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From the Fathers to Trent: An Examination into the Patristic Grounds for
Transubstantiation

Klaas Walhout

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It has been theorized that the phrase “hocus-pocus”—a term implying “deception” or “slight of hand”—came about through a bastardization of the Latin phrase *hoc est corpus*, spoken during the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist.¹ This re-appropriation of the Latin phrase is clearly a slight at the Catholic belief surrounding the Eucharist and transubstantiation, suggesting that to believe in a change in the bread and wine’s substances into flesh and blood, one practically must believe in magic. This confusion and animosity toward the Catholic belief always seems to spark overly harsh criticism from Protestants and others. But really, the belief is meant as a more functional one, one of the many aspects of the mystery of the sacrament of the Eucharist, a defining doctrine of the Catholic Church. The Catholic belief is rooted in the Patristics; and though later instantiations of the doctrine rely on outside philosophical terms and axioms, the original belief is functional, meant to allow for the experience of Christ at the Eucharistic table.

First, we should understand just how and when the doctrine of transubstantiation began to be understood in the official sense—that is, the councils that started mentioning or declaring the Church’s official stance on it. Only then can we investigate whether the stated beliefs are rooted in the Patristics. The doctrine, though not officially stated, was mentioned in the encyclical of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215: “(Christ’s) body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God's power, into his body and blood...”² Though this council does not yet assign a name to the belief, or make it official church doctrine, it is clear that these beliefs about the changing of the “substance” of bread and wine into flesh and blood are in the air at the time of

¹ Sr. Thomas Perrin Harrison, "Some Folk Words." *American Speech* 5, no. 3 (1930): 222.

² Papal Encyclicals Online. "Fourth Lateran Council : 1215." 1930.

<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum12-2.htm#Confession%20of%20Faith>.

the council. Without a doubt, then, we can say that this was a commonly held belief in the Middle Ages.

Around three hundred years later at the Council of Trent (1551), the priesthood declared transubstantiation official church doctrine: “by the consecration of the bread and wine a change is brought about 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 properly and appropriately calls transubstantiation.”³ Why, then do the bread and wine remain appearing as bread and wine? Because the “species” remains, while the substance is changed.⁴ So, it is clear that the Early Modern Period (during the Reformation) is when the official doctrine was declared, and evidence from the Fourth Lateran council goes to show that these ideas were not pulled out of thin air.

To further establish the weight of the theological tradition that led to these beliefs, the best place to look is in the Patristics. They are the largest body of Christian thinkers not far removed from the life of Christ and primitive Christianity, and it is important that a Catholic doctrine that the Council of Trent claims the Church holds as a “true and ancient doctrine”⁵ is truly ancient.

So, let us explore the grounds and justifications for a doctrinal declaration in the Patristic-era thinkers:

Ignatius of Antioch

Saint Ignatius writes about what appears to be transubstantiation in his letter to the Smyrnaeans saying that Christians should “stand aloof” from certain heretics: “They abstain from the

³ H J. Schroeder, ed., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1950), 73.

⁴ Marie-Joseph Nicolas, *What is the Eucharist?* (New York: Hawthorn Books Publishers, 1960), 33.

⁵ Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees*, 72.

Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again.”⁶ It is evident here that Saint Ignatius is affirming (and laying groundwork for) that the proper belief regarding the Eucharistic meal is that the bread is, in fact, the literal body of Jesus Christ. Additionally, we must pay close attention to the fact that he does not simply talk about Jesus Christ the Savior, but he who suffered and by his father was “raised up again.” From this we can deduce that the “heretics” he is telling the Smyrnaeans to avoid are those who do not even believe that Christ was a physical man who suffered, died, and was raised. So, we can count this as adding to the legitimation of the later Catholic position’s grounding in tradition by way of language of the meal being the body of Christ without and semblance of figurative language. But we must also remain aware of the fact that it is written against those who do not believe in the physicality of Christ on the first place. It is, in a way, reacting to a philosophical tradition that is denying the physicality of Christ.

