

Pope Gelasius and Transubstantiation

Was transubstantiation generally believed in the early church? It is interesting to read what Pope Gelasius (492-496 AD) had to say about this matter. But first let's define the meaning of the doctrine.

Transubstantiation (from Latin *trans-* across, and *substantia* substance) is the conversion of the substance of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ at consecration, only the appearance of bread and wine still remaining. "Substance" means what something is in itself.

The Council of Trent states: "If anyone says that in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist the substance of the bread and wine remains conjointly with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denies that wonderful and singular change of the whole substance of the bread into the body and the whole substance of the wine into the blood, the appearances only of bread and wine remaining, which change the Catholic Church most aptly calls transubstantiation, let him be anathema." (Council of Trent, session 13, canon 2).

Thus, the Catholic Church teaches that at consecration the bread and wine no longer remain; they become truly, really and substantially the body and blood of Christ even though the appearance (or "accidents") remains unchanged. We continue to see bread and wine though they are no longer bread and wine; what we perceive and taste as bread and wine are in fact the body and blood of Jesus.

Now let's see what Pope Gelasius taught. In a treatise *De Duabus Naturis* against Eutyches and Nestorius (who taught that in the incarnation the human nature of Christ was absorbed in the divine nature), Gelasius wrote:

"The sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, which we receive, is a divine thing, because by it we are made partakers of the divine nature. Yet the substance or nature of the bread and wine does not cease. And assuredly the image and the similitude of the body and blood of Christ are celebrated in the performance of the mysteries."

Gelasius taught that the sacramental bread and wine are the "image and the similitude" of the body and blood of Christ; the "substance or nature" of the bread and wine remain unchanged – "it does not cease". Bread remains bread; wine remains wine. Clearly, Pope Gelasius contradicted the idea of transubstantiation.

How do Catholic apologists react to this? One Catholic writer argues that "Pope Gelasius was simply saying that the appearance [accidents] of bread/wine remain alongside the Real Presence in an attempt to explain the mystery of the Incarnation, since Christ humanity remains alongside His divinity. Some scholars interpret the above passage to refer to the accidents of the bread and wine." ([Kenneth Henderson](#))

Did Pope Gelasius really mean "appearance" when he wrote about "substance" and "nature"? Was the pope ignorant of the meaning of the very terms used in the Nicene Creed (325AD) and the Definition of Chalcedon (451AD) to describe who Jesus actually is?

There is a very simple reason why Gelasius did not mean "appearance". Remember he is using the Eucharist as an analogy for the Incarnation, namely that "Christ's *humanity remains* alongside His divinity." Now if by "substance or nature" he meant that only the appearance of bread and wine remains,

it follows that Christ merely *appeared* human but in fact he was not! That is the very heresy he was refuting!

No, rather, Gelasius rightly believed that the distinction of divine and human natures of Christ are “in no way annulled by the union” (Council of Chalcedon). Jesus is truly God and truly man! The Eucharist illustrates this great truth, for, just as the substance of the bread and wine remains unchanged, so the human nature of Christ remained unchanged despite its union with divinity.

Pope Gelasius did not try to prove that the bread and wine remain unchanged. He could take it for granted that his readers at the close of the fifth century believed that the substance of the eucharistic elements do not cease. The novel idea of transubstantiation was developed and adopted much later in the history of the Catholic church.