

NOTES ON THE DOCTRINE OF TRANSUBSTANTIATION AS ILLUSTRATED IN XVI CENTURY ART

WHEN the Reformation flooded northern Europe the doctrine of the Transubstantiation was swept with criticism and doubt. Luther, Calvin and those of like mind believed that the holy meal was, not an actual consumption of the body and blood of Christ, but a service of symbolism establishing a spiritual communion. In the Church of Rome, however, it was essential that the direct presence of Christ be by divine miracle in the wafer and the wine.

To expound this idea three types of illustrations were evolved in the early sixteenth century; one was to show the inevitability of the coming of Christ to the solace of the shrunken and devout, a second to show the efficacy of the Eucharist in a score of miracles, the third to explain the entry of Christ's real body and blood into the bread and the fruit of the vine.

It had long been the custom to illustrate the inevitability of the coming of Christ and the Redemption of Man by showing how every prior event was an anticipation of some phase of Jesus' life and passion. The plan was to fit every story in the Old Testament to some episode in the New Testament and, conversely, to find for every moment in Christ's life, as recorded, at least two anticipations or antitypes, as they were called. Thus Jonah emerging from the whale was an antitype of the Resurrection and to the mind of the time there was nothing comic or unfitting in the juxtaposition.

One way of reaffirming the Eucharist, then, would be to find Old Testament antitypes for it and here the work was already largely to hand,



PLATE I

ONE PIECE OF A SET OF TAPESTRIES MADE FOR THE ABBEY OF RONCERAY, EARLY
XVI CENTURY. THE LOUVRE

for the Communion was but a continuation of the Last Supper and antitypes had already been worked out for that.

A characteristic example of this type of demonstration is a tapestry which dates from about 1530 in the Church of Saint Stephen in Chalon-sur-Saône. In the center, above, is the altar with the host displayed in a monstrance. The donors and their children kneel before it on either side with angels hovering over them. In the four corners are the antitypes, Melchisidech offering the wine to Abraham, the Gathering of the Manna, the Feast of the Pentecost and the Last Supper. In these events, said the theologians, communion by consumption of bread and wine was predicted.

The Miracles of the Eucharist were numerous and varied. An unrepentant sinner falls dead on taking the Eucharist; an incredulous priest is struck with heavenly fire while celebrating the mass (Pl. I) or a wafer given to an unshriven penitent stains the napkin with blood. All these and many more, as well as the antitypes, were set forth on twelve tapestries with more than thirty episodes made for the Abbey of Ronceray in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Thence the set passed, after various vicissitudes, into the Chateau of Plessis Macé where it was sold and dispersed in 1888. (Pls. I, II) This ambitious demonstration of the Communion begins with Adam delving and Eve spinning, goes through the killing of Abel, covers the main episodes of the histories of Abraham and of Moses, includes the decapitation of Achimelech and the Triumph of David as antitypes by an elaborate and complicated deduction; explains the institution of the Sacrament by a summary life of Christ and finally illustrates more than a dozen of the Miracles. Even the animal kingdom is called on here to reaffirm the sanctity of the Host; a pagan is converted by seeing a horse, an ass and a cow adoring their creator, another pagan of an unworthy character attempts to pass before the Host but his horse refuses to rise no matter how much he is beaten, until the pagan accepts the true faith (Pl. II), while another unbeliever throws a blessed wafer to his dog who promptly bites him.

But the most interesting of the works of art inspired by the Transubstantiation are those that explain the passage of Christ into the wafer or wine. In France and Flanders these go back to a doctrine that had