Justin Martyr

A slightly later Patristic, Justin Martyr, continues along the same lines as Ignatius in his first *Apology*, emphasizing that the food in the Eucharistic meal is, in fact, the flesh of Jesus Christ: “...Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.”⁷ Again, the emphasis here is that Jesus Christ was, indeed, made flesh, and the language appears to say that a literal flesh and blood are

⁶ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. I. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973). 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

present at the table. This emphasis is consistent with what we saw in Ignatius, and it is starting to become apparent that these patristics are surrounded by a decidedly Neoplatonic (i.e. anti-physical) philosophical tradition which would deny the physical nature of Christ.⁸ But where this passage sets itself apart from the above one is that Justin Martyr uses the word “transmutation.” This is really the first time a word describing the actual process of the change of the substances appears, and though the word itself is not reused by the later Catholic councils, it is quite clear that the idea of substantial change remains intact.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus gives an account of the bread in the Eucharist that clearly perpetuates the idea later articulated as transubstantiation. In *Against the Heretics*, 7.2, he writes: “Creator Sovereign and Lord of all things, he takes up the cup from creation and declares it is his own blood, and through it he finds his way into our blood. And he assures us that the bread taken from creation is his body with which he feeds our bodies.”⁹ Saint Irenaeus clearly means that bread we take “from creation” is the physical bread that we eat. But really, to him, it is the body of Christ. In support of portraying Justin’s view this way, Marie-Joseph Nicolas even writes (in her book *What is the Eucharist?*) that in his view the bread is able to nourish us “because of the ‘heavenly’ element it contains once it has become a Eucharist.”¹⁰ It is apparent that Irenaeus asserts that there is something going on on a cosmic scale when the bread is somehow changed into the body of Christ. Clearly, though, his main emphasis is on being fed by this bread, probably in a spiritual manner. The way which allows for this deeply spiritual emphasis to fully blossom is a primitive form of transubstantiation, which allows for a certain reality in the nourishment. Nonethe-

⁸ I assume the assent of the reader here to the fact that the Neoplatonic tradition contributed to Christologies which denied the physical being of Jesus.

⁹ Nicolas, *What is the Eucharist?*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

less, he tacitly asserts that some cosmic event happens that changes the bread to something “heavenly” (as Nicolas states) and, in addition, sows the seeds of transubstantiation.

Tertullian

Tertullian, in his famous work *Against Marcion*, is clearly responding to the what he considers to be heretical theology: “Then, having taken the bread and given it to His disciples, He made it His own body, by saying, ‘This is my body,’ that is, the figure of my body. A figure, however, there could not have been, unless there was first a veritable body. An empty thing, or phantom, is incapable of a figure.”¹¹ This passage is necessary to examine because it illustrates just how he understood the bread in the Eucharist functionally and whom he was arguing against. The context of this argument is Tertullian arguing against Marcion’s theory that Christ was merely a phantom. Marcion would have argued that because Christ was a phantom, he merely “pretended the bread was His body.”¹² So, when Tertullian writes about a phantom being “incapable of a figure” and arguing that the figure indicates something real and tangible, it is unclear whether he is simply speaking about Christ himself or whether he extends the argument to a literal reality of the bread as his body. Because of his ambiguity, it could be argued that Tertullian certainly does contribute to the language of transubstantiation. Additionally, it is an important passage because we see that he is clearly responding to those who thought that Christ was a “phantom” or a non-physical being—further affirming our belief about the Neoplatonic climate in which these Patristic theologians were writing.

Ambrose of Milan

¹¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. III. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), 418.

¹² *Ibid.*

Ambrose writes clearly about the Lord's Supper, stating that consecration renders the meal into something else: "The Lord Jesus Himself proclaims: 'This Is My Body.' Before the blessing of the heavenly words another nature is spoken of, after the consecration the Body is signified. He Himself speaks of His Blood. Before the consecration it has another name, after it is called Blood."¹³ Clearly, consecration has some type of creative and/or transforming power, according to Ambrose. Though he does not talk specifically about substances being changed, we can see that he thinks that there that (specifically) the wine is changed into something *called* "blood" after the prayer of consecration. Thus, the consecration by the priest plays a very active role in what we now understand as transubstantiation. Though Ambrose is not clear in a strong affirmation of a change in substance, we encounter another functional term to deal with how the body of Christ is present: "signified." I understand this as similar to Tertullian's term "figure." "Sign" (presumably the Greek word σημεῖον) indicates the same idea of presence of Christ in the Eucharist and seems more preoccupied with using theology to indicate communion with Christ in the Eucharist rather than using philosophy to talk about what exactly happens to the bread and wine. Therefore, we take away a very functional understanding of what may be called "transubstantiation" by Ambrose.

