

LITURGY/SACRAMENTS—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Eucharistic Conversion
Convener: Rhodora E. Beaton, St. Catherine University
Moderator: Steven Rodenborn, St. Edward's University
Presenters: Robert J. Daly, Boston College
Gary Macy, Santa Clara University
Jill Raitt, University of Missouri, Columbia

This panel addressed the relationship between the conversion of the eucharistic elements and the conversion of the gathered community as understood in Early, Medieval, and Reformation Christianity, respectively. Acknowledging that this has become an urgent question for contemporary theology, each panelist addressed the following thesis: in the absence of *any* conversion of the participants, there is no conversion of the eucharistic elements.

Robert Daly began his focus on eucharistic theology in early Christianity by noting that the biblical and earliest postbiblical texts emphasized personal worthiness and ongoing need for conversion on the part of the participants. This emphasis is linked to a physical understanding of eucharistic conversion in the works theologians such as Justin Martyr, who suggests that the transformation is “for us, through our bodies.” Daly then turned to Ambrose of Milan’s *On the Mysteries* to examine the developing notion of a change in the elements which is attributed to the words of Jesus. Illustrating the ways fifth-century questions differed from our own, Daly pointed to the case of Pope Gelasius’ response to the Monophysite crisis. Defending the Christological claim that the two natures of Christ remain intact even while being hypostatically united with one another, Pope Gelasius assumed that the bread and wine also retained their own natures even while being divinely transformed. Here Christological concerns influenced eucharistic theology in a manner which exists in tension with later understandings of eucharistic conversion. Daly concluded his remarks by observing that, although the early Christians did not pose the question of eucharistic conversion in the same ways that we might, they did, in general, insist on the reality of the conversion of the participants in the eucharistic celebration; they seemed less concerned about whether the conversion of the participants was required for the conversion of the elements.

Gary Macy then presented a paper informally titled “You Are What You Eat,” addressing issues of eucharistic conversion from the Patristic Era to the Middle Ages. Pointing out that medieval theologians did not regard transubstantiation as central to eucharistic doctrine, Macy argued that for most, union in faith and love was the primary point of the Eucharist; the idea of “making God present” was not central. As with eucharistic theologies in the Early Church, medieval theologies, such as that of Baldwin, focused on the transformation of the participants and the conversion which they experienced from mortal life to immortal life. The symbolic function of the eucharistic elements was central. As Macy put it, “we eat food to give mortal life, we eat food to give immortal life.” This focus on the symbolic quality of the Eucharist was developed by Franciscan theologians Alexander of Hales and Nicholas of Lyra. For these theologians, who drew from Baldwin, union with God was of ultimate importance; Eucharist was one way to experience this union. In order to experience

this union with God through the Eucharist however, the participant must be capable of understanding a symbol. If the participant (or an animal) was incapable of understanding the symbol, that person would be united only to the visible bread (the sign), not to God. In such cases, the real presence would be available, but would not be available for that individual. In this era, the eucharistic conversion of the participants depended on their understanding of the symbolic reality of the elements.

In the final paper, Jill Raitt focused on the Swiss Reformed traditions and on the English Reformation, observing that each of these eucharistic theologies relied on the works of Augustine and on the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of John. While Luther emphasized that Christ is present “in, with, and under the bread and wine,” the Swiss reformers emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit who makes possible “the mouth of faith by which [one is] united with the substance of the body of Christ.” Along with their German and Swiss counter-parts, theologians of the English Reformation such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, agreed that the bread and wine were somehow changed; distinct from common food, they become the instrument of union with the incarnate and risen Christ. Various theories of transformation existed, but the Reformers were unified in rejecting transubstantiation. Agreeing that union with the incarnate and risen Christ itself transforms the community and effects the salvation of participants, thus fulfilling the purpose of the Lord’s Supper, these theologians emphasized the transformation of the participants rather than the issue of how the elements were transformed.

The panel concluded with Raitt inviting the audience to reexamine history to pose questions which were not asked before but which are appropriate to today. Lively discussion followed regarding the implications for *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, for eucharistic devotions in a variety of contexts, and for ecclesiological structures.

RHODORA E. BEATON
St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota