

THE EUCHARIST AS LANGUAGE

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Plainly, the Eucharist can be studied in the light of a great number of disciplines: anthropology, history, sociology and so on. It seems reasonable, however, to suppose that, first of all, it is a matter of theology. By theology I do not now mean a study of religions but rather a study within a religious tradition. In other and more classical words, it means "Faith seeking understanding". I shall be looking at the Eucharist from the inside, so to speak, rather than as a detached observer.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. (Heb. 1:1-2)

This tremendous claim in the Epistle to the Hebrews, I take as my starting point. I am not concerned, for present purposes, with whether this Epistle falls short of Chalcedonian Christology or even that of John, but simply with the notion that God "spoke to our fathers" and that he has "spoken to us" by the Son.

In what I would call the mainstream Catholic tradition, (elegantly set forth in Eph. 3:1-10) God's revelation of the "mystery of his will, according to the purpose he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time (is) to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth".

This revelation is presented to us by the prophets (in the words of Scripture) but most definitively in the Word made flesh dwelling amongst us; and the dwelling amongst us which took place historically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, giving rise to the preaching of the New Testament, thereby takes place sacramentally in the mysteries that constitute the institutional Church. These are the continuing presence/absence of the Word of God, centring on the Eucharist.

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Of course, all these propositions are highly debatable but my purpose is not an apologetic in defence of this view, but simply to admit to what I am taking for granted as background to the proposition that I do want to discuss. This is the proposition that the body of Christ is present in the Eucharist as the meaning is present in a word.

Three or four decades ago a number of Roman Catholic theologians, uneasy with what they took to be the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation as an account of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, proposed to substitute a doctrine of "transignification", according to which it was not that the *being* of the bread and wine became the being of Christ, but that the *meaning* which the bread and wine had as a symbol of our unity in a common meal, became through our faith a sign of deeper unity in the body of Christ. This presented as an *alternative* to transubstantiation sounded suspiciously close to the proposition that a piece of fabric with the necessary number of stars and stripes on it should be the national flag and, on ceremonial occasions be saluted as an expression of patriotism. This is perfectly reasonable behaviour but it makes of the flag an emblem whose meaning is supplied by the opinions and aspirations and bonds of friendship in the human society in question. The proposition that the Eucharist is something much the same seemed to empty it of its mystery, not to say its interest. It is true, as I shall be trying to argue, that human language itself, whether of flags or words, is a kind of mystery, something that in a way transcends our understanding even while being the means of our understanding. But, of course, for the tradition from which I speak, the mystery of the Eucharist is much deeper than this. For the Church is not founded on the opinions, aspirations and friendships of its members, rather it creates and sustains these; and "the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord ...".

The Eucharist is the creative language of God, his eternal Word made flesh. The *aspirations* are the hope engendered by the resurrection, the *opinions* are the faith which is the word of God, and the *friendship* is the *agape* that God has given to us that we might share it with all humankind. The "society" whose "emblem" it is (I put both those words in scare-quotes to indicate that they are both being used analogically) is the society which is "the body of Christ" whose emblem is, (in yet *another* analogical sense) "the body of Christ".

A word, now, on the philosophical background to talk of transubstantiation. For Aristotle, as for Aquinas, a substance exists by being a certain kind of thing, having an essence which distinguishes it from other kinds of things. ("No entity without identity" as Quine used to say; "It is form that gives *esse*" as Aquinas used to say.) To say that Fred exists is not to attribute to him a property called "existence", there is no such property, it is to say of him that he truly *is a human being*; being a human being *is* what it takes for him to exist. This predication, they would say, is in the category of substance (simply answering the question: What is it?). True statements in other, accidental, categories (such as: he is sitting down ... or has a cold ...) although they

presuppose, they would say, the existence of Fred, do not *directly assert* that he exists. Material substances exist (as does everything other than God) by being some kind of thing, and exist over against the possibility of changing into other kinds of things—for this is what being “material” implies. They are contingent, not in the later rationalist sense, (that we can conceive them not being), but in the medieval sense of being contingent on how they will be affected by the other things in the universe. That such substances (and, for that matter, non-material, imperishable “necessary beings” like Angels) should also exist over against the deeper possibility of there not being anything at all, nothing to be made out of, nothing to be made into, would be a thought quite foreign to Aristotle. And of course, that it *is* a real thought is something that needs to be demonstrated. Aristotle had a metaphysics of *substance* and form; Aquinas developed a deeper metaphysics of *esse*, and creation.

