

EUCHARISTIC CONTROVERSIES

Tosh Thomas

BA Philosophy

E-Mail: tosthomas96@gmail.com

Abstract: The corporeal presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist has been a subject of controversy for many centuries. The first controversy took place in the 9th century between two Benedictine monks of Corbie in France, namely, Radbertus and Ratramnus and the second happened in the middle of 11th century between Berengar and Lanfranc. In both cases, the conflict was between a materialistic and a spiritualistic conception of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and its effects. Later, Scholastic theologians resolved this issue and the Council of Trent gave a final word to it. The Protestant circles had various opinions regarding the Eucharistic presence of our Lord. This academic paper traces the history of the Eucharistic Controversies.

Key Words: Eucharistic Controversy, Radbertus, Ratramnus, Berenger, Lanfranc, Aquinas

1. Introduction

The corporeal presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist has been a subject of controversy for many centuries. The first controversy took place in the 9th century between two Benedictine monks of Corbie in France, namely, Radbertus and Ratramnus and the second happened in the middle of 11th century between Berengar and Lanfranc. In both cases, the conflict was between a materialistic and a spiritualistic conception of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and its effects. Later, Scholastic theologians resolved this issue and the Council of Trent gave a final word to it. The Protestant circles had various opinions regarding the Eucharistic presence of our Lord.

2. The Middle Ages

a. Paschasius Radbertus (800-865), a learned devout monk and later the abbot of Corbie, was the first one to teach the doctrine of transubstantiation – though he never used this term – as adopted in the Catholic Church. In his work, *De corpore et sanguine Domini* (831), he stated his teaching as in line with that of Cyprian, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregory, Isidore and Bede. In describing the relationship between the Eucharist and the Body of Christ, he was closer to the teachings of St. Ambrose. Depending on the definition of Isidore of Seville, he defined a sacrament as a liturgical rite in which the external visible action brings about something internal and invisible. He then raised the question whether the

sacrament of Eucharist is a symbol (*figura*) or a reality (*veritas*) and replied that by the work of Holy Spirit, the substance of the bread and wine is effectually changed into the flesh and blood of Christ, although the figure of bread and wine remain. He identifies Eucharist with the historical body of Jesus, yet on the other side, he represents the sacramental consumption as a spiritual process by faith. Thus, he combines both sensuous and spiritual conceptions.

b. Ratramnus, contradicted this view by advocating a symbolic explanation. Although after the consecration the external appearance of bread and wine remains, the mind of the Christian sees beyond his senses. Relying on St. Augustine, he taught that the Eucharist is *figura* rather than *veritas*. The Eucharistic species are the body and blood of Christ only in a symbolic sense to the faith of the believers. For him, the Holy Mass was only a commemorative celebration of Christ's sacrifice whereby Christians are assured of their redemption. He substantiated his views based on Augustine's teaching that distinguished between the sacrament and reality.

c. Berengar of Tours (1000-1088), highly esteemed of rare learning and piety, felt that Radbertus' teaching on Eucharist was contrary to Scripture and Fathers of the Church. In opposition to the real corporeal presence, he insisted on spiritual presence and participation. The words of institution must be taken figuratively, just as the



imagery of the vine, the corner-stone, the door etc. used for Jesus. Berenger apparently doesn't deny change occurring in consecration. The bread and wine do not lose their substance but they become efficacious to the believer. Just as Christ's body is now glorified in heaven so too, we through participating in it we spiritually ascend to heaven.

d. Lanfranc, the chief opponent and a former friend of Berengar, assailed him in a treatise on Eucharist, advocating the doctrine of transubstantiation. He describes the change of substances into the body and blood of Christ as miraculous and incomprehensible. He also taught that even the unworthy communicants received the same sacramental substance as believers, though with opposite effects.

3. The Scholastic Period

From the 12th century, the term 'transubstantiation' appeared frequently in various ecclesiastical documents such as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and Second Council of Lyons (1274). By 13th century, the doctrine gained adequate formulation in the Scholastic circles. The most crucial of these is of **St. Thomas Aquinas**, who in his *Summa Theologica*, holds the view that the whole substance of the bread and wine is changed into the whole substance of Christ's body and blood respectively. Explaining this change, he says, "this is not a formal, but a substantial conversion... it can be called transubstantiation" (ST 3a, 75.4). To him, transubstantiation meant that in the consecration God himself brings about a creative transformation of reality where the substance changes though the accidents remain the same.

4. Protestant view

The doctrine of transubstantiation has always been considered by the Protestants as one of the fundamental errors of the Catholic Church. **Martin Luther** professed the doctrine of consubstantiation, according to which the substances of bread and wine co-exist in union with the substances of Christ's glorified body and blood. Luther himself and many of his followers support this by saying that Christ's humanity by virtue of union with His divinity,

acquires the property of co-existence with other created objects. Hence this is similar to hypostatic union.

a. Zwingli, regarded sacraments as no more than visible symbols. In this view, the Eucharist is only a sign of Christ's presence and the recipients eat His flesh and blood only spiritually.

b. John Calvin attacked both transubstantiation and consubstantiation and taught that Christ's body and blood are present in the Eucharist virtually i.e., by a power emanating from them. Many later protestants tended to interpret the Eucharist as a ceremony of thanksgiving and a profession of faith

5. Conclusion

The controversy comes to its climax with the affirmation made by the **Council of Trent in 1551**. The council explains that, "by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation." **The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1377** (CCC 1377) teaches that, "The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist. Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ." Thus, we believe that Jesus Christ is truly and fully present in the Holy Eucharist

6. Bibliography

- CATECHISM OF CATHOLIC CHURCH. Bangalore: Theological Publication of India, 1994.
- HARING, N.M. 'Eucharistic Controversy' in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. V), Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 1981.
- VOLLERT, C. 'Transubstantiation' in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. XIV), 1981.



SCHAFF, Philip. *History of the Christian Church (Vol. IV)*, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.