

The Ecumenical Significance of Eucharistic Conversion

Robert J. Daly, S.J.

Boston College, emeritus, USA

Gary Macy

Santa Clara University, USA

Jill Raitt

University of Missouri, emerita, USA

Theological Studies
2016, Vol. 77(1) 7–31
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0040563915620189
tsj.sagepub.com


Abstract

What is the relationship between the conversion (1) of the elements into the (real) Body of Christ and (2) of the participants into the (mystical) Body of Christ? When we bring this and related questions to the early church, the Middle Ages, and the Reformation, we find that the conversion of the eucharistic elements has indeed been understood by unimpeachably sincere Christians in a broad variety of ways. In contrast, there has been a remarkably constant convergence regarding the all-importance of the conversion of the participants. Were this taken as the starting point, we might discover that we have much more ecumenical unity regarding the Eucharist than is usually thought to be the case.

Keywords

consubstantiation, conversion, deification, early church, ecumenical, English reformers, Eucharist, eucharistic elements, Franciscan theologians, Middle Ages, Real Presence, Reformation, spiritual communion, symbolic reception, transelementation

Corresponding author:

Jill Raitt

Email: raittj@missouri.edu

The relationship between the two eucharistic conversions—(1) the conversion of the elements of bread and wine into the real Body and Blood of Christ and (2) the conversion of the participants into the mystical Body of Christ—has always been, explicitly or implicitly, but usually never far from the foreground, part of the way Christians think about the Eucharist. This relationship takes on new meaning in contemporary theology, due at least in part to the tendency in modern thinking to identify reality with meaning; put simplistically, if something has no meaning, it also has no reality.¹ Throughout its history, Christian theology has fairly consistently seen conversion of the participants as the goal and purpose of the conversion of the elements. As Bernard Prusak put it in a recent article in this journal, “The conversion of the matter of bread and wine into the subject of the personal presence of the risen Christ is not an end in itself.”² Pushing this “envelope” a bit further, Prusak adds, Chauvet emphasizes that “the Christ who comes-to-presence in the bread and wine does not suddenly fall ‘from heaven.’ . . . He comes from the [liturgical] *assembly*—and this is why the grace of the Eucharist is Christ, head and body.”³

When this way of thinking—that conversion of the participants is what gives not just meaning and purpose but also *reality* to the conversion of the elements—is pushed to one of its “theo-logical” conclusions (which neither Rahner nor Chauvet nor Prusak do, and with Mudd explaining in depth why they don’t), it can lead to the blunt thesis that in the absence of any conversion of participants there is no conversion of the eucharistic elements.

Such a radical thesis, bluntly formulated, seems to run counter to a central aspect of the Catholic faith-understanding of the eucharistic mystery. And it seems, on the face of it, to be a “natural,” that is, “theo-logically” necessary conclusion of a line of

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1. This is a major thread running through much of modern hermeneutics. Its impact on the theology of the sacraments and the Eucharist has been part of Karl Rahner’s various writings on the sacraments, and has more recently been magisterially explored by Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), and then most recently reexamined from the background of Bernard Lonergan’s critical realism in Joseph C. Mudd, *Eucharist as Meaning: Critical Metaphysics and Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014).
 2. Bernard P. Prusak, “Explaining Eucharistic ‘Real Presence’: Moving beyond a Medieval Conundrum,” *Theological Studies* 75 (2014) 231–59, at 256. Prusak continues, “When Jesus broke bread and said, ‘take and eat,’ and took a cup and said, ‘take and drink,’ he had another conversion as his goal. He was initiating a meal at which those assembled in his name would eat the bread become his body and drink the wine become his life-blood in order to be changed into what they received and thus become the Body of Christ within history. As Rahner noted, ‘The first truth of the eucharistic doctrine is, “This is my body,” not “Here I am present.”’ . . . It is not because Christ is present that we offer him as our sacrifice and receive him in communion, but the other way round.” See Karl Rahner, “The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” in Karl Rahner, *More Recent Writings, Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 287–311, at 309–10.
 3. Prusak 256, quoting Chauvet 390, emphasis original.

thinking regarding sacramental efficacy that, with roots in Aristotle, runs right up through Aquinas and the critical-realist metaphysics of Bernard Lonergan: that “action is the presence of the agent in the patient, not something performed by the *already-out-there-now* present agent.”⁴ In other words, “the action of the sacraments is not something happening between God and human beings, but something happening *in* human beings,” that is, in the admittedly oversimplified sense in which we are using the term—their conversion.⁵ “Natural” and “theo-logical” conclusion-drawing has, historically, often led to irreconcilable counterpositions, as the sad history of Christian heresies witnesses. Faced with such a situation, one can (1) fight, or (2) declare the contradictions to be non-essential, or unimportant, or even ignore them or pretend they are not there, or (3) as Lonergan urges, seek to transcend them at a higher level of understanding. The third choice is, of course, the one we favor. And although it is not the precise task we take up in this article, we hope that what we present here will at least contribute to moving in that direction.

When, then, as a heuristic device, we bring our counterpositional thesis into conversation with various parts of the Christian tradition, we become aware not just of its oversimplification and of our need to guard against retrojecting modern conceptualities and questions into previous ages and situations. We also become more aware that the concerns that underlie such a “thesis” have always been there: from the Hebrew prophets’ visceral rejection of any sacrifice unaccompanied by proper dispositions, to Paul’s condemnation of the wealthy Corinthians celebrating “their” Lord’s Supper without concern for their less fortunate brethren (1 Cor 11:20), and moving on from there to the powerful witness of writers from the patristic, medieval, and Reformation ages. The strength and consistency, throughout the whole Christian tradition, of what this “thesis” globally calls “conversion of participants”—somewhat in contrast to the “conversion of the elements”—constitutes a massively important and insufficiently emphasized historical fact. In ecumenical terms, this suggests that there is already much more real, and not just potential, unity in Christian eucharistic theology and faith than is usually thought to be the case.

In what follows, Robert Daly will be primarily responsible for the material from the early church, Gary Macy for that from the Middle Ages, and Jill Raitt for that from the Reformation.

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4. Mudd, *Eucharist as Meaning* 213. For lack of space, we content ourselves with merely asserting that “action is the presence of the agent in the patient.” Laying out the background of this assertion (as generally accepted by most “high-church” or “main-line” sacramental theologians) and arguing the validity of its application to what we are attempting to do in this article would be the work of at least another full article.
 5. Mudd, *Eucharist as Meaning* 214. Similar to our remarks in the previous note, we do not try to lay out and explain the great variety of nuancing in the way our various authors and sources understand and use words like “real” and “actual.” This is not just for lack of space; it is also a plea—while not neglecting the details—to give primary attention to the “big picture.”

Eucharistic Conversion in the Early Church

Chronologically, the first witness we encounter relevant to our thesis is the already-mentioned 1 Cor 11:20. Without projecting our precise question back into Paul's mind, it is clear that, not only for Paul but for the entire subsequent patristic tradition, something powerfully real, and possibly even dangerously so, is taking place. For, after narrating what the Lord did on the night when he was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23–26), Paul proclaims, “All who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor 11:29 NRSV, used throughout). This earliest Christian eucharistic text confirms the desperate importance of what we are calling the two eucharistic conversions. But take caution: Paul doesn't go into the nature of that relationship.⁶ And indeed, the subtlety of what he was trying to express a few chapters later with his *pneuma-sōmatikon*/spiritual-body understanding of our resurrected bodies (1 Cor 15:35–54)—for it is the resurrected body of Christ that is present in the Eucharist⁷—warns against projecting subsequent theological concepts back into Paul's mind.

The next extant Christian witness relevant to our thesis seems to be the two eucharistic prayers in *Didache* 9 and 10. Toward the end of the second of these prayers we read,⁸

Remember, Lord, your church,
to save [her] from every evil
and to perfect [her] in your love
and to gather [her] together from the four winds

6. For us to do so now, relative to this text and to 1 Cor 10:16–17 in Paul's previous chapter, would require us to assume and apply a hermeneutical horizon that Paul did not have. See Helmut Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther, Kapitel 5,1–11, Ökumenische Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament, Band 7/2* (Gütersloh/Würzburg: Gütersloher Verl.-Haus/Echter, 2000) 259–62. Also: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University, 2008) 376–97; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 750–71.

7. As modern theology has been reminded by the great work of Gustave Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World*, trans. René Hague (New York: Seabury, 1972 [Crossroad, 1976]).

8. I reproduce the “analytic” translation of Milavec. See Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, & Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50–70 CE* (New York: Newman, 2003) 9, 12–45; idem, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003) xvii, 2–37. This analytic translation enables one to reconstruct important aspects of the Greek original (that would be lost in a normal English translation) by means of the following typographical signals: (1) words in brackets serve to clarify the elliptical intent of the Greek while acknowledging that they are absent from the literal Greek text; (2) English words linked together by underlined spaces signal instances where a single Greek word needs to be rendered by a phrase in English; (3) an umlaut (double dot) over the letter of a word indicates a plural in the Greek original.

[as] the sanctified into your kingdom
 which you have prepared for her,
 because yours is the power and the glory forever.
 Come, grace [of the kingdom]!
 and pass_away, [Oh] this world!
 Hosanna to the God of David!
 If anyone is holy, come!
 If anyone is not, convert!
 Come Lord [*maran atha*]! Amen! (10:5–6)

In these eucharistic prayers, christologically so primitive—apparently pre-Gospel⁹—Jesus is referred to not as God, or even as Lord (*kyrios*), but only as Servant, and there is no mention or even suggestion of a conversion of eucharistic elements. There is only, in 10:6, a conversion of the participants, in which conversion (or a state of being converted) seems to be not the result of, but a prior condition for, participation in the Eucharist. Thus, the conversion we seek to find in these very early texts is broader and less defined than the two conversions of our opening sentence (and the relationship between them). But that prior conversion does figure prominently in *Didache* 14, a passage that probably dates from the final redaction of the document at the end of the first or beginning of the second century:

(And) according to [the] divinely_instituted [day/rule] of [the] Lord,
 having_been_gathered_together, break a loaf.
 [A] And eucharistize, having_beforehand_confessed_your_failings,
 so_that your sacrifice may be pure.
 [B] Everyone, on_the_other_hand, having a conflict with a companion,
 do_not let [him/her] come_together with you
 until they_have_been_reconciled,
 in_order_that your sacrifice may not be defiled.
 For this is [the thing] having_been_said by [the] Lord:
 “In every place and time, offer to me a pure sacrifice,
 “Because a great king am I,” says [the] Lord,
 “And my name [is] wondrous among the gentiles.” (14:1–3)

Chronologically—but with no assumption of a linear development—the next eucharistic texts are those in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.¹⁰ Profoundly rich as they may be in their theological implications, especially when read by the eyes of faith illumined by two millennia of eucharistic practice, none of these texts deals precisely with our modern question. It is similar with Clement and Ignatius.

9. Most scholars agree that these prayers seem to predate the final redaction of the *Didache* that dates from the end of the first to the beginning of the second century.

10. Mark 14:22–24; Matt 26:26–28; Luke 22:19–20; John 6:51–58.

Clement of Rome (fl. ca. 96) emphasizes that what seems to be the eucharistic ceremony—though he seems, at times, to be talking more about the OT sacrifices than about the Christian Eucharist—has to be performed precisely: “Those therefore who do anything beyond that which is agreeable to His will, are punished with death” (1 Clem. 61). We find a similar concern in Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35–ca. 107): “Let nothing be done without the bishop” (Smyrn. 8). In neither of these apostolic fathers can we find anything that can be cited as direct background¹¹ for our questions about eucharistic conversion.

In Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165), however, it is possible to begin to find some aspects of our modern questions being taken up:

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, 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 . . . [here Justin quotes the words of Institution] . . . Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done . . . (*1 Apology* 66)

One can read here at least the background of what later could be expressed more precisely as the conversion of the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The polemical reference to the devils in the mysteries of Mithras indicates clearly that something very real is understood to be happening. However, there seems to be no reference, or only an implied reference, to a conversion of the participants.

Some of the numerous eucharistic texts of Irenaeus (ca. 130–ca. 200) on the Eucharist seem at least to foreshadow what we now understand as eucharistic Real Presence. Some seem to emphasize the need for right dispositions toward one’s neighbor. However, nowhere is the connection between them so clear as to claim it as background for our question. And some texts actually imply a possible resistance to our question, for example: “Sacrifices, therefore, do not sanctify a man . . . but it is the conscience of the offerers that sanctifies the sacrifice when it is pure, and thus moves God to accept [the offering] as from a friend” (*Adv. Haer.* 4:31.2). A bit further we read,

As the bread . . . when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity. (*Adv. Haer.* 31.3)

Examined critically in its full context, this text is a *prima facie* witness or background not for a conversion of the elements, what the later tradition called transubstantiation, but rather for some kind of multiple presences, what the later tradition called

11. Indirectly, however, a Christian’s desire to be, like Ignatius, “ground into the pure bread of Christ,” has massively powerful implications for personal “conversion.”

consubstantiation. We will see this later, spelled out quite explicitly, in the teaching of Pope Gelasius.

In Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215) we find in *Paedagogus* 2 and *Stromata* 1 several uses of the Pauline texts (1 Cor 11:20–22, 27–28) that emphasize what is obviously a conversion of the participants. And while there is no specific mention of a conversion of the eucharistic elements, there is, in Clement’s quotation of “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” an obvious reference to a eucharistic presence that is both real and effective:

The imitation of those who have already been proved, and who have led correct lives, is most excellent for the understanding and practice of the commandments. “So that whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor 11:27–28). It therefore follows, that every one of those who undertake to promote the good of their neighbors, ought to consider whether he has betaken himself to teaching rashly and out of rivalry to any; etc. (*Strom.* 1.1)

It is thus clear that, by the beginning of the third century, a connection was being made between a real and active eucharistic presence and the right conduct or *metanoia* of which *Didache* 10:6 and 14:1–3 spoke.

Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) reinforces this teaching in multiple passages (e.g., *Ep.* 9.2–3; *Ep.* 74.21). In his treatise *On the Lapsed*, while citing 1 Cor 10:21 and 11:27, he rages against the policy of giving communion to “un-penanced” sinners and apostates. In his *Treatises* 3.26 we read “That it is of small account to be baptized and to receive the Eucharist, unless one profits by it both in deeds and works.” Whether one calls this “conversion” or simply “right dispositions,” it is desperately important.

In the *Apostolic Constitutions*¹² we find further background for, though no direct evidence of, the questions we are asking. The focus centers on concern, similar to Cyprian’s, about unworthy participation in the Eucharist:

Let no one eat of these things that is not initiated; but those only who have been baptized into the death of the Lord. But if any one that is not initiated conceal himself, and partakes of the same, “he eats eternal damnation” [cf. 1 Cor 11:29] because, being not of the faith of Christ, he has partaken of such things as it is not lawful for him to partake of, to his own punishment. But if anyone is a partaker through ignorance, instruct him quickly, and initiate him, that he may not go out and despise you. (*Ap. Const.* 7.25)

Especially interesting here—because of its emphasis on the participants, and the location of conversion or non-conversion—is the teaching that not only does a knowing participation of the uninitiated result in “his own punishment,” but an unknowing participation of the uninitiated does not result in such punishment.

12. *Apostolic Constitutions* is mid-fourth century in its final redaction, but it contains material that is much earlier. This passage, for example, builds upon the late first-century *Didache* eucharistic prayers.

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395) provides a handy summary of at least one line of patristic teaching¹³ in the late fourth century:

Rightly, then, do we believe that now the bread which is consecrated by the Word of God is changed into the Body of God the Word. For that Body was once, by implication, bread, but has been consecrated by the inhabitation of the Word that tabernacled in the flesh. Therefore, from the same cause as that by which the bread that was transformed in that Body was changed to a divine potency, a similar result takes place now . . . the bread, as says the Apostle [1 Tim 4:5] “is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer”; . . . that by this communion with the Deity mankind might at the same time be deified, for this end it is that, by dispensation of this grace, He disseminates Himself in every believer through the flesh, whose substance comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the bodies of believers, to secure that, by this union with the immortal, man, too, may be a sharer in incorruption. (*Catechetical Oration* 37)

Similar ideas of real change of the elements of bread and wine and of a bodily communication of the sanctification/deification that takes place in the believers is found in the *Catechetical Orations* of Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–387):

For as the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist before the invocation of the Holy and adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, while after the invocation the Bread becomes the Body of Christ, and the Wine the Blood of Christ . . . For thus we come to bear Christ in us, because His Body and Blood are distributed through our members; thus it is that, according to the blessed Peter, we “become partakers of the divine nature” [2 Pet 1:4]. (*Cat. Or.* 19.7)

Ambrose of Milan is, for the later Western tradition, the star patristic witness both for a real change of the eucharistic elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and for identifying/associating this change with the Lord’s instituting Words:

But if the words of Elijah had such power as to bring down fire from heaven, shall not the word of Christ have power to change the nature of the elements? . . . Shall not the word of Christ, which was able to make out of nothing that which was not, be able to change things which already are into what they were not? For it is not less to give a new nature to things than to change them. (*On the Mysteries* 9.52)

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 . . . Before the consecration it has another name, after it is called Blood. And you say, Amen. (*On the Mysteries* 9.54)

13. This “one line of patristic teaching” has often been assumed to be the dominant line. However, the relatively sparse liturgical data that have come to us from the early Christian centuries do not allow us to draw such an unqualified conclusion. In other words, one cannot claim, without qualification, that those who fail to find in these early Christian texts unequivocal support for the traditional Catholic interpretation of them, are misreading the historical data.

It is Augustine (354–430), however, who is the most prolific of the Fathers, at least regarding the patristic background to our modern question. From a quick survey of the entire body of his writings, he seems to be ambiguous regarding the reality of the conversion of the elements, even—and especially—when he (as seemingly the first Father to do so) brings to bear John 6:63—“It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless”—on the preceding text of John 6:51–58, which expresses a eucharistic realism. Ambiguity is also the result of our attempt to determine, in our terms, precisely who or what is being changed in the passage from the *Confessions* where Christ says, “And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me” (*Conf.* 7.10).¹⁴ It is clearer in his famous “*Estote quod videtis, et accipite quod estis*—become what you see, and receive what you are” from Homily 272, and also from a longer passage from that sermon:

In the visible object of bread, many grains are gathered into one just as the faithful (so Scripture says) form “a single heart and mind in God” [Acts 4:32]. And thus it is with the wine. Remember, friends, how wine is made. Individual grapes hang together in a bunch, but the juice from them all is mingled to become a single brew. This is the image chosen by Christ our Lord to show how, at his own table, the mystery of our unity and peace is solemnly consecrated. I repeat: This is the image chosen by Christ our Lord to show how, at his own table, the mystery of our unity and peace is solemnly consecrated. All who fail to keep the bond of peace after entering this mystery receive not a sacrament that benefits them, but an indictment that condemns them.¹⁵

For here, as in Augustine’s sermons generally, it is not possible to tie him down to the kind of realistic transformation of the eucharistic elements that we have in Ambrose, but he is consistent in portraying to the neophyte Christians the sacraments as means to make believers members of the Body of Christ (baptism) and to encourage them to live as Christ’s Body—“become what you see”—united in peace and charity (Eucharist).

However, as we make our broad sweep through the patristic tradition, it is important to keep in mind that eucharistic theology—along with what we, today, think of as some of the major questions of eucharistic theology—was simply not a major concern of the fathers of the church. A striking illustration of that is the eucharistic theology of St. Gelasius (d. 496; pope from 492), long thought to have been the author of the Gelasian Sacramentary and the *Decretum Gelasianum*. Different understandings of the Eucharist were, at that time, not a threat to Christian unity; but different understandings about the nature of Christ (e.g., monophysitism vs. the hypostatic union) definitely were. For, in contrast to the apparent consensus developing in much of the rest of the patristic tradition that has come down to us, Gelasius definitely taught, or perhaps, more accurately assumed, that in the Eucharist, the bread and wine retained their natures, and that, basically, there was simply added to them the nature of the

14. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University, 1991) 124.

15. Sermon 272, PL 38, 1247, http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272eucharist.htm. (Accessed January 6, 2016). Emphasis mine.

divinity; just as he needed to prove against the monophysites that the two natures in Christ, human and divine, remained intact, though indeed hypostatically united:

Certainly the sacraments of the body and blood of Christ, which we receive, are a divine thing. On account of this and through the same “we are made partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). And yet the substance or nature of the bread and wine does not cease to exist—*et tamen non desinit substantia vel natura panis et vini*.¹⁶

In the twilight of the patristic tradition, John of Damascus (ca. 655–ca. 750) in his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* sums up much that had gone before: but then adds a very important caution that has been heeded more in the East than in the West:

[Since He made all things] can he not then make the bread his Body and the wine and the water his blood? . . . He connected his divinity with these and made them His body and blood in order that we may rise to what is supernatural through what is familiar and natural . . . but the nature of this cannot be searched out. (4.13)

In sum, there are three elements to the heuristic “thesis” with which we began: (1) the conversion of the eucharistic elements, (2) the conversion of the participants, and (3) the relationship between these two. With regard to the conversion of the eucharistic elements, the *Didache* only distantly, the Gospels more clearly, and Paul very strongly imply that there is something very special and powerfully real about them. Justin Martyr in the mid-second century speaks of them in terms that can suggest conversion. By the end of the second century Irenaeus is speaking of the bread in terms of Real Presence, but without being clear about whether or what kind of conversion he might have in mind. This lack of clarity regarding what might be “happening” to the bread and wine continues in Clement of Alexandria, Cyrian, and even in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. But this ambiguity changes in the fourth-century witnesses of Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ambrose of Milan, who vigorously teach real change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. However, that this was not the common teaching of all the fathers is clear from the teaching of Augustine, which is difficult to pin down, and the explicit teaching of Gelasius against metabolic change.

As for the conversion of the participants, the early church witness is at first weak: in the Scriptures, when they are critically read, it is there only implicitly, however strongly, and sometimes it seems, as in the *Didache*, mainly as a precondition for, rather than consequence of, participation in the Eucharist. As powerful as it presumably was among the early Christians, emphasis on this conversion remains somewhat implicit until Clement of Alexandria, and indeed does not get spelled out until Augustine. But that holds only if we are limiting our view to strictly eucharistic texts. For personal conversion, in something of the sense that Augustine made explicit, was obviously what Jesus and all true followers of Jesus have very much had in mind.

16. See Edward Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998) 31–58, or, more briefly: “The Eucharistic Theology of Pope Gelasius I: A Nontridentine View,” *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997) 283–89.

As for the relationship between these two conversions, we really come up with no clear answer if, in strict criticism, we refrain from projecting back into Christian antiquity our modern question—whether in the absence of any conversion of eucharistic participants there is any conversion of eucharistic elements. *That* there is a relationship between them, whether prior, or consequential, or occasional, or whatever, was not something that the authors of these Christian texts across the sweep of antiquity apparently thought about and, if so, certainly not in a consistent way.

