

From 'One in Christ 1986-2

'Subsistit In': ARCTIC-II 69/1(87)

## The Significance of Vatican II's Decision to say of the Church of Christ not that it 'is' but that it 'subsists in' the Roman Catholic Church\*

When I began teaching ecclesiology six years before the opening session of Vatican II, there was no doubt what was meant when one said: 'The Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church'. ('Roman' here means 'in communion with Rome', and of course includes the eastern Catholic Churches). Pope Pius XII had made it perfectly clear, both in *Mystici Corporis* (AAS 35, 1943, 221 ff.) and in *Humani Generis* (AAS 42, 1950, 571) that the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church were one and the same thing.

After Pope John XXIII had announced the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, a Preparatory Theological Commission was formed in 1960, with Cardinal Ottaviani, Prefect of the Holy Office, at its head, and Fr Sebastian Tromp, chief collaborator in the writing of *Mystici Corporis*, as its secretary. From the texts produced by this commission, one can safely judge that the expectation of its members, carefully picked by the Holy Office, was that the bishops gathered at the council would in no case depart from the official teaching of the Popes. It seems clear they saw the role of the council as turning into conciliar doctrine what was already papal teaching.

Hence it is no surprise when we find the following statements in the *schema De Ecclesia* presented by this preparatory commission to the council in its opening session of 1962: 'The Roman Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ . . . and only the one that is Roman Catholic has the right to be called Church' (AS I/4, 15).

Among the criticisms that were made of this schema during the week that it was discussed by the Council (Dec. 1-7, 1962; AS I/4, 126-391), one that was heard a number of times concerned this exclusive identification between the Mystical Body and the Catholic Church. As is well known, the frosty reception given to the whole schema was enough to convince the leadership of the council that it should be quietly withdrawn without even being put to a vote. So during the spring and summer of 1963 a new *schema De Ecclesia* was prepared, which, it must be said, did incorporate quite a lot of material from the previous one, while differing a great deal from it in tone and general approach.

On the question we are dealing with, the new schema followed the previous one in asserting that the one and only Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church; but it added the significant admission that

\* Fr Francis A. Sullivan, S.J. is Professor of Ecclesiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. This article was given as an address at the Centro pro Unione in Rome, 4 March, 1986. We are grateful to the Atonement Friars for permission to publish it.

'many elements of sanctification can be found outside its total structure', and that these are 'things properly belonging to the Church of Christ' (AS II/1, 219-220). This last phrase at least implied that such 'elements of sanctification' as are to be found outside the Catholic Church are ecclesial in nature; and that suggests that there is at least something of Church beyond the limits of the Catholic Church.

This is the schema that was discussed for the whole month of November, 1963, and on which the bishops submitted their *modi*, or proposals for emendation. In the interval between the session of 1963 and that of 1964, a very considerable revision was made of the *schema De Ecclesia*, and it was while the Theological Commission was preparing the revised text that the question was raised within the commission itself, as to the consistency of maintaining on the one hand that the Church of Christ was simply identified with the Catholic Church, and then admitting that there were 'ecclesial elements' outside of it. The solution arrived at was to change the text from saying that the Church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church, to saying that it *subsists in* it. The official explanation given to explain this change to the bishops was: 'so that the expression might better agree with the affirmation about the ecclesial elements which are found elsewhere' (AS III/1, 177). Unfortunately for the commentators, no further elucidation was offered as to the precise sense in which the word 'subsists' was intended to be taken.

The one fact that is absolutely certain is that the decision no longer to say 'is' – a decision ratified by the vote of the Council – is a decision no longer to assert such absolute and exclusive identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church as had been claimed by the previous *schemata*. The fact that the 'many elements of sanctification and of truth' – these last words added by the commission at the same time – are explicitly recognized as 'ecclesial' in nature, evidently suggests that there must be something of Church out there. There would have been no point in making this change if the new term: 'subsists in' were to be understood in the same exclusive sense that had been affirmed by the simple copulative 'is'.

Practically all commentators have seen in this change of wording a significant opening toward the recognition of ecclesial reality in the non-Catholic world. But much remained to be clarified, and I would venture a guess that more ink has been spilled on the meaning of 'subsistit' than on any other single word in the documents of Vatican II. I would distinguish three questions that need to be answered, and to which I shall address myself:

1. What is the significance of this change from 'is' to 'subsists in' for our thinking about the Catholic Church?
2. What is its significance for our thinking about other Christian communities?

