

## The Answer to a Poisoned Book.

*The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Volume 11, Edited by Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller. New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1985. Pp. xcii, 1-424.*

**A**LTHOUGH Thomas More was reluctant to enter the Reformation controversy over the Catholic doctrine concerning the eucharist, he may have written as much about the sacrament of the altar as about any other single object of his belief. His major contribution to this debate is Volume 11 in Yale's edition of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, and it is with mixed feelings that I undertake a review of this book. On the one hand, we find again the evidence of that assiduous scholarship which has for decades now distinguished this collection ; on the other hand, I notice something missing here that inhibits my usual enthusiasm for the work of the Yale editors. More's writings on the eucharist pose some problems. Why did he lay so great a stress upon this doctrine ? I sense here something of momentous political as well as doctrinal importance. What were the crucial points at issue and how might we synthesize More's own stand in this combat ? It is with regard to this kind of question that I judge *CW 11* to be somewhat flawed. But, for the moment, let us ignore the flaw and concentrate upon the more positive features of the new edition.

More's text has been admirably reproduced. The handsome Baskerville type, the topical headings on alternate pages, the original side-notes now indented in the body of the text all work to guide the reader's eye and to make the study of the work as easy as its contents permit. The words of More's opponent, frequently cited in the course of *The Answer*, are contrasted to his own prose by means of a smaller Roman typeface, while quotations from scripture and other works are set in italics. This high quality of presentation is something we have come to expect from the Yale edition, and, in this regard, *CW 11* is no exception.

To facilitate our understanding of the elements of this controversy, the editors have included, as Appendix A, the complete text of *The Souper of the Lorde*, the so-called poisoned book against which More had composed his *Answer*. The introduction to this text informs us of the almost complete dependence of its anonymous author on the thought of Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer. Parts of *The Souper of the Lorde* consist of straight translations from the work of Zwingli, and, even where the English writer sets out on his own, his thought on the eucharist is guided by the sacramentarian views of his mentor. Following the text of *The Souper*, Michael Anderegg conducts us, in Appendix B, through the history dealing with the problem of the heretical book's authorship. In 1548, John Bale indicated in his *Scriptorum summarium* that George Joye wrote *The Souper*, and, in 1573, John Foxe put forward the name of William Tyndale as its author. Since the sixteenth century, arguments have been made for either one of these claims. Anderegg argues convincingly for Joye's authorship without trying, however, to settle the matter once and for all.

The editors show a judicious discretion in annotating *The Answer* in the commentary which immediately follows More's text. Not once in my rereading of the book did I fail to find a note where the passage called for one. On the other hand, the editors were not driven by the pedant's compulsion to annotate at every turn. The entire commentary covers sixty-three pages. Most of the notes are brief and to the point, but, when required, the extended explanation can prove most illuminating, as does the commentary on a sentence from Augustine that runs from the bottom of page 287 to the top of page 289. Augustine's sentence -- *Corpus in quo resurrexit in uno loco esse oportet* -- was used, we are told, by Zwingli as an argument against the real presence. Frith employs it against More but fails to cite where it can be found in Augustine. The editors not only locate the passage (*In Ioannis evangelium*, 30.1) but also mention that Melancthon had already pointed out that the sentence, in its original context, had « little or no bearing on the eucharist » (288).

The Introduction to *CW II* begins with a historical account of the eucharistic controversy as it took place in Germany, Switzerland, and England between 1524 and 1533. The debate over the physical presence of Christ in the sacrament caused a falling out between Luther and Karlstadt in August of 1524, and the rupture led to the latter's exile from Saxony « as a dangerous rebel » (xxii). From its very inception, the eucharistic debate betrays a political connection and suggests a law

of corresponding intensities by which we can gauge a relationship between rebellion and belief : the more radical the revolt, the more abhorrence will be directed at a real presence. This is borne out in the case of Karlstadt. On Christmas Day of 1521, when Luther had been absent from Wittenburg, Karlstadt celebrated the first Protestant communion service in German, without vestments, and without elevating the host. A storm of iconoclasm soon followed which only Luther's return to Wittenburg in March of 1522 could quiet.