Etienne Gilson was, I think, quite right to argue that the notion of *esse* (existence over against the possibility that nothing whatever might have existed) came to medieval European thought not from classical Greek philosophy, but from the biblical doctrine of creation. Since it was generally agreed by advocates of both transubstantiation and of transignification that the consecration of the bread and wine made no chemical or physical or other scientifically detectable difference to these elements, the choice seemed to be between a deeper metaphysical transformation of the elements or a change in *our* interpretation of their significance. Of course, for transignificationists this change in our perception was an act of faith, a supernatural activity in us of the Holy Spirit, but it seemed to be something that had to do with us, in us, rather than with the bread and wine themselves. It sounded like nominalism—this was, of course in a period when “metaphysics” was not a respectable word but a term of abuse (like “theological” today).

The most coherent exponent of transubstantiation, Thomas Aquinas, was quite clear that it was a matter of metaphysics. He argues that the Eucharist is not a question of the substance of bread becoming the substance of a human body (this kind of substantial change is familiar enough and takes place whenever we eat a slice of bread); it is a miraculous transformation at a deeper level, which Aquinas compares to creation, in which the *esse* (the existence) of this piece of bread and this cup of wine becomes the *esse* of Christ. This transformation of a substance into another *particular* existent, as distinct from a different kind of thing (as in ordinary substantial change) would have been completely unintelligible to Aristotle as, of course, was the notion of creation and, indeed, the whole notion of *esse* in Aquinas’s sense.

My next task, then, is to give some account of “meaning”. This philosophical task may seem rather distant from doing theology as such, but if faith is “seeking understanding” it had better not be confused about understanding. I shall be arguing that meaning is never subjective “just in the mind” but nor is it “objective” in the sense that most people would reckon that leopards and trees are objectively there (or not).

“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less ...”. “The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all”. He was, of course, talking nonsense. Words are for communication, which means common use, and cannot function unless there is a conventional agreement about their meaning. As Wittgenstein has convincingly shown, there can be no such thing as a private meaning. Meaning *belongs to the language itself*. Though, of course, in the development of language throughout a human history, there is the creation and appreciation of new meanings, which is the intellectual life of a human society and is the intellectual life of particular individuals who share in the task. This is a point well brought out by Peter Geach (in *Mental Acts*, London, n.d.) in criticising the form of behaviourism he detected in Gilbert Ryle’s *Concept of Mind* (London, 1949). The same point was made by Thomas Aquinas in the *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*. The understanding of meaning is the work of human intelligence, by which we transcend our individuality: but this intelligence is nevertheless itself a power of the human soul which is always the substantial form of an individual human body. I found a fascinating parallel here with Bill Kavanagh’s account of the authentic *Catholica* arising from local churches but refusing to be limited by localisation itself (unlike the devil’s caricature: the standardisation that belongs to the ethos of the market economy). For Aquinas, concepts, unlike sensations, are not the private property of individuals but do arise from individual material animals transcending their individuality and hence their materiality. As Aristotle knew, thoughts, unlike sensations, have no corporeal organ. Brains do not think; they are the co-ordinating centre of the structure of the nervous system which makes possible the sensual interpretation of our world, which is itself interpreted in the structure of symbols, language, which we do not inherit with our genes but create for ourselves in community.

