). “Die Juxtaposition, das Nebeneinander von Altem und Neuem, Tradition und Fortschritt, läßt sich als durchgängiges Strukturprinzip aller Konzilstexte beobachten, so auch der Liturgiekonstitution...Legt man das Kernanliegen der gesamten konziliaren Erneuerung...zugrunde, so ist eine bleibende Aufgabe gestellt. Das Konzil hat die Kirche und damit auch die Liturgie als eine *semper reformanda* erklärt.” See also L. Deiss, *Visions of liturgy and music for a new century*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 237.

⁸² L. Boeve, “Thinking sacramental presence in a postmodern context,” in *Sacramental presence in a postmodern context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, (Leuven: University Press, 2001), 6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8. Also: “Sacramentum est in genere signi,” said Thomas Aquinas.

The Vatican II-era sacramental theology advanced by Karl Rahner⁸⁴ and by Edward Schillebeeckx⁸⁵, as forward-looking as this was at the time, is at heart still grounded in the realm of Neo-platonic thought.⁸⁶ The sacramental theology framework within which scholars work today has undergone radical change, but the process of renewal is still ongoing. This framework from which scholarship is now emerging is, it is argued, too dualistic, static, transcendent, and ultimate for the degrees of immanence, particularity, contextuality, contingency and proximity⁸⁷ that are characteristic of the human condition before God today.⁸⁸ God does not become real or present in our lives in some ordered or predictable way. The sacramental encounter with God in the eucharist occurs when God causes tension by irrupting into our personal narrative.⁸⁹

For some there is a quite simple solution to what is really a simple question (the nature of the real presence in the eucharist) that has somehow broken loose and floated away from its traditional theologically safe and secure moorings. Louis-Marie Chauvet argues that the “proof” of the real presence is not in some “scientific” formula but rather in the ecclesial body, as the Fathers of old taught.

Theological tradition distinguished a threefold Body of Christ. 1: his historical and glorious body; 2: his eucharistic body that was called “mystical body”, because it was a “mysterious body”, that is to say in sacramental form; 3: his ecclesial body, growing in belief through history. Then, in the perspective of the church Fathers, the emphasis was not placed on the relationship of the second

⁸⁴ God self-communicates as a grace-filled presence to a fundamental human autonomy.

⁸⁵ Sacraments are signs that mediate, anticipate salvation – healed and reconciled life.

⁸⁶ Pope Benedict XVI recently confirmed (during his widely-reported speech on 12 September 2006 at Regensburg University) the fundamental debt owed by Christian thought to its syntheses with the ancient Greek philosophers to form a coherent world religious philosophy.

⁸⁷ None of these contemporary concepts are reified states or existences, nor do they come with an automatic negative/positive polarity.

⁸⁸ Boeve, “Thinking sacramental presence in a postmodern context”, 9-11. Also Kubicki, “Perception, presence and sacramentality”, 227.

⁸⁹ Boeve, “Thinking sacramental presence in a postmodern context”, 23.

body to the first: the church knew no controversy about the presence of Christ in the eucharist until the 9th century; up to this period, it was serenely affirmed, without problem one could say. Their emphasis was placed on the relationship between the second body with the third: the ecclesial body was for them the “proof” [*vérité*] of the eucharistic body... One tends thus to isolate it [the real presence] from the liturgical context where it occurs and from the ecclesial context for which it occurs.⁹⁰

Other contemporary theologians tackle the question of the real presence full-on in the context of new philosophies of contingent pluralism. Nathan Mitchell is one such, who bases much of his thinking on the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion (born 1946) who argues that God cannot be inscribed with being, and whose prodigal gifts of love and forgiveness subvert “the tyrannizing orders of exchange” that limit human life.⁹¹ Notions of being and causality to explain the real presence fail because they operate from the empirical world. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ outstrips the capacity of empirical evidence. Real presence exists without “empirical place”.⁹²

The Easter story is key to Marion’s theology, the starting point to our understanding of the real presence. The resurrection generates a new narrative for human beings; everything we “know” has to be re-learned in the new narrative of God’s limitless self-

