

Friday for the Third Week of Easter

Acts 9:1–20

Psalm 117

John 6:52–59

Summa theologiae

Bene scripsisti de me Thoma (You have written well of me Thomas) What would you have as a reward?

Nil nisi te (Nothing except you).

No teaching of Jesus' is clearer and no doctrine of the Church has been more often contested than the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, a technical term coined by St Thomas Aquinas. For 2000 years the Catholic Church has always taught that at the deepest reality the Eucharistic elements change into the personal presence of Christ, even as their appearances remain the same. This is what we mean by "transubstantiation."

St Thomas argued that at the consecration the substance of the bread is changed into the substance of the body of Jesus, and that the substance of the wine is changed into the substance of the blood of Jesus, even as the accidents of bread and wine remain unchanged. If the terms "substance" and "accident" seem odd to us, we can translate them simply and accurately as "reality" and "appearance." Aquinas taught that the deepest reality of the Eucharistic elements' changes into the personal presence of Christ, even as their appearances remain the same.

We know that most of the time reality (what something is) and appearance (what something looks like) coincide, but we also know that there are exceptions to the rule. If you look up into the sky on a clear night you see what appear to be stars in their present configuration, but the astronomers tell us that you are actually seeing into the distant past, since it has taken thousands of years for the light of those stars to reach your eyes. You are not looking at the stars that are there, but rather at the stars that were there: appearance and reality, in this case, divide.

Or suppose you meet a person who makes a very poor first impression and you conclude that he is just not a likable man. But someone who knows him much better, who has watched him under a variety of circumstances and across many years, corrects you: "I know he can seem that way, but he really isn't." Once again,

appearance and reality do not coincide, and the noncoincidence is pointed out by someone who has more experience than you do.

Something very similar is at play regarding the Eucharist. But still how does Aquinas explain the change? Aquinas saw the change as a consequence of the power of Jesus's words: "this is my body" and "this is the cup of my blood." For you see words are not only descriptive; they can also be, under certain circumstances, transformative: they can change the way things are.

Clearly our Lord understood that this is indeed his body and blood. That this is so, what should our attitude be when receiving Jesus? Jesus tells us what it should be explicitly:

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

In the Greek the word used for "eat" in the first instance is the common word we would use for "eat". But in the next two instances the word for eat has been changed to the word used to represent how an animal would chew or gnaw on a bone.

Such say Jesus is to be our attitude towards his body and blood because when we chew and gnaw on his flesh and drink his blood abide he abides in us and we abide in him.

Thanks be to Jesus that he is so clear on the simple way by which we can truly share his life every day as we hear him say:

This is my body which will be given up for you.