

Cardinal Willebrands

Vatican II's Ecclesiology of Communion

What did the Second Vatican Council mean when it said the one true church of Christ "subsists in" the Catholic Church, rejecting wording that the church of Christ "is" the Catholic Church? This question is fundamental to the council's ecclesiology, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, told the National Workshop for Christian Unity May 5 in Atlanta. In his speech — which he also gave May 8 in Washington, D.C. — Willebrands recalled the council fathers' debate. There was no intention to break with earlier doctrine, he said; rather, encouraged by frequent relations with other Christians and the spirit of the ecumenical movement, the council fathers were looking for "a development and deepening of the fundamental thought" of earlier doctrine. Thus the formula "subsists in" resulted not only from developments in ecclesiology, but also a "parallel reflection on the place in the body of Christ of Christians not living in communion with the Roman see," he said. With the change of language, the council went from identifying the church of Christ with the Catholic Church to say-

ing that Christ's one church "goes beyond the visible limits of" the Catholic Church, he said. It also made clear that "outside the Catholic Church there exist many elements of sanctification and truth which are the gifts proper to the church and therefore true ecclesial elements.... 'Subsistit in' thus allows emphasizing both the conviction that the one and genuine church of God is found in the Catholic Church and the certitude that it nonetheless extends, though lacking its fullness, beyond the Catholic Church." The text of the speech follows.

The words *subsistit in* by which the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* defines the presence of the church of Christ in the Catholic Church are of fundamental importance for understanding the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, especially in relation to the Catholic principles of ecumenism. The words are found in No. 8 of the constitution and in No. 4 of the Decree on Ecumenism. Both documents were promulgated by Pope Paul VI Nov. 21, 1964. More than 25 years later it still matters to

A speech given by Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, during his recent visit to the United States appears on these pages. In another address he spoke of the "passion for unity." Addressing a May 5 luncheon of the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, he spoke at one point of the evidences of this passion among recent popes, including Pope John Paul II.

"Pope John XXIII impressed the world in calling all Christians to full unity in the church of Christ, and all peoples of the world to peace," said Willebrands. This pope "addressed the world in a new way, with openness and trust. His passion for the unity of the followers of Jesus Christ led him to convoke an ecumenical council of the church and to put the question of Christian unity at the heart of the Second Vatican Council. It led him also to take the unprecedented step of creating the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, entrusting to it one of his main intentions, the very passion of his heart, responding to the words of Jesus 'that all may be one.'"

Willebrands continued: "This sentiment is expressed in many ways in the ministry of Pope Paul VI. It is revealed in a particular way in his relationship with the ecumenical patriarch Athenagoras I. The pope and the patriarch had met in Jerusalem, two pilgrims to the city of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. They prayed together, saying alternately the verses of the 17th chapter of St. John's Gospel, the patriarch saying his verses in Greek, the pope his verses in Latin. Later Pope Paul VI said to me: I never imagined that from a simple meeting such a deep friendship could arise.

◀ “Patriarch Athenagoras asked for a dialogue of love. This was not a superficial idea, just in order to have a friendly approach to the dialogue. In reality he touched the deepest level of our being and of the church of Jesus Christ. The dialogue of love meant recognizing each other as the church of Christ. Living together in this love we make theology and we build unity according to St. Paul’s ‘veritatem facientes in caritate,’ ‘building the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ’ (Eph. 4:15). It was this passion for unity that led Pope Paul VI, together with the ecumenical patriarch, to take the historic step at the closing days of the council, on Dec. 7, 1965, of issuing simultaneously in Rome and Constantinople the common declaration aimed at erasing from the memory and midst of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches the excommunications of 1054, and hoping to start a process that could lead eventually to full communion of faith, concord and sacramental life between Catholics and Orthodox.

“I think also of Pope John Paul II. I believe that a passion for unity characterizes his mind and ministry. Again and again he called ecumenism ‘a pastoral priority of the church.’ A journalist once said to me: ‘These are only words.’ I respond by saying, first of all, that a word of the pope, expressed publicly and officially to the Roman Curia, indicates his policy. And, second, he repeats it on the occasion of his pastoral visits in different countries. Moreover, he continually finds significant occasions to meet with heads and members of other churches and ecumenical communities. Let me call to mind only his visits to Constantinople, to

recall their intention and meaning, and stress their importance.

Given that *Lumen Gentium* is the basic text for the ecclesiology of the council, it is important to recall the maturing of the formula *subsistit in* and to clarify its intention and meaning.