Britain had, fairly recently, a prime minister who notoriously said, “There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals and their families.” I will argue that there is a kind of objectivity to meaning just because there *is* such a thing as society and, moreover, that there is a symbiotic relationship between language and society; one cannot exist without the other. And both are essential to (of the essence of) being human. I shall claim that the sacraments which centre upon the Eucharist are the language which makes a certain “society” possible, and that it is this society that makes this sacramental language meaningful, and what makes *this* language distinct from others is that the society in question is the mystery of the People of God. Of course, anything that is actual is “of God”, created and thus kept in being by the creative act of God, but the people of God are not simply God’s creatures but the outcome of his personal convenantal love, the Holy Spirit, so that we are *children* of God sharing by grace in his own divine life. The sacramental language is the language granted to us in which this mystery is to be expressed and lived out in human and material terms.

The word "sacrament" is, like so many theological words, used *analogically* (as with "sin" and "love" and all the words we use to speak of the unknown God). The first and greatest sacrament is the culmination of scriptural revelation (in the perspective of *Hebrews*) in the Word made flesh, the humanity of *Christ*, the image of the invisible God. Secondly, we speak analogically of the *Church* as "sacrament", "a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity amongst all humankind" (*Lumen Gentium* 1). The document of the Second Vatican Council from which these words come is in a medieval tradition which sees sacraments not simply as "outward signs of inward grace" but as taking in the whole sweep of salvation history, past, present and future, and sees this unity of humankind as something mainly for the future: "while people of the present day are drawn ever more closely together by social, technical and cultural bonds, it still remains for them to achieve full unity in Christ." That seems to me the ecclesiastical understatement of the century.

After the humanity of Christ and, then, the Community of the Church, the third analogical use of "sacrament" we use is when speaking in the plural, of the "*sacraments of the Church*"—Baptism, Eucharist, etc. My own view, which I do not have a chance to expound here, is that discussion of these has to be a discussion of the constitution and structure of the People of God, which is neither political nor invisibly "spiritual" but precisely *sacramentally* visible. But we do not have time for this. Sufficient to say that the Eucharist in my view, (which is not at all original), is the centre of the sacramental life and other sacraments are sacramental by their relationship to the Eucharist.

But, back to the objectivity of meaning. In order to understand this, we first need, I think, to distinguish clearly between *sense experience* and *understanding*. Aquinas said that to make this distinction was one of the great achievements of Aristotle; but since then the blight of empiricism, amongst other things, has badly obscured it. To elucidate it, I think we need to think first about animal life.

It seems to me characteristic of animals that, unlike lifeless things like bits of glass and computers and volcanic rocks, they have purposes and a point of view and they *interpret* and *evaluate* from their own point of view the world in which they live. They find bits of their world frightening or edible or pleasurable or sexually attractive ... or whatever. Animals do not have to be taught to groom each other; lambs do not have to learn to run away from wolves. Moreover, they manifestly do some things willingly and some things, under coercion, unwillingly.

It was by way of Avicenna (Ibn Sina, the eleventh-century Persian philosopher) that the medieval Europeans learnt of what they called the "interior sense powers". These were, first the *sensus communis*, the power of coordinating the deliveries of the different exterior senses, to produce what in the early twentieth century we began to call the Gestalt as the meaningful object of sense experience. Secondly, there was the *imaginatio* or phantasma, the

power of retaining such experience for future reference. Thirdly, was the *sensus aestimativus* (or *cogitativus*) that I have called the evaluative sense-power, by which the animal feels that something is dangerous or edible or whatever. Finally, there is the *sense-memory*, the awareness of time and temporality, the power of recalling experiences as past. In linguistic animals there is also a quite distinct power which is not a sense but the "intellectual memory", which is not concerned with time as such but is the power of *recall* by which what we have learnt and not forgotten is brought to mind when we are not at the moment thinking about it—like your address or the capital of Spain or Newton's second law.

So I want to argue that the sensuous bodily life that, broadly speaking, we share with non-linguistic animals, is primarily about finding *meaning* in the world. This is sense-experience: not simply being struck by some mythical "sense data", but being struck by the *significance* of surrounding things for the animal itself "from its own point of view". Such an experience gives rise to animal behaviour (if a bit of its world strikes an animal as edible it will tend to try to eat it). Not all such response is as simple as this. If, for example, a male animal perceives a fellow male of the species as threatening and aggressive, his response may be the performance of a ritual action of, say, submission, which will divert the other's aggression. Ritual behaviour amongst non-linguistic animals is extremely common in moments of crisis, both in danger situations and in courtship, and it is one of the features of behaviour that we should be careful *not* to confuse with language. The reason for this is that it is genetically determined by the animal's inherited DNA and quite as automatic as any other triggered response.