⁹⁰ L. M. Chauvet, *Les sacrements: Parole de Dieu au risque du corps*, (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1993), 154-5. (My translation). “La tradition théologique distinguait communément un triple corps du Christ : 1. son corps historique et glorieux; 2. son corps eucharistique, que l’on a appelé ‘corps mystique’ jusqu’au fin du XIIe siècle, parce que ‘corps en mystère’, c’est-à dire en sacrement ; 3. son corps ecclésial enfin, en croissance dans l’histoire. Or, dans la perspective des Pères de l’Eglise, l’insistance ne portait pas sur le rapport du second corps au premier : l’Eglise n’a pas connu de controverse sur la présence du Christ dans l’eucharistie avant le IXe siècle ; jusqu’à cette époque, celle-ci était affirmé sereinement, sans problème pourrait-on dire. Leur insistance portait sur le rapport du second corps avec le troisième : le corps ecclésial était pour eux la ‘vérité’ du corps eucharistique... On tend donc à l’isoler du contexte liturgique où elle advient et du contexte ecclésial pour lequel elle advient”.

⁹¹ Mitchell, *Real presence*, 107-112. The “restored currency” of God’s relationship with humankind is unconditional love and forgiveness (Marion’s exegesis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, quoted in Mitchell *Real presence*, 110).

⁹² Marion, quoted in Mitchell, “Mystery and manners”, 140.

giving and love. Jesus Christ is with us in a new way after the resurrection and the ascension, no longer physical but in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. The presence and absence of Christ form one “ambivalent reality”. Christ’s real presence in the eucharist must be “inscribed on our bodies”, and not limited to a particular space.⁹³ After Easter, God takes on an eschatological body – the church, the Body of Christ – to be the real presence, the limitless gift of God’s love to others.⁹⁴ This post-ascension “absent” presence through the Holy Spirit is an intensification of Jesus’s physical presence; this human-physical distance, marked by the ascension, paradoxically makes Christ’s presence in his church continue and intensify.⁹⁵

6. Conclusion

The work of contemporary theologians would seem to indicate that a new synthesis is underway to help us understand, appreciate, pray and become the real presence of Christ at the eucharist. This new synthesis takes current insights from philosophy, from the tradition and from sacramental theology, much as in the manner of Augustine and Thomas in earlier times, proceeding from faith, and attempting to make the truth of the real presence “clearer and more obvious”.⁹⁶

⁹³ Marion, quoted in Mitchell, “Mystery and manners”, 143.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 147-148: the kenosis of God - the Ascension “marks the Paschal conversion of all presence into gift”.

⁹⁶ Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei*, 25. There are some pithy epigrammatic statements in the literature that attempt to catch people’s attention and to summarise this new synthesis. N. D. Mitchell, *Meeting mystery*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 176. “At the eucharist, the body of Christ is not just *on* the table, but *at* the table” (echoing the US Bishops, *Real presence*, 6 – we are not simply spectators at but participators in the eucharist). D. N. Power, “The language of sacramental memorial,” in *Sacramental presence in a postmodern context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, (Leuven: University Press, 2001), 157. “The eucharist is a sacrament of the people of God, who, by ingesting the body and blood become the truly real presence of Christ in the World”.

Mitchell has developed⁹⁷ five summary principles regarding an authentic Catholic theology of real presence. He notes that “real presence”, while a belief going back to the early church, is in fact a late medieval term that possibly first gained wide (and uneven) currency in and after the debates with the reformers. Christ is wholly and substantially present at the eucharist, as taught continuously throughout the history of the church. Christ’s real presence at the table of the eucharist is intimately related to Christ’s presence in the Word.⁹⁸ The reality of the real presence is not just in the sacramental species, but in the unity of the church, the mystical Body of Christ. And there is a “radically kenotic aspect”⁹⁹ to the real presence.

After all, sacraments are for embodied people: “The purpose of the eucharist is not to change bread but to change people”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ N. D. Mitchell, “Real presence.” *Worship*, 80, (2006): 563-66, presumably replacing or updating his earlier “five principles” on the real presence in his book *Real presence: The work of eucharist*, (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2000), 91-5. The 2000 “five principles” were actually first published elsewhere in 1998.

⁹⁸ A classic teaching that may be lost on those who promote adoration divorced from eucharist, or who see the real presence “only” in the exposition of the reserved sacrament (see T. F. Koernke, “The many presences of Christ: Recovering the tradition, renewing the churches\”, in *The many presences of Christ*, ed. T. Fitzgerald and D. A. Lysik, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 125).

⁹⁹ Mitchell, “Real presence”, 565.

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, *Real presence*, 120.

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