3. What is its significance for our thinking about the universal Church of Christ?

The first point I would make is that none of these questions can be given a satisfactory answer on the basis of this one text of *Lumen Gentium* alone. What we are seeking is the 'mind of the Council' about some of the most basic questions relating to what the Decree on Ecumenism calls 'the Catholic principles of ecumenism'. The people working on the *schema De Ecclesia* were very much aware of the fact that at the same time a *schema De Oecumenismo* was being prepared, and it was their intention to leave the ecumenical aspects of ecclesiology to be handled in that decree. Actually these two documents were promulgated on the very same day: 21 November 1964. In the allocution which he gave on that occasion, Pope Paul VI, in addressing himself especially to the non-Catholic observers, made the explicit point that the doctrine on the Church in *Lumen Gentium* was to be interpreted in the light of the further explanations given in the Decree on Ecumenism (AAS 56, 1964, 1012-3). So we shall seek the answers to our questions in both of these documents, and in the official *relationes* given by the respective commissions to the council fathers.

We begin our first question by asking: how is the word 'subsists' to be understood? The *relatio* that I have already quoted as giving the reason for the change gives us no further light on the way they intended 'subsists' to be taken. However, the commission also provided a *relatio* that briefly summarized the contents of each paragraph of Chapter I. The second paragraph of n. 8, in which our phrase occurs, was summarized as follows: 'Ecclesia est unica, et hic in terris adest in Ecclesia Catholica, licet extra eam inveniantur elementa ecclesialia' (There is but one Church, and on this earth it is present in the Catholic Church, although ecclesial elements are found outside of it) (AS III/1, 176). Here the word that corresponds to 'subsistit in' is the very simple 'adest in'. This, I think, is a good reason for not following those commentators who have interpreted the word 'subsistit' in the light of a philosophical notion of *subsistentia*. One went so far in this direction as to suggest that the Catholic Church is to other Christian communities what *ens subsistens* (the divine Being) is to created beings. Another philosophical approach is to imagine that the Church of Christ is being thought of here as a kind of 'platonian idea' which has its 'concrete form of existence' in the Catholic Church. Some German translations actually lend themselves to such an interpretation.

However, most commentators, and I believe rightly, reject the idea that 'subsists' is being used here in any such technical philosophical sense. It is a good working rule that, in the absence of clear indications to the contrary, terms used in conciliar documents are meant to be taken in the ordinary sense that the word has in common usage. If one looks up the word *subsisto* in a Latin lexicon, one finds that the primary meaning

is: 'to stand still, to stay, to continue, to remain', etc. That such is actually the correct meaning of the word in our passage is confirmed both by the context, and by other places in the conciliar documents where the same word occurs.

If one reads the whole paragraph (8b) one sees that the Church of Christ which is said to subsist in the Catholic Church is not an ideal Church, needing to be concretely realized in this world, but is the historical Church of the New Testament: the Church that Jesus entrusted to Peter and the other apostles to be propagated and governed. It makes excellent sense to say that this Church continues to exist, and that it is still to be found in the Catholic Church, the one, namely, that is governed by the successors of Peter.

Other passages confirm this interpretation of the word 'subsist', especially two that occur in the Decree on Ecumenism. In n. 4c we are told that 'the unity which Christ gave to his Church can never be lost, and it *subsists* in the Catholic Church'. Later on, in n. 13b, the Decree speaks of the Anglican Communion as one of the separated Christian communities in which Catholic traditions and institutions 'ex parte subsistere pergunt': 'at least in part continue to exist'.

But the all-important question, on which we are seeking the mind of the Council, is still to be answered: namely, *how*, in exactly what way, does the Church of Christ subsist in the Catholic Church? I believe the answer to this question is found in the Decree on Ecumenism. No. 2 of this decree gives us the best description to be found anywhere in the documents of the council of the kind of unity that Christ gave to his Church. There we see that while it is essentially a communion of faith, hope and love, whose principal cause is the Holy Spirit, the Church is also intended to be visibly united in the profession of the same faith, the celebration of the same sacraments, in the fraternal concord of one people of God. In order to bring about and maintain such unity, Christ endowed his Church with a threefold ministry of word, sacraments and leadership, first entrusted to the apostles with Peter at their head, and then continued in the college of bishops under the Pope.

If we keep in mind this description of the unity which Christ gave to his Church, we can see how significant is the statement in the same Decree, no. 4c: 'We believe that the unity with which Christ from the beginning endowed his Church is something it cannot lose; it subsists in the Catholic Church, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time'.

What follows explicitly from this profession of faith on the part of the Council – this is without doubt the force of the opening words: 'we believe' – is that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church with that unity, both spiritual and visible, described in UR no. 2. Neither the separation between East and West in the eleventh century nor the divisions of Christianity since the sixteenth, has meant the loss of such

unity. It subsists: it is still to be found intact in the Catholic Church. This does not mean that there is no ecclesial unity at all to be found in other Christian Churches, nor indeed that there is no real, though imperfect communion still binding all the baptized and their communities together. But the Decree goes on to say, with complete frankness, that our separated brethren and their Churches do not enjoy the kind of unity which Christ intended his Church to have. Such unity subsists in the Catholic Church, and in it alone (UR 3e).