The words *subsistit in* did not occur in the *Lumen Gentium* schema distributed to the fathers in 1963. This schema repeated (in its Paragraph 7) the substance of the preparatory commission’s text of November 1962, though modifying it on some important points. The one church, which the creeds call “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” “is the Catholic Church constituted and ordered as a society in this world.”¹¹ The 1962 text had said “only the Roman Catholic (Church) is rightly called the church.” The dropping of the adjective *Roman* is noteworthy.

When the *subsistit in* appeared with the 1964 draft, it was explained thus in the *relatio* justifying the changes introduced by the doctrinal commission: “*Subsistit in* is used instead of *est* as an expression more in harmony with what is said elsewhere about ecclesial elements.”¹² Close study of the speeches in the *aula* and of remarks sent in writing shows that the change from *est* to *subsistit in* did not arouse a “wave of reactions” announced by one journalist. (The question of collegiality and how it fits in with the ministry of the bishop of Rome was already attracting more attention.)

The strongest opposition to *subsistit in* was undoubtedly that of Bishop (Luigi) Carli, which should be quoted: “The words *subsistit in* are not acceptable, for they would suggest that the church of Christ and the Catholic Church are two distinct things, of which the former subsists in the latter as in a subject; we should simply and more truly say *est* because the sources say this.”¹³ Others questioned whether the expression *subsistit in* adequately conveyed the commission’s intention.¹⁴ But the commission stuck to its choice, and said why:

“Nineteen fathers propose that we should write ‘*subsistit integrally*’ in the Catholic Church. Another 25 want to add ‘subsists by divine right.’ Again 13 others want *est* instead of *subsistit in*. One, however, proposes *consistit* instead of *subsistit*. Obviously there are two tendencies, one which would somewhat broaden the proposition, the other which would like to restrict it. For this reason the commission, after long discussion, chose *subsistit in*, a solution agreed upon by all present.”¹⁵

The doctrinal commission then was unanimous. This should be noted.

While recognizing the importance of the change of terminology from *est* to *subsistit in*, I think it must be said that the council intended no break with the doctrine of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. The council fathers were, rather, looking for a development and deepening of the fundamental thought of the encyclical. The deepening had been much encouraged by frequent relations with other Christians and by

the spirit of the ecumenical movement. For this reason the meaning of the expression *subsistit in* cannot be examined merely by considering *Lumen Gentium*. This is certainly the basic text, but it was given further explanation in the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Pope Paul VI, promulgating the two texts Nov. 21, 1964, referred to this point: “*La medesima dottrina della Chiesa...integrata tale dottrina dalle dichiarazioni contenute nello schema ‘de Oecumenismo,’ parimente approvato da questo Concilio*” (The same doctrine of the church...integrated this same doctrine by the statements contained in the schema *De Oecumenismo*, also approved by the council) (AAS, 56, 1964, 1012-13).

It is clear that, at the very least, in the immediate context of the council this change from *est* to *subsistit in* was conditioned not only by the ecclesiastical study of elements of the church or traces of the church. There was a parallel reflection on the place in the body of Christ of Christians not living in communion with the Roman see. This aimed at opening up somewhat the position of *Mystici Corporis* on membership of the church, keeping its essential insight but interpreting it by a theological reading in an ecumenical context.

Certainly *Mystici Corporis*, after having identified the true church with the Roman Church (No. 13), went on: “Only those are really to be numbered among members of the church who have been baptized and profess the true faith and have not wretchedly separated from the structure of the body or because of grave transgressions withdrawn from lawful authority.” And Pius XII based this view on incorporation in Christ himself, whose body the church is. But this link with Christ, with the conviction that sanctifying grace, which can be given to others besides Catholics, implies of its very nature real communion with the Lord Jesus — above all where the sacrament of baptism has been received — would logically suggest enlarging in some way the field of incorporation. The encyclical itself spoke of those who “are oriented toward the mystical body of the Redeemer by some unconscious desire and resolve” and hence, without being visibly incorporated into the (Catholic) Church are nonetheless “in grace.”¹⁶ Long before, Clement XI had rejected Quesnel’s position on “outside the church no grace is granted.”¹⁷ Where there is grace there is union with Christ; and all union with Christ brings one within the scope of the church.