However, as we move into the later patristic tradition, we find at least that the good effects of the eucharistic reality begin to be spoken of in terms of deification. A frequently quoted text in support of this is 2 Pet 1:4: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become partakers of the divine nature.” Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, tells his congregation, “by partaking of the body and blood of Christ, you might be made of the same body and the same blood with him . . . thus it is that, according to Blessed Peter, we become partakers of the same nature.”¹⁷ This seems to be the precise note now sounded in one of the offertory prayers of the current Roman Catholic liturgy: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

This eucharistic reality, this new reality on whose existence all agree, can be “explained” either by concepts of “change” (the background for what, in the West, came to be called transubstantiation) or by concepts of “addition” (the background for what, later, came to be called consubstantiation). This double possibility of change or addition applies, by implication, not just to the elements but also to the participants: Are *they* changed into something new, as in the grace-transformation or divinization of Catholic or Orthodox theology? Or is it simply that something new is added to them, as in the “external attribution” of classical Lutheran theology?

Fairly strong authoritative teaching near the end of the patristic period (John of Damascus [ca. 655–750]) seemed to be insisting upon not trying to explain this mystery: “The manner of this cannot be searched out.”¹⁸ However, as history tells us, attempting to explain the mystery of the Eucharist was precisely what was beginning to take place in the West a century later when Ratramnus and Radbertus (monks in the ninth-century monastery of Corbie) started having a go at each other.¹⁹ It is worthy of note that neither side of the ninth-century Paschasius–Ratramnus debate engendered

17. “On the Eucharistic Food,” in *St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, ed. F. L. Cross (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1995) 68.

18. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, bk. 4, chap. 13, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 9, part 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1944) 83. The *Urtext* is in *PG* 94.1145-46.

19. Prusak, “Explaining Eucharistic ‘Real Presence’” 241–49 provides a helpful summary (1) of this debate between Paschasius Radbertus, insisting on the physical reality of Christ’s bodily presence in the Eucharist, and Ratramnus, insisting on the symbolic and figural reality of that presence; (2) of the ensuing debate two centuries later in the eleventh century

any official reactions or repercussions.²⁰ This indicates that the relatively peaceful coexistence of quite diverse eucharistic theologies that characterizes Christian antiquity seems to have lasted at least until the ninth century.²¹

Eucharistic Conversion in the Middle Ages

The “Middle Ages” is a derogatory term for the wasted space between the genius of the Greco-Roman period in which early and patristic Christianity emerged and the rediscovery of that brilliance in the Reformation and Renaissance. This creates several illusions, only one of which we wish to stress here. That illusion is that the “Middle Ages” is somehow of a piece, that it consists of some kind of unity and conformity. It does not. It is perhaps better to think of the period covering (roughly) 500 to 1500 as simply one half of the history of Christianity, spanning several quite divergent periods and cultures. This section will generalize about the thrust of the teachings on the Eucharist from this period, but it is wise to keep firmly in mind that this is itself a construct of historians that necessarily papers over some fairly major fissures.

First, contrary to the post-Reformation fascination with the medieval theologians’ treatment of transubstantiation and Real Presence, the medieval theologians themselves did not see these issues at all as central to the Eucharist, and certainly did not understand the Real Presence in the Eucharist as necessary for salvation. The transformation that theologians of these centuries understood as salvific was the union in faith and love that took place between the believer and the risen Christ.²²

To use the terms laid out in the introduction to this article, theologians from the twelfth century onward assumed without question that (1) the conversion of the eucharistic elements brought about the Real Presence of Christ (although they disagreed mightily about how that presence might be possible). They were quite certain as well that the Eucharist could be of salvific value to the recipient only if reception of the Eucharist were accompanied by (2) the conversion of the participants. They wrestled much more strenuously with (3) the relationship of these two conversions than had their predecessors.

when Berengar was roundly condemned for taking up and expanding on Ratramnus’s position; and (3) of the theological solution via transubstantiation articulated two centuries later by Thomas Aquinas (which three centuries later, in the 16th century, became the official orthodox Catholic position), eucharistic Real Presence.

20. Prusak, “Explaining Eucharistic ‘Real Presence’” 245.
21. Thus, and except possibly for those involved with the fifth-century North African Donatists who held that the validity of the Eucharist depended on the virtue of the priest celebrant, the ancients would probably look at us with puzzled bewilderment if we asked them whether the reality of the presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus in the bread and wine of the Eucharist depended on the reality of the conversion of those participating in the Eucharist.
22. This section is more fully explained in Gary Macy, “Theologies of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages,” in *Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 365–98.

Those few with the leisure to write about the Eucharist in the Early Middle Ages, most notably the fellow monks of Corbie, Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus, continued the teaching of the early church writers that (1) the elements were converted into the Body and Blood of the Risen Lord (despite different understandings of how that presence occurred) and that worthy reception must entail (2) a conversion of the individual. Serious attempts to grapple with the relationship between these two conversions began in earnest in the twelfth century. The most influential theology of the Eucharist from the twelfth century was that which emerged from the cathedral school of Laon and the school of the Augustinian canons at St. Victor in Paris, in part due to the influence these schools had exerted on Peter the Lombard in his influential *Four Books of Sentences*. These two schools elaborated a theology that focused on the purpose of the Eucharist. Theologians from these schools understood the function of the sacrament as the celebration of and the growth in an active life of faith and charity. The question soon arose whether one could achieve this effect of worthy reception without actually receiving the consecrated bread and wine. Works associated with the school of Anselm at Laon argued that this was indeed possible. To describe this form of “reception,” they introduced a third form of communion, spiritual reception alone. According to these theologians, one could receive the full benefits of the Eucharist by devotional acts that demonstrated a union with God in faith and love.²³ An important step had been taken in clarifying that a change in the elements did not effect or imply a conversion of the participants. In fact, the conversion of the elements was secondary to, and unnecessary for, the salvation of the participant.

An anonymous work of the School of Laon, the *Summa sententiarum* (ca. 1125–1150) first proposed a framework for this understanding that would be adopted by nearly every later theologian up until the Reformation (and in Roman Catholic theology, far beyond). In its theology, the *sacramenta* (symbols or signifiers) of the ritual were the appearance of bread and wine; the *res sacramenti* (thing symbolized or signified) was an active life of faith and love also defined as the unity of the church. Between these two lies the Real Presence that is both signified by the appearance of bread and wine and signifies a life of faith and love (*sacramentum et res sacramenti*). For the *Summa sententiarum* and particularly for Hugh, the great master of the School of St. Victor, the Real Presence itself cannot be the end result, the purpose, of the ritual. Just as the presence of Jesus on earth was only a means to lead his followers to a deeper spiritual union with God, so too the presence in the sacrament is meant to lead to a spiritual union with Christ acted out in the life of faith and love which constitutes the Church.²⁴

Baldwin, the Cistercian abbot of Ford and later Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a beautiful little tract on the Eucharist in the late twelfth century. In it, he stressed the point made by the Victorines but in a more pastoral mode:

23. See Gary Macy, *Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) esp. 86–96.

24. *Summa sententiarum*, Tractatus 6, c 3, *PL* 176: 146A–B; Hugh of St. Victor, *De sacramentis* 8.13; *PL* 176: 470D–471B.

God decreed that mortality be clothed in immortality, and mortal life be transformed into eternal life. Therefore the food is changed into food, the bread of life into the bread of life, but the bread of life transformed into the bread of eternal life, in order that from this change of food into food, a change of mortal life into immortal life is believed and understood and hoped and expected.²⁵

For Baldwin, the change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is only a symbol of the more important change in the recipient from a creature doomed to death to one transformed into an immortal life. Baldwin made this clear in a passage where he described in more detail the transformation that can take place in the Eucharist:

For if our conversion from evil into good in the present time is effected in us in order that we might somehow be a new beginning of the creation of God and a new creation in Christ, according to what the prophet said, "And I said, now I begin this change from the right hand of the Most High" (Psalm 76:11 Vulgate; Psalm 77:11 modern), what then we will be, what I say we will be, when that which is mortal in life is absorbed; when, seeing the glory of God revealed in person, in that same image we will be transformed from clarity to clarity as from the Spirit of the Lord; when equal to the children of the resurrection and the equal of the angels, we will be so dissimilar to what we are now, that almost nothing will exist of what we are now? And thus the consummation of a happy life is the mystical power of this change.²⁶

Perhaps the most influential theologian of the Eucharist in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was the secular master turned Franciscan, Alexander of Hales. He put in a more systematic fashion the pastoral insight of Baldwin. Writing between 1220 and 1236 in a work now known as the *Quaestiones disputatae* "Antequam esset frater," Alexander explained that there are three kinds of union possible in the Eucharist. One can be united in thought, in love, and in nature to Christ. Those who existed before the coming of Christ could be united in thought and love but not in nature. Angels, too,

25. "Decrevit Deus mortale hoc immortalitate vestire, et mortalem vitam in vitam aeternam transferre. Propterea cibum in cibum mutavit, panem vitae in panem vitae, sed panem vitae transitoriae in panem vitae aeternae; ut ex mutatione cibi in cibum credatur et intelligatur, speretur et expectetur, mutatio mortalis vitae in immortalem vitam"; Balduinus de Forda (Balduinus Cantuariensis), *Tractatus de sacramento altaris* SChr 93, pars. 2, cap. 1, p. 212, line a18.

