

On receiving the Eucharistic Gift - some background notes

O come to our Communion Feast;
There present, in the heart
Not in the hands, the eternal Priest
Will his true self impart.

So Keble (*The Christian Year, Gunpowder Treason*). To be honest, Keble did alter the text to “As in the hands” in the last edition published before his death, but “Not in the hands” was the original wording and was retained for many decades and for many editions of this most popular work. Many who think themselves followers of the Oxford Movement may be surprised at these facts.

Keble is following the XXXIX Articles. Article XXVIII states:

Corpus Christi datur, accipitur et manducatur in Coena, tantum coelesti et spirituali ratione. Medium autem, quo corpus Christi accipitur et manducatur in Coena, fides est.”

Bishop Guest, who is the author of this article in its revised (1563) form, claimed that it was drawn up not to “exclude the Presence of Christ’s Body from the Sacrament, but only the grossness and sensibleness in the receiving thereof.” (Bicknell, *The thirty-nine Articles*, page 480.) Similarly, the next Article denies that the wicked receive Christ, but states that they purchase condemnation by abusing, not Christ’s body and blood, but the “sacramentum seu symbolum” of so great a thing.

However, the Articles are far from belittling the gift in the Sacrament. Article XXVIII again, after condemning the view that the Sacrament is only a human sign, continues:

Atque adeo, rite, digne, et cum fide sumentibus, panis quem frangimus est communicatio corporis Christi: similiter poculum benedictionis est communicatio sanguinis Christi.

Keble would also have been aware of the “black rubric” at the end of the Communion Office which in its 1552 form (an afterthought) denies that kneeling at the communion implies “that any adoration is done, or ought to be done, either unto the sacramental bread and wine there bodily received, or unto any real and essential presence there being of Christ’s natural flesh and blood” (because the natural body and blood are in heaven and not here). However, this rubric was most carefully changed in 1662 to “any corporal presence of Christ’s natural flesh and blood”. This change merely insists that we are not cannibals and might well be thought to *allow* a “real and essential presence”.

The doctrine of the Church of England is positively very strong as to what the faithful receive in the Sacrament, and negatively not very interested in the Elements except as they convey that blessing. In this it is consistent with the universal Church apart from those who hold transubstantiation properly so called (the modern Church of Rome is reluctant to abandon the word, but does not seem to me to mean much more by this than the “real presence”; and any Oxford philosopher will incidentally suspect that there is no positive content to the word “real” either here or elsewhere). It should be recognised that **no** church is committed to “bleeding hosts” or to the “Mass of St. Gregory” except as a somewhat strained symbol. They are *not* transubstantiation.

Lest it be thought that Keble is eccentric, even Cardinal(!) Newman wrote: “Our Lord neither descends from heaven upon our altars, nor moves when carried in procession. The visible species change their position, but He does not move.”

I cannot do better for a detailed survey of the question than to recommend reading of Gore "The Body of Christ" (John Murray, 1901 and subsequent editions). This contains much useful exposition of what the early church did (and did not) hold and do, and is easily intelligible. There is little point in summarising it; the whole benefit lies in the evidence. On the narrower question of the Anglican formularies, Gore thinks "we must admit that the doctrine of the objective presence in, under, or with, the consecrated elements is plainly evaded and not asserted in the revised Declaration about kneeling appended to the Communion service in 1662." (page 232 in the 1907 edition).

There is very little teaching about the Elements in themselves as distinct from in faithful reception until frequent communion ceased - and not even then in the Eastern church. It might be thought that the Western teaching is a consequence first of the wish to justify devotional practices and secondly of the lust to explain everything; and the reaction to that teaching by the reformers is in part driven by the determination that there should more frequent communion if possible, but in part by the determination to exclude devotional practices which they rightly knew were not primitive and suspected were products of false doctrine and even idolatry. We simply won't find conclusive early teaching about the Elements in themselves, though early practice certainly includes extended communion (of the sick) and communion from the reserved sacrament (at home) - without any evidence of devotions in either case other than due reverence.

The major Anglican treatment of the topic subsequent to Gore is in "Doctrine in the Church of England (SPCK 1938 - an Archbishops' Commission largely chaired by Temple). Pages 168ff describe various views of the relationship between the presence of the living Christ at every Eucharist and the consecrated blood and wine. I quote in extenso, but without the footnotes, since this document is much harder to obtain than copies of Gore:

"Much misunderstanding has in fact arisen from the ambiguity of the phrase "Real Presence". And it is therefore the more important to make clear that what causes division of theological opinion in the Church of England is not any question concerning the real and spiritual presence of the living Christ at every Eucharist (for this is acknowledged by all) but only the questions whether and in what way that presence is to be specially associated with the consecrated bread and wine. With regard to the answer to these latter questions three main schools of traditional thought are to be distinguished. But the classification involved is logically rather than historically exact, the actual teaching given by particular theologians being sometimes inconsistent, and often ambiguous or perhaps intentionally indefinite.