It would be easy to trace the slow development of theological reflection on this point, but it is better to go straight to the council itself, following the resounding speech in the *aula* by Cardinal (Achille) Lienart on Dec. 1, 1962. Already the *adumbratio schematis* of the German bishops and theologians (December 1962, February 1963), basing itself on the various elements which make up the church of God — profession of faith, sacraments, hierarchical structure — distinguished between perfect and imperfect incorporation. It stated: “According to their need for these three elements, men are in

different degrees united to the church, so much so that the title of member in the language of today's church should not simply be denied to those who are only imperfectly united to it."⁸

The *propositio schematis* of the bishops of Chile and other regions of Latin America (January 1963) set out to identify the explicitly ecclesial elements to be found among the Christians who "by divergences in faith or by defect of communion with the Roman pontiff are separated from the Catholic Church." It then spoke of an incorporation "by full visibility" and of another achieved "not yet perfectly visible." For "as a community at once visible and mystical, the church allows of its members being incorporated in various analogous ways which express its visible character and join people to Christ by grace with greater or less perfection."⁹

Note finally that both the schema by certain Italian fathers (January 1963) and that by some French bishops and theologians (January 1963) dwell on the *conjunctio* between the separated brethren and the church gathered in integral faith and communion with the bishop of Rome. They spoke particularly of "a certain conjunction in the Holy Spirit, who not only acts in Catholics by gifts and graces, but is also at work in those others, so that all Christ's disciples are incorporated in the church in Christ's own way."¹⁰

Many fathers touched on this point in speeches or written submissions. I quote only that of Bishop (Leon) Elchinger, who seems to me to have expressed the climate of the discussion:

"On the subject of who forms part of the church. From its context the schema might suggest that only those belong to the church — the body of Christ — who live in visible unity with the pope. (The schema in question is that of 1963.)

"Criticism. To say that the Catholic Church, the sole church of Christ, does not extend beyond its visible limits contradicts several truths assumed in the schema:

"1. It is said that the church of Christ extends in some fashion over all men, from the first chosen to the last.

"2. It is said that 'where the church is, there is the Spirit.' This is a quotation from St. Irenaeus which goes on, 'Where the Spirit is, there is the church.' Now the Spirit and grace are also given to Christians in good faith who are juridically separated from Rome.

"3. It is said implicitly that Christians in good faith, though separated from Rome, can be saved. Now only the church of Christ which is the Catholic Church is the ark of salvation.

"4. Baptism and the eucharist, received with faith and charity by a Christian in good faith separated from Rome, unite him or her to the body of Christ. But where the body of Christ is, there is the church.

"5. ... (It) is said that everyone baptized is subject to the laws of the church. Now no one is subject to the laws of a society to which he does not belong.

"Proposed amendment: Could we not say that the church, 'mother and mistress of all men,'

is the Catholic Church ruled by the pope and the college of bishops, stretching also to all men of good will who by faith and baptism are united in Christ and are thus called or destined to belong fully, in a visible unity, to the one church of Christ."¹¹

Others asked that the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* be not interpreted in a *stricter* way, and that it be said that, besides Catholics, "other baptized adults who by God's special grace keep the spiritual life in their hearts can be said to be, in a wider and incomplete sense, members of the church, even living members."¹²

We cannot fail to note that all this belongs in a "broadening" of Pope Pius XII's doctrine — which nevertheless is not rejected as a whole — thanks to a deeper grasp of the Pauline vision.¹³ A short phrase proposed by the German bishops and the Scandinavian episcopal conference gives the crux of the whole argument: "No one can be Christ's without belonging to the church."¹⁴ But the body of Christ is the church. The conclusion is that whoever belongs to Christ belongs to the church, and hence that the limits of the church are coextensive with those of belonging to Christ. This seems to me the dogmatic reflection behind the transition from *est* to *subsistit in* as it emerges from the council itself.

As far as the discussion of *Lumen Gentium* is concerned, in the conscience of the bishops the chief reason inducing the commission to adopt *subsistit in* seems to have been a reflection on the depth of the mystery of grace. The inclusive insight of *Mystici Corporis*, somewhat refined, was thus the texture on which the doctrine of Vatican II was constructed. The idea of the "elements of the church," which the commission invoked to justify the formula and which was to be treated more fully in Paragraph 15 before becoming the object of a large part of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, was viewed in this perspective of the mystery of grace. It is important to make this clear. It shows that the change from *est* to *subsistit in* has a bearing far beyond the strictly institutional. It has to do with grasping the implications of belonging to Christ. The standpoint is not juridical but Christological. The problem of *subsistit in* cannot be properly understood from any other standpoint.

To keep within the strictly ecclesiological compass, it should be remembered that the Western tradition has for centuries implicitly entertained the certainty that the church of God goes beyond the limits of the Catholic Church in communion with the see of Rome. But it has not advanced the theory. We need to bring up here the whole history of relations with the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Indeed, in its official documents the Catholic Church has never ceased since the rupture to consider the Oriental communities as authentic churches — and that since Gregory VII.¹⁵ Nonetheless it recognized — often with bitter regret — that those churches were cut off from her and, to use the categories of those days, so different from those of an ecclesiology of communion, "were no longer within her bosom."

