

Transubstantiation

THEOLOGY, HISTORY,
AND CHRISTIAN UNITY



Brett Salkeld

Foreword by Michael Root

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1

Introduction

Transubstantiation in Dispute and Dialogue

Rejection of Transubstantiation

Martin Luther

As noted in the preface, the first Reformation salvo against transubstantiation was launched by Martin Luther in 1520 in his landmark *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.¹ In it he listed three “captivities” in which Rome held the Eucharist, but termed the “second captivity”—namely, the doctrine of transubstantiation—“less grievous”² than the other two. Because it supported the doctrine of real presence, of which Luther was a fierce advocate, it did not get near the measure of Luther’s ire that the third and greatest captivity, the Mass understood as a sacrifice, did.³ Nevertheless, Luther found transubstantiation to be philosophically incoherent and resented its imposition by Church authority. In fact, by the late Middle Ages, several theologians were following the lead of William of Ockham, one of the founders of the nominalist school in which Luther was educated, who had concluded that

1. It is important to note, however, that the basic direction Luther was to take here was already indicated in his work “A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass,” written earlier that same year. See William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 130–33.

2. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in LW 36:28.

3. The first captivity, the withholding of the cup from the laity, is no longer standard Catholic practice and consequently not a major ecumenical question.

the theory known as consubstantiation was more philosophically coherent than transubstantiation and would be preferable had the Church not officially endorsed transubstantiation at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).⁴ Luther himself references “the learned Cardinal of Cambrai,”⁵ one Pierre d’Ailly (1350–1420), a student of Ockham’s, as convincing him that “to hold that real bread and real wine, and not merely their accidents, are present on the altar, would be much more probable and require fewer superfluous miracles—if only the church had not decreed otherwise.”⁶

Luther was willing to let transubstantiation stand as a theological opinion—though he made it clear that he found it a poor one—but not as required doctrine, arguing that the Church does not have the authority to impose such a human opinion as an article of faith. Of Thomas, whom many scholars believe Luther knew only secondhand,⁷ and his view of transubstantiation, Luther wrote,

But this opinion of Thomas hangs so completely in the air without support of Scripture or reason that it seems to me he knows neither his philosophy nor his logic. For Aristotle speaks of subject and accidents so differently from St. Thomas that it seems to me this great man is to be pitied not only for attempting to draw his opinions in matters of faith from Aristotle, but also for attempting to base them upon a man whom he did not understand, thus building an unfortunate superstructure upon an unfortunate foundation.⁸

Luther’s concerns about transubstantiation were twofold. First of all, Luther was convinced that, in the doctrine of transubstantiation, philosophy was allowed to override the biblical witness. The Bible does not speak of the accidents of bread, but of bread. Recourse to such Aristotelian categories is an unnecessary distraction from the witness of the Word of God. “Moreover,” Luther asserts,

4. Roch A. Kereszty, OCist, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Perspective* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2004), 137–38. Cf. Ian Christopher Levy, “The Eucharist in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 237–38; Reinhard Hütter, “Transubstantiation Revisited: Sacra Doctrina, Dogma, and Metaphysics,” in *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life*, ed. Reinhard Hütter and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 51–52.

5. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in LW 36:28.

6. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in LW 36:29.

7. Charles Morerod, *Ecumenism and Philosophy: Philosophical Questions for a Renewal of Dialogue* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2006), 54.

8. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in LW 36:29.

the church kept the true faith for more than twelve hundred years, during which time the holy fathers never, at any time or place, mentioned this transubstantiation (a monstrous word and a monstrous idea), until the pseudo philosophy of Aristotle began to make its inroads into the church in these last three hundred years [i.e., since the Fourth Lateran Council officially established transubstantiation in 1215].⁹

Second, Luther was concerned that transubstantiation failed to respect the logic of the incarnation, on which the sacrament is based. He writes that

what is true in regard to Christ is also true in regard to the sacrament. In order for the divine nature to dwell in him bodily [Col. 2:9], it is not necessary for the human nature to be transubstantiated and the divine nature contained under the accidents of the human nature. Both natures are simply there in their entirety, and it is truly said: “This man is God; this God is man.” Even though philosophy cannot grasp this, faith grasps it nonetheless. And the authority of God’s word is greater than the capacity of our intellect to grasp it. In like manner, it is not necessary in the sacrament that the bread and wine be transubstantiated and that Christ be contained under their accidents in order that the real body and real blood may be present. But both remain there at the same time, and it is truly said: “This bread is my body; this wine is my blood,” and vice versa.¹⁰

For Luther, both the biblical witness and the logic of the incarnation demand the same thing, namely, that one affirm the continued reality of the bread and wine. Transubstantiation fails for him precisely because it denies their reality.

Because the medieval theory of consubstantiation, preferred by Ockham and others, affirms the continued substance of the bread and wine after the consecration (transubstantiation, alternatively, teaches that the substance of the bread and wine is precisely what has *become* the substance of the body and blood of Christ), many have referred to Luther’s own view as consubstantiation. However, despite the affinity between Luther’s own view and the theory of consubstantiation, Luther himself did not use the term, nor do the Lutheran confessions; and many contemporary Lutherans reject it as an accurate description of their eucharistic doctrine, preferring, for example, the term “sacramental union.”¹¹ Luther’s concern that the Roman Church had abandoned the biblical witness for philosophy meant that he was not

9. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *LW* 36:31.

10. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *LW* 36:35.

11. See, e.g., John R. Stephenson, *The Lord’s Supper*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics XII (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2003), 109.

interested in replacing one philosophical explanation with another.¹² Nevertheless, as we shall see in chapter 3, Luther was willing to have recourse to philosophy in his debate with the Swiss, led by Zwingli, who, in Luther's view at least, reduced the Supper to a mere mnemonic device.

John Calvin

John Calvin, a second-generation Reformer, hoped to produce an articulation of eucharistic presence that would satisfy both the Lutherans and the Swiss, thereby preserving the unity of the Reformation communities.¹³ That this hope was disappointed is a matter of historical fact, but despite his failure in terms of unifying the Protestant movement, Calvin's eucharistic doctrine remains immensely important. In fact, with Lutheran realists on the one hand, and Swiss symbolists on the other, Calvin's attempt could be understood as an early work of ecumenism. (Indeed, he encountered that perennial bane of ecumenists: being rejected by both sides.) Unfortunately for us, Calvin's ecumenical sympathies did not extend beyond the communities of the Reformation. And while he could write quite sensitively, seeking the truth in the affirmations of the two disputing parties,¹⁴ Roman Catholic articulations, especially about transubstantiation and sacrifice, were not generally subject to the same sympathetic treatment.¹⁵

Transubstantiation is, for Calvin, "this ingenious subtlety" through which "bread came to be taken for God."¹⁶ Like Luther, Calvin denounces the fact that transubstantiation denies the presence of the bread and wine after the consecration. The Church Fathers certainly talk of a "conversion" of the elements, admits Calvin, "but they all everywhere clearly proclaim that the Sacred Supper consists of two parts, the earthly and the heavenly; and they interpret the earthly part to be indisputably bread and wine."¹⁷ And, also like Luther,

12. Crockett, *Eucharist*, 134.

13. Alasdair Heron, *Table and Tradition: Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1983), 122.

14. Cf. Heron, *Table and Tradition*, 124–26. See especially Calvin's "Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord," in *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 2:163–98.

15. Reformed theologian George Hunsinger writes, specifically with respect to the theme of sacrifice, that "by comparison with his predecessors, [Calvin] also took greater notice of Roman Catholic rebuttals, though he rejected them out of hand." Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 105.

16. John Calvin, "Book IV, Chapter xvii: The Sacred Supper of Christ, and What It Brings to Us," in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, Library of Christian Classics 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1374 (13).

17. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17:1375; cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* (Chicago:

Calvin points out the relatively recent vintage of the term: “For transubstantiation was devised not so long ago; indeed not only was it unknown to those better ages when the purer doctrine of religion still flourished, but even when that purity already was somewhat corrupted.”¹⁸ Furthermore, asserts Calvin, to deprive the bread and wine of their reality is to deprive the Supper of its sacramental nature and to make of it a deception rather than a revelation:

Christ’s purpose was to witness by the outward symbol that his flesh is food; if he had put forward only the empty appearance of bread and not true bread, where would be the analogy or comparison needed to lead us from the visible thing to the invisible? For, if we are to be perfectly consistent, the signification extends no farther than that we are fed by the form of Christ’s flesh. For instance, if in baptism the figure of water were to deceive our eyes, we would have no sure pledge of our washing; indeed, that false show would give us reason to hesitate. The nature of the sacrament is therefore canceled, unless, in the mode of signifying, the earthly sign corresponds to the heavenly thing. And the truth of this mystery accordingly perishes for us unless true bread represents the true body of Christ.¹⁹

Rather than believing in a sacrament, wherein an earthly reality represents a heavenly one, the Catholic view is, according to Calvin, the product of a “crude imagination” that views the consecration as “virtually equivalent to magic incantation.”²⁰ “That fictitious transubstantiation for which today they fight more bitterly than for all the other articles of their faith”²¹ functions precisely to obscure the essence of the sacrament. Both the superstitious common folk and the leaders of the Catholic Church “are little concerned about true faith by which alone we attain fellowship with Christ and cleave to him. Provided they have a physical presence of him, which they have fabricated apart from God’s Word, they think that they have presence enough.”²² Calvin, often caricatured as a mere memorialist on the question of eucharistic presence by those who have not read him, has turned the tables here. It is the

University of Chicago Press, 1984), 197–98. Pelikan notes that “Roman Catholics cited as ‘clear testimony for transubstantiation’ the ambiguous formula of Irenaeus that ‘the Eucharist . . . consists of two realities, earthly and heavenly.’”

18. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17:1375 (14). Calvin later adds, “Even in Bernard’s time, although a blunter manner of speaking had been adopted, transubstantiation was not yet recognized. And in all ages before this comparison flitted about on everybody’s lips, that the spiritual reality is joined to bread and wine in this mystery” (*Inst.* 4.17:1377).

19. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17:1376 (14).

20. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17:1377 (15).

21. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17:1374 (14).

22. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17:1374 (13).

Catholics with their transubstantiation who have the rather bare theology of eucharistic presence, not merely memorialist, but merely physicalist. According to William Crockett, Calvin “believed that in practice, the doctrine of transubstantiation had turned the real presence of Christ into an object on the altar that placed it at the disposal of human beings. This is simply blasphemy for Calvin. God is never at our disposal. We are always at God’s disposal.”²³

The Council of Trent

To all of this, the Council of Trent responded with a staunch defense of contemporaneous Roman Catholic terminology and practice. Though the council did also offer clarification at places where what was being attacked by the Reformers did not accurately reflect the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, the canons at the end of each decree anathematizing positions contrary to those of the council are what have historically stood out most strongly.²⁴

The council’s thirteenth session produced the “Decree on the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist,” which dealt with, among other things, the question of transubstantiation. In its first two canons we find a whole range of Reformation opinion on the matter refuted:

1. If anyone denies that in the most holy sacrament of the eucharist there are contained truly, really and substantially, the body and blood of our lord Jesus Christ together with the soul and divinity, and therefore the whole Christ, but says that he is present in it only as in a sign or figure or by his power: let him be anathema.

2. If anyone says that in the venerable sacrament of the eucharist the substance of the bread and wine remains together with the body and blood of our lord Jesus Christ, and denies that marvelous and unique change of the whole substance of the bread into the body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood, while only the appearance of bread and wine remains, a change which the catholic church most aptly calls transubstantiation: let him be anathema.²⁵

And, following a series of canons concerned with defending practices of Catholic piety such as adoring the reserved host, canon 8, continuing in the

23. Crockett, *Eucharist*, 151.

24. David N. Power, OMI, *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 254; see also Liam G. Walsh, OP, *Sacraments of Initiation: A Theology of Life, Word, and Rite*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2011), 335; Kereszty, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 150.

25. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:697.

spirit of canons 1 and 2, anathematizes anyone who “says that Christ, when presented in the eucharist, is consumed only spiritually, and not also sacramentally and really.”²⁶

It is clear enough then, that, in the sixteenth century, both the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church made statements categorically rejecting what they took to be the position of their opponents. Nevertheless, the perceptive reader might be asking whether there was more room for agreement than we have seen presented here. Indeed, it is hoped that this brief introduction indicates both the self-assuredness of the various parties and the rancor of the debate so as to help us better understand how the question of transubstantiation came to be so intractable for so many centuries. Furthermore, the emphatic role that transubstantiation played in the writings of Luther and Calvin, and in the canons of Trent, helps to explain how it has become so central to the ecclesial identity of both Catholics, in its acceptance, and Protestants, in its rejection.²⁷

But, as important as it is to understand the depth of the disagreement in the sixteenth century and the emotional weight attached to these issues down the centuries, it is also essential to note that, at many key points, the combatants were talking past each other. In a less-heated ecclesial climate, it could become clear that what each party rejected was not always what the other party affirmed and that, underlying certain articulations that looked diametrically opposed, there lay common concerns and convictions. It is because of this that, once the Roman Catholic Church entered ecumenical dialogue in earnest following the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, convergence on the Eucharist was able to proceed quite rapidly. A brief investigation of this phenomenon is our next task.

Agreement on Transubstantiation?

Given the centrality of disputes about the Eucharist in the division of the Western Church in the sixteenth century, it is not surprising that discussion about the Eucharist would play a prominent role in contemporary ecumenical dialogue. What *is* surprising is how quickly the descendants of Trent were able to come to wide-ranging eucharistic agreement with the descendants of Luther and Calvin, and even, to a lesser degree, those of Zwingli.

26. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2:698.

27. Cf. Hütter, “Transubstantiation Revisited,” 22; Gerard Kelly, “The Eucharistic Doctrine of Transubstantiation,” in *The Eucharist: Faith and Worship*, ed. Margaret Press (Homebush, Australia: St. Pauls, 2001), 56.

With the Second Vatican Council and its decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, promulgated November 21, 1964, the Catholic Church officially entered the modern ecumenical movement. By 1967, the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States had produced the agreed statement *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*. By 1971, the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), jointly launched in 1966 by Pope Paul VI and the archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, had put forward *An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine*. Also in 1971, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) released *The Eucharist in Ecumenical Thought*, a document that drew heavily on the unofficial Group of Les Dombes dialogue between Catholics and Reformed Protestants in France and its document *Towards a Common Eucharistic Faith?*²⁸ By 1973 these four documents were gathered into the slim volume *Modern Eucharistic Agreement*.²⁹

What the WCC affirmed of its own document could easily be applied to the other agreements: “We believe that it reflects a degree of agreement that could not have been foreseen even five years ago and that our future is bright with hope.”³⁰ (In 1992, the Vatican itself made a similar, if more measured, judgment about the ARCIC statement. The ARCIC report, it says, “witnesses to achievement of points of convergence and even of agreement which many would not have thought possible,”³¹ and that “it is in respect of *Eucharistic Doctrine* [ARCIC I had also dealt with ministry and authority] that the members of the commission were able to achieve the most notable progress toward a consensus.”³²) In fact, by 1982, less than twenty years after the Roman Catholic Church’s entry into the ecumenical movement, Roman Catholic theologians had joined signatories from Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, United, Disciples, Baptist, Adventist, and Pentecostal communities

28. On the relationship between these two documents, see H. R. McAdoo, “Introduction: Documents on Modern Eucharistic Agreement,” in *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1973), 8–13.