26. "Nam si conversio nostra de malo ad bonum in praesenti tempore id efficit in nobis, ut simus aliquod initium creaturae Dei et quasi nova creatura in Christo, propter quod propheta dicit: Et dixi: nunc coepi; haec mutatio dexteræ Excelsi; quid tunc erimus, quid inquam erimus, cum absorbebitur quod mortale est a vita; cum, revelata facie gloriam Domini speculantes, in eandem imaginem transformabimur a claritate in claritatem tamquam a Domini Spiritu; cum filii resurrectionis et aequales angelis Dei ita nobis dissimiles erimus, ut paene nihil minus existimari possimus, quam quod nunc sumus? Virtus itaque hujus mysticae mutationis consummatio est beatæ vitae." Balduinus de Forda (Balduinus Cantuariensis), *Tractatus de sacramento altaris* SChr 93, pars. 2, cap. 1, p. 214, line a18.

having a different nature than Christ, cannot receive him naturally. Then, too, Christ can be received with more or less love, and more or less understanding. This means that there are different degrees of reception of Christ. Perfect reception would take place only in heaven, Alexander intimated. Those who receive the sign alone, like Jews and pagans, are united only to the sign, as if it were mere bread. Again there is union of those who both believe and understand the reason for the sign. Finally, there is the greater union of those who believe and love, and this is spiritual reception.²⁷ As for the Victorians and for Baldwin, real reception in the Eucharist, the *res tantum*, is a spiritual union in love and faith.

The Real Presence was not the *res tantum*, the point of the ritual, it was rather *res et sacramentum*, that is, itself a religious sign or symbol. It was not the end result of the Eucharist, but merely pointed to that result. The point of the sacrament (the *res tantum*) was a union of faith and active love. This teaching provided theological support for the growing practice of “spiritual communion,” or ritual substitution for sacramental communion. Theologians from the first half of the twelfth century and continuing throughout the Middle Ages would insist that the reception of the *res*, that is living a life of union with Christ in faith and love, sufficed for salvation with or without the added graces of sacramental reception. Such a reception of the *res tantum* was designated as “spiritual reception” and was understood as the purpose of the Eucharist and indeed the real point of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.²⁸

Based on this theology, theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would recommend spiritual reception for those too ill to receive sacramental reception, or those for whom sacramental reception would be sacrilegious due to serious sin. Writing in the early thirteenth century, the Parisian theologian William of Auxerre would describe sacramental communion as the prerogative of the priest while the people receive only spiritually.²⁹ Thus a theological justification existed for the infrequent sacramental communion that marked this period.

27. Alexander of Hales, *Glossa in quatuor libros sententiarum*, 13.5, ed. S. Bonaventurae, *Glossa in quatuor libros sententiarum* (Bibliotheca franciscana scholastica medii aevi) 15 (Florence, 1957) 204. Cf. also 10.7, *ibid.* 161–62.

28. For a discussion of these practices, see Macy, *Theologies of the Eucharist* 93–96 and Gary Macy, “Commentaries on the Mass in the Early Scholastic Period,” in *Medieval Liturgy: A Book of Essays*, ed. Lizette Larson-Miller (New York: Garland, 1997) 25–59.

29. Cited in Édouard Dumoutet, *Le Désire de voir l’hostie et les origins de la devotion au saint-sacrement* (Paris, 1942) 49 n. 3. On the elevation, see Peter Browe, “Die Elevation der Hostie,” *Bonner Zeitschrift für Theologie und Seelsorge* 8 (1931) 20–66; reprinted in Peter Browe, *Die Eucharistie im Mittelalter: Liturgiehistorische Forschungen in kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht* (Münster, 2003) and *idem*, *Die Verehrung der Eucharistie im Mittelalter* (Rome, 1967) 26–69. For lack of space we are leaving untreated a number of interesting questions: e.g., To what extent did the emphasis on spiritual communion emerge on its own merits, so to speak, or was it more due to the actual lack of reception by the faithful when ritual practice made them feel unworthy or unwelcome? For a recent discussion of these issues, see Gary Macy, “Theologies of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages” 391–96.

In sum, in both medieval theory and practice, the point of the Eucharist was not the change that took place in the bread and wine, nor the presence of the Risen Christ that resulted from the change, but rather the change that was effected in the believer who received worthily. So strong was this belief that the ritual reception of the Body and Blood was not considered necessary to effect the change which it merely symbolized.

This framework for understanding the ritual of the Eucharist provided a means for understanding the relationship between the presence of the Risen Christ effected in the Eucharist and the potential conversion of the believer signified by that presence. If the Real Presence itself was symbol then it was subject to the limitations of any symbol. First and foremost a symbol is only effective for those who understand that something is a symbol. This is an intellectual exercise performed by the participant. Franciscan theologians in particular would argue that there was, in fact, no presence for those who did not understand that the bread and wine were symbols of the Body and Blood of Christ, and that even for the believers, once the bread and wine ceased to be symbols, there was no presence possible for them.

Again, it is Alexander of Hales who first systematically laid out this theology when he discussed the question of whether only rational creatures have the ability to receive this symbol. It would seem that irrational creatures must be able to receive since, once transubstantiation takes place, the Body of Christ remains as long as the species of bread remains. If an animal receives the species of bread, it ought as well to receive the Body of Christ. If, however, by symbolic reception is meant that the recipient touches the reality behind the sign and not just the sign, then neither animals, nor Jews, nor pagans can be said to receive symbolically. True to his principles, Alexander asserted that to receive symbolically, properly speaking, is to be united either in nature or faith or charity with Christ. Certainly, then, animals cannot receive. Even Jews and pagans, however they might share in the same human nature as Christ, do not receive symbolically since they do not understand or believe in the reality underlying the signs.³⁰

For Alexander, then, the presence of Christ in the Mass is simply not present for animals, nor is it present for humans who don't know or don't believe the consecrated bread and wine are symbols of that presence. Despite what popular miracle stories might intimate, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist cannot be desecrated by animals since they don't understand symbols, nor can it be desecrated even by pagans or Jews who do not believe that the bread and wine are symbols.

Most medieval theologians followed Alexander in his teaching, particularly the Franciscan theologians; and even those like Thomas Aquinas, who disagreed in part with Alexander, had to address and explain Alexander's approach.³¹ We cannot address

30. *Quaestiones disputatae* 205–10, Collegium S. Bonaventurae 699–700.

31. But that Aquinas also recognized the importance, indeed the primary importance, of the conversion of the participants, more or less in line with the thrust of our article, is clear from the way he quotes Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10 in *Summa Theologiae* III q. 73, a.3, ad 2: "I am the food of the fully grown, grow and you will feed on me; but you will not change me into you, like the food of your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me"

what all of these theologians wrote, but we would like to introduce you to one little work that directly addressed the issue at question here.

Nicholas of Lyra, the Franciscan exegete, became a master at the University of Paris in 1309. He wrote his famous commentaries on Scripture between 1322 and 1339, and died while teaching at Paris in 1349. These commentaries are not his only works, however. He also produced a short work entitled *Dicta de sacramento*. It was published in Cologne in 1480, and then reprinted in 1485, 1490, 1495, and then a final time in Paris in 1513, and so would have been available to the Reformation theologians.

This work is a discussion of the conditions necessary for worthy reception of the Eucharist, and clearly relies on the discussion of the Franciscans outlined so far. Nicholas suggested twelve requirements for a worthy reception. One must be a human, a viator (that is, still in this life), a believer, an adult, mentally competent, fasting devoutly, without awareness of mortal sin, not guilty of notorious crimes, having a clean body, not prohibited by the appearance of a miracle, having a proper minister, and finally, having a right intention.³²

Fascinating as some of those requirements might be, our discussion here will be limited to the two conditions most interesting for this study, that the recipient be a human and that he or she be a believer. The first condition, according to Nicholas, immediately excludes both animals and angels. If one asks what an animal receives when it eats the consecrated bread, Nicholas responded that some argue that the Body of Christ ceases to be there. Nicholas rejects this opinion, however, both on the grounds of authority, and because God has made a special pact with the church that as long as the species exist after consecration the Body of Christ will remain united to them. Nicholas then posited that animals receive really but not symbolically.³³

(cf. n. 14 above). And, in line with the other theologians of his time, Thomas adds, “Potest autem aliquis in Christum mutari et ei incorporari voto mentis, etiam sine huius sacramenti perceptione.”

32. “He sunt conditiones necessaria requisite ad idoneum susceptorem sacramenti eucharistiae per quas potest responderi ad plures questiones consuetas fieri. Requiritur enim quod sit homo, viator, fidelis, adultus, mente peditus, ieiunus deuotus, sine conscientia peccati mortalis, crimine non notatus, corpore mundus, apparitione miraculosa non prohibitus, a ministro ydoneo tempore debito, intentione recta.” Nicholas of Lyra, *Dicta de sacramentis* (Cologne, 1495) The edition is unfoliated.
33. “Prima conditio est quod sit (homo) per quod statim excluditur omne brutum animal et angelus siue bonus siue malus. Sed si queratur Numquid brutum animal suscipit sacramentum. Dixeratur aliqui quod immediate quando brutum suscepit sacramentum desinit ibi esse corpus Christi. Sed hoc reprobatur a magistro sententiarum in quarto de consecratione. Et similiter in decretis de conse. di.ii.ca. Qui bene non custodierit. Et ideo dicitur ab alis aliter et melius ut videtur quod quamdiu species ille sacramentales mutare non fuerint per calorem naturalem stomachi: tamdiu remanet ibi corpus Christi. Vnde sicut habemus ex speciali facto diuino quod ad vltimam dispositionem corporis humani deus infundit creando ipsam animam et eam tenet in corpore durante tali dispositionem: sic etiam deus statuit pactum cum ecclesia quod tamdiu esset ipsum corpus Christi sub sacramento quamdiu permanent ille species quam prius afficiebantur et aspicebant panem sicut subiectum a quo

Nicholas explained further when he discussed why the recipient must be a believer. If one asks what unbelievers receive in the ritual, Nicholas responded that they receive as animals do. Nicholas argued that there is a difference between receiving the symbol alone, and receiving symbolically. To receive symbolically, one must understand the signified reality under the symbol, and this neither unbelievers nor animals can do.³⁴

Nicholas is consistent in his use of these distinctions. Children before the age of reason can receive really, but not symbolically, just like animals and infidels. In the same way, those who are mentally incompetent should only receive if they are capable of giving some sign of devotion, or if they were recently capable of such a sign. In short, there must be some evidence that these people are capable of understanding how symbols work. If not, they are not capable of symbolic reception.³⁵

Nicholas stated the importance of asserting the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Eucharist somewhat more strongly than earlier Franciscan theologians. As long as the species exist, so does the Body and Blood, despite what happens to the species. He equally strongly asserts, however, that the presence is only there for those capable of understanding that presence. Neither animals, nor infidels, nor children, nor the mentally incompetent can understand the sign value of the symbol, and therefore they do not have access to the Real Presence. For them, this might as well be ordinary food.

Nicholas provides an excellent example of how a middle-of-the-road theologian would treat the relationship between a person, the bread and wine, and the Real

postea miraculose separantur et manu tenentur et propter illud est ut redderet deus ecclesiam certam quando ibi esset corpus Christi et quando non. Recipit ergo brutum realiter et non sacramentaliter et hoc exponam inferius in tertia conditione." Ibid.

34. "Tertio dixi (fidelis) et intelligo non illum qui de fide solum instructum est sed illum qui iam accepit sacramentum baptismi et factus est per hoc de familia Christi. Ex quo statim patet quod catechumino quamtuncumque habenti fidem perfectam non debet hoc sacramentum administrari. Sed si queratur Numquid infidelis recipiendo sacramentum recipit corpus Christi dicendum de ipso sicut de bruto supra tactum est quod sumit realiter sed nullo modo sacramentaliter inquantum infidelis. Si queras Numquid idem est sumere sacramentum et sacramentaliter sumere. Dico quod non quia sumere sacramentaliter addit supra sumere sacramentum modum sumendi videlicet quod referat signum in signatum suum credendo et si opus est confidendo ore quod sub illis speciebus veraciter contineatur corpus Christi quod non facit infidelis nec etiam brutum." Ibid.
35. "Nunc autem pueri ante annos discretionis et si possunt eucharistiam realiter sicut quemcumque alium cibum comedere, non tamen possunt hoc sacramentum sacramentaliter manducare nec eo uti ut sacro signo, referendo significandum in signatum sed ut communio signo, et sic propter carentiam discretionis non percipiunt ibi veraciter continere corpus Christi." Ibid. See also: "Si autem sit amentes sic quod non fit furiosus sed tantummodo loquens inania et a vero sensu alienatus. Adhuc distinguendum est, quia vel pretendit actus et signa deuotionis tunc potest ei ministrari, si vero nullum actum aut signum deuotionis pretendit, recurrendum est ad tempus precedens passionem quia si tunc petierit et deuotionem pretenderit et obstet aliquid aliud periculum, licite potest sibi dari." Ibid.

Presence. Transubstantiation might effect a relationship between the bread and the wine and the Real Presence, but that did not guarantee any relationship between the Real Presence and the person. A person could only contact and be affected by the Real Presence if they not only understood symbols in general, but also specifically understood this symbol. If they did not meet these requirements, they, in his mind, had a relationship only with the exterior appearances of bread and wine. Further, once the bread and wine ceased to be recognizable food and drink, the relationship with the Real Presence was severed, since the bread and wine no longer functioned as symbols of the Body and Blood of Christ received in the Eucharist. Finally, there was a preexisting relationship in faith and love between a worthy recipient and the risen Christ, a relationship that communion symbolized, celebrated, and strengthened, but did not create. This relationship of faith and love was so central to medieval thinkers that if it actually or already existed, the ritual of communion that celebrated it was not necessary for salvation.

These theologians, like their forebears in the early church, do not answer our questions, and indeed might not even understand them if asked. However, the answers they provided to the questions of their own day do give a set of parameters for an answer to the questions we are asking in this article. Which conversion was more important, that of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, or the conversion of the recipient into a more and more active life of faith and love? Clearly the latter took precedence for medieval theologians. Is there a conversion of the bread and wine without a conversion of the recipient? Here, at the least the Franciscan theologians would say that there was a real conversion of the bread and wine, but the presence of the risen Christ that resulted could only be accessed, or better, only be present, to those who could and did understand the sign value of that presence. Here is one solution to the problem of the relationship between (1) the conversion of the elements and resulting presence of the risen Lord and (2) the conversion of the participant in the ritual of the Eucharist. The relationship hinged on the sacramental (symbolic) nature of the presence of the risen Lord. The presence of the risen Lord was real, and not dependent for its own existence upon the faith of the believer. However, that presence was only mediated to the believer symbolically (*sacramentaliter*). All the conditions of a true symbol had to be met in order that there be any connection between the believer and the Real Presence. The Real Presence was not dependent on the participant, but was simply not accessible unless the participant was capable of using symbols and aware of what these elements symbolized.

This understanding entails a sophisticated understanding of symbols (*sacramenta*) and insists strongly on the traditional teaching of the church that the Eucharist was indeed a symbol (*sacramentum*). This teaching offered a way to take seriously both the reality of the presence of the risen Christ and the purpose of the Eucharist that is the conversion of the individual believer. It was an imperfect solution, often misused and misunderstood in popular devotions to the Eucharist. However, it was a serious attempt to understand how the two conversions in the Eucharist converge. It is not the teaching of the Reformers, nor is it the teaching of Trent. However, it does offer a possible means for those theologies to dialogue since it is the origin of both.

Insights from the Reformers of the Sixteenth Century

Echoing the Renaissance, the cry of the Reformers of the sixteenth century was *ad fontes*. While this call was primarily applied to Martin Luther's *sola scriptura*, the theological development and defense of their beliefs drew those who knew both Greek and Latin to call upon the Latin and Greek fathers. We shall hear them doing so as their alternatives to the Catholic banner-word, "transubstantiation," led them to develop their eucharistic theologies in terms of the purpose of the Eucharist, union with Christ and strength to live as members of the Christian community into which they had been baptized. This was particularly the case with the Reformed wing of the Reformation stemming from the Swiss Reformers Huldrych Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich and John Calvin in Geneva. English Reformers, beginning with Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer, were aided by the Polish John à Lasco, the German Martin Bucer, and the Italian Peter Martyr Vermigli.

Using themes from Augustine, Cyril, and other fathers of the church, the Reformers developed different theologies not only of the role of the bread and wine during the Supper but, more pertinent to our thesis—and indeed not totally unlike the emphasis on personal conversion that we found in the medieval theologians—also of what the faithful and the faithless received when they communicated and what that meant in their lives. How seriously did communicants understand their participation to be? In some instances, their very lives could be at risk; in others, they could suffer exile depending on which theology their rulers determined must be accepted in his or her realm, whether a kingdom or a princely territory within the Holy Roman Empire.

In *This Is My Body*,³⁶ Thomas Davis analyses the theologies of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, not just to rehash the usual polemics around the use of bread and wine, but to consider as well the role of what he calls "the social-spiritual body of Christ," the community gathered around the table of the Lord. Davis focuses on the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 10–12 to draw out the three Reformers' understanding of "body." The context of 1 Corinthians 10–12 is social conflict in the Corinthian Church. St. Paul's goal is to raise the Corinthians' minds by reminding them not only of who they are as Christians, but also in whose name they gather, and for what purpose. Rather than tolerate a situation in which the rich feast in elite groups who ignore those with nothing to eat, all should "discern the body" and have compassion for one another. 1 Corinthians 12 develops the analogy of the Corinthian congregation as the Body of Christ. Davis notes the medieval development of the notion of the social body formed by participation in the Eucharist, and cites Bernard of Clairvaux who suggested that "weak members could commune in the faith of stronger members,"³⁷ a teaching cited positively by Luther³⁸ and continued by Zwingli, Calvin, and other Reformers of the

36. Thomas J. Davis, *This is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 149–68.

37. *Ibid.* 151.

38. See "Sermon on the Proper Preparation of the Heart for the Sacramental Reception of the Eucharist," *AW* 1:333.

sixteenth century, including the Catholic humanist Erasmus. In short, the social Body of Christ is bound by an ethical obligation toward fellow communicants in the eucharistic Body of Christ.

For Martin Luther, the Eucharist presents the two-fold Word of God, preached and given in the two sacraments that Protestants thereafter claim are the only sacraments founded directly by Christ: baptism and the Lord's Supper, which form the community that is the church. The proclaimed Word of God elicits and creates faith in the hearers gathered to hear the Word of promise that Christ died for each of them. Luther supported infant baptism throughout his career, but several times Luther changed his argument concerning the effect of baptism in infants. His theories ranged from seeing that the faith always required for salvation becomes the infant's through the faith of the church, to seeing baptism as the seed that will flower when the child comes to its own faith later in its life. With regard to the Lord's Supper, Luther consistently taught that Christ the Word's real, substantial presence that draws believers into the unity of Christ's Body is found in, with, or under the consecrated bread and wine.

Huldrych Zwingli, a student of Erasmus who was strongly convinced that reason should guide the interpretation of Scripture, denied that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. The Christ who suffered and died once and for all is risen and ascended to the right hand of God; therefore that historical and risen body is not present for those gathered for the Lord's Supper. Rather the faith-filled congregation remembers that Christ died for each one and that Christ sent the Holy Spirit to unite the faithful and make them the Body of Christ on earth. Therefore Zwingli admitted a spiritual participation by faith in the crucified and risen Body and Blood of Christ so that Christ is both "host and feast" in holy communion. When Zwingli died in 1531 at the battle of Kappel, Bullinger took his place as the chief pastor and theologian in Zürich, from 1531 until 1575. His influence on the Reformed churches on the continent and particularly in England was long and profound.

Calvin's doctrine, as expressed in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.17.10 sqq.), strongly asserts a spiritual *true* presence, and a *true* participation in Christ's body and blood by faith through the Holy Spirit who, at the *sursum corda*, lifts the faithful to the risen Christ in heaven where they are united to his substance so that they become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. The presence of Christ is substantial, but in the faithful communicants, not in the bread and wine. Bollinger never agreed with Calvin's use of the word "substantial" with regard to the communicants' participation in Christ, and the two Swiss Reformers agreed to differ on this point for the sake of unity against both the Catholic and the Lutheran assertions of a substantial presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. For the Swiss Reformers, communion is effected by faith through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Those who have no faith are unworthy and so are not united with Christ but receive *only* bread and wine; there is no *communicatio indignorum* nor is there, as Catholics and Lutherans both taught, any oral manducation of the substantial Body and Blood of Christ. Rather the Genevan Reformers taught that the Holy Spirit offered the Body and Blood of the risen Christ to the mouth of faith.

Two continental Reformers who, unlike Bullinger, actually lived and taught in England and through their chairs at Oxford and Cambridge were influential in England were Peter Martyr Vermigli and Martin Bucer. Martyr, an Augustinian abbot, converted to Protestantism. In 1542 he made his way from Italy to Switzerland where he was befriended by Bullinger. Martyr was then invited to Strasbourg where in 1542 he was appointed professor of theology by Martin Bucer. In 1549 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer invited both Bucer and Martyr to England, appointing Martyr as the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford where he lectured primarily on the Eucharist. Bucer was appointed a Professor of Divinity at Cambridge and the two corresponded at length about eucharistic doctrine. At Oxford Martyr engaged in a formal disputation with the Catholics William Tresham and William Chedsey, in which Martyr argued,

Moreover, consider that the word of consecrating, signifieth nothing else among the Fathers than to dedicate a thing common and profane unto a holie use: and this is to make it holy . . . those things are now made sacraments to signifie unto us effectually that by the power of the holie Ghost as touching the minde and faith. Wee must offer and exhibite the bodie and bloud of the Lorde.³⁹

In company with Zwingli, Calvin, and others of the Reformed camp, Martyr insists that the bread and wine *are changed*. From being common table food and drink, they are changed into sacraments; that is, through their use in the Lord's Supper they become instruments of the union of the communicants with the incarnate and risen Christ and therefore with each other as the ecclesial Body of Christ on earth.

