CHAPTER NINE

EX PARTE VIDENTIUM: HERMENEUTICS OF THE EUCHARIST

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The title ‘ex parte videntium’ draws attention to something different from one of the two things Peter Martyr Vermigli ‘heartily affirm[s]’ in order to ‘cover’, as he writes in his ‘Dedication to Thomas Cranmer’,¹ ‘the whole matter in a few words’, namely ‘all the present controversy regarding the presence of Christ in the Eucharist’:² apart from the statement ‘that this sacrament of the holy Supper is nothing without use’, ‘the other point is that when we make use of it we grasp Christ’s body and blood by faith alone’.³ No doubt, ‘by faith alone’ is a central concern in Vermigli’s argumentation. Yet ‘ex parte videntium’ focuses rather on the overall structure of argumentation.

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In Vermigli’s Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist (1549) there can’t be enough pejorative qualifications for transubstantiation, the core issue of the controversy. Apart from being just an ‘opinion’⁴—and a ‘recent’ one at that,⁵ ‘the notion of transubstantiation’⁶ is but a ‘fiction’,⁷ the product of an ‘absurd device’,⁸ of ‘fancied devices’⁹ and

² OTD, T 16–17.
³ OTD, T 17.
⁴ OTD, T 23.24.98.100.106.
⁵ OTD, T 23.97.
⁶ OTD, T 20.
⁷ OTD, T 44.76.
⁸ OTD, T 75.
⁹ OTD, T 15.
‘delusions’;¹⁰ it is a ‘permanent illusion’¹¹ filled with arguments that are
not seldom ‘frivolous’¹² and at times even ‘absurd’.¹³ It is an ‘error’,¹⁴
the expression of ‘superstitions’¹⁵ and ‘idolatries’.¹⁶ ‘[T]he dogma of
transubstantiation’¹⁷ gives rise to the ‘false and senseless dogma […]
that after the sacrament is received another sacrament remains’,¹⁸ which
runs counter to the fact that there is no sacrament apart from the use
of the sacrament—nullum sacramentum nisi usum.¹⁹ As Vermigli writes
at the end of the Treatise:

I have observed so far that the Eucharist (with which we are dealing)
has been so overwhelmed, buried, and deformed by lies, devices, and
superstitions that it could be reckoned anything besides what the Lord
instituted in the Supper. To prevent its being easily purged, the devil
(the greatest enemy of all peace and truth) has sown so many opinions,
controversies, disagreements, heresies, and battles, although without
blood, that scarcely any consent worthy of Christians can be hoped for
by human reason. Alas! we have not endured these things without harm,
for we have dealt double injury to this sacrament: in part because we
have erected an accursed idol instead of the excellent and special gift
of Christ; in part because we have abused these holy mysteries, without
sincere faith, with conscience defiled by grave sins, scorning a proper
examination of our own hearts.

I pray that God will pity such a great calamity, and will deign to restore
to his church at last a Eucharist renewed and enjoying its proper use;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²⁰

In the record of the discussions during the four days of the Disputation
(May 28, 29, 31, and June 1, 1549), pejorative qualifications like those
in the Treatise are used less often regarding aspects of transubstan-
tiation, although Vermigli still alludes to ‘absurdity’,²¹ ‘superstition’,²²

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¹⁰ OTD, T 15.
¹¹ OTD, T 39.105.
¹² OTD, T 75.
¹³ OTD, T 37.39.91.96.118.
¹⁴ OTD, T 20.100.
¹⁵ OTD, T 16.20.92.101.106.125.
¹⁶ OTD, T 16.86.101.125.
¹⁷ OTD, T 91.
¹⁸ OTD, T 44.
¹⁹ OTD, T 44.87.
²⁰ OTD, T 125.
²¹ OTD, D 151.221.
²² OTD, D 209.