

Those with eyes to see

James Alison

Walk about Zion, go round about her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels; that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God for ever and ever. He will be our guide for ever. (Ps 48, 12-14)

The best analogy I know for Transubstantiation – the conversion, after consecration, of the substance of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ – is the phenomenon of “Magic Eye” images. These are glossy, colourful, two-dimensional pictures of what appear to be a series of wavy lines or patterns. For the viewer to get the “magic” effect, they should gaze upon the picture for some time, allowing the eyes to relax. At first there is a moment of dizziness as the stereoscopic functions of the brain kick in, trying to make sense of the two-dimensional surface, then, sometimes helped by the viewer moving the picture towards, or away from, the eyes, suddenly a three dimensional image is apparent. It has no necessary relationship at all to the content of the wavy lines or patterns. Indeed the wavy patterns simply yield and become the contours of, for instance, three dolphins leaping out of the water.

Once the eyes have picked up the 3-D image, they stay fairly easily relaxed in their resting on the image, and it is possible for the viewer to move the eyes around, and look at different elements of the 3-D world which is opening up before them. The eyes no longer have to be fixed on one single spot.

Of course, there is no magic trick here at all. The 3-D image is embedded in the wavy-lined pattern by an artist, and there is nothing subjective about what can be seen. It is not that some people looking at a “Magic Eye” picture see Dolphins, and others a Wensleydale cheese. Nor do the eyes need to be strained in order to see the image. The stereoscopic functioning of the brain will pick up what is there if given half a chance by the viewer, which may mean that the viewer must learn to un-strain their gaze.

This is, it seems to me, what is meant by Transubstantiation. We come into a Church building, with a group of people like ourselves, and in a quiet and relaxed and ordered way we start to give thanks, our gathering led by a priest. Giving thanks allows the gaze to relax. After all, the giving thanks, which is the most active thing we do in the Mass, and the basis for its proper name – Eucharist - is directly dependent on our confidence that Our Lord has given himself for us, once and for all, to be a perfect living sacrifice, that this is now done, and he is ascended to where he is triumphant, as a lamb slaughtered, on an altar in heaven, surrounded by a festal chorus of angels and of those who have gone before us in the faith. Giving thanks is our mode of presence to the reality which is going on constantly in heaven, and goes on even if we don't know about it.

The idea behind the Eucharist seems to be this: that as we relax into our thanksgiving, so the apparent pattern which we are seeing, and taking part in – words of scripture, prayers, priest, gestures and symbols of bread and wine – becomes the contour of something else, something 3-D, and we find ourselves actually participating in the heavenly liturgy which we know to be just there, but cannot usually see.

Typically in the prayers, the Spirit is invoked, and Jesus' words are repeated in the first person, and what we find is that rather than this being something we are doing, we are in the presence of someone doing something *to us*. The 3-D picture kicks in. Not dolphins, but a Great High Priest, who is also a slaughtered lamb, coming out of the veil-less Holy of Holies, and giving us his body and sprinkling us with his blood.

This is what is central to “transubstantiation” – the shift from the perception that it is we who are doing something, to the realisation that someone is doing something to, and for us, so that it is the crucified and risen Jesus who is the 3-D protagonist of the Eucharist, rather than the 2-D object of it.

Of course, this whole process is significantly focused on the presiding presbyter and on the bread and wine, because in the course of the thanksgiving, the Great High Priest takes advantage of the sign of the presbyter reciting words in the first person, to show Himself coming forth from the Holy of Holies where he has offered his own blood as that of a lamb, so that the bread and the wine actually become the living signs of that self-giving.

Consider the way in which, in the “Magic Eye” illustration, what had seemed to be a relatively independent picture (the wavy lines) suddenly became not a picture at all, but merely the contours of the 3-D image that emerged as your eyes became focused. Once you have seen the 3-D picture emerge you understand that there are not two separate pictures present simultaneously, one picture consisting of wavy lines, and another consisting of 3-D dolphins.

Rather you see that the wavy lines are not a picture at all, but are only there as the contours which make possible the presence of the 3-D dolphins. And to someone who objected, “Even if there are those 3-D dolphins, it is still basically a picture of wavy lines” you would say “I’m afraid you haven’t yet got it. The moment you glimpse the 3-D thing, you will understand that those wavy lines are not a picture, they are merely the contours which make possible a 3-D picture.”

This I take it, is the reason why the Church has insisted that what takes place at the Eucharist is *Trans*ubstantiation and not *Con*substantiation. Once the elements have been made alive to the reality of which they have become the living sign, their “breadness” and “wineness” are nothing but the contours of that reality, and not a “thing” in themselves at all.

We shouldn't imagine that, after the consecration, Jesus is somehow present *hidden* under the appearance of bread and wine, as though those appearances were somehow an obstacle to our seeing him. The logic of that would be that if we could somehow peel back the visible obstacle, we might catch a glimpse of Jesus underneath it all. This would be the same as someone teaching you to look at a "Magic Eye" picture by saying "the 3-D object is there, hidden under all those wavy lines, so you've really got to strain your sight until you can catch it". The exact opposite is the case: since the 3-D reality is there, and the whole purpose of the picture is that it wants to make itself visible to you as 3-D and this is the easiest way for it to do that, it is in fact as your relax your sight that it is able to manifest itself to you.

So in the Eucharist, it is because we can approach the reality in a relaxed way, confident that Jesus wants to make himself known to us, that we can trust that the bread and the wine, rather than being the obstacles to that act of communication, actually become the glowing reality of that act of communication. Jesus' showing forth his self-giving is not something hidden by the elements of bread and wine; the elements of bread and wine are the manifestation of what that self-giving looks like and is.

With the "Magic Eye" picture we can be confident that once we "get" the 3-D image, we know we won't lose it, or can easily get it again, so we can allow our eyes to travel over the page, looking round the corners and up at the 3-D angles, seeing if we can catch a glimpse of some other detail of the 3-D image. Just so, in the Eucharist, as we become confident in our trained relaxation that the whole occasion will become an opportunity for the crucified and risen Jesus to show himself and share himself with us, so also we needn't be frightened of looking around, getting to know the ramparts and towers of the city of Zion to which we have been invited.

This is one of the reasons why the Mass is so inexhaustible. It becomes possible to dwell, through the open Holy of Holies, on the different angles by which Our Lord chose to show his love for us. There is the "angle" of the Great High Priest, the one who was gird about with the Name of the Lord when he went into the Holy of Holies, that is, he was the Lord himself coming forth into creation in order to unsnarl the ways in which our transgressions have snarled it up. This is the way in which Our Lord is a "Victim" in the traditional sacrificial sense, indeed how he fulfilled that sense perfectly, since at last he was Priest not as a stand-in for the Lord, but was the Lord himself. So his self-giving was the one true sacrifice.

But he is also "victim" in the modern, ethical sense, an entirely innocent person who was killed so as to assuage the wrath of people who needed a victim in order to keep their system going. And it was because he voluntarily chose to occupy this space of being a "victim" in the modern sense that he brought to an end sacrifice. Indeed it is perfectly possible to say that his giving himself up to death wasn't a sacrifice at all in the traditional sense of the word, but rather, by showing that at the root of what we call "sacrifice" there is a simple, mendacious, mechanism of murder, that is, by revealing that there is nothing holy at all in all our mechanisms for creating victims, he brought the world of sacrifice to an end.

The one true sacrifice, and no sacrifice at all – different angles of the same emerging 3-D image of the ramparts of Zion. One of the delights of the Eucharist, being able to spend time in the courts of the Lord, gazing upon his Holy Place, is that there is no hurry, no strain needed as we allow ourselves to be made aware of the extraordinary deliberate intelligence which brought together those two senses of “victim”, and did so as part of a benevolence, of a longing for us to be free, and to be happy, and to be involved in a daring act of creation. Such benevolence, such loving, cannot be seen in itself, except through signs made regularly and trustably alive.

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