29. ARCIC, “An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine,” in *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1973), 23–31; A Lutheran–Roman Catholic Statement, “The Eucharist as Sacrifice,” in *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1973), 33–49; Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, “The Eucharist in Ecumenical Thought,” in *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1973), 79–89; Group of Les Dombes, “Towards a Common Eucharistic Faith?,” in *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1973), 51–78.

30. Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, “The Eucharist in Ecumenical Thought,” 84.

31. CDF/PCPCU, “The Official Response of the Roman Catholic Church to ARCIC I,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 38.

32. CDF/PCPCU, “Official Response,” 39.

in recommending the publication of the WCC agreed statement *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)* for the consideration of Christians throughout the world.³³

In response to such rapid progress and ecumenical productivity, at least two questions emerge: What is the actual content of these agreements? And how were they achieved so rapidly?

A Unique Presence

One of the most remarkable things about the agreements is that several dialogues were coming to roughly the same conclusions at roughly the same time.³⁴ That being the case, we need not wade through each document individually, but can rather highlight several themes that can be found in most or all of them.

Perhaps the most salient point, when considering all the agreements taken together, is the universal affirmation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. This should not be overly surprising when we consider that neither Luther nor Calvin ever rejected real presence, though it is worth noting how quickly the Zwinglian position became marginalized in ecumenical dialogue.³⁵ In the past, terms such as "bare memorialism" or "crude materialism" were used to denounce the views of one's opponents. In ecumenical dialogue such terms become, instead, boundary markers for orthodoxy.³⁶ Those affirming real presence assure us that they subscribe to neither of these two positions. The Group of Les Dombes statement, for example, speaks of "leaving aside both the spiritualistic subjectivism that makes Christ's presence depend on the faith of the communicants (and, taken to the extreme, reduces the sign to nothing) and the materialism which sees in the things themselves—the species—the more or less magical presence of Christ."³⁷ For its part, the Lutheran–Roman Catholic agreement affirms "in common a rejection of a spatial or natural manner of presence, and a rejection of an understanding of the sacrament as only commemorative or figurative."³⁸

33. *BEM*, back cover.

34. McAdoo, "Introduction," 13.

35. Indeed, it is telling to note that defenses of Zwingli today rarely take the form of arguing for eucharistic absence, but rather of arguing that Zwingli is not such a professor of absence as is popularly presumed.

36. Cf. Bruce Marshall, "The Eucharistic Presence of Christ," in *What Does It Mean to "Do This"? Supper, Mass, Eucharist*, ed. Michael Root and James J. Buckley (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 47–48.

37. Group of Les Dombes, "Towards a Common Eucharistic Faith?," 74.

38. A Lutheran–Roman Catholic Statement, "The Eucharist as Sacrifice," 40. See also Lehmann and Pannenberg, *Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, 115.

Such clarifications in the bilateral dialogues opened the way for the WCC multilateral dialogue to declare in *BEM*, paragraph 13, that

the words and acts of Christ at the institution of the eucharist stand at the heart of the celebration; the eucharistic meal is the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, the sacrament of his real presence. Christ fulfills in a variety of ways his promise to be always with his own even to the end of the world. But Christ's mode of presence in the eucharist is unique. Jesus said over the bread and wine of the eucharist: "This is my body. . . . This is my blood . . ." What Christ declared is true, and this truth is fulfilled every time the eucharist is celebrated. The Church confesses Christ's real, living and active presence in the eucharist. While Christ's real presence in the eucharist does not depend on the faith of the individual, all agree that to discern the body and blood of Christ, faith is required.³⁹

Sacrifice?

More surprising than agreement on presence, which had been explicitly affirmed by several prominent Reformers and the communities that followed them, was the concomitant agreement on sacrifice, which had been rejected by every Reformer and Protestant community. The agreement was "concomitant" because it was intimately linked with the idea that the Christ who becomes present in the Lord's Supper is none other than the crucified and risen—that is, *sacrificed*—Lord, who had instituted the Eucharist precisely as a memorial of his sacrifice. Christ's presence was the presence of his sacrifice. The key development here was the rediscovery of the depth of the biblical term for memorial, *anamnesis*. Whereas "memorial of sacrifice" and "sacrifice" had previously been understood as exclusive terms, biblical scholarship had demonstrated that *anamnesis* meant much more than simple remembrance.

The Protestant rejection of the Eucharist as sacrifice was largely based on concerns that it took away from the once-and-for-all (expressed by the Greek term *ephapax*) nature of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Many Catholic articulations of eucharistic sacrifice seemed to Protestants to require a re-sacrificing of Christ in every Mass, something clearly rejected by Scripture. The deadlock was broken when it became clear that, as the great Catholic ecumenist Jean-Marie Tillard, OP, explains,

memorial, in its biblical connotation, completely excludes any repetition of the event it is commemorating and any idea that the ritual celebration of the event is merely commemorative. To discern in the Eucharist the *memorial* of

39. *BEM*, 12.

the Passover demands, therefore, that we maintain and venerate the *ephapax*, in respect of time and formal content, of the sacrifice of Jesus, and at the same time affirm the presence *en misterio* (*in sacramento*) of this *ephapax* in the ritual of the liturgical banquet. The Eucharist is not something added on to the Passover and yet it is no hollow image or mere symbol of it. The category of *sacramental existence*, defined as a real mode of being but not pertaining to the natural order, entirely dependent on the power of the Spirit, takes full and precise account of this situation. Nevertheless, the notion of *memorial*, makes it clear that this “sacramental” presence is not simply to be restricted to the presence of the Body and Blood of the Lord. It includes all that is contained within the paschal mystery.⁴⁰

With this recovery, the relationship between the cross and the Eucharist was able to be articulated in ways that satisfied both the Catholic concern for identity and the Protestant concern for distinction. It became clear from the scriptural sources themselves that the relationship was, in a word, sacramental. As the Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson writes, “The eucharist is *sacramentally* whatever it is; if it is a sacrifice, it is sacramentally and not otherwise a sacrifice, and its interpretation as sacrifice must be interior to its interpretation as sacrament.”⁴¹

Thus, the members of ARCIC could declare together that

Christ’s redeeming death and resurrection took place once and for all in history. Christ’s death on the cross, the culmination of his whole life of obedience, was the one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. There can be no repetition of or addition to what was then accomplished once for all by Christ. Any attempt to express a nexus between the sacrifice of Christ and the eucharist must not obscure this fundamental fact of the Christian faith. Yet God has given the eucharist to his Church as a means through which the atoning work of Christ on the cross is proclaimed and made effective in the life of the Church. The notion of *memorial* as understood in the Passover celebration at the time of Christ—i.e., the making effective in the present of an event in the past—has opened the way to a clearer understanding of the relationship between Christ’s sacrifice and the eucharist. The Eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or

40. J. M. R. Tillard, OP, “Roman Catholics and Anglicans: The Eucharist,” *One in Christ* 9, no. 2 (1973): 144.

41. Robert W. Jenson, *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 35. Jenson points out in a footnote that this was “Thomas Aquinas’s starting point, *Summa Theologiae* III, 79,7. ‘This sacrament is not only a sacrament but also a sacrifice. For *in that* in this sacrament the passion of Christ is represented . . . it has *also* the character of sacrifice’” (emphasis added).

of its significance, but the Church's effectual proclamation of God's mighty acts.⁴²

It is remarkable to compare this statement to what the wholly independent Group of Les Dombes concluded at almost exactly the same time:

Christ instituted the eucharist as a memorial (*anamnesis*) of his whole life and above all of his cross and resurrection. Christ, with everything he has accomplished for us and for all creation, is present himself in this memorial, which is also a foretaste of his Kingdom. The memorial, in which Christ acts through the joyful celebration of his Church, implies this re-presentation and anticipation. Therefore it is not only a matter of recalling to mind a past event or even its significance. The memorial is the effective proclamation by the Church of the great work of God. By its communion with Christ, the Church participates in this reality from which it draws its life.⁴³

Again, it was the success of the bilateral agreements that paved the way for *BEM* to be able to state, in paragraph 8,

The eucharist is the sacrament of the unique sacrifice of Christ who ever lives to make intercession for us. It is the memorial of all that God has done for the salvation of the world. What it was God's will to accomplish in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection and ascension of Christ, God does not repeat. These events are unique and can neither be repeated nor prolonged. In the memorial of the eucharist, however, the Church offers its intercession in communion with Christ, our great High Priest.⁴⁴

Two false dichotomies that were at the root of pre-ecumenical polemics were thus overcome. With regard to eucharistic presence it was now affirmed by all involved that Christ *really* is present—that is, his presence is objectively given *to* the Church and not simply represented symbolically *by* the Church. At the same time, all affirmed that such an objectively given presence was not at all natural, material, physical, or magical. It was precisely *sacramental*, and thus operated at a different, deeper level of reality than the one presupposed and implied by such terms. With regard to eucharistic sacrifice, Christians were now able to affirm together that Christ's sacrifice on the cross really was unique, unrepeatable, and once-for-all, while at the same time acknowledging that that unique sacrifice was made really present to the Christian community

42. ARCIC, "An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine," 27.

43. Group of Les Dombes, "Towards a Common Eucharistic Faith?," 58.

44. *BEM*, 11.

in the celebration of the Eucharist. And both these dichotomies were overcome with the help of the biblical concept of *anamnesis*, which made clear that what Jesus intended at the Last Supper, where he would have used the Hebrew equivalent, *zikkaron*, was a memorial like the Jewish Passover, which made God's mighty acts present to the celebrating community without threatening the unique and unrepeatable status of those acts.⁴⁵

Contextualizing Presence and Sacrifice

It is interesting to note that, despite their centrality in the division of the Church, presence and sacrifice don't even get their own sections in *BEM*. The Eucharist section of *BEM* has three parts: I. The Institution of the Eucharist; II. The Meaning of the Eucharist; and III. The Celebration of the Eucharist. The Meaning of the Eucharist is the longest part, and it has five subsections: A. The Eucharist as Thanksgiving to the Father; B. The Eucharist as Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ; C. The Eucharist as Invocation of the Spirit; D. The Eucharist as Communion of the Faithful; and E. The Eucharist as Meal of the Kingdom. As might be expected from the explanation given above, both presence and sacrifice are dealt with in subsection II.B, The Eucharist as Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ. Now it could certainly be argued that this was the most important section of the *Eucharist* document. And I think it is clear that this section generated the most response from the Churches in their official responses to *BEM*.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to note that, while controversy about the Eucharist has centered on these two issues, the meaning of the Eucharist itself is not confined to them (though all the meanings are, of course, interdependent).

By highlighting other essential aspects of eucharistic meaning, *BEM* was able to contextualize the debates about presence and sacrifice. First of all, it contextualized them by showing that, despite our vehement disputes about these issues, there is much about the Eucharist that continues to unite the various Christian communities. Second, the value of these two doctrines is certainly clearer when they are not artificially isolated and debated without reference to the rest of eucharistic theology. One example can serve to make this point. The role of the Holy Spirit, emphasized in section II.C, The

45. Tillard, "Roman Catholics and Anglicans," 143. See also Jorge A. Scampini, OP, "The Sacraments in Ecumenical Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 680.

46. *Churches Respond to BEM*, vols. 1–6 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986–). *Churches Respond to BEM* is a six-volume series edited by Max Thurian and published by the World Council of Churches. It is common practice to refer to it by naming the responding Church, the volume in the series and the page number.

Eucharist as Invocation of the Spirit, helped many Churches to better appreciate what was and was not being affirmed by the articulation of real presence.⁴⁷ This passage, in paragraph 14, was especially helpful:

The bond between the Eucharistic celebration and the mystery of the Triune God reveals the role of the Holy Spirit as that of the One who makes the historical words of Jesus present and alive. Being assured by Jesus' promise in the words of institution that it will be answered, the Church prays to the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit in order that the Eucharistic event may be a reality: the real presence of the crucified and risen Christ giving his life for all humanity.⁴⁸

The response from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Socialist Republic of Romania demonstrates very clearly just how this section helped to undergird the agreement on presence:

We welcome the emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit, since this makes it clear that the church has no control over the gifts of the sacrament but prays for the presence of God. In this connection, we are delighted with the emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the Lord's supper. We thereby affirm our repudiation of any magical or mechanical view of Christ's presence in the eucharist.⁴⁹

The Anglican Church of Canada felt that "the emphasis on *epiclesis* not only restores the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in the operation of the sacraments, but also makes it clear that the sacraments are prayer-actions and not mechanical means of grace."⁵⁰

A Change of Attitude

In our brief survey of the content of ecumenical agreement on the Eucharist, we have already, unavoidably, started to answer our second question—namely, "What made such rapid convergence possible?" A recovery of the biblical notion of *anamnesis* and the situating of the critical issues of presence and sacrifice within a broader theological context were certainly proximate

47. William Tabbernee, "BEM and the Eucharist: A Case Study in Ecumenical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Peter Bouteneff and Dagmar Heller (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 36; Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Eucharist in the Churches' Responses to the Lima Text," *One in Christ* 25, no. 1 (1989): 59–60; Egil Grislis, "Eucharistic Convergence in Ecumenical Debate: An Intimation of the Future of Christianity?," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 6, no. 2 (1990): 256–57.

48. BEM, 13.

49. Quoted in Tabbernee, "BEM and the Eucharist," 36.

50. Quoted in Grislis, "Eucharistic Convergence," 256.

factors in this convergence. But other, less immediate, though no less important, factors were also at work.

The first thing worth noting is that the reason rapprochement seemed so impossible in the first place is that interconfessional polemics had made our differences look bigger than they actually were. Anglican bishop R. P. C. Hanson notes that rejections of “localized” presence or “physico-chemical” change “might by short-sighted persons be regarded as concessions by Roman Catholics, were it not that they are not difficult to reconcile with Roman Catholic doctrine.”⁵¹ Such a statement demonstrates that what we had spent much of five hundred years denouncing were not our opponents’ actual positions, but caricatures of those positions. What was necessary to make that apparent was a change of attitude, not of doctrine.

This conclusion is backed up very forcefully by a careful study undertaken in Germany by Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed theologians, which found that “the [sixteenth-century] condemnations which are directed at the theology of the Real Presence no longer apply to today’s partner and have become null and void.”⁵² A reading of this fascinating document makes clear that, while real differences existed at the time of the Reformation and continue to exist today, much of our ostensible disagreement on the theology of the Eucharist was a result of talking past one another. In this regard, it is worth quoting Bishop Hanson’s apposite observation: “It is a surprising but incontestable fact that today the theologians find it easier to agree than any other ecclesiastical group,” because “unlike other Christians, they know too much to be divided by anything less than the truth.”⁵³

Of course, it was not always the case that theologians of different traditions were more likely than the rest of the faithful to agree with one another. In fact, “a century ago it was generally assumed that in any attempt of divided Christian bodies to come closer to each other the difficulties and obstacles would be provided by the theologians, whereas the ordinary rank-and-file would not find it difficult to understand each other.”⁵⁴ This too speaks to the importance of a changed climate. When the basic stance of separated Christians is to maintain their identities by demonstrating the heresies of the other group, theologians will be the biggest obstacles to unity because they will be the best equipped for making such attacks. When, on the other hand, that basic stance changes to one of seeking mutual understanding, the

51. R. P. C. Hanson, “Eucharistic Agreement: An Ecumenical and Theological Consensus,” in *A Critique of Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1975), 27.

52. Lehmann and Pannenberg, *Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, 116.

53. Hanson, “Eucharistic Agreement,” 33.

54. Hanson, “Eucharistic Agreement,” 33.

theologians will again be in the vanguard, being the most equipped to find real commonality under the layers of polemic and identity assertion that have built up over the centuries.

It seems, then, that underneath ecumenical agreement based on careful scholarship—as demonstrated, for example, by the recovery of the meaning of *anamnesis* by biblical scholars—the deeper cause of our rapid progress was a change in attitude. The modern world provided at least two goads in that direction. First of all, Christians in the modern world are more likely to move among Christians of different traditions in their daily life. Such intercommunication is the bane of caricature. Second, in an increasingly post-Christian culture, Christians of different traditions are more able to see one another as allies than as enemies.⁵⁵ As is well known, the beginning of the ecumenical movement was in the mission fields, where Christians of various Churches encountered one another and came to see the scandal of their division more clearly in non-Christian contexts. That the modern West is now essentially mission territory has done much to change the attitudes that separated Christians in that part of the world have toward one another.

It is certainly the case that, spurred on by such cultural factors, and enlivened by the efforts of a good many theologians and other Christians, the ecumenical movement has radically changed the face of Christianity. And eucharistic agreement is among the most impressive of its achievements. Nevertheless, the perceptive reader might be wondering if this is really the whole story. As remarkable as it was that a document like *BEM* could be produced within twenty years of Vatican II, the reverse of this coin is the fact that *BEM* is now almost forty years old, and relatively little has happened in terms of eucharistic agreement since. The early dialogues moved very quickly because so much of our disagreement was illusory. It did not take long for honest, industrious, and intelligent theologians to clear up many basic issues once the climate was right.

More Work to Do

On the other hand, we must note that the Churches are still divided, and that they are still divided on the question of the Eucharist. The average Catholic and the average Protestant still hold one another's eucharistic theologies in suspicion, or at least this is true among those with a basic awareness of their own Church's views. I suggest that there are a few factors at play here. For one thing, many Christians are simply unaware of the level of agreement

55. Both these ideas are presented in R. R. Williams, "Agreements: Their Sources and Frontiers," in *A Critique of Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1975), 18–19.

that has been possible. Others, aware that agreements have been signed, are suspicious of the contents of such agreements. Finally, despite the enormous strides made, the agreements themselves do not claim to be complete. Work remains to be done.

Transubstantiation, in particular, remains a stumbling block for ecumenical dialogue. While virtually every Christian community involved in ecumenical dialogue affirms Christ's eucharistic presence in some manner or other beyond the merely symbolic, Cardinal Kasper is correct to note that the lack of consensus on the term "transubstantiation" may well indicate deeper differences about real presence. At the very least, the role that the term plays in ecclesial identity formation will make it difficult for Christians to recognize the depth of their agreement on real presence as long as the question of transubstantiation remains unresolved. Before we begin our investigation of transubstantiation in earnest, then, it is important to look at three factors that have made consensus about the term itself difficult.

First of all, the ecumenical movement has, in general, avoided addressing it directly in its agreed statements. Consensus on transubstantiation *per se* was seen as unnecessary and fraught with controversy and was, therefore, eschewed in favor of (the relatively much easier) agreement about real presence. One reason, though it is only one, that consensus about transubstantiation has proved difficult is because it has not been attempted.⁵⁶ The dialogues were right, of course, that transubstantiation would be a very difficult issue on which to find consensus. We have already seen that the term is loaded with issues of ecclesial identity. We can now add that a further difficulty is that the term itself is esoteric and widely misunderstood—by both its proponents and its critics and in both popular and academic circles. Our second task in what follows is to look briefly at the nature of those misunderstandings. Third, those misunderstandings are rooted, to a large degree, in a radical shift in the dominant philosophical framework of Christian theology in Western Europe between the time of Thomas Aquinas and the Reformation. The emergence of nominalism by the late Middle Ages ensured that what the term "transubstantiation" meant for Luther and Calvin was quite different from what it had meant for Thomas Aquinas. What they, and all the Reformers with them, rejected was not what Thomas had affirmed.

56. I am speaking here of the publicly agreed statements of ecumenical dialogues, not of the work of the theologians in coming to these agreements. Many dialogues have, of course, dealt with transubstantiation "behind closed doors." But if they came to agreement there, this was not generally made explicit in the final public statements. The Christian people could not easily see the relationship between their own acceptance or rejection of transubstantiation and the agreements of the dialogues on real presence.

The Marginalization of “Transubstantiation”

It has been, by and large, the practice of the ecumenical movement, in its official documents, if not in its closed-door discussions, to ignore or marginalize the term “transubstantiation.” And, indeed, some have lauded this decision as a move beyond what divides us. The Church of North India, in its official response to *BEM*, for instance,

appreciates this statement for its careful avoidance of such controversial terms as “transubstantiation,” “transignification,” etc., and focuses attention on the central significance and experiential aspect of the Eucharist in terms of the “real presence” of Christ in this sacrament, which is likely to be acceptable to most of the WCC member Churches as a common understanding of the Eucharist.⁵⁷

For its part, the ARCIC Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine chose to treat transubstantiation in a footnote, which read,

The word *transubstantiation* is commonly used in the Roman Catholic Church to indicate that God acting in the eucharist effects a change in the inner reality of the elements. The term should be seen as affirming the *fact* of Christ’s presence and of the mysterious and radical change which takes place. In contemporary Roman Catholic theology it is not understood as explaining *how* the change takes place.⁵⁸

While we can leave a more careful parsing of this note for the next chapter, what is important for us here is that this attempt to downplay controversial and loaded terminology failed. In the *Elucidation* that followed the *Agreed Statement* in 1979, the commission noted that, in many of the responses it received,

the word *become* has been suspected of expressing a materialistic conception of Christ’s presence, and this has seemed to some to be confirmed in the footnote on the word *transubstantiation* which also speaks of *change*. It is feared that this suggests that Christ’s presence in the eucharist is confined to the elements, and that the Real Presence involves a physical change in them.⁵⁹

But it does not seem to be the case that a simple avoidance of the term would have solved ARCIC’s problems, and, indeed, we will see that it did

57. Quoted in Wainwright, “Eucharist in the Churches’ Responses to the Lima Text,” 56–57. See also Scampini, “Sacraments in Ecumenical Dialogue,” 680.

58. ARCIC, “An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine,” 31n2.

59. ARCIC, “Eucharistic Doctrine: Elucidation (1979),” in *The Final Report* (Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference, 1982), 20–21.

not solve *BEM*'s. Apparently expressing concern from a different direction, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) observed that "certain . . . formulations . . . do not seem to *indicate adequately* what the church understands by 'transubstantiation.'"⁶⁰ One suspects that both those who reject transubstantiation and those who accept it would have benefited from seeing it spelled out in more detail in the document, if for slightly different reasons.

And here, perhaps, is the most interesting twist: it may seem that the CDF—which wants an affirmation of transubstantiation, or at least of "what the church understands by [it]"—and those concerned that transubstantiation indicates a physical change—and therefore seek its repudiation—are approaching the document from diametrically opposed points of view; in point of fact, however, they are not. Rather, any formulations that actually do indicate "what the church understands by 'transubstantiation'" should reassure, rather than scandalize, those who are concerned that the term indicates a physical change. It would seem that the decision to avoid or marginalize the term actually created anxiety about it, while a decision to address it head-on would have relieved such anxiety.