Cyril of Alexandria

Saint Cyril writes about the Eucharist in fairly specific terms, expositing its theological reasoning. He is also quite specific in the language he uses to describe what takes places at the table:

"It was fitting, therefore, for Him to be in us both divinely by the Holy Spirit, and also, so to speak, to be mingled with our bodies by His holy flesh and precious blood; which things we also possess as a life-giving Eucharist, in the form of bread and wine. For lest we should be terrified by seeing [actual] flesh and blood upon the holy tables of our churches, God, humbling Himself

¹³ Calvin College. "On the Mysteries, Chapter 9." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.v.x.html>.

to our infirmities, infuses into the things set before us the power of life, and transforms them into the efficacy of his flesh...”¹⁴

Cyril offers us one of the clearest descriptions of Patristic transubstantiation here, explicitly stating that, while the form of the bread and wine are still present, they have been “transformed” (μετίτησις)¹⁵ into the “efficacy” of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Why is this? Because God stoops to “our infirmities” so that we, like we are told so many times in scripture, may not be afraid. Truly, Cyril graces his readers with a lovely representation of the clear strand of thought on transubstantiation in the patristics—he clearly says that the bread and wine are “transformed” and gives practical theological reasoning for it.

Now that a sample of the notable Patristic authors have been quoted and explored, we can see that there are serious and explicit grounds in the roots of the tradition of Catholic thought for belief in transubstantiation—due especially to the language. But it is still necessary to establish common threads in the Patristics, and see how these threads prevailed all the way through the Fourth Lateran Council to the Council of Trent; especially how they were corrupted or expanded (whether justly or unjustly). The first common thread among several of these thinkers is that they were partially responding and/or reacting to the philosophical climate around them—a climate that was hostile toward the idea that God could be a physical man. Even the generally anti-physical Christian thinker Origen affirmed some type of “body-blood-nourishment” language in affirming the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.¹⁶ Beyond this, he even wrote, “in the old law the manna was figurative food; but now the flesh of God is meat in reality.”¹⁷ Whether or

¹⁴ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke* (Studion Publishers, 1983), 180.

¹⁵ Google Books. "Patrologia Graeca." 72:911.

¹⁶ Aidan Nichols, *The Holy Eucharist: From the New Testament to Pope John Paul II* (Dublin: Veritas, 1991), 34.

¹⁷ John Duffey, "The Sentiments of the Primitive Fathers and Doctors of the Church on the Holy Eucharist." *The Catholic Layman* 3, no. 28 (1854): 51

not this is explicit enough to say Origen believed in transubstantiation in any proper sense, we can still see a similar theme to the above-mentioned Patristics even in this slightly more Neoplatonic thinker in the language of real nourishment.

This goes to show, then, that the theological significance contained in the heart of the doctrine—that is, the nourishment by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—was genuinely understood by the Patristics and is rightfully still around today. In other words, though we see transubstantiation affirmed in contrast to gnostic philosophy, it is mainly to preserve theological idea of the mystical nourishment we get from Jesus Christ. As far as concerns about outdatedness go, we must acknowledge that there is still, in the Christian church, a large amount of Neoplatonic thought (e.g. contemporary eschatology). Though there is significant effort to stamp out Neoplatonic philosophies from the church, I do believe it could be valuable to have doctrines that deliberately work against this. This is how transubstantiation (in theory) can work in the Catholic Church. So, the theme of the Patristics as responding to a philosophical climate is easily seeable today.

