

by Bishop B.C. Butler

The Church of Christ, according to L.G., which we profess in the Creed, when considered as a constituted and organised society in this world, subsists in the Catholic Church.

The phrase to attend to here is SUBSISTIT IN. In his commentary, the late Mgr. Philips, who was one of the secretaries of the Doctrinal Commission of Vatican II and may well have penned this passage, remarks: "The text does not say: the Church of Christ IS the catholic community". He does not mention, but it is a fact, that a draft of this passage DID have the word EST, and this was changed in the final and authentic version. The change is therefore to be held to be deliberate, and at once the drift of it becomes important. Philips himself says: We may expect that SUBSISTIT IN will cause floods of ink to flow.

How are we to translate the phrase? (a) We must presume that it does NOT mean EST. (b) Subsistence does not mean the same as existence (as though the Church of Christ exists in the catholic Church (but possibly also, if not equally, in other Christian communions etc.)). (c) In philosophy subsistence, I think, means having a personal existence; I exist in my activities, I subsist as an intelligent hypostasis. I should therefore be inclined to translate: "Reaches and expresses its full quasi-personal identity in". (Philips writes: "I should be inclined to translate thus: 'It is there that we find the Church of Christ in all its plenitude and all its strength, as St. Paul says of the risen Christ that he is established Son of God en dynamei, with power'". I do not like this translation, because it would imply, would it not, that there is no "plenitude" and no "strength" in expressions of the Church's existence on earth outside the Catholic communion. I think "reaches and expresses its full personal identity" is a phrase free from such misunderstanding. It would allow us to say that the Church of Christ

exists in partial plenitude and in some strength also in, e.g., the Coptic communion (though it does not reach full personal identity there). It would also allow us to admit, what is surely true, that we do not find in the Catholic communion "all the plenitude and strength" of the Church of Christ).

I hold that this phrase, and teaching elsewhere in Vatican II which coheres well with my interpretation of the phrase, has great, though limited, importance as a major development in authentic ecclesiology. First, its greatness:

#### A GREAT ADVANCE

Gregory Baum remarks that Pius XII, in MYSTICI CORPORIS, "beginning with BODY EQUALS BODY SOCIAL, identified, without any qualifications, the mystical body of Christ with the Catholic Church" (to-day we should be more chary of identifying body, in the phrase mystical body of Christ, with body social. There is an equivocation here comparable, though of different origin, with the equivocal meaning of the English word "priest" - presbyter or hieres? It can be argued that when Paul, in his ~~maturer~~ writing, presents the Church as the body of Christ, he is thinking not of a social body - as when Constantine spoke of the corpus Christianorum - but of the personal body of Christ). The consequence of this unqualified identification (which was in the spirit of Bellarmine) is seen when Pius XII teaches that only those in full communion in the Catholic Church are reapse members of the Church.

If Baum (and others) have correctly understood Mystici Corporis, Vatican II's correction of its teaching was theologically necessary. We have only to reflect that (a) we recognise the validity of the baptism of those who from the beginning of their Christian lives are and remain outside the full communion of the Catholic Church; (b) baptism incorporates into Christ; (c) the Church is the body, the corpus, of Christ; and we then see that the Church certainly transcends the limits of the Catholic

communion. (Theologians used to talk of belonging to the "soul of the Church"; but it is extremely difficult to conceive of the Church as existing discarnately on earth; and in any case, baptism admits to the Church as Christ's body. Again, some, taking a canon-law stance, used to argue that a baptised person ceased to be a member of the Church when he adhered voluntarily to a "sect". Quite apart from the fact that such adherence is usually not subjectively sinful, this will not do, because baptism is unrepeatable (as Rome insisted against Cyprian) and, according to us, imports a "character" that survives at least till the death of the baptised person).

It is interesting to note that Hawarden, a professor of Douai c. 1700 A.D., states explicitly that all such baptised persons (except, he may imply, those who have sinned gravely against faith, a sin so enormous that he suggests that it would be uncharitable to assume it) are fully members of the Church which we profess in the Creed. Cardinal Bea was not an innovator, but one loyal to the true tradition.

The Church, then, transcends the limits of the Catholic communion, at least in the persons of baptised separated brethren.

But Vatican II went further. In the Decree on Ecumenism it spoke of the separated Christian communions and said of them: "Though we believe that they suffer from defects, they are far from being without significance and weight in the mystery of salvation. The Spirit of Christ does not refrain from using them as means of salvation". Now unless this is polite verbiage (for God can draw straight with crooked lines), it must mean that these separated communions, as such (i.e. not as mere aggregates of individual believers) are doing that work which was entrusted to the Church as such; and doing it in some specially Christian-ecclesial sense that would not be true even of the most "Catholic" secular state. (On the other hand, I do not lay much weight on

the appellation of "churches", given to some of these separated communions by the Council. This could be polite usage, though it may also be due to the fact that the Holy See has regularly used such terminology vis-a-vis the separated Eastern bodies; and the Greco-Russian Orthodox communion may well be a special case, as to which cf. Bouyer).

I infer that the Church transcends the limits of the Catholic communion not only in the persons of baptised Separated brethren but in the Christian communions with which the Decree was concerned.

Elsewhere, the Decree has some remarks about "communion" which could be made the basis of ecclesiology. It speaks of these separated bodies as having an "imperfect" communion with the Catholic Church: (a) "as the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion are overcome"; (b) "those of her sons who ... are yet separated from full communion with her" - a sua plene communionem seuncti sunt; (c) "those who plan to devote themselves to the work of restoring the full communion that is desired between the Eastern Churches and the Catholic Church"; (d) Arrangements are laid down between the Eastern and Western Catholic Churches to endure "till the Catholic Church and the separated Eastern Churches come together into fullness of communion". (e) "There are serious obstacles to full communion (between the other churches and the Catholic Church)" (Decr. n.3). (f) "Those who believe and have been baptised are established in a certain, but incomplete (non perfecta) communion with the Catholic Church" (ibid.).