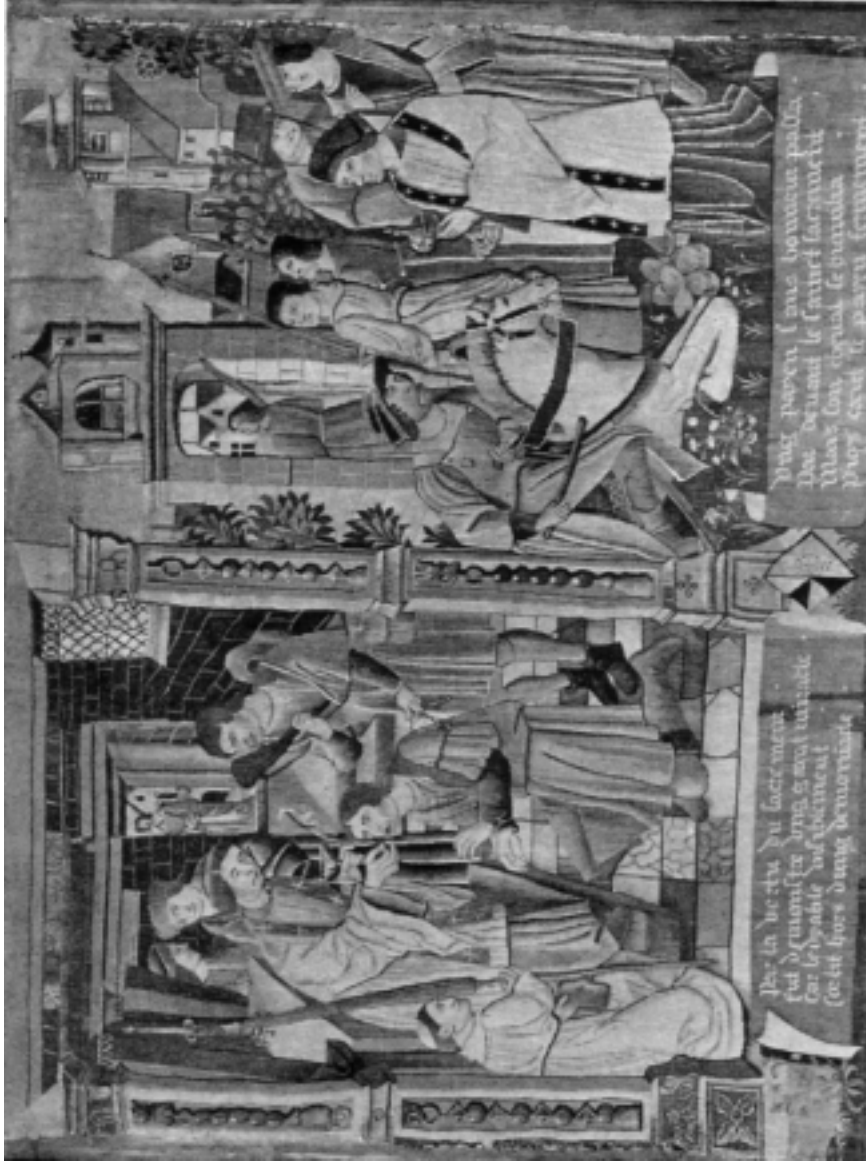


PLATE II

ONE PIECE OF A SET OF TAPESTRIES MADE FOR THE ABBEY OF RONCERAY, EARLY XVI CENTURY.
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

been popular for a century and had already given rise to fixed types of illustrations, the Adoration of the Holy Blood. This cult undoubtedly started when the Crusaders first brought back relics in the form of tiny phials containing a drop or two of Christ's blood but it did not become of major importance, at least not in the arts, until the fifteenth century. Then began, almost certainly in Flanders, a series of paintings playing on this motif. The cross was erected on top of a well coping. The blood from Jesus' wounds ran down into this well and sinners crowded about it to win redemption by bathing in these waters of life. Sometimes the four evangelists sat on the coping; sometimes the spouts of the well were made of their emblems' heads; sometimes Virtues, comely young women, urged the repentants on, and in time Mary Magdalen and Mary the Egyptian came to be the typical sinners almost always associated with the rite. The theme had a great success in both Flanders and France and was repeated endlessly, the gruesome realism not shocking at all to the mind of that time.

When the call to arms on behalf of the Eucharist came it was this theme that was seized upon and modified to the purpose. The blood of Christ became now, not the waters of life, but the wine of the chalice, and the aim was to show this sacred wine in its immediate derivation from Jesus' own wounds. The wine flows from the grape under the press; Jesus' wounds gave out their streams of blood on the cross: so the parallel was made explicit and the body of Jesus was shown laid on his tomb, the cross above serving actually as a press. The blood flowed down and became the wine of the Sacrament.