The second theme throughout these Patristics has been briefly discussed and proceeds directly out of the first one; thus, it does not need to be greatly expounded upon. This common theme is that, because many of these writers are writing in response to the philosophical climate in order to preserve theological significance, they use their primitive transubstantiation in quite a functional way. This is not to say that without the philosophical climate the doctrine would not have come about. It is only to say that, in propping up the idea of nourishment by Christ, it is meant to take a back seat to the most valuable theological ideas for the life (not just the doctrine) of the church—in this case, the experience of the Eucharist.

This functional take on transubstantiation as a response to a hostile climate stands in stark contrast to the hardline stance taken by the priesthood at the Council of Trent in 1551 (at least one thousand years after the very latest of the Patristics we looked at). The declaration itself is not hardline, and is proven above to be somewhat grounded by early Catholic/Primitive Christian thought. But along with the statement itself came a series of warnings to Christians who did not adopt the view of the Eucharist laid out at the Council of Trent (i.e. Protestants).¹⁸ The document containing the statement reads: “If any one shall deny that in the most holy Sacrament of the Eucharist is contained really and actually and substantially the body and blood together with the soul and Godhead of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore the whole Jesus Christ, but shall say that He is in it only as a sign or a figure or in power, let him be anathema.”¹⁹ It goes on to say more specifically that the “substance” of the bread and wine change while the “species” remain the same. The exhortative document goes on to use the words “substance” and “species” several more times. Additionally, it even talks about the “particles left over” from communion and that Christ at the Eucharist is “actually” eaten. In the usual fashion, it states that if anyone does not agree with these stated beliefs, “let him be anathema.”²⁰

By proclaiming, “Let them be anathema,” the Catholic Church is simply following its custom in stating its doctrine, not being maliciously exclusive. But this statement, in my mind, is given more teeth in the context of this document of exhortation that came out of the Council of Trent. This is because of the philosophical specificity of the language used when they write “substance” and “species.” In using such precise language, the document is drawing up a very specific correct belief, while the theological significance of said belief is caused to take a

¹⁸ Darwell Stone, *A History of the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (London: Longmans, Green, 1909), 91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

backseat to the dogma. This becomes clearer in light of further examination of the Patristics' language.²¹

Looking back at the excerpt from Tertullian, we see that he uses the word "figure" to describe just what the meal is.²² Ambrose of Milan says that, post-consecration, Christ's body is "signified."²³ Saint Ignatius and even the famous Church father Augustine affirm that the bread "signifieth" the body.²⁴

This kind of language being repeated by the Patristics reiterates the emphasis on sacramental significance over any literal emphasis on the nature of the change in the meal (though the literal emphasis was obviously still there). So a question arises of just how the strong dogmatic language came to be so prevalent that the Catholic Church thought it necessary to put it in its official doctrine. With words like "substance" and "species" becoming not only common in the declaration and warning document, but very key to understanding it, we must ask ourselves just where these words came from. What immediately comes to mind is the language and terminology of Aristotelian philosophy.

In talking about the "species" of bread and wine, it is implied that, while the bread and wine appear to be as they are, their appearance is only their "species" (their substance is something heaven). This puts a premium of something's substance and not on its appearance. It could be said, then, that the appearance of the bread and wine being just the species indicates that their

²¹ It should be noted that the Patristic writers are all writing in Greek and the document from Trent would have been written in Latin. However, the words which are repeated in each document are different enough that the inherent obstacle in translating them all into English is not so difficult that that the final English translations of them could be conflated. The Latin *substantia* and *species* are describing the bread and wine's nature, while the Greek σημαίνει and other words that could be translated to "sign," "signify," or "figure" are talking about the bread and wine's active *role* in the Eucharist.

²² Roberts, Donalds, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 418.

²³ "On the Mysteries, Chapter 9."

²⁴ Duffey, "The Sentiments of the Primitive Fathers," 51.

appearances are accidental—that is, not necessary to their being. With this very slight and honest tweak we can call the bread and wine’s “species” their “accidents.” At this point we have crossed over into Aristotelian philosophy and terminology. A substance is understood in this tradition as what something is in its essence, while an accident is simply an attribute of something.²⁵ Thus, there is an obvious parallel between the language of Aristotle and the language of Trent.