I suspect that no one who reads ARCIC member Jean-Marie Tillard's eloquent exposition of transubstantiation in his article "Roman Catholic and Anglicans: The Eucharist"⁶¹ will doubt that the commission had the capacity to address it head-on in a way that would have satisfied both the CDF and those Protestants concerned that transubstantiation indicates a physical change and a materialistic conception of presence. Instead, however, a rather lengthy back-and-forth between the commission and the CDF was required to convince Rome of the commission's intentions. And, though it eventually succeeded, the process surely left many feeling betrayed, hurt, and confused, as we shall see.

Adequately Indicated?

That the initial *Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine* was ambiguous is demonstrated by the fact that, while some evangelical Anglicans could write the commission with their concerns that the word "become," buttressed by the transubstantiation footnote, indicated a material presence and a physical

60. CDF/PCPCU, "Observations on the ARCIC Final Report," *Origins* 11 (May 6, 1982): 754 (emphasis added).

61. Tillard, "Roman Catholics and Anglicans," 171–78. This is an example of a commission doing excellent work "behind closed doors" but not displaying that work for the broader public in their official statements.

change, Bishop R. R. Williams, from that same wing of the Anglican Church, could write that

what finally emerges is something very different from anything like transubstantiation (a subject reduced to a small footnote in the Anglican-Roman Catholic *Agreed Statement*) and it is not particularly like what one might call the Anglo-Catholic substitute for transubstantiation. Nor is it very much like the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. The agreement rests on an assurance that Christ himself is really present and that the words of consecration (to use an old-fashioned form of expression) are still divinely authorized and spiritually valid.⁶²

On Williams's reading of the document, the CDF is quite right to be concerned that Catholics might want reassurance. Catholics certainly wouldn't sign up for "something very different from anything like transubstantiation." On the other hand, many Catholics, especially those who have studied the doctrine, would find that what Williams asserts in his last sentence here is, in fact, *particularly like* transubstantiation.⁶³ And, if I may be so bold as to speak for Lutheran readers, they too would affirm that the heart of their eucharistic doctrine (whether they would use the term "consubstantiation" or prefer something like "sacramental union") rests precisely on the idea "that Christ is really present and that the words of consecration . . . are still divinely authorized and spiritually valid."⁶⁴

The commission was now faced with two, even three, groups. There were, on the one hand, Catholics needing reassurance that what their Church understands by "transubstantiation" had been "indicated adequately." And there were Anglicans, some of whom were worried that "transubstantiation" had been allowed in through the back door and others who were grateful that it had been marginalized! Neither of these latter groups, however, demonstrated any knowledge about what the term in question actually means. But the commission, in its *Elucidation*, chose not to directly address the issue of transubstantiation. Instead, it wrote that

becoming does not here imply material change. Nor does the liturgical use of the word imply that the bread and wine become Christ's body and blood in such a way that in the eucharistic celebration his presence is limited to the

62. Williams, "Agreements: Their Sources and Frontiers," 17.

63. See, e.g., Joseph Wawrykow, "Luther and the Spirituality of Thomas Aquinas," *Consensus* 19, no. 1 (1993): 89. For a recent Catholic articulation of transubstantiation that comes remarkably close to defining transubstantiation in just this way, see Marshall, "Eucharistic Presence of Christ."

64. See, e.g., *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1519), in *LW* 36:30.

consecrated elements. It does not imply that Christ becomes present in the eucharist in the same manner that he was present in his earthly life. It does not imply that this *becoming* follows the physical laws of this world. What is here affirmed is a sacramental presence in which God uses the realities of this world to convey the realities of the new creation: bread for this life becomes the bread of eternal life. Before the eucharistic prayer, to the question: “What is that?,” the believer answers: “It is bread.” After the eucharistic prayer, to the same question he answers: “It is truly the body of Christ, the Bread of Life.”⁶⁵

Now, it must be said that this is a very satisfying paragraph to a Catholic.⁶⁶ In point of fact, it is a fairly good introduction to the meaning of “transubstantiation.” On the other hand, it must also be said that, because the term itself goes unmentioned, it does not clear up the confusion about “transubstantiation” evident after the *Agreed Statement*. Does this explanation of “becoming,” shorn of any connection with “transubstantiation,” indicate that the commission is moving away from “transubstantiation”? The Catholic (not to mention the Anglican!) still doesn’t know whether the term “transubstantiation” is avoided because it is being somehow repudiated, and the Anglican (not to mention the Catholic!) still doesn’t know if “transubstantiation” implies material change, even if “becoming” doesn’t. And neither the Anglican nor the Catholic is given the clear impression that Bishop Williams’s contention—that “an assurance that Christ himself is really present and that the words of consecration . . . are still divinely authorized and spiritually valid” is “something very different from anything like transubstantiation”⁶⁷—is, in fact, seriously mistaken. Had the commission adverted to the fact that the above-quoted paragraph aligns very precisely with what Catholics actually mean by “transubstantiation,” both the Catholic and the Anglican reader could have been reassured.

It is interesting to note that, in its *Official Response*, the CDF also chooses to avoid the term “transubstantiation,” though its concern that certain affirmations by the commission “are insufficient . . . to remove all ambiguity regarding the mode of real presence which is due to a substantial change in the elements,”⁶⁸ clearly demonstrates a concern to “indicate adequately what the church understands by [it].”⁶⁹ This insistence on the part of the CDF was not taken kindly by many in the ecumenical sphere, to whom it

65. ARCIC, “Eucharistic Doctrine: Elucidation (1979),” 21.

66. Cf. CDF/PCPCU, “Official Response,” 39.

67. Williams, “Agreements: Their Sources and Frontiers,” 17.

68. CDF/PCPCU, “Official Response,” 43.

69. CDF/PCPCU, “Observations,” 754.

sounded “as though non-Catholics are being asked for one-hundred percent agreement to the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church,” and “like a milder, toned-down version of the ‘ecumenism of return.’”⁷⁰ The archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, in his comments on the Roman Catholic *Official Response*, diplomatically (or not so diplomatically!) suggested that “in the case of the Roman Catholic Response, however, the question to our two Communion appears to have been understood as asking: ‘Is *The Final Report* **identical** with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church?’”⁷¹ And the veteran Catholic ecumenist Francis Sullivan opined that “if the Vatican is going to continue to apply the criteria which it has used in judging the work of ARCIC-I, then I fear that the ecumenical dialogues in which the Catholic Church is involved have a rather unpromising future ahead of them.”⁷²

While I believe there is some merit to these concerns (for instance, Sullivan makes the important point that the Vatican Response gives the impression of criticizing ARCIC for not achieving things that ARCIC never claimed to achieve),⁷³ I cannot agree with Sullivan’s conclusion that “what the CDF would require of an agreed dialogue statement is that it fully correspond to Catholic doctrine, and that, to do so, it must use the language in which the Roman Catholic Church has expressed that doctrine.”⁷⁴

The Rank and File

In fact, following one further clarification, Cardinal Cassidy indicated that the “appropriate dicasteries” (presumably the CDF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity [PCPCU]) found that the agreement reached by ARCIC I “is thus greatly strengthened, and no further study would seem to be required at this stage.”⁷⁵ It is important for our purposes to look at what that final clarification had to say, specifically about transubstantiation:

70. Jeffrey T. VanderWilt, *A Church without Borders: The Eucharist and the Church in Ecumenical Perspective* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 110. Cf. David Brown, “The Response to ARCIC-I: The Big Questions,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 148–54; Gillian R. Evans, “Rome’s Response to ARCIC and the Problem of Confessional Identity,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 155–67.

71. George Carey, “Comments of the Archbishop of Canterbury on the Response of ARCIC-I,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 48 (boldface original).

72. Francis A. Sullivan, “The Vatican Response to ARCIC-I,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 231.

73. Sullivan, “Vatican Response,” 225–26.

74. Sullivan, “Vatican Response,” 228.

75. Cardinal Edward Cassidy, “Letter to the Co-chairs of ARCIC-II (March 11, 1994),” *Origins* 24 (October 6, 1994): 299.

Paul VI in *Mysterium Fidei* (AAS 57, 1965) did not deny the legitimacy of fresh ways of expressing this change even by using new words, provided that they kept and reflected what transubstantiation was intended to express. This has been our method of approach. In several places the Final Report indicates its belief in the presence of the living Christ truly and really in the elements. Even if the word *transubstantiation* only occurs in a footnote, the Final Report wished to express what the Council of Trent, as evident from its discussion, clearly intended by the use of the term.⁷⁶

Why, after a back-and-forth of over two decades, did this seem to be enough for Rome? While some would suggest that the CDF finally browbeat ARCIC, and particularly the Anglican members of it, into a virtual acceptance of “transubstantiation,”⁷⁷ I want to suggest a different hermeneutic.

As we have already seen, transubstantiation, in its affirmation or denial, is an important identity marker for both Catholics and Protestants, even while many people in both groups do not clearly understand what the term entails. In such a context, the failure to address it explicitly is bound to rouse suspicion, not primarily in the Vatican, but among the faithful themselves, many of whom are suspicious that ecumenical dialogue is a matter of watering down the faith, or compromising truth for the sake of unity. And, it must be added, that by “the faithful,” I do not mean merely the Catholic faithful. As is clearly indicated by the overview that ARCIC gives in the 1979 *Elucidation*, both Catholics and Anglicans were suspicious: worry was expressed that *an-annesis* was both too strong and too weak; concern was evident that Christ’s presence, as expressed in the *Agreed Statement*, was both too real, and not real enough.⁷⁸ Those who wondered whether the “commission has been using new theological language which evades unresolved differences”⁷⁹ wanted to know whether there was a clear enough affirmation/denial of transubstantiation.

That the Christian people will not, by and large, accept agreed statements where they do not find their own faith articulated in the language in which they were formed is an essential consideration for ecumenism. It is not, I would suggest, a matter of the Vatican insisting on the language of the Catholic tradition for its own sake, but rather a recognition that, if the results of ecumenical dialogue are to take root among the Christian people, those people must be able to be clear that what a document is affirming is synonymous with their

76. ARCIC II, “Clarifications of Certain Aspects of the Agreed Statements on Eucharist and Ministry,” *Origins* 24 (October 6, 1994): 302.

77. Cf. VanderWilt, *A Church without Borders*, chap. 4: “Ecumenism at Risk,” esp. 109–13.

78. ARCIC, “Eucharistic Doctrine: Elucidation (1979),” 17–18.

79. ARCIC, “Eucharistic Doctrine: Elucidation (1979),” 18.

faith. It is not the case that the Vatican requires its dialogue partners to use Catholic language before agreement can be reached, though it is easy to see why many frustrated ecumenists have come to this conclusion. It is something rather more subtle, as careful attention to the CDF's language will indicate. As already related above, the Vatican's first response to ARCIC, its *Observations*, did not ask that "transubstantiation" be affirmed, but that "what the church understands by [it]" be *adequately indicated*.⁸⁰ This is actually a difference of some consequence.

It is undeniably the case that "transubstantiation" is a widely misunderstood term. But it is also undeniably the case that Catholics (or at least many Catholics) will not be convinced by any agreed statement that does not affirm it; and Protestants (or at least many Protestants) will not be convinced by any agreed statement with Catholics that does not deny it. What possible way forward can there be when one group insists on a certain term's affirmation while another group insists on its denial, and the vast majorities in both groups don't know what the term means? It seems to me that, in such a situation, someone must "adequately indicate what the church understands by 'transubstantiation.'" Without that, any agreement made by professional theologians seems unlikely to resonate with the Christian people.

It is certainly true that one can profess the perennial faith of the Christian Church regarding Christ's eucharistic presence without recourse to the term "transubstantiation." As many rightly point out, the term did not exist for the first thousand-plus years of Christianity, and Rome recognizes the Church's eucharistic faith in the Eastern Churches even when they do not make use of it. Nevertheless, it is important to note that neither the Church of the first millennium nor the Churches of the East have a rejection of transubstantiation in their foundational documents or their communal identity. When a term or concept has been the subject of controversy between two communities, it cannot be ignored or passed over in the same way as between two communities in which the issue never arose. What the Roman Catholic Church understands by "transubstantiation" needs to be adequately indicated, not because Protestants must affirm Catholic doctrine in every detail, but so that Catholics entering into agreements with Protestants can know that their faith is not being watered down or repudiated, and so that Protestants entering into agreements with Catholics can be assured that they are not thereby selling the Reformation farm. *Consensus on "transubstantiation" is important not because the word itself is essential for Christian faith but because, without such consensus, the Christian people won't know whether*

80. CDF/PCPCU, "Observations," 754.

official ecumenical agreements on the Eucharist have genuinely resolved our differences.

Is this dynamic not, in fact, what Fr. Tillard is hinting at when he writes the following? The theologians, he says,

have to go on working out ways and means of showing that the traditional belief of their respective Churches is safeguarded in the common statements they, the theologians, elaborate. As long as the relationship between theology and official teaching remains what it is, this difficulty has to be faced; otherwise any unity ultimately reached would rest on a totally fruitless compromise instead of blossoming into the genuine *koinonia* of faith and life which we must envisage. It is no use having a consensus to which you merely append your signature: it has got to be a thing you can live by.⁸¹

Now, it is certainly a great ecumenical achievement that the commission was finally able to reassure the Vatican of its intentions, to the point where “no further study would seem to be required.”⁸² Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the way in which Rome was finally satisfied about ARCIC’s treatment of transubstantiation left many parties confused. What, for instance, would someone of Bishop Williams’s opinion take away from the claim that “even if the word *transubstantiation* only occurs in a footnote, the Final Report wished to express what the Council of Trent, as evident from its discussion, clearly intended by the use of the term”?⁸³ Would he feel he had been duped by the original *Agreed Statement*? Perhaps betrayed by the commission, or at least by Anglican commission members who seem to have lost their nerve? Or would he perhaps come to realize that “transubstantiation” doesn’t mean what he originally thought it meant? If this latter, it can hardly be because its meaning was ever explicitly spelled out.

Even though ARCIC was eventually successful in reaching agreement on eucharistic presence, the process through which that achievement was arrived at undoubtedly left many Anglicans and Catholics confused and hurt. It is not my contention that this was entirely the fault of the commission. It is, in fact, a vocational hazard of the ecumenist. Any time one seeks consensus on contentious issues deeply rooted in communal identity, one risks rejection and confusion. And, as mentioned above, I do not imagine that the CDF’s handling of the situation was entirely above reproach. But, regardless of how one apportions the blame for the shortcomings of the process, it seems clear that *the*

81. Tillard, “Roman Catholics and Anglicans,” 131–32.

82. Cassidy, “Letter to the Co-chairs of ARCIC-II (March 11, 1994),” 299.

83. ARCIC II, “Clarifications,” 302.

avoidance or marginalization of terms central to the consciousness and identity of divided Christians, however well intentioned, will not serve the ecumenical goal. That this is the case is also supported by the evidence regarding *BEM*.

Responses to BEM (Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry)

As we have already seen, *BEM* chose to avoid the term “transubstantiation” completely. And while some groups, like the above-quoted Church of North India, applauded this decision, it left others confused. We need not wade through the whole history of the document and its reception in order to demonstrate this. A few representative quotes from the Churches’ responses to *BEM* will suffice.