This subject, so morbid, was welcomed with enthusiasm, especially in France, and innumerable stained glass windows were dedicated to it, a number of which still exist. The most famous is that in the Church of Saint Etienne du Mont in Paris, though it is rather late in date, from the opening years of the seventeenth century.

As usual the body of Jesus lies on the tomb, the cross serving as the press and the blood flowing forth in rich streams into storage vats under the supervision of a Pope, a Cardinal, a Bishop and various prelates. These are engaged also, on the right, in putting other already filled vats into a cellar. Meanwhile Saint Peter at the head of the tomb is tramp-

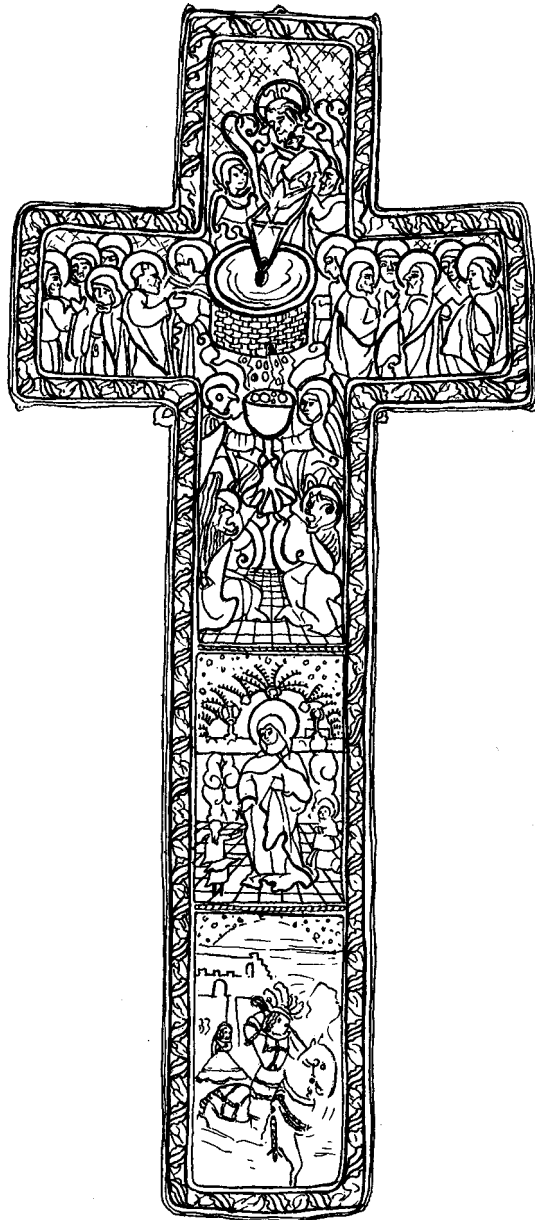


PLATE III

DRAWING MADE FROM PHOTOGRAPH OF EMBROIDERY
ON CHASUBLE AT KARLSRUHE

ling the grapes to make more wine which mingles with the blood of Christ and above is a chariot drawn by three of the symbols of the Evangelist and driven by the fourth, the angel, carrying away more of the barrels to storage. In the upper left corner is the cultivation of the wine and in the upper right a communion service. Seven stanzas in French explain the pictures, the last summing up, in none too classical verse, the animating motif of the whole theme:¹

Happy the Christian with faith firm beyond loss
 That God for his salvation suffered on the Cross;
 And that by the Sacraments of the Church he wins,
 Sacraments that Jesus with his blood let flow,
 Holy purification, the remission of sins
 And the sole salvation that man born in sin can know.

The same theme appears in another practically contemporary window in the Church of Saint Peter in Troyes, where there was a relic of the Holy Blood. The Saint Etienne Eucharist windows were apparently very complete for some of the Miracles also were represented. One, also illustrated in the Ronceray tapestries, recounted how an unbeliever bought a blessed wafer and when he put a knife into it blood spurted out. He then put it into a pot to boil and lo! a crucifix rose out of the pot. The Saint Etienne window shows a large iron caldron over a bonfire which several men are vigorously blowing with bellows. Out of the caldron rises a Crucifix, not a vision of steam but a solid fact. God's blood made the wine and God's body emerges from the bread.