Another direct link between the continent and England is John à Lasco, Polish nobleman, Roman Catholic bishop, and then Protestant reformer through the influence of Zwingli and Bullinger, Oecolampadius, and William Farel. À Lasco left Poland in 1536 and by 1540 was a pastor in eastern Friesland. Although à Lasco was influenced by the Swiss Reformers, particularly Bullinger, he developed his own sacramental doctrine that bears heavily on the end of the Lord's Supper and on the liturgy that contributes to that end. It was at Emden that à Lasco wrote *Epitome doctrinae Ecclesiarum Phrisiae orientalis*⁴⁰ and a short letter on the Supper, *Epistola de Coena*.⁴¹ In the *Epitome*, he insists that the nature and use of the elements are determined by their finality as pledges (*sphragida*) of acceptance into the grace of God.⁴² In 1548 à Lasco went to England to pastor the Strangers' Church in London. There he tried to preserve England from the kind of bitter polemics that disturbed continental

39. Martyr, *The / Common Places / of the most famous and / renowned Divine doctor / Peter Martyr / divided into foure principall parts with / a large addition of manie theo- / logical and necessarie discourses, some never / extant before. Translated and partlie gathered by / Anthony Marten Imprinted at London in Pater Noster Rowe, / 1583* (Special Collections, University of Chicago Library.)

40. À Lasco, *Opera tam edita quam inedita recensuit vitam auctoris enarravit*, ed. A. Kuyper (Amsterdam: Frederic Muller, 1866) I, 481ff.

41. *Ibid.* 557ff.

42. *Ibid.* 513.

Protestantism. He insisted that the purpose of the sacraments, union with Christ, is all-important. The “how” of the sacramental union may be variously interpreted and, as long as transubstantiation is eschewed, any interpretation may be allowed for the sake of Christian charity. His own interpretation, however, is given in his *De sacramentis*, in which à Lasco makes the same point made by Calvin and Beza, Zwingli and Bullinger, Martyr and Bucer, that the union is not of the mystery or *res* and the sign, but of the communicants with Christ in the *koinōnia* spoken of by St. Paul. In this meaning of the *res sacramenti* the Reformers and the Catholics agree.

In England, the Reformed theologians taught a true presence of Christ versus the real corporal presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. As they did so, their argument turned to an emphasis on what participation in the Eucharist means. They understood well the purpose of Christ in instituting the Lord’s Supper: to unite believers to himself so that all are one body. The liturgy of the Lord’s Supper, including the use of bread and wine, was a means to that end.

Their theologies utilized terms found in the ancient fathers, in the ninth-century Ratramnus of Corbie whose work was printed in 1531,⁴³ and in Theophylact (d. 1090), Archbishop of Achrida (Albania). In 1545, Ratramnus’s work persuaded Nicholas Ridley⁴⁴ concerning the spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper who in turn, in 1546, persuaded Thomas Cranmer of what he claimed to be the Augustinian-Ratramnian eucharistic doctrine. Their doctrines used such terms as transutilization, transfinalization, and from Theophylact, transelementation rather than transubstantiation, although Theophylact says in one place that the equivalent of *transelementatio* is *transsubstantiatio*, but in another place that *transelementatio* refers to John 6:56–58. He writes, “But used for what? for what purpose?” The answer is in John 6:56–58:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.

And finally, influenced by Zwingli and Bullinger, the English Reformers asked, through the transutilization of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper, just what is transformed, transelemented? Is it not the congregation itself? Here is a sample of this understanding from the examination of Nicholas Ridley by Queen Mary’s chosen theologians:

Harding, speaking of Theophylact:—“No other doctor maketh more against you. Latin ‘transelementatur,’ that is, turned from one element into another. And shewing the cause why it is in form of bread, he saith, ‘Because we are infirm, and abhor to eat the raw flesh, especially the flesh of man; therefore it appeareth bread, but it is flesh.’”

43. *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* (843 CE). It is worth noting that Ratramnus’s radical opinions attracted no condemnation in his own time.

44. Nicholas Ridley, *the Works of Nicholas Ridley, D.D., Sometime Lord Bishop of London. Martyr, 1555*, ed. Henry Christmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1841) 206.

Ridley:—"That word hath not that strength which you seem to give it. You strain it overmuch, and yet it maketh not so much for your purpose. For the same author hath in another place, [gives the Greek], 'we are trans-elemented, or transformed and changed, into the body of Christ:' and so by that word, in such meaning as you speak of, I could prove as well that we are transformed indeed into the very body of Christ."⁴⁵

Ridley had a profound influence on Thomas Cranmer, as did Heinrich Bullinger whose sermons on basic doctrines of faith were collected in volumes of ten sermons each, hence *Decades*, published between 1549 and 1551. They were translated into many languages, including an English translation published by the Parker Society in 1552. During the reign of the Catholic Mary I (1553–1558) Ridley and Cranmer were burned at the stake. Other English reformed clergy fled to Geneva and Zürich. They returned when Elizabeth I was enthroned, bringing with them theologies influenced by their hosts, Calvin and Bullinger. These Marian exiles, many of whom found hospitality in Bullinger's Zürich, returned to England in 1558. Their appreciation for Bullinger's works resulted in the *Decades* becoming the required text for studying theology and pastoral matters for the non-Anglican, hence unlicensed, clergy. Bullinger taught the doctrine of the change of the bread and wine "when they are used in the celebration of the sacrament, they differ very much from what they were before; *and are sacraments signed of Christ by his word, ordained for the salvation of the faithful.*"⁴⁶ The elements then take on the name of the signified *res*, union with and life in Christ, the incarnate Word.

For the English Reformers, the purpose of the Eucharist is a deepening of the baptismal grace that gives birth to the Body of Christ and nourishes the communicants in the Christ life. This is the *transelementatio* of Theophylact in the eleventh century and of Nicholas Ridley in the sixteenth. The bread and wine are both symbols of the heavenly banquet and also food that unites the congregation as and in the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

We return to our original question regarding the relationship between the two eucharistic conversions: If conversion of the participants is what gives meaning to the Eucharist, can there be, absent that conversion, any reality—and if so, what kind of reality—to the conversion of the eucharistic elements? As we suspected might be the case, we did not find that question being taken up, as such, either by the writers of the early church, Middle Ages, or Reformation. But the projection back into those ages of our modern concern for that question and for the implications of that question was not without fruit. We found, on the one hand, that the conversion—or in some cases

45. Theophylact, in Evan. Hohan, chap. vi (Ed Morelli, Paris 1631) 651–52. The word *metas-toicheiomenos* is hardly more mellifluous than *transsubstantiatio*.

46. Bullinger, *Decades*, ed. Thomas Harding (Cambridge University, 1852) 315. Emphasis mine.

non-conversion or only qualified conversion—of the eucharistic elements was understood in a broad variety of ways by Christians whose commitment to being Christian—at times at the cost of their lives—is beyond question. On the other hand we also found that from the outset—and not just in the views of the Reformers, but also in the supposedly transubstantiation-fixated views of the medieval scholastics—there was a remarkably constant convergence regarding both the importance of and understanding of the conversion of the participants, whether prior to or as a consequence of participation in the Eucharist, but also—and this is very important—by no means exclusively connected with or dependent upon participation in the Eucharist. And for the medieval theologians, as well as for the Reformation theologians, conversion of the believer took, in the importance generally given to it, pride of place over the conversion of the elements. This historical fact suggests that—especially when considered in terms of its ecumenical significance—there is already much more unity in Christian eucharistic theology than is usually thought to be the case.

Author biographies

Robert J. Daly, S.J., Dr. Theol. from Würzburg, is professor emeritus of theology at Boston College. He specializes in the liturgical-theological significance of the history of Christian sacrifice. Recent publications include *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (2009); “Opfer,” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (2014); “Ecological Eucharology,” *Worship* (2015).

Gary Macy is the John Nobili, S.J., Professor of Theology at Santa Clara University. He has published ten books and over twenty articles on Christian history and ritual. Most recently he coedited *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages* (Brill, 2012).

Jill Raitt is Professor Emerita in Religious Studies at the University of Missouri, Columbia where she continues to teach. She is the author of over 40 articles in books and journals, a senior editor of two encyclopedias, and the author of three books. She is a former member of the Lutheran–Catholic Dialogue in the USA.