Karlstadt later retreated to Basel where, in the fall of 1524, he published a series of tracts denying not only the real presence but also the sacramental orientation of the bread and wine as signs. These publications probably gave occasion to Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich to announce his own sacramentarian theology, which he carefully distinguished from the positions of both Luther and Karlstadt. Thus was hatched the doctrine against which Thomas More would compose his *Answer*. The history of the origins of these teachings on the sacrament of the Lord is described clearly and succinctly. The entrance of Johannes Oecolampadius into the controversy stimulated, by reason of this scholar's erudition, a concern for the writings of the fathers on the eucharist. As both sides began looking more frequently to early Christian thought for support, Thomas More took greater care over the accuracy of his presentation of the fathers.

In Section Two of the Introduction, Stephen M. Foley retraces More's argument through the entire five books of *The Answer*. The richest part of this essay treats the correspondence which More establishes between the bread of the godhead and the bread of Christ's body in the eucharist. « In the bread of John 6, » writes Foley, « More finds a dynamic coherence : the bread of godhead and the bread of Christ's flesh, the figure of his sacrifice and the reality of his presence, spiritual and bodily eating all coincide » (lxiv). We discern in More's *Answer* a parallel between the gift whereby the Father eternally begets the Son and the gift which Christ makes of himself in the sacrament. The Father in begetting the Son does « give him all that ever was in himself...and yet keep nevertheless all the same still himself » (30).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Christ in the eucharist gives of his body, whole and entire, without suffering a loss to that body. More declares that it is wrong to think of Christ's gift in the sacrament « as though he meant to give it them in such wise as himself should lose all that they should eat » (81). Foley writes of « the eucharistic miracle of incorporation -- which emerges in the course of Book I as the most important aspect of the eucharist -- the spirit and the

body, the faithful and God, the sign and the reality become one » (lxiv). This is a notion of no little depth, indicating a theology of the sacrament worthy of our reflection. Yet, after Foley's account of Book I, his essay loses its initial stimulus and never again regains it. The problem, I feel, arises from the tactical error of trying to outline all five books when he, himself, admits that « the return to the hurly-burly of the polemical style in the final four books seems like a fall from grace » (lxxi). If More's style falters here, is there nothing else worth salvaging? Surely the other four books could have been summed up briefly, and there was little sense at all in devoting almost ten pages to masks and reality when something far more essential to *The Answer* and More's other eucharistic writings was left out entirely. Let me explain.

As was mentioned earlier, Thomas More devoted no little amount of time and energy to the Catholic doctrine of the eucharist. He reserved major portions of the *Responsio ad Lutherum* and *A Treatise upon the Passion* for this subject. His *Letter Against Frith* is exclusively taken up with the rebuttal of a young reformer's attack on the real presence. To this list we can add *The Treatise on the Blessed Body*, and those passages where the eucharist is brought up in other polemical works. All of the writings just mentioned, with the exception of *The Letter Against Frith*, have already been published in Yale's *Complete Works*. Now More's *Answer to a Poisoned Book* appears, and we are still without any attempt on the part of the editors at a comprehensive analysis of More's eucharistic belief. Surely in his *Answer*, if anywhere, we might expect such an essay. This work must be considered his major opus on the sacrament and, therefore, calls for a serious study of questions concerning his eucharistic theology. Where lay the brunt of his enemies' attacks mounted against the sacrament? What were the difficulties adhering to his own defense and where did he decide to place the greatest emphasis in his response? Finally, what was so crucial and urgent about this debate that More was willing to devote so much time to it during the last months of his freedom? These questions have not been asked by the editors. It is not what *CW II* says that mars this edition, but what it leaves unsaid. Although the limitations of a review hardly permit a satisfactory reply to the above interrogations, it would be irresponsible on my part, after lodging my complaint, not to suggest a partial response to these problems.