But in any case, every non-linguistic animal's response to its world is mediated by, and determined by, the meaning it discovers in it by its senses. What it *desires* to achieve or avoid (which is to say what it will *tend* to achieve or avoid) is conditioned by, indeed is *defined* by, its sensual interpretation of its world. Meaning can only be understood in terms of the larger notion of structure.

Meaning, in a perfectly general sense, is, I would maintain, always the role or place or function that some part of the structure has within that structure. What does it *mean* to be President of the United States? To answer this you have to give some account of the *structure* of U.S. government and society. What does "perhaps" *mean*? It is a word, an adverb, qualifying a statement to express possibility with uncertainty. (O.E.D.) You have thus placed "perhaps" within the *structure* of language in which it has a part to play.

Now consider seeing. It begins with light of some kind falling on the retina of the eye, in consequence of this, because the eye belongs to the structure of the bodily nervous system, certain things occur in the brain and, in consequence of *this*, certain tendencies may arise in the muscles of the animal's limbs and so on. The point of this is that the eye, because it belongs to the structure of the nervous system, is *relevant* to other parts of the animal's

body. What happens in the eye is *meaningful* for the animal. It is this meaningfulness of the eye that we call "sight". The eye does not see; it is the whole animal that sees because of what has happened in the eye and elsewhere. The eye is an instrument of seeing (so the Greeks called it an "organ", which means instrument). Animals see and hear and feel because the behaviour of parts of them is relevant to the whole. We call it an *organic* whole.

The non-linguistic animal's interpretation of its world is expressed in its behaviour, and only in its behaviour. There is a superstitious view that the brain is what sees. This is quite false. The brain is the coordinator, the "nerve centre" of the nervous system (and even this is not true in all animals). The notion that the brain sees is only a degree less absurd than the notion that the brain understands or thinks. The brain is not even the organ of understanding but rather part of the sensitive infra-structure necessary for understanding.

So: the non-linguistic animal's interpretation and evaluation of its world is expressed in its behaviour and *only* in its *behaviour*. The linguistic animal's interpretation of its world is expressed also in *language*. So we must now turn to language and understanding.

The extraordinary thing about human animals is that besides the inherited, genetically supplied nervous system which not only is the structure that makes meaningful *sense-experience* possible, it also provides an (enormously more complex) brain structure which will serve as the necessary infra-structure of meaning that *we do not inherit but create for ourselves*, the structures of language. Nobody could have a gene for the Polish language, and if she could, Polish could not be a language.

As when we and our fellow animals *experience* our world we take it up into our inherited, more or less *genetically determined* bodily structures, so when we *understand* we take this experience up into our socially created structures of language. So our understanding, our use of language, requires sense-experience as *that which* we interpret and "comment on" but also because, in order to use the meanings we understand, we need what Aquinas calls the "*conversio ad phantasmata*": a reference back to the interior sense-power of "imaginatio" in order to recall and actually reflect upon what is latent in our intellectual memory but which needs bringing to mind. This selective recall of what we have in the intellectual memory is, for Aquinas, at the heart of the unique human capacity for free choice. The necessity for the *conversio ad phantasmata* shows us why what we have called the "bodily infra-structure" of human linguistic intellectual life is so important, and it is why, for example, brain-damage inhibits thinking. This is not, as I have said, because the brain is an organ of understanding, but because the brain is an important part of the "infra-structure" upon which human understanding depends.

To make a language is to take certain material things (noises, marks on paper or cuts in stone ... etc.) and use them not as tools for their causal efficacy, as we might a hammer or a sword, but as symbols, as having an

externally imposed meaning, imposed by our *convention*. Of course, no amount of study of the *intrinsic* meaning (the *natural form*) of the material thing which happens to be used as a symbol will reveal what its *linguistic* meaning is. You have to go amongst the community who use it and share their life so that you will come to appreciate how it is to be used in accordance with their conventions.