I don't know of any earlier official document that has made such use of this distinction between imperfect and full or perfect communion. And I do not remember that Vatican II itself ever gave the rationale, in so many words, of the distinction. What follows is therefore tentative.

F.O. Maurice saw the Church as coalescing around the gifts (e.g. Bible and sacraments) given by Christ for the salvation of

men. With this pointer, I suggest that there is communion between persons on earth to the extent that they share something in common (or, in the extreme case, are shared by something in common). The koinon, as opposed to the idion, is that which is common property. Koina ta ton philon. To koinon = "the commonwealth". Cf. in Latin res publica as contrasted with res privata. Or think of the common land of an English mediaeval village.

Common possession establishes a basis of mutual relatedness, sometimes potential and sometimes actual. Two Francophones are at least potentially related to each other through a mutually understood system of communication. The villagers build up a shared life with a network of relationships through their common field. The commonwealth founds a system of mutual trust, loyalty and patriotism.

The common possession may be material or immaterial. In the primitive Jerusalem church, according to Acts, there was practised a community of goods which must have set up a close relationship comparable to that of a modern religious community with its vow of poverty and common property. But the abiding realities which are held in common by Christians are spiritual, though often materially embodied (cf. the Incarnation). Bible, sacraments, the Creeds, the dicta of the early Councils, the traditional deposit in the Fathers etc., are embodied spiritual values. Those who share them are in a certain communion with each other; and this goes for churches as well as for individuals. In the last analysis, Christian faith is a uniting factor; and (between Christians, Jews and Moslems) faith in the OT revelation. Or rather, if we are speaking of the "communion" of Christians, the uniting factor is Christ apprehended by faith; or again and still more fundamentally God in this faith-apprehended Christ: "That your communion may be with us, and our communion is with the

Father ...". Here we must remind ourselves that in this communion, which binds all Christian believers together through Christ in God, the initiative is with God throughout, and it may be better to speak, not of Christ as our common possession but, of Christ as possessing us all through his Holy Spirit.

What, then, of the spiritual-material factors mentioned above (Bible, sacraments etc.)? I think we have to bear in mind that Christ himself is a "spiritual-material" factor: we believe not in some Christ only to be met with in heaven, but in the Word of God incarnate. The kerygma is itself a material-spiritual thing; and so of course is baptism. So is the Eucharist, not to speak here of the other sacraments. The Christian communion is thus no merely mystical union of believers, whose extent is known only to God; it is also a visible historical entity, coalescing around the Tradition.

On this view of things, "full communion" would be what unites those who acknowledge the totality of the factors of the Christ-established communion, including that "structure" which, in however embryonic a form, we believe that Christ gave to his Church so that it should be more than a mere numerus credentium.

#### A LIMITED ADVANCE

There is a way of understanding this teaching on imperfect and full communion which would lead to a position which I regard as unacceptable. It might be argued that, when there are separated Christian churches, none of them enjoys "full communion"; that the Church is fragmented into parts of which none can claim any sort of "uniqueness" or exclusive authority. This would be a resuscitation of a liberalised form of the "branch theory" - liberalised, because it would designate as branches not only the three communions of Canterbury, Constantinople and Rome (as did the Anglo-Catholic version of the branch theory)

but every Christian church, at least such as admitted to membership by baptism.

I do not believe that such an interpretation is consistent with the teaching of Vatican II.

Dec. on Ecumenism, n.2: "It is through the faithful preaching of the gospel by the apostles and their successors - the bishops with Peter's successor at their head - through their administration of the sacraments, and through their loving exercise of authority, that Jesus Christ wishes his people to increase under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thereby, too, he perfects his people's fellowship in unity: in the confession of one faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in the fraternal harmony of the family of God".

n.3: "Our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as communities and churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those whom he has regenerated ... For it is through the Catholic Church alone, which is the generale auxilium salutis, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ ... "

Hence, L.G. can say: "Whoever ... knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her could not be saved". This is a very mild statement of the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, but it would be disingenuous to deny that there remains here a claim to "uniqueness".

TWO MODELS?

I therefore ask whether the theologian will not find himself working with at least two models of the Church, neither of which can be

discarded; models which it may be difficult to harmonise to the satisfaction of our reason. There is an analogous situation with regard to the two models of the electron. And cf. Rahner's combination of his "supernatural existential" with belief in the uniqueness of the redemption in Christ. I personally think that a Roman Catholic is driven to hold that, while his communion is "always in need of purification" (and there could be a very far-reaching reform, e.g. by trying to clear away the "imperial" extensions of papal government), still this need is not quite comparable with the need of the other communions not only thus to "purify" themselves but actually to "take into their system" some features which the Catholic Church has preserved and which it holds to be essential. The retort could be made: But has the Catholic Church not already admitted that she needs to restore the Bible to a place comparable to that which it holds in Protestantism? Yes, but the Bible was never rejected by the Catholic Church, whereas the papacy - to take an example - has been left out of the Protestant view of Christianity.

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(The case of the Eastern-Orthodox communion is very special, and might even throw some light on the wider issues. Bouyer hazards the suggestion that "full communion" has never been entirely broken between that communion and the Catholic Church, so that the two together have always been the "one Catholic Church". I don't necessarily accept this view of Bouyer, but it might be worth attention).