Let us concentrate, for the moment, on More's eucharistic theology as it appears in *The Answer*. First of all, we must call it polemical insofar as it is formulated in answer to an outspoken, caustic attack on

the Catholic belief in the sacrament of the altar. What characterizes this attack? It is based on a figurative interpretation of Christ's words of institution, « This is my body. » Christ's real body is not received in the commemoration of the Lord's supper but rather the minds of the congregation are nourished, as it were, by the recollection of Christ's sacrifice of that body on the cross. From an argumentative point of view, such a doctrine has a simplicity about it which calls for no complicated defense nor, for that matter, for any act of faith in a mystery that lies beyond the reach of human comprehension. For the most part, everything here falls within the range of man's intelligence. From this rather easily defined position, the author of *The Souper* launches his attack on a Catholic belief that is supported by terms nowhere to be found in scripture. The turning of bread into Christ's body and of wine into Christ's blood occurs in the manner of a transubstantiation by which the underlying reality changes while the appearances remain. Yet the body of Christ, present on the altar, does not occupy space after the manner of a normal body. Scholastic theology teaches, as *The Souper* mockingly states, that the body is there « indiffinitive incircumscripitive non per modum quanti neque localiter » (329). What, it might be asked, has all this to do with the simplicity of faith? Worst of all, Catholic teaching insists upon a beastly, carnal eating of the body, a kind of mangling of the flesh of Christ by the teeth of the communicant. This last charge, a gross misrepresentation, runs through *The Souper*. Its author identifies the carnal understanding of Christ's listeners in John 6 with the Catholic interpretation and contrasts this way of thinking with a spiritual understanding which encourages an interior presence of Christ in the heart through an act of faith in him and an act of recollection of his loving sacrifice. The implication running through *The Souper* is that any real presence of Christ's body in the eucharist bespeaks a crude and carnal interpretation of Christ's words.

More's task, then, in *The Answer* is not an easy one. He has to assert the presence of the real body of Christ in the eucharist without subjecting that body to the base enormities such a presence calls for in the minds of the opposition. More draws a distinction that is essential to this argument: there is, to be sure, a « very eating » of the body of Christ (84), but there can be no earthly or carnal understanding of this act. Listen to More's paraphrase of the words of Christ in John 6: « But my words, therefore, that I have spoken to you of my flesh to be eaten be not flesh alone but spirit also and life. Therefore, you must

understand them not so fleshly as you do, that I would give you my flesh in gobbets dead, but you must understand them spiritually, that you shall eat it in another manner animated with my soul, and joined with the spirit of my godhead, by which my flesh is itself made not only lively but also giving life » (82). More insists upon a spiritual sensitivity to this real, physical presence. In explaining it, he eschews the technical terms of the scholastics which his opponent had derided. Both in the selection of its terms and in the sources of its thought More's eucharistic theology is patristic, not scholastic.

In calling it patristic, I do not mean that More necessarily disagrees with the conclusions of the scholastics. For instance, in the matter of spiritual eating, Aquinas will say that the body of Christ « is not given to be eaten in an ordinary manner, with the result that, like earthly foods, it might be received as macerated in its own appearances. » Christ « gave them to understand, » he continues, « that it is received in a certain spiritual fashion, apart from the manner of earthly carnal foods. »<sup>2</sup> More shares this position, but the source of his thought goes back to Augustine's distinction between earthly and spiritual foods. So he writes in *The Answer*, again in a kind of paraphrase of the words of Christ in John 6.