That assertion demands a very important qualification. It is not true that it is only the *conventional* and not the *natural* properties of our symbols that matter in a language. The full complete and perfectly precise use of language is what we nowadays call poetry. In listening to or reading or writing a poem, we pay attention not only to what I shall call the conventional "dictionary meaning" of a word but also its sensual value, how we interpret it through our natural bodily nervous system, its rhythm and how it sounds and feels along the nerves. And this is not only true of the limited area we call poetry but also of normal human conversation. In fact to use language attending *only* to its dictionary meaning demands a special skill, but a very important one, for on it depends the development of all the scientific disciplines—indeed, it is largely this that defines our use of words like "scientific" and "logical". (But poetry is language trying to be bodily experience, as music is bodily experience trying to be language.)

It is when our language is stripped down to its dictionary meanings that we can confidently say that all human languages are intertranslatable, so that when we learn "our own" language we are not simply fitting into the customs of our tribe, but potentially hearing or speaking to the whole human race, past, present and to come. To understand a meaning at the human linguistic level is just to have a skill in using a symbol, let us call it a word. Now, there is an important difference between understanding a linguistic meaning and having a sensation, even though both are a matter of meaning, though at different levels. I can reasonably expect another member of my species to have roughly the same sensations as I have. It must be much the same for him or her as for me to be hungry or angry or frightened—if this were not so we could never learn the words "hunger", "anger" or whatever.

Now it is not so with understanding linguistic meanings: here it is necessary not simply that another should have *similar* meanings in mind; it is necessary that he or she should have *identical* meanings in mind. It is necessary that we should agree on at least the "dictionary meaning" of the words, otherwise we shall be at cross purposes.

Fortunately it is not difficult to resolve such misunderstanding because it is a feature of language that we can talk about talking. In our sensual interpretation this is not possible, or at least not in the same way. (The interior evaluative sense (the *sensus aestimativus*) come close to sensing a sense—as the alternative medieval name for it—*sensus cogitativus*—implies.)

Sensations remain my private property or yours. Thought, however, transcends my privacy. To repeat myself, in the creation of language we reach

beyond our private material individuality to break into the non-individual, non-material sphere of linguistic meaning. This does not, of course, mean that we cease to be material animals, but we are the material animal which has a way of transcending its individuality so that the community it forms with others is something entirely new.

The human polis does not rest upon interacting self-interests—as Aristotle thought our international relations did—and Thatcherites thought all human community did. But the polis itself rests, as Aristotle thought, on *philia* (*Pol.* III.9). What distinguishes citizens from foreigners in the true polis is that our moral bonds with the foreigners are those of a particular kind of commercial justice, whereas what unites citizens is *philia*, friendship, which involves the capacity to transcend our individuality and our individual interests. And with this we are not far from “Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend”.

And here we come to the central meaning of the Eucharist. With the irony or paradox typical of the New Testament, it is a celebratory feast which is about a defeat and death. It is both about the world of sin and about the redemption of this world within, but from beyond, this world by grace. It is misunderstood if either of these is forgotten or played down. It is an *agape*, a love feast, but it is saying that love is best represented in our kind of world by an acceptance of death, indeed—an acceptance of murder. But this is not presented as a philosophical or sociological discovery. It is not presented as a doctrine at all. The festival celebrating liberation from slavery takes place under the shadow of the imminence of Calvary, and these irreconcilables like presence/absence cannot coexist on paper but only in a person, in the human person of Christ. Not in what he illustrates or what *he stands for* but in *himself*. That is why transubstantiation is right. The Christian Church as I see it does not first of all preach a doctrine—as Paul said, we preach “Christ crucified”. Sure, over the centuries we have quite rightly developed doctrines, but these have been articulated to prevent misunderstandings, especially facile simplifications.

Like Karl Marx, Thomas Aquinas thought that the Christian religious cult belongs essentially to an age of alienation, or as he put it, of sin. And by the use of this word “sin” he indicates that the alienation is something deeper than anything Marx understood. For sin, for Thomas, was an option for some perceived good which, in the circumstances would be *incompatible* with *friendship*, *agape* with God, and that means alienation from the very roots of our existence and from our sharing in divinity. For Marx, religious cult was merely a symptom, certainly not a cause, of human alienation. It was neither the cause nor the cure, but simply “the painkiller of the people” giving an illusion of well-being. With the elimination of the market economy, which has to treat human beings as commodities, religion, Marx thought, would simply fade away much as being greedy for sweets fades away as we grow up. Aquinas would have seen this as too optimistic; his thought is more

complex. He sees the sacramental order as essentially God's word in our symbolic linguistic mode but, like Paul, he sees it also as a possible occasion of sin. In the famous passage from 1 Cor. 11, Paul tells them roundly:

When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you ... When you meet together it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal and one is hungry while another is intoxicated ... do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

and Paul goes on

It was on the night he was *betrayed* that the Lord Jesus took bread and having given thanks broke it and said "this is my body". (my emphasis)

Like the historical death of Christ, the sacramental commemoration (and even celebration) of it takes place in a world of sin.

A church which is not a challenge to the values of such a world is one which, as Paul says, "does not discern the body", but the body is there to be "discerned" and they are "profaning the body and blood of the Lord" which is there to be profaned. For the Eucharist is the Word of God and not the word of man. We *make*, as well as *being made by* our human language, but we do not make the meaning of the Eucharist; if it is anything of interest it is the Word of God and thus a word of power: the creative word that says "light be"—and there was light. The re-creative word says "this is my body and my blood"—and so it is. What the bread and wine have become is clearly not an icon, picture, reminder of Christ but Christ himself, and him crucified, the only one who can reconcile the opposites, who can bring life out of death.

A church which celebrates the Eucharist while ignoring what we should nowadays call "the fundamental option for the poor" is "eating and drinking judgement upon herself", as Aquinas thought; it is using the language of God to tell a lie.

Medieval Eucharistic theology distinguished three levels of meaning in the Eucharistic language. There was what was simply a sign *sacramentum tantum*, visible to anyone, a ritual meal, like a party which could be studied as well by atheist anthropologists as by Christians. This sign, however, is a God-spoken word which reveals itself to our faith at two levels. First there is the significance for *this* world of both grace and sin, this still-alienated world. The sign is that of the Church witnessing to this world and challenging it with the revelation of the gospel of love. This the medievals called the "*res et sacramentum*". This "*res*" means what is signified by a sign; "*sacramentum*" means a sign itself. So at this level of meaning we have what is signified by the ritual meal, our human word of friendship. For now it signifies and thus realises the incarnate Word of God at the moment of his supreme expression

of love for us (what John calls his "hour" and his "lifting up") when his body is broken in death (as symbolised by the separation of body and blood). Here he reveals his loving and obedient faithfulness to his mission from the Father, the mission to be the first totally human being, living by love, by transcending his individual self and self-interest and thereby being totally vulnerable, not seeking to evade or resist whatever his brothers and sisters would do to him. It was this loving acceptance of defeat at our hands that won for this first really human being his defeat of death and our being given a sharing in such resurrection.

This real presence, then, of the incarnate Word of God in his meaning of victory-through-accepted-defeat for himself and for us, is the *res*, the thing directly signified by our Eucharistic token meal. But this *res*, the sacramentally real presence of the body of Christ, is also itself a sign, a *sacramentum*, of a deeper *res*, a deeper reality, indeed the deepest reality.

The sacramental order of this world points towards and partially realises a further third level of meaning, the ultimate mystery that is signified-and-not-a-sign of anything deeper (*res tantum*). This is the *agape*, the *caritas*, the love which is the Godhead. The liturgy of the Eucharist and its attendant sacraments, our life in the Church, is itself a sacramental sign and realisation of our life in the Kingdom.

Then there will be no more Eucharist, no more sacramental religion, no more faith or hope; all this will wither away, there will be simply the unimaginable human living out of love which is the Spirit of God in eternity.

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