Canterbury, to the Lutheran parish in Rome, to the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The recent day of prayer for peace in Assisi was also an important ecumenical event — for the Christians who were there, as well as having other important dimensions of an inter-religious nature, involving other religions of the world. In many different settings I have seen and can witness to the ecumenical passion and engagement of the Holy Father. Of course, his love for unity can never be set apart from his love for truth. On the contrary, it binds him to 'bear witness to the truth' (Jn. 18:37). This identifies his action with the intention of Christ, with the passion of the Lord for the unity of his followers."

For a past text in *Origins of current interest*, see "Doctrinal Congregation Criticizes Brazilian Theologian's Book," a statement of the congregation regarding a work by Franciscan Father Leonardo Boff, the book "Church: Charism and Power" (vol. 14, pp. 683ff). At one point, the congregation criticizes Boff's interpretation of the words of the Second Vatican Council, "subsistit in." "Turning upside down the meaning of the council text on the church's subsistence lies at the base of L. Boff's ecclesiological relativism," the congregation concluded (p. 685f).

The congregation said a "relativizing concept of the church stands at the basis of the radical criticisms directed at the hierarchic structure of the Catholic Church. In order to justify it, L. Boff appeals to the constitution 'Lumen Gentium'.... From the council's famous statement, 'Haec ecclesia (sc. unica Christi ecclesia)...subsistit in ecclesia Catholica' ('this church (that is, the sole church of Christ)...subsists in the Catholic Church'), he derives a thesis which is exactly the contrary to the authentic meaning of the

◀ council text, for he affirms: 'In fact it (sc. the sole church of Christ) may also be present in other Christian churches.' But the council had chosen the word 'subsistit' — subsists — exactly in order to make clear that one sole 'subsistence' of the true church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only 'elementa ecclesiae' — elements of church — exist; these — being elements of the same church — tend and conduct toward the Catholic Church.... The Decree on Ecumenism expresses the same doctrine...and it was restated precisely in the declaration 'Mysterium Ecclesiae.'"

Some theologians who heard Cardinal Johannes Willebrands' address said it was reasonable to assume that he was responding to the doctrinal congregation. In a May 18 National Catholic News Service report, writer Jerry Filteau explained:

"Several theologians said later that Willebrands' position was very different from a 1985 commentary...by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation.

"In a March 1985 statement...criticizing...Father Leonardo Boff, the doctrinal congregation had argued that the 'authentic meaning' of the conciliar texts in question was that 'only elements of the church' exist outside the 'visible structure' of the Catholic Church.

"The doctrinal congregation said the Latin term 'subsistit in' (subsists in) was chosen by the council 'exactly in order to make clear that one sole 'subsistence' of the true church exists,' namely the Catholic Church.

"That aspect of the doctrinal congregation's Boff critique was given scant attention in general press coverage of the controversy, but it provoked consternation in ecumenical circles.

"The Rev. Albert Outler of Southern Methodist University, a leading theologian and ecumenist who attended Vatican II,...sharply criticized the statement in an essay

They were *dissidentes*. There do then exist churches outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3). The opening statement of the document drawn up at Florence in 1439 for union between Greeks and Latins thus acquires its full meaning:

"Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad. For the wall which separated the Western and Eastern churches has been taken away, and peace and harmony restored. Christ, the cornerstone, who made each into one, has bound the wall by the strongest bond of charity and peace, making it a joining and containing force for perpetual unity, after the enduring mists of sadness, after the black and horrid night of long drawn-out quarrels, the serene light of the union desired by all has dawned."

The church of God has been divided into two parts. But the division has not cut deep, it has not touched unity in Christ, the unity of charity and peace, that alliance of perfect unity which has banished darkness and bathed us in a new light.

On the basis of that *traditio*, it was possible to see that a strict identification of God's church with the Catholic Church took no account of what the Catholic Church itself in practice witnessed to.

This led to recognizing an area of eclesiality, resting on very deep sacramental foundations, marked by a genuine apostolic identity and carrying essential elements of eclesial existence, which nevertheless had not maintained full communion with the Catholic Church ("the Western church").

In these circumstances, to state without qualification that the church of God in this world *est* the Catholic Church amounted to restricting the meaning of the word *church* in a way which contradicted eclesial practice. Moreover, how could you cut off from the church, without breaking with the traditional meaning of the word, communities brought together by a true eucharist and directly rooted in the apostolic community? Where there is a true eucharist, is there not genuine incorporation into Christ? Here again a deepening of eucharistic doctrine — indebted largely to bringing in Oriental traditions — prompted a broadening of the outlook of *Mystici Corporis*. Objective reflection on the elements (good things, treasure, traces) of the church was dependent on a larger understanding, that of the really eclesial values of the sacramental life of the Eastern churches.

In its relations with the Christian bodies resulting from the Reformation, the Catholic Church has been led little by little to discover not only that their baptism is valid, but that they produce fruits of grace. With the passing of the polemical fever of the counter-Reformation it was realized — and here we have the origin of thinking about the *elementa ecclesiae* (*Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3), that in those communities there is an evangelical life which can have no other source but Christ and his Spirit (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 20-23). But to talk about the effectual work of the Spirit of Christ in com-

munities which explicitly confess God in Jesus Christ — is this not already to talk of the church? Does not the council say that these are *elementa ecclesiae Christi propria*? (*Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3, 23).

We can thus understand the impact of Cardinal Lienart's speech, which gave the tone to the entire council debate on the subject:

"Formulas and ways of speaking of the church which corrupt the mystery of it must at all costs be avoided. Thus, for example, the relation of the Roman Church to the mystical body, their identity, must never be stated as though the mystical body is totally confined within the bounds of the Roman church. The Roman church is truly the body of Christ, but does not exhaust that body.

"On the contrary, all who are justified belong to the mystical body of Christ, since no grace is given to men which is not the grace of Christ, and no one is justified without being incorporated in Christ. Yet nobody belongs to the Roman church except those who have been properly baptized into it and have not cast off the ties of faith and communion.

"The mystical body therefore extends much further than the Roman church militant. It embraces also the church suffering in purgatory and the church triumphant in heaven.

"And what shall I say of separated Christians, who nevertheless by valid baptism are 'buried in Christ' so that in him they may rise to supernatural life and remain with him? I am sad that those outside the Roman church do not enjoy with us all the supernatural gifts of which she is the dispenser, but I would not dare to say that they do not belong in any way to the mystical body of Christ, even though they are not incorporated in the Catholic Church. It is clear then that our church, though it is the visible manifestation of the mystical body of Jesus Christ, cannot be absolutely identified with it in the sense I have spoken of.

"For that matter I would not dare to say, in order to establish that identity... 'the church by the very fact that it is a body, is discerned by the eye,' for this is not true of the church in heaven, which remains the body of Christ in a more perfect way; the comparison with a body does not lie here, but in the organic unity by which a multitude of members, offices and charismata make a unity, whose vital principle is the grace of Christ and whose soul is the Spirit.

"Therefore I earnestly beg that Article 7, Chapter 1, which makes the Catholic Church absolutely equivalent to the mystical body, be deleted, and that this schema be thoroughly revised so that the church of Christ appear less under a juridical aspect but rather shine out fully in its mystical nature."¹⁶

The transition from *est* to *subsistit in* finds its place, then, within a broad reflection which is both Christological and ecclesiological — the one inseparable from the other.

It is worth recalling that, since Vatican II closed without being able to discuss the schema *De Ecclesia*, the paragraphs of *Lumen Gentium*

we are examining represent the first great conciliar statement by the West on the church since the break with the Eastern church and then with the Reform. It was to be expected that the experience and practice of centuries of division should be taken into consideration.

Subsistit in states first of all a positive certitude on which all the first part of *Lumen Gentium* is like a commentary. The immediate context affirms the unity and uniqueness of Christ's church, that which our Savior after his resurrection committed to Peter as its pastor and made forever (*in perpetuum*) "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tm. 3:15). The council here joins with the thought of Vatican I, which says: "The church is of itself, because of its Catholic unity and enduring stability, a kind of great and everlasting motive of credibility, an unshakeable witness of her own divine delegation" (*De fide cath.* III).

The Decree on Ecumenism centers more on the unity of the church "in the confession of one faith, on the common celebration of divine worship and in the fraternal harmony of the family of God."

This one and only church "we believe dwells in the Catholic Church as something she *can never lose*" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4). This unity given forever and not to be lost characterizes the Catholic Church: It is sustained by the Holy Spirit in Christ to the glory of the Father. Thus in the Catholic Church is found the whole of the revealed gift and the fullness of the means of salvation.

In the same sense Vatican I had said: "Only to the Catholic Church do all those many and wonderful things belong which have been ordained by God for the clear credibility of the Christian faith" (*De fide*, III). If the one word *subsistit* does not of itself provide a full explanation, the context does. It is the manner in which Christ's church is found in the Catholic Church which gives the full content of that word. At the same time, the difference between *subsistit* and *existit* remains essential, because *subsistit* does not rule out that "many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). "Some, even very many of the most significant endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3). The Constitution on the Church and the Decree on Ecumenism state that these elements are ecclesial elements ("these are gifts belonging to the church of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8) "belong by right to the one church of Christ" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3).

This means to say that the church of Christ is not limited to the visible structure of the Catholic Church. Given that these elements are elements of the church, they "possess an inner dynamism toward Catholic unity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). The movement toward full unity is by divine grace built into the church wherever she exists and lives.

The Spirit does not cease to move all who are baptized and incorporated in Christ toward full unity. The church of Christ will grow in unity day

by day to the end of the ages (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4).

The positive certitude that the council wanted to express in the formula *subsistit in* may, according to Msgr. Gerard Philips, be summed up and transcribed thus: It is in the Catholic Church "that we find the church of Christ in all its fullness and all its strength." It is clear that in the council's thought this "fullness" is tied to the presence within the episcopal body of a focus of communion and of cohesion in faith and charity in the ministry of the bishop of Rome. But here above all it is important to be clear and to interpret the council with finesse.

In line with *Mystici Corporis*, No. 8 of *Lumen Gentium* reasserts indeed that there is no ecclesial fullness according to the present economy of salvation, except in the community "which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor" (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4). We have there an absolute conviction which nothing in the text modifies. Yet it would seriously misrepresent the thought of the council to see this "fullness" as deriving solely from juridical and canonical communion with the bishop of Rome. It is conditioned by that communion, but not reducible to it. It is essentially a communion in the whole economy of means of grace.

Indeed what is implied here is what the Lord Jesus intends as the normal state of the life of grace for his people. And that normal state is made up of the blending of all the values of faith and sacramental life which communion with the episcopal college and its head is there precisely to realize.

As a gloss on Msgr. Philips' expression, I would say that it is in the Catholic Church that the whole of what the Lord Jesus Christ has given to his people, to enable them to constitute the community of grace willed by the Father, is transmitted and kept so that it cannot be lost. Obviously that whole is not to be reduced to a simple addition sum of the means of grace. It includes also the whole spiritual atmosphere created by the tradition of thought, prayer and conduct handed on from generation to generation. And it is pierced through and through by the deep anxiety for the salvation of the whole world which from apostolic times has filled Christian communities.

It will be seen that this "fullness" of realization of the church is looked at here ideally as the upholding of everything the Lord Jesus has bequeathed for the building up of the church from Pentecost to the last day of history. No judgment is implied on the way in which the faithful or even the communities make use of this legacy, on their fidelity to it or, as would be said today, their "subjective holiness." Indeed *Lumen Gentium* does not hesitate to speak of a church which, including sinners as it does, is at once holy and always needing to be purified (*sancta simul et semper purificanda*) and this a few lines after it has affirmed the *subsistit in*. The standpoint is Christocentric. There is no question of declaring the Catholic Church self-sufficient or morally superior. It is enough to state that by the Spirit of Christ there has been

published last year in the book 'Vatican II Revisited.'

"At the council, Dr. Outler said, the non-Catholic observers saw the 'subsistit' texts — the term was used three separate times — as crucial to moving the Catholic Church away from its ecumenical policy of the previous 30 years into a new policy, based on the idea of unity through 'convergence,' which was to become the basis for 'a massive ecumenical reorientation' by the Catholic Church.

"Two decades later, it (that convergence approach) has not only been denied but repudiated" by the doctrinal congregation, Outler wrote.

"In a speech last August to leaders of U.S. Catholic religious orders, Outler asserted that official ecumenism is 'dead in the water' these days, in part because 'Romans in high places are re-exegiting 'subsistit in' as if it always had meant 'est.'" (The speech appeared in *Origins*, vol. 16, pp. 253ff.)

In one passage, Outler explained that what had impressed Protestant observers at Vatican II was "the quiet affirmation that the 'ecclesia unica' subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. By a fairly plain inference, we took that to mean an allowance for its real presence in other churches, in however reduced a degree. This altered the whole ecumenical perspective — or so it seemed at the time — from the notion of union by 'return' to one of 'convergence.'"

deposited in it and is still to be found everything that makes it possible for the church of God to be what it is called to be.

