



When I was growing up in the Episcopal Church, I was told that our Church teaches the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist but that Anglicanism does not accept the Roman Catholic teaching of Transubstantiation.

Now we have an Agreed Statement on the Eucharist with the Roman Catholic Church which the Bishops at the 1988 Lambeth Conference accepted as an official Anglican doctrinal statement. What has happened?

This is a question which has confused many Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike. In order to understand this question we have to talk about doctrine and dogma as well as the way educated people thought at the time of St Thomas Aquinas, the Priest who theologically developed the concept of Transubstantiation, a way of talking about the Eucharist which was first officially used in the Western Church in 1215.

Although they are often used synonymously in popular speech, doctrines and dogmas are actually two different things in theology.

A *doctrine* is a belief or teaching of the Church. It is the “**what**.” For example, the Doctrine of the Incarnation is the belief of that God came into time and space 2,000 years ago in the form of Jesus of Nazareth.

A *dogma* is an official explanation by the Church of **how** the doctrine takes place. The Dogma of the Incarnation was defined by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 (and is printed out on page 864 of *The Book of Common Prayer*).

Like the Early Christian Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Anglican Churches, and the Old Catholic Churches have always taught that Jesus Christ gave the power to interpret authoritatively His revelation only to His Apostles *as a body*. Therefore only a General Council (i.e. a council of all the Bishops in the Apostolic Succession) has the power to interpret doctrines—which is what a dogma is—and these Churches have not recognized any dogmatic definitions since the last General Council of the undivided Catholic Church which was held in A.D. 787 (and dealt with the place of Icons in the Church).

Furthermore, Anglicanism (as well as many theologians of all traditions) has held that dogmas are always problematic because they attempt to do something that simply cannot be done: speak definitively and absolutely in time-and-space language and concepts about things that cannot be limited by and expressed in time-and-space language. Therefore defining a dogma is, in a sense, like radical surgery: it is a last resort, not the first choice in treating a problem; it is only appropriate when the damage resulting from not issuing an official explanation is clearly greater than the theological problems it may create.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a Dominican Priest and the greatest theologian of the medieval Western Church. St Thomas did brilliantly what every theologian is to do: talk about the eternal and unchanging truths of the Christian Faith in terms that people of a particular age can grasp and understand.

In the High Middle Ages educated Europeans understood the world in terms of the philosophy of Aristotle (as opposed to the scientific terms in which people today understand the world around them).

Aristotle taught that all matter is made up of an inner “substance” (which gives it its reality) and an outer “accident” (which gives it its appearance). (Today, of course, we believe that matter is made up of molecules, atoms, and sub-atomic particles which determine its nature.) What St Thomas did was talk about the universally-held Doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist—the change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ—in the language of the day. He said that, when the bread and wine are consecrated by a validly ordained Priest, the “accidents” (outward appearance) remain the same, but the inner “substance” (reality) of the bread and wine becomes the “substance” of the Body and Blood of Christ: i.e. “transubstantiation.”

Anglicanism honors St Thomas Aquinas and values his theology. He did brilliantly in his age what every theologian is to do in his/her own age. While the concept of Transubstantiation does not generally speak effectively to most people in an age which thinks of everything in scientific terms and knows virtually nothing of Aristotelian philosophy, it nevertheless continues to be outstanding theological work. Anglicanism is not opposed to Transubstantiation, much less opposed to the Doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The controversy surrounding Transubstantiation arose in Anglicanism at the time of the 16th century Reformation. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was a synod of Roman Catholic Bishops which met in northern Italy to reform the parts of the Western Church loyal to the Papacy in order to stop the spread of Protestantism. Among the things the Council did was define St Thomas Aquinas’ medieval way of talking about the Eucharist as a *dogma*. This controversy was compounded in 1870 when another Papal council declared that every person must accept the Roman Catholic Church’s dogmas in order to be saved.

What Anglicanism refused to accept was the Roman Catholic Church’s *Dogma* of Transubstantiation. It was a question of power and authority, not disagreement about Eucharistic theology or the reality of the change which takes place in the bread and the wine in the Blessed Sacrament.

Anglicanism maintained that a synod of the Roman Catholic Church had no authority to define unilaterally a dogma nor unilaterally to declare its definition necessary to salvation ... that this was an unacceptable usurpation of authority. Furthermore, while there had indeed been erroneous teaching among Protestants about the Eucharist, all other “treatments” had not been exhausted before resorting to the “radical surgery” of a dogmatic definition.

What has changed—and ended the Anglican difficulties with the Roman Catholic teaching—is contained in a footnote inserted by the Roman Catholics themselves in the Agreed Statement on the Eucharist: “The word *transubstantiation* is commonly used in the Roman Catholic Church to indicate that God acting in the Eucharist effects a change in the inner reality of the elements. The term should be seen as affirming the fact of Christ’s presence and of the mysterious and radical change which takes place. In contemporary Roman Catholic theology it is not understood as explaining how the change takes place.”