

Let's suppose a guy has a mid-life crisis: he starts going to the gym and get himself in pretty good shape; he gets hair transplants and a little plastic surgery; change the way he dresses and trades in the mini-van for a sports car. The outside appearances have changed but we would still say that inside its still the same guy. In the middle ages when theologians and philosophers were trying to explain the eucharist, St Thomas Aquinas said that this pattern where the outside can change but something vital still stays the same inside, is the exact opposite of what happens in the eucharist. The outside appearance – bread/wine – stays the same and that vital something inside changes. He came up with a fancy word for this that caught on: transubstantiation: or more simply “the transformation of the basic substance underneath what we see on the outside.”

It's a nice word that found its way into the official language of the church. What it wants to say is true from a certain point of view but I'm not sure its really very helpful for us. In a world where every school kid studies about the molecules and atoms and unimaginably smaller components that make up the things of our world, “changing the inside without changing the outside” can just leave you scratching your head. There doesn't really seem to be a stable “inside” the way Aquinas imagined it.

I'd like to suggest a different way to think about what happens in the eucharist. You might call this approach: “the insides stay the same but outside relationships change.” In this approach dramatic change isn't unusual, it's the way everything works. To keep this simple we won't go into particle physics or string theory, we'll start with something pretty large from a scientist's point of view: an electron.

Now if this little electron hooks up with a proton you now have a hydrogen atom. Hydrogen is an explosive gas that can do all sorts of things a lone electron can't do, but the electron is still there. Only it is part of something greater now.

Later in the day our hydrogen atom meets up with a friendly pair of oxygen atoms and now you have a water molecule. Now we have a liquid instead of gases and water can do all sorts of amazing things that those individual atoms could never do – but the hydrogen atom is still there and so is that little electron.

Now that water gets taken up into the roots of plant. Plants can grow and move and reproduce, something water could never do. If a bird, an animal or one of us eat that plant, another whole world of possibilities opens up – but all the way down the chain – that little electron is still there. For our purposes, we can say an electron can hardly do anything but as it became part of other relationships it changed into something greater than itself and is now part of an organism – you, for example - capable of incredible things.

But lets say that instead of that plant going on to become that hot dog bun you ate last week, it is made into a small wafer of bread that is one day place on the altar where again it will become something new. The risen lord Jesus says this is now part of me, this is me coming physically close to you, this is everything that makes me who I am, this is my body.

With each new configuration, each new set of relationships, reality for that little electron drastically changed, it took on new identities: hydrogen, water, wheat, and now the body of Christ.

The change comes from the dramatic new capabilities that come with each new defining relationship, not because the little electron has been changed. For that bit of bread the most dramatic change imaginable comes when, during the liturgy, it is now pronounced to be the body of Christ.

We could easily end the story of the electron that made good, right there because really there isn't any higher to go. But the story, in fact, does go on. You are what you eat. Our theology says that we receive the body of Christ so that we may become the body of Christ. This new relationship where we have a close, intimate, physical connection to Christ has to change us. We are to become Christ's hands, feet, voice in our world. In short we are to become a people of service to others.

Our little electron friend was pretty lucky – he just went along for the ride as each new world of possibilities opened up. For us, it is a little more difficult – we can say no, we can refuse to be the body of Christ or we can accept that challenge. The washing of feet is a solemn call for all of us renew our relationship with Christ, be a people of service to others, really be the body of Christ.