The *subsistit in* has, however, another overtone; and in the spirit of the council's discussion of *Lumen Gentium* it is as important as what has gone before. In the formula inspired by *Humani Generis* and above all by *Mystici Corporis*, the *est* was exclusive. It stated flatly what Cardinal Lienart in his speech had translated as a strict identity between the Roman Catholic Church and the mystical body, "as though the mystical body were totally confined within the bounds of the Roman church."¹⁸ *Subsistit in*, on the contrary, is meant to indicate that the church, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, is found in this world — constituted and organized as a society — in the Catholic Church, though indeed it goes beyond the visible limits of the latter. But beyond those limits it no longer has its fullness and full force. That was certainly how the fathers thought in their speeches. Moreover, the text is careful to make clear at once that outside the Catholic Church there exist many (*plura*) elements of sanctification and truth which are the gifts proper to the church of Christ and therefore true ecclesial elements.

Subsistit in thus allows emphasizing both the conviction that the one and genuine church of God is found in the Catholic Church and the certitude that it nonetheless extends, though lacking its fullness, beyond the Catholic Church. Only the fullness of the elements of truth and sanctification manifests the power of the presence of the Spirit and guarantees that it cannot be lost. Paragraphs 14 and 15 make clear that among non-Catholic Christians there is "a baptism which unites them to Christ, "indeed a certain true conjunction in the Holy Spirit." There is even mention in some cases of sacraments received "in their own church." For them too, certainly, it is a matter of at least some belonging to the church.

It should be pointed out that if the Christians of those churches or communities are truly sanctified or brought to "a sincere religious zeal," "a strength which can go as far as the shedding of blood," "a communion in prayer and other spiritual benefits" (No. 15), this does not happen independent of their communities. We are not talking about belonging to Christ and hence to the church as though it were a gift of grace not coming to them through their own Christian church or confession. Christians belonging to another church or ecclesial community confess the Christian faith, though it be not identical with the faith of the Catholic Church. It is the faith of their community which they express when they receive baptism. The baptism that community celebrates is a baptism which incorporates in Christ within *that* community. There are no vagrant baptized. The many elements of sanctification and truth which exist outside the visible limits of the Catholic Church are inseparable from the other elements with which they are in symbiosis. It is in the community, Lutheran, Methodist or Baptist, etc., that grace is given, and belonging to the church takes place there.

Are we to conclude that *subsistit in* leads to an excessive relativization of the unique quality of the Catholic Church? Some have thought so. But that would be to forget that the expression cannot be soundly interpreted apart from its context. The context shows plainly that there is no question of denying this unique quality of the Catholic Church, which the references to the hierarchy throw even more into relief. Paragraph 14 speaks of full incorporation achieved *only* in the Catholic Church, as explicitly as could be wished.

"They are fully incorporated in the society of the church who possess the Spirit of Christ, who accept the entire order and means of salvation instituted by him and are joined in the same visible structure with Christ, who rules that structure through the supreme pontiff and the bishops — joined, that is, by ties of profession of faith, sacraments and ecclesiastical authority and communion."

It would nevertheless be a mistake to think that the expression aims to concentrate all ecclesiality solely in the Catholic Church and considers the *elementa* present elsewhere as detached and drifting fragments. The insistence of the text on the role of the Holy Spirit in non-Catholic communities where, also in them, "he works through his sanctifying power, his gifts and his graces" (No. 15) prompting them to unity "in one flock under one shepherd" forbids denying to those communities *as such* all properly ecclesial reality. Moreover, what I have said about the traditional attitude toward the Eastern churches — though they too are detached from "communion under the successor of Peter" — shows that instinctively the Catholic Church has refused to see in the Orthodox communities nothing but a collection of elements of the church. She has seen them as authentic churches. Perhaps this case is regarded as an exception? It would surely be a very significant one, which deserves full attention.

Moreover, No. 15 of the constitution includes the traits proper to these churches in a long list directed at *all* the "churches and ecclesial communities" cut off from full communion with the bishop of Rome.

It has been said that in the council documents you can find two ecclesiologies that do not harmonize, that even contradict each other. Only a selective reading could lead to that view. It is evident that the fathers never wanted to depart from the doctrine of Vatican I. They wanted to complete and deepen that doctrine and open it up to new problems posed in the 20th century, especially from an ecumenical standpoint.

Subsistit in cannot be authentically understood except in the setting of ecclesiology of communion, and then only if communion is seen not simply horizontally nor merely as between Christians or Christian communities, but also and in the first place as communion with God himself. The statement of the first Johannine epistle is here of capital importance, whatever the circumstances which explain it: "Fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn. 1:3).