Needless to say, this has fueled a debate on whether or not Aristotle’s philosophy is present in Catholic thought on transubstantiation (especially at Trent). Thinkers on either side of this debate have argued different things quite persuasively on whether substance and appearance are believed by Trent to be changed and also where and whether or not Aristotle’s philosophy factors in.^{26 27} Whether or not this is actually the exact source influence is up for grabs. Some Catholic thinkers are prone to argue that there was no influence from the Aristotelian philosophy²⁸, while some Protestant critics want to chalk the doctrine up to the Aristotelian tradition.²⁹ There seems to be no consensus when it comes the Aristotelian influence on transubstantiation. But regardless of the extent of the influence, it can work as a case study of how a secular philosophical tradition can influence a Christian doctrine: secular philosophical ideas and terminology can slip in, fostering new and changed ideas by modifying earlier Christian ones.³⁰ There is clearly some semblance of Aristotelian influence here; but the reality is that the evidence is inconclusive.

²⁵MIT, "Metaphysics, Book VII," The Internet Classics Archive.
<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.7.vii.html>.

²⁶ D.C. Cassidy, "Is Transubstantiation Without Substance?", *Religious Studies* 30, no. 2 (1994): 197-98.

²⁷ Joseph M. Powers, *Eucharistic Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 114.

²⁸ For example, Paul Haffner in his book *The Sacramental Mystery*

²⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 198. (quoting Luther)

³⁰ This is in no way an inherently bad thing. Secular philosophy will always inevitably influence Christian thought.

Regardless of the thought history, the Council of Trent is much more concerned with the proper understanding of substance and species (or “accident”) than any of the Patristic thinkers. This preoccupation with proper understanding therefore creates an irony: the trend we established in the Patristics was an emphasis on the physicality of Christ in contrast to Neoplatonic thinking—that is, a tradition which stresses the understanding of immaterial metaphysical things rather than physical. So, in getting caught up in metaphysical terminology and stipulations, the above-quoted document from Trent loses sight of physical, human emphasis and rather is more concerned with the non-tangible metaphysical terminology. While the whole document of Trent puts an appropriate stress on the value of the sacraments—specifically the Eucharist—for the Church, it is specifically in the nitty-gritty talk about transubstantiation where the discussion seems to wander into metaphysics.

This is not meant to be a malicious indictment of the Council’s declaration of transubstantiation, pinning it into a corner just for hammering a certain philosophical aspect home. In claiming to be the one true Church, it is necessary to declare beliefs as official doctrine so that knowledge and truth can proceed to all Christians. Really, the Catholic Church did nothing wrong in declaring these things dogmatically. But it should still be noted that because of the personal nature of communion, which allows God and man to meet in some capacity, the overly dogmatic talk about transubstantiation does come dangerously close to missing the point of it in the first place: to allow us to understand how Christ is present with us at that the table. If we get caught up in the process of that understanding, this may hamper the theologically significant experience we have with Christ at the table which is ultimately meant to be just that: an experience.

This takes us back to the Patristics, who were clearly concerned with this theological experience at the communion table. There is no being exactly sure of the process of change that led

the functional description of the Patristics to the dogmatic proclamation of the Catholic Church. But while the poison of extreme dogmatism can skew a certain read of Trent documents, we must still remember that the seeds of transubstantiation were truly planted by the Patristics. Any misguidance and loss of sight came from outside factors, and transubstantiation in itself came from wholly Catholic places (the very first Catholics). Whether one sees the outside philosophical influence as inevitable, unconscionable, or non-existent, we must acknowledge that transubstantiation was originally understood as aiding in Christ's presence at the table before Trent got hung up on the understanding itself.

Ultimately, Christ's presence in the Eucharist overcomes any attempt to fully understand it, and this is another aspect of Catholic belief that gets chalked up to mystery. Though it is important to look at Trent with a critical eye in order to avoid muting experience with intellect, with a charitable eye we see a general thread from the Patristics to Trent to the present. This trend is that of a love for the mystery of Christ's presence at the table and a genuine attempt to understand it. So really, "hocus-pocus" has no place in the Catholic faith because any explanations for such a strange phenomena as transubstantiation are rooted in tradition, and the rest must be left up to beautiful mystery.