

Elizabeth Anscombe on Transubstantiation

Read the following extract and debate this motion: “The Catholic Church should water down the idea of transubstantiation”.

“It is easiest to tell what transubstantiation is by saying this: little children should be taught about it as early as possible. Not of course using the word “transubstantiation,” because it is not a little child's word. But the thing can be taught, and it is best taught at mass at the consecration, the one part where a small child should be got to fix its attention on what is going on. I mean a child that is beginning to speak, one that understands enough language to be told and to tell you things that have happened and to follow a simple story. Such a child can be taught by whispering to it such things as: “Look! Look what the priest is doing ... He is saying Jesus' words that change the bread into Jesus' body. Now he's lifting it up. Look! Now bow your head and say 'My Lord and my God'" and then "Look, now he's taken hold of the cup. He's saying the words that change the wine into Jesus' blood. Now bow your head and say 'We believe, we adore your precious blood, O Christ of God.'" This need not be disturbing to the surrounding people.

I knew a child, close upon three years old and only then beginning to talk, but taught as I have described, who was in the free space at the back of the church when the mother went to communion. “Is he in you?” the child asked when the mother came back. “Yes,” she said, and to her amazement the child prostrated itself before her, I can testify to this, for I saw it happen. I once told the story to one of those theologians who unhappily (as it seems) strive to alter and water down our faith, and he deplored it: he wished to say, and hoped that the Vatican Council would say, something that would show the child's idea to be wrong. I guessed then that the poor wretch was losing the faith and indeed so, sadly, did it turn out.

[G.E.M. Anscombe, “Transubstantiation,” pamphlet published by the Catholic Truth Society, London, 1974; reprinted in G.E.M. Anscombe, *Collected Philosophical Papers Volume III: Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, pp. 107, 108.]