Indeed, if the church is fundamentally this communion with the Father and

the Son in the Holy Spirit, we can see that on the one hand the depth of this communion determines the depth of incorporation in the church, and on the other that it cannot be a question of all or nothing. To welcome the word of God by faith, to seal that welcome by baptism, to live in brotherhood, to be full of the will to witness to Christ Jesus, to celebrate the eucharist, to remain in the communion of the episcopal college and of its head, these are steps inspired and supported by the Spirit of Christ and they create communion. To be sure, the latter does not possess all its essential characteristics except where an authentic eucharist is celebrated and lacks its fullness except where the hierarchy is united around the bishop of Rome. Nonetheless, where only the first of those Christian steps are found we are already in the field of *koinonia*, already associated with the reality of ecclesial being. We are not empty of communion in God's sight, we are not "outside the church of God."

It follows from this that, in relation to communion with God — inaugurated by the Spirit of Christ — which is the essential axis of ecclesial communion, some communities may already be *of the church* without yet *being churches* (that is, having an authentic eucharist) and without establishing links of horizontal communion with the Catholic Church. Belonging to the church turns essentially on the relation which comes down from God. And if, to repeat the words of *Lumen Gentium*, it does not find its fullness except in communion with him who, in the episcopal college, safeguards the bond of visible unity of all the eucharistic communities, that fullness is itself a grace from God. *Subsistit in* thus appears, in an ecclesiology of communion, as an attempt to express the transcendence of grace and to give an inkling of the breadth of divine benevolence. It is then that the traditional view of ecclesial *koinonia* as the *sacramentum* of God's design takes on a new depth.

I have dealt mainly with *Lumen Gentium*. The council document on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) was to be a kind of bringing into play within the council of everything implied in the transition from *est* to *subsistit in*. It is no accident that the clearest commentary of those I have examined is this from the Decree on Ecumenism:

"Men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly, the differences that exist in varying degrees between them and the Catholic Church — whether in doctrine and sometimes in discipline, or concerning the structure of the church — do indeed create many and sometimes serious obstacles to full ecclesiastical communion. These the ecumenical movement is striving to overcome. Nevertheless, all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They therefore have a right to be honored by the title of Christian, and are properly regarded as brothers in the Lord by the sons of the Catholic Church" (No. 3).

Footnotes

¹ See G. Alberigo, F. Magistretti, *Constitutionis*

Dogmaticae Lumen Gentium Synopsis Historica, Bologna, 1975, 38.

² *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii oecumenici Vaticani II*, Vol. III/1, 177. But these texts are grouped more accessibly in Alberigo and Magistretti. For the passages quoted here see pp. 440, 261-262.

³ *Acta synodalia*, II/1, 653.

⁴ Thus Father Aniceto Fernandez, master general of the Dominicans, who suggested *consistit in* (ibid., 68).

⁵ *Modorum expensis*, cf. Alberigo and Magistretti, 504-507.

⁶ See on this point the very firm statements of the Holy Office to the archbishop of Boston (Aug. 8, 1949) about the Feeney affair, which based itself on the encyclical (Denzinger-Schonmetzer, 3866-3873, 3871). I cite the central paragraph of the

Holy Office's letter:

"The same must however be said of the church insofar as it is itself a general aid to salvation. It may be that for someone to gain eternal salvation it is not always required that he be actually incorporated as a member of the church, but it is at least required that he belong to it by desire and resolve. However, it is not always necessary that this resolve be explicit, as it is with catechumens, but where a person is invincibly ignorant God also accepts an implicit resolve, so called because it is contained in that good disposition of the soul by which a person wishes to conform his own will to the will of God" (DS, 3870).

⁷ DS, 2429.

⁸ Alberigo and Magistretti, 384.

⁹ Ibid., 397.

¹⁰ Ibid., 426; cf. 419.

¹¹ *Acta synodalia* II/1, 656-657.

¹² Msgr. Rousseau, ibid., 561.

¹³ Thus Msgr. Meouchi, ibid., 693-694.

¹⁴ Ibid., 289.

¹⁵ On this subject see the interesting note by G. Hofmann, "*Notae historicae de terminologia theologica Concilii Florentini*" in Greg. 20, 1939, 257-263 (260-261); Y. Congar, "*Note sur les mots confession, eglise et communion*," in Irenikon 23, 1950, 3-36 (23-24).

¹⁶ *Acta synodalia*, I/4, 126-127.

¹⁷ Msgr. Philips, *L'Eglise et son mystere au Ile Concile du Vatican*, T.1, Paris, 1967, 119.

¹⁸ See above, Note 16.

¹⁹ It was spontaneously taken thus by non-Catholics.