The mystic press is repeated in France with only minor changes until it becomes dull and spiritless as all stereotyped themes are bound to do. But in Germany quite other illustrations were being evolved to meet the same didactic need, and there apparently the iconography became less

'Heureux homme Chrestien si fermement tu crois
 Que dieu pour te sauver a souffert à la croix
 Et que les Sacrements retenus a l'Eglise
 De son sang precieux ont eu commencement
 Qu'en les bien recevant toute offence est remise
 Et qu'on ne peut sans eux avoir son sauvement.

fixed, for a number of totally unrelated interpretations appear. As France gave her attention primarily to the communion wine, so Germany gave hers principally to the bread, developing a symbolism for the origin of the host.

The most naive and factual of these is known as the Mill of the Host. A painting of the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century in the Museum of Ulm shows this with childlike literalness. The Virgin and the four symbols of the Evangelists are at work pouring sacks of grain into the hopper of a mill that looks like a giant old-fashioned coffee grinder. The eleven Apostles, Judas being carefully omitted, turn the crank. A spaced stream of holy wafers trickles out of the spout and flutters down onto the soul of man, a little personage, quite naked, seated in a communion cup held by the Pope, a Cardinal and two damask-mitred Bishops. It is all very solemn and busy and quite delightfully absurd.

Another treatment of the theme is interesting, not only for the iconography but also for the medium. This is a chasuble (Pl. III) with the origin of the host embroidered on the orphrey in a kind of stump work, in very high relief, amazingly modelled.² Stump work is always a tour de force but here it is justified, in so far as any such aesthetic vagary can be justified, by its perfection. It so far exceeds any of the English stump work that there is really no comparison. The work was done in a convent near Karlsruhe about 1520 and the chasuble, along with several other vestments, similarly decorated with other subjects, is in the Schloss Museum of Karlsruhe. The conception of the Transubstantiation is here both intellectually and aesthetically more refined than in any of the other versions. The real presence comes, not directly from the body of Christ, but from the Holy Ghost. The dove, wings outspread, is at the top of the panel, the rays of light spraying out from his beak. These are transmuted into water and received into the Fountain of Life, a stone-coped well. The Apostles cluster on either side of this, all twelve this time. At the bottom, the water trickles slowly out of the well and falls in round, flat drops, thus becoming wafers, into the chalice which is held by the

²For a fuller description of this type of embroidery see the article in this issue of the Bulletin entitled *St. George and the Dragon: An Embroidery in Relief*.

four evangelistic symbols, again personified and robed. The imagination and allusiveness of this symbolism is in quite another realm of mind from the brutally specific mystic presses.

A third German rendition is even more indirectly symbolical, though perhaps less rich in reference and hence less convincing in feeling. This is in a panel from the Weiserswiller altar, now in the Museum of Fine Arts of Strassburg. Into this comes again something of the childlike, toy quality of the Ulm picture, although with a little more lightness of imagination.

Christ's cross, which still bears his wounded body, has branched and leafed into a tree. The tree reveals its miraculous character by carrying three kinds of blossoms; dark red velvety rosettes, doubtless the red roses that are the symbol of the Church, stained with Christ's blood; wax white, daphne-like flowers, virgin pure, meaning surely the Immaculate Conception; and the paper white, holy wafers. The wafers and the daphne flowers flutter down to be caught, on the left, in the mantle of the Virgin which is upheld by two pastel-robed angels. Behind Mary are the two Johns: John the Baptist with his lamb and John the Beloved Disciple with his chalice. On the opposite side of the cross the wafers fall upon two episodes. Nearer the cross is Saint Peter, in the Pope's triple tiara, holding an enormous key, launching a boat carrying a Cardinal and a Bishop. The mast of the boat is decorated with the symbols of the four Evangelists. This is certainly the foundation of the church with perhaps some idea of a journey for the conversion of the world. Behind and above this is the second episode, the institution of the Mass, with a priest and his attendant in front of the altar and a wafer coming to rest in the chalice before them.

Through such works of art was the doctrine of Transubstantiation taught to the people of the Renaissance. If as a subject it did not inspire the greatest works of art, it gave motifs of character and interest which offered vivid decorative possibilities.



HAND-WOVEN CARPET: SPANISH, XVI CENTURY, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.
SIMILAR TO SOME IN MRS. WILLARD'S COLLECTION