For this meat will in no wise perish. But whereas the bodily meat that the man eateth of the sheep in the nourishing of the man perisheth and loseth his own nature, not turning the flesh of the man into the flesh of the sheep, but being turned from the own proper nature of the sheep's flesh into the natural flesh of the man, this meat is of such vigor & strength that, in the nourishing of the man, it abideth whole and unchanged, not being turned into the flesh of the man but altering, turning, & transforming, as holy Saint Austin saith, the fleshly man from his gross fleshliness into a certain manner of the pure nature of itself, by participation of that holy blessed flesh and immortal, that is with his lively spirit immediately joined and unseparably knit unto the eternal flowing fountain of all life, the godhead (28-9).

In the case of spiritual food, then, the natural order of assimilation is reversed : the food does not become the man but rather man is drawn to become Christ, the bread of life. As the editors of *CW II* point out (244), Augustine treats this striking characteristic of spiritual food in his *Confessions* (7.10.16).

Time and again, More insists that the body of Christ in the sacrament is not to be thought of in terms of the meat found on a butcher's counter. This body is served in the form of bread ; it is ever one, whole, lively. As a risen body, it has shaken off mortality and now becomes an instrument for giving life. When faced with the natural problem of multilocation, More suggests the analogy between the presence of the eucharistic body and the presence of the soul in the body (209). The Morean dialectic alternates between a physical presence and a spiritual appreciation of the presence. Nowhere is this last point more apparent than in the analogy More strikes between the eucharistic Christ's presence in many places and the word uttered by a single voice and so diffused that it is heard in many ears (208). He says that he never ceases to wonder at this phenomenon in spite of all the efforts of philosophy to explain it. The editors suggest the *De sacro altaris mysterio* of Innocent III as a possible source for this analogy but a more probable one for both More and Innocent is Augustine's *Sermo XXVIII (De vetere testamento)*. In this sermon, Augustine is not directly treating the problem of multilocation in the eucharist. Rather he is writing about the nature of spiritual presence and returns to aspects of spiritual food other than the one already mentioned in *The Confessions*. And these qualities of divine presence and nourishment will later be attributed to the eucharist as well.

Early in *Sermo XXVIII*, Augustine quotes from John 6:51 with its clear eucharistic theme : « I am the living bread which came down from heaven. » He then speaks of Christ as the nourishment of the spirit, a nourishment not unlike the very instruction which Augustine provides for his listeners. The preacher tells his audience that Christ is « the food that replenishes without wasting itself, food that is taken without being consumed, food that satisfies the hungry, yet remains whole. »<sup>3</sup> These are the very characteristics More attributes to Christ in the sacrament. His body there « abideth whole and unchanged » (29), a body which in giving loses none of itself (81). Further in this sermon, Augustine refers to the almost spiritual nature of the diffusion of sound in the multilocation of an idea become word.

A thought, dwelling in my heart, moves out to yours without leaving mine. Still, I say, as the concept remains fixed in my heart, I simultaneously want it to be in yours. I seek, then, sound as the channel through which it can pass to you, and I give voice to the sound and, as it were, I place my meaning

upon it, I utter it, broadcast it, teach it, without ever losing it. If my thought is able to achieve this by means of my voice, could not the Word of God do this by means of his flesh? For, behold, the Word of God, God with God, the Wisdom of God, remaining ever with the Father, in order to come forth to us, sought out flesh, as it were, his sound, and placed himself in it and came to us without ever leaving the Father.<sup>4</sup>

Man's concept, simultaneously held within the mind and projected abroad through human speech, becomes for Augustine an image of the Word of God, ever resting in the bosom of the Father while he assumes flesh and comes to mankind. More's analogy between the eucharistic Word, the one gone out to the many, and the word of a single voice touching a host of listeners, grows rich and appealing against the Augustinian background. *Sermo XXVIII*, a rather brief homily, is pregnant in its notions of spiritual food and spiritual presence, notions which More adapts to his own purposes in the attempt to make graphic his understanding of what is meant by the Catholic belief in the mystery of the eucharist.

