



On the miracle the
Church calls
“Transubstantiation”

As New Year 2013 dawns, the world around us seems anything but new. Ancient hatreds tear apart the people of Syria. Lone shooters gun down the innocent in shopping mall and school. In the darkness of deep midwinter the old, old story of hatred and revenge chills us to the bone.

But 2013 is the Year of Faith in the One who comes to make all things new. At every Mass He works a miracle of newness before our very eyes: the miracle the Church calls “transubstantiation.”

The Word of God changes the substance of the bread and wine (what they really are) into His Body and Blood (what the Creator wants them to be), while the appearances of bread and wine (their look, feel, and taste) remain exactly as they were. And all this happens because Jesus is “consubstantial” with the Father, “the Maker of heaven and earth.” This all-powerful God need do no more than say the word to make something exist that did not exist before: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” It follows that this same God, by the mere power of His Word over “all that is visible and invisible” is free to change something that already exists into an entirely new substance, as Jesus changed water into wine at Cana and wine into Blood at the Last Supper.

But that is not all He came to make new; the dynamism of transubstantiation is not exhausted on the altar. Consider the transformation that happens in the confessional when the priest says, “I absolve you of your sins.” As in the Eucharist, no observable change occurs; the appearances remain the same. If the penitent is you, you won’t be surprised when you look in the mirror. It’s easy to recognize the person coming out of the confessional as the same one who went in. But within that person everything is made new. The Word of Mercy has brought about a marvelous invisible change from the darkness of sin and guilt to the light of pardon and peace. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

It takes the light of faith to discern the invisible change; as with transubstantiation there is no “scientific” way to prove or disprove it. We shall be made new only if we take Jesus at His word. “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them.”

Pope Benedict encourages us to exercise our faith in divine mercy frequently in the Year of Faith. What better way to make 2013 truly a New Year?