Several Churches express concern that *BEM* had somehow implied transubstantiation, or at least had not explicitly excluded it:

The eucharist was to be in *remembrance* memorial and not re-enactment nor transubstantiation as advocated by sections of the church. If the miracle of transubstantiation operates, then the bread and wine now changed into actual flesh and blood of Jesus could no longer be said to be “memorial” as He is literally present and materially so in bread and wine. (The Moravian Church in Jamaica, V.170)

Is the presence of Christ a matter of transubstantiation or of “transignification”? (The United Protestant Church of Belgium, III.171)

But what precisely is the significance of the added words: “the sacrament of his real presence”? Do they mean that the bread which we eat and the wine which we drink *contain* the blood and flesh of the Son of Man? Is the formula intended to permit the possibility of belief in transubstantiation? If so, we could not subscribe to it. Or is it meant to say that the bread and wine are sacraments of the real *spiritual* presence of Christ? If so, then it conveys our convictions. Apparently the solution is to be found in the accompanying Commentary, namely, that the words are carefully chosen to allow both possibilities. And that is disquieting. (Union of Welsh Independents, III.273)

Some churches were concerned that the document’s focus on *epiklesis* contained “hints of transubstantiation”.⁸⁴

The shadow of transubstantiation clouds the analysis [of pericope 14 and its commentary concerning *epiklesis*]. (Union of Welsh Independents, III.274)

84. Tabbernee, “BEM and the Eucharist,” 37.

We cannot agree to the understanding of the *epiklesis* as consecrating the elements in the sense of a doctrine of transubstantiation. (Evangelical Church of the Rhineland V.79)

In our churches there are reservations in particular against *epiklesis* of gifts in isolation, because of any “theology of transubstantiation” that might possibly lie in this. (Federation of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR, V.135)

One Church took a stance dramatically different from the one represented by the previous quotes:

The document recognizes *anamnesis* as the essence of the eucharistic meal, whereas the Orthodox Church confesses as the essence of the eucharist the transubstantiation of the holy gifts. (Russian Orthodox Church, II.8)

These quotes raise all kinds of questions that need not detain us at length. What is important for us is to note the way in which transubstantiation functions in the imaginations of the responding Churches. Many Churches that are careful to reject transubstantiation make no attempt to define it. The Moravian Church of Jamaica, in its attempt at definition, seriously misses the mark. And even the Russian Orthodox Church, with its blunt affirmation of transubstantiation, gives at least the impression that transubstantiation is somehow incommensurable with *anamnesis*. In each case (if in different ways and to greater and lesser degrees), transubstantiation seems to function more as an identity marker than as a theological concept (even if the brevity of the United Protestant Church of Belgium’s question makes its view a little more difficult to gauge).

The Catholic Response?

What, then, was the response of the Roman Catholic Church, which many of these other communities seemed to have in mind when crafting their own responses?

On the one hand, we welcome the convergence that is taking place. On the other hand, we must note that for Catholic doctrine, the *conversion* of the elements is a matter of faith and is only open to possible new theological explanations as to the “how” of the intrinsic change. The content of the word “transubstantiation” ought to be expressed without ambiguity. For Catholics this is a central mystery of faith, and they cannot accept expressions that are ambiguous. (Roman Catholic Church, VI.21)

In order to understand this response we must recall the discussion of transubstantiation in ARCIC and the CDF/PCPCU's responses to it. I suggest that "express without ambiguity" here is functionally equivalent to "indicate adequately" in *Observations*. Rome wants to be sure that transubstantiation is articulated in such a way that the faith of Catholics is clearly and accurately expressed. Again, the concept or term "transubstantiation" per se is not being required of other Christians, though some have felt that this is the position of the CDF. In fact, this response indicates a difference between what is a matter of faith and what is a matter of theological opinion or explanation. What is a matter of faith for Catholics, highlighted by the use of italics (in original) here, is "the *conversion* of the elements."⁸⁵ This echoes the footnote in the original *Agreed Statement* from ARCIC, which claims that the term "transubstantiation" "should be seen as affirming the *fact* of Christ's presence and of the mysterious and radical change which takes place."⁸⁶ This is precisely what is highlighted here. What is not a matter of faith is the precise theological articulation of that presence and change. Other theological articulations can be attempted provided that they do not deny what is affirmed by, or what is the genuine "content" of, transubstantiation. That this is an appropriate reading of the response is supported by the fact that the CDF responded so favorably to ARCIC's mention of Paul VI's *Mysterium Fidei* when, in *Clarifications*, it wrote that "Paul VI in *Mysterium Fidei* (AAS 57, 1965) did not deny the legitimacy of fresh ways of expressing this change even by using new words, provided that they kept and reflected what transubstantiation was intended to express."⁸⁷

Rome's evident concern for clarity on the question is consistent with what the Lutheran Egil Grislis concluded, after his reading of the responses: "The desire for further refinement of the understanding of the eucharist is a widespread one."⁸⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright, the Methodist theologian who chaired the session that approved *BEM*, agrees with Grislis⁸⁹ and gives a very helpful schema for the ways in which the various Churches need to contribute to the clarity sought by so many of the respondents:

85. Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 85–86: "What has always mattered to the Church is that a real transformation takes place here. Something genuinely happens in the Eucharist. There is something new there that was not before. Knowing about a transformation is part of the most basic eucharistic faith."

86. ARCIC, "An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine," 31. Cf. A Lutheran–Roman Catholic Statement, "Eucharist as Sacrifice," 43; Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*, 186.

87. ARCIC II, "Clarifications," 302. Cf. Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, #25 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium_en.html).

88. Grislis, "Eucharistic Convergence," 260.

89. Cf. Wainwright, "Eucharist in the Churches' Responses to the Lima Text," 54.

Once the question of the elements has been raised, it will not go away. In so far as erroneous answers threaten the faith, the question must be faced. It would be important that the Orthodox Churches explain to others what they mean by the transformation of the elements (*metabole*); that the Roman Catholic Church explore with others how what is “most aptly called transubstantiation” (Council of Trent) may otherwise be expressed; that those Protestants who deny any “essential change” in the elements state what they are thereby affirming. Here the dialogue remains open after the Lima text.⁹⁰

Note that Wainwright also understands that the Roman Catholic response does not demand that other Christians subscribe to transubstantiation per se. Beyond that detail, Wainwright’s broader conclusion here also matches my own—namely, if there is to be any rapprochement on the question of eucharistic presence between the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant groups, then the issue of transubstantiation must be tackled head-on.

A Recent Breakthrough

In this regard, one can hardly be anything but greatly encouraged by the recent Fourth Agreed Statement of the Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, 2003–2009, called *The Presence of Christ in the Church, with Special Reference to the Eucharist*. This agreed statement is quite unique in its careful parsing of transubstantiation.⁹¹ Transubstantiation is carefully located in its historical and theological context, and common misreadings of the doctrine are refuted. Its rejection at the time of the Reformation and its reaffirmation by the Council of Trent are briefly, but helpfully, described. And, finally, its rejection by the Disciples of Christ is relativized by the recognition that what they meant to reject, within their own philosophical context of Scottish commonsense realism, was “almost the opposite of what Aquinas had intended.”⁹² With this ecumenical heavy lifting done, the agreement reached on eucharistic presence lacks any ambiguity around the question of transubstantiation.⁹³

90. Wainwright, “Eucharist in the Churches’ Responses to the Lima Text,” 65–66.

91. Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, “The Presence of Christ in the Church, with Special Reference to the Eucharist: Fourth Agreed Statement of the Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, 2003–2009,” *Call to Unity* (October 2012): ##30–37.

92. Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, “Presence of Christ in the Church,” #37.

93. Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, “Presence of Christ in the Church,” esp. ##41–42.