As we have seen, More holds for a spiritual understanding of a real and true eating of the body of Christ. He does not see any incongruity between the spiritual perception of a fleshly reality. His unhesitating stand on this issue may be due partially to another patristic source, St. John Chrysostom's *Homily 46* on John, Chapter Six.<sup>5</sup> More, no doubt, attached great importance to this sermon. Parts of it occupy the major portion of both the eighth and the ninth chapters of *The Answer's* fourth book. I would like to accentuate two aspects of this remarkable passage as they help to define further what it means to partake of the body of Christ. Both of these aspects find a correspondence on the natural plane and contribute to a tenderness which distinguishes Chrysostom's view. Firstly, the Greek father looks upon the nourishment provided by Christ for his little ones as a kind of nursing. « The fathers and the mothers, » says More's translation, « oftentimes put out their children to other folk to nurse. But I (may our Savior say) nurse and feed my children with mine own flesh » (174). Secondly, we detect earlier in the sermon something in addition to a nutritional reference when the preacher says that Christ has « by his own body mingled himself with us » (174); the Latin of the Basel edition of the *Opera* reads: *per corpus suum se nobis commiscuit* (282). The nuptial overtone is clear. Earlier still, Chrysostom says that we « be one body and members of Christ's flesh and bones » (173). The first part of this state-

ment echoes the Pauline teaching of 1 Corinthians 6.15: « Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? » In this passage, Paul stresses the matrimonial link between Christ and his spouse, the church, when he cites Genesis 2.24: « 'For the two,' it says, 'shall be in one flesh.' But he who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit with him » (16-17). The mystery of the eucharist proclaims not only a union in spirit but also a mystical union in body: « But yet that we should be not only by love, » says Chrysostom, « but also in very deed, turned into the flesh of his, that thing is done by the meat that his liberality hath given us » (173-4). In the mystery of love, of the two in one, the problem of multi-location diminishes: « Number there in love was slain. »<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, then, More's theology of the eucharist, we can call it polemical in its thrust, patristic in the derivation of its thought and terminology, realist in its affirmation of the bodily presence of Christ, and spiritual in its understanding of that presence. There remains still one more question for our consideration. Why did More judge the assault upon the Catholic dogma of the eucharist to be so important that it commanded much of his attention at the close of his career? Of course, there can be no doubt about the very fundamental significance of this teaching to Catholic belief and prayer life. We need not belabor the obvious in this matter. But there is something about the eucharist that cogently shows a connection between theology and sixteenth-century politics which few, if any other doctrines can illustrate. For reasons that we will see, belief in a real presence has much to do with the public and political force of Christianity itself.

The reformers, for the most part, seem to have been aware from the start of the intrinsic link between the ecclesiastical teachings on the eucharist and the powers which the priesthood claimed within the hierarchical church. According to Gordon Rupp, all the reformers knew that, when they denied the mass to be a sacrifice, they were contesting a doctrine which enhanced the priest's dignity by reason of his being « commissioned to offer such a sacrifice on behalf of the living and the dead. »<sup>7</sup> Again Rupp points out that Karlstadt, by calling into question the real presence, opened an attack on « a teaching which necessarily magnified the office of a priest, whose prayers were answered by the miracle of transubstantiation. »<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas would go further. The priest's power of consecration in the mass does not merely magnify the sacerdotal office; it brings that very authority into being. « The power which the priest has, » he writes « over the mystical body derives from the power he has over the real body of Christ. »<sup>9</sup> Without

a real presence, there is no need for the priest to possess the power to consecrate. Without consecration, what call would there be for a laying on of hands? In attacking the real presence, a blow was aimed at the very source of the spiritual authority within the hierarchical church. So the author of *The Souper of the Lorde*, in spite of his erroneous, derisive expression, unerringly linked sacerdotal authority to the real presence when he wrote of the priests uttering « their sleight juggling over the bread to maintain Antichrist's kingdom therewith » (147).

The Thomas More who writes with such commitment in defense of the Catholic teaching on the eucharist understands that defense as an almost logical extension of his argument on behalf of the church's spiritual authority in *The Apology* and in *The Debellation of Salem and Byzance*. In this sense, his *Answer*, composed manifestly against a denial of the real presence in the blessed sacrament, has two distinct aspects. It consists of a theological argument concerning the nature of the eucharist as part of a debate being waged within the Christian community; it consists also of matters which directly pertain to the authority of the spirituality of England, the church leadership which enjoyed by law power over its Christian subjects. Of course, at this particular moment in English history, that authority was being challenged by Henry VIII, and Thomas More was deeply involved in protecting the boundaries of the spiritual realm against the infringement of a temporal power. Modern revolution in the West has recently been described in a way which suggests More's importance to that history: « all the national revolutions from the sixteenth century on -- except the American -- were directed in part against the Roman Catholic (or in Russia, the Orthodox) Church, and all of them transferred large portions of the canon law from the church to the national state, thus secularizing them. »<sup>10</sup>

In these final paragraphs, I have been trying to show the relationship between More's deep concerns for the Catholic doctrine of the eucharist and the momentous political changes that were taking place as he wrote. We will not enjoy a complete picture of this complex and many-sided man until we see More the humanist, the theologian, the lawyer, and the politician, as one. *CW II* has presented us with a wealth of materials that can contribute to this picture, even if, in the arranging of them, the editors have slighted the full significance of More's eucharistic theology.

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1. I have modernized the spelling and the punctuation of *The Answer's* text.
2. *Summa contra gentiles*, 4.68.2. Translation by Charles J. O'Neil in *On the Truth of the Catholic Church, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Four: Salvation* (Garden City: Image Books, 1957), p. 269.
3. *Cibus est qui reficit, nec deficit: cibus est qui insumitur, et non consumitur: cibus est qui esurientes satiat, et integer manet* (PL 38.183).
4. *Intellectus ergo manens in corde meo migrat ad tuum, nec deserit meum. Verumtamen cum intellectus inest cordi meo, et volo ut insit etiam cordi tuo, quaero qua ad te transeat quasi vehiculum sonum; et assumo sonum, et quasi impono intellectum, et profero, et produco, et doceo et non amitto. Si potuit hoc facere intellectus meus de voce mea, non potuit Verbum Dei de carne sua? Ecce enim Verbum Dei Deus apud Deum, sapientia Dei manens incommutabiliter apud Patrem ut procederet ad nos, carnem quasi sonum quaesivit, eique se inseruit, et ad nos processit, et a Patre non recessit* (PL 38.185).
5. The editors of *CW II* call Chrysostom's sermon *Homily 45*. Their reckoning, I believe, is based on the Basel edition of Chrysostom's *Opera* (1530-31). Migne (*PG* 59. 257-58) lists it as *Homily 46*.
6. William Shakespeare, « The Phoenix and the Turtle, » line 28.
7. *Patterns of Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 143.
8. *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 143.
9. *Praeterea, potestas quam habet sacerdos super corpus mysticum, dependet ex potestate quam habet super corpus Christi verum* (*In quartum librum sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi, Distinctio XVIII, Quaestio I, Articulus I, Quaestiuncula III, 3*).
10. *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 24.

#### Editor's postscript.

Clarence Miller, on returning to Angers the proofs of this *CWII* review, made the following remarks:

Walter Gordon's review of the *Answer* is very serious, careful, and thoughtful. I am particularly pleased with the passage he brought forward from Augustine's homily 28. For the rest he is pretty much popularizing what we provided -- which is a good thing, but not what we do in our editions. I think he is wrong about the section entitled « Masks and Reality, » which I consider very useful; it is a deft treatment of More's polemical technique. (...) The other new point in the review is the political dimension of More's defence of the eucharist. And this may be valid enough in the abstract, but in fact More himself makes little of this side of it. There may be a connection between More's defence of the spiritual jurisdiction of the clergy in *The Apology* and *The Debellation* and his defence of the eucharist, but I don't find that More himself makes it (Walter could have given a little evidence from More himself on this point).