(1) The first school is that which teaches that the bread and wine in some sense really or actually *become* through consecration the Lord's Body and Blood. Those who maintain this doctrine usually speak of the Lord's body and Blood as being present "under the forms of bread and wine", and therefore also of Christ Himself as being really present "in the sacrament" (i.e. the outward sign.) They would at the same time affirm that the manner of the presence is altogether spiritual, being apprehended only by faith and in no way perceptible to any bodily sense. The doctrine thus described is that of "the Real Presence" in the narrower meaning of the phrase. It has been given greater precision in varying forms. Historically the most important of these forms have been

(i) Transubstantiation, which received universal authority in the Western Church at the Fourth Lateran Council and has remained a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, and

(ii) Consubstantiation, which is the classical doctrine of Lutheranism.

Of these Transubstantiation is explicitly rejected by the Thirty-Nine Articles; but the doctrine of "the Real Presence," even in that narrower meaning with which we are now concerned, is not exclusively committed to either Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation: the theologians of the Oxford Movement, who were mainly responsible for the revival of the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Church of England, rejected the Roman Catholic dogma of Transubstantiation, and did not, on the other hand, adopt Luther's alternative theory. The doctrine which they revived is now, without any precise definition, widely taught by one school of thought in our Church. Among Anglican theologians of the present day a considerable number believe that this doctrine is sound in essence. Some of them are content with the use of traditional language to express it; but others, especially in recent years, have felt the need for some restatement of it designed to remove traditional objections; and various suggestions for such restatement have been made . . .

(2) Most clearly opposed to the doctrine of the "Real Presence" is that commonly known as Receptionism. Receptionism derives its name from its teaching that, though the Body and Blood of the Lord are really received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper, yet their presence is real in the hearts of the recipients only, and not in the elements prior to reception. According to this doctrine the consecrated bread and wine are said to be the Lord's Body and Blood only in a figure. The special presence of Christ, therefore, is to be associated not with the elements but with the reception of them. Moreover, many Receptionists would strongly affirm that Christ Himself is really and spiritually present at every Eucharist as the unseen host at His own Table. Nor would they deny that, as thus present, Christ offers Himself as their spiritual food to all communicants alike, although they would maintain that those who approach the Lord's Table unworthily and without faith do not so receive Him.

(3) A doctrine intermediate between the two already mentioned is that called Virtualism. The Virtualist is not content to affirm that the consecrated elements are only a figure of spiritual realities. Like the believer in the "Real Presence" he maintains that a spiritual change in the elements themselves is effected through consecration. But, in affirming that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ in a spiritual manner, he understands his statement to mean that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood, not *in substance* (as though the elements could be identified with the natural Body and Blood which were on the Cross), but *in spiritual power and virtue and effect*. Generally speaking, the holders of this doctrine desire to affirm that through consecration the bread and wine are endowed with spiritual properties which justify the description of them as the sacramental Body and Blood, or as being sacramentally the Body and Blood, while they shrink from language which would seem to them to imply that the consecrated elements are the same as the flesh which was crucified and rose again from the grave. Virtualism, however, is not always stated in the same way. Sometimes the language of Virtualists suggests Receptionism, whereas more often it attributes a kind of sacredness to the sacramental signs which is only intelligible on the assumption that the Lord's presence is specially associated with them.

It remains to be said that perhaps the strongest and most characteristic tradition of Anglicanism is to affirm such a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as enables the faithful communicant both to receive His life as a spiritual gift and to acknowledge Him as the giver, while at the same time the affirmation is combined with a determination to avoid as far as possible all precise, scholastic definitions as to the manner of the giving."

If there is a criticism to be made of this lengthy quotation, it is the unwillingness to address the view which Dix only a few years later attributed, perhaps rightly, to Cranmer, that the Elements were mere empty tokens, which one used as a matter of obedience, but which could never convey anything. Dix cites “we spiritually and ghostly with our faith eat Christ, being carnally absent with us in heaven, in such wise as Abraham and other holy fathers did eat Him for many years before He was incarnated and born”. And Cranmer’s version of Article XXVIII stated that “a faithful man ought not either to believe or openly confess the real and bodily presence (as they term it) of Christ’s Flesh and Blood in the sacrament of the Lord’s supper” (I do not have the Latin).

The way in which the whole Church of England abandoned Cranmer’s teaching (but until recently adulated his words) is a strange story. It was right to abandon his teaching, and to revert to an earlier view (however defined more against transubstantiation than positively) that “God’s presence and His very self” is conveyed through the devout reception of the Elements, and that is their purpose.

Guest explained his teaching cited above: “that though he (Bishop Cheney of Gloucester) take Christ’s Body in his hand, received it in his mouth, and that corporally, naturally, really, substantially and carnally, as the Doctors do write, yet did he not for all that see it, feel it, smell it or taste it.”

Oddly, the aggressive return to normal doctrine in the Catechism “the Body and Blood of Christ are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord’s supper” was made in 1604 apparently to satisfy “puritain” Calvinists!

Hooker (book V chapter lxvii) makes the practical point: “The real presence of Christ’s most blessed body and blood is not therefore to be sought in the Sacrament, but in the worthy receiver of the Sacrament.”