What I believe follows implicitly from this, is that it is the mind of the Council that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church not only with the unity that Christ intended his Church to have, but with all its inalienable properties intact. To say that the Church of Christ subsists means that it still exists with all those gifts with which Christ endowed it. To say that it subsists in the Catholic Church means that it is in the Catholic Church that it is to be found still existing with all its essential properties: its oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. This does not mean, of course, that they are found there is a state of eschatological perfection. We have already seen the Council express its hope that the unity of the Church will continue to increase until the end of time. LG 48c describes the Church in this world as endowed with a holiness that, while real, is still imperfect. UR 4, 10 admits that the divided state of Christianity hinders the Church from achieving the fullness of its catholicity. But, while imperfectly achieved, these are properties which the Church of Christ can never really lack. To say that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church then means that it continues to exist there with all those gifts which it can never lose.

Another statement of the Decree on Ecumenism that suggests the mind of the Council on our question is the assertion: 'It is through the Catholic Church alone that the whole fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained' (UR 3e). This does not mean that there are not many such means of salvation present and effectively used in other Christian Churches and communities; this is explicitly recognized in the same context. But at the same time it is said, in general, of the separated communities, that 'we believe they suffer from defects' in this regard. From this it follows that it is in the Catholic Church alone that the Church of Christ subsists with that fullness of the means of salvation which Christ entrusted to the apostolic college.

To sum up: I believe we have a clear answer, in the Decree on Ecumenism, to the question as to how the Council intends us to understand the statement that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. It means that the Church of Christ has continued and will continue to exist until the end of time with all its inalienable properties and with all the means of salvation with which Christ endowed it, and it is precisely in the Catholic Church that it continues so to exist.

Of course it must be kept in mind that this is a question of *institutional*

integrity: of fullness of the means of salvation: or to put it another way, we are talking about the Church as *sacramentum*, not as *res sacramenti*. There is no question of denying that a non-Catholic community, perhaps lacking much in the order of sacrament, can achieve the *res*, the communion of the life of Christ in faith, hope and love, more perfectly than many a Catholic community. The means of grace have to be used well to achieve their full effect, and the possession of a fullness of means is no guarantee of how well they will be used.

I would also like to point out that I do not think that the interpretation which I propose as corresponding to the mind of the council as to *how* the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church would certainly follow from the mere use of the word 'subsistit' in LG 8. The word 'subsistere' by itself does not necessarily connote such structural integrity as is claimed for the Catholic Church. In fact, the Council used the same word, with the qualifier 'ex parte', 'partially' or 'incompletely', when it said that certain Catholic traditions and institutions 'subsist' in the Anglican Communion (UR 13b). This has to be kept in mind if the question is raised whether the Church of Christ can be said to 'subsist' also in other Christian Churches. I would say that if one is going to use such language, one must be careful to qualify one's statement in some such way as the Council itself qualified its statement about the Catholic traditions that 'subsist' in the Anglican Communion.

Another point that seems important to make is that the Council surely means to say that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church with such structural or institutional integrity that it cannot lack an authoritative magisterium capable of settling dogmatic questions in a definitive and eventually infallible way. The thesis of a recent book by the Basque Jesuit Luis Bermejo: *Towards Christian Reunion*, is that the dogmatic decisions of the Western Catholic Councils, and specifically those of Vatican I, have no claim to infallibility, because the Church of Christ is no longer exclusively identified with the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore only a truly ecumenical consensus of the whole Christian world would enjoy the privilege of infallibility. The problem is that Bermejo builds his thesis on the dropping of the word *est* – which does mean abandoning the exclusive identification of Church of Christ with Catholic Church – but he never seriously examines the question as to what the Council meant by its alternative assertion: that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. He does not consider the implications of the Council's statement that the unity which Christ gave to his Church cannot be lost and that it subsists in the Catholic Church. If the unity of the Church is essentially its unity in faith, then the Church can never lack the effective means to promote and safeguard such unity, and this ultimately involves its capacity to settle questions about faith definitively and with a divine guarantee of truth in its ultimate decisions.

We come now to our second question: what is the significance of the

change from 'is' to 'subsists in' for our thinking about the rest of the Christian world? It hardly needs to be said that we cannot depend for our answer to this question on the statement of LG 8 alone, which speaks of the presence of elements of sanctification and truth outside the Catholic Church: elements which are said to be gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ.

At this point it seems necessary to consider the interpretation which the CDF has given of this text in the *Notificatio* which it published just a year ago concerning Leonardo Boff's book *Church, Charism and Power*. In criticizing the statement of Boff to the effect that the Church of Christ subsists also in other Christian Churches, the Congregation offered the following interpretation of the mind of the Vatican Council (I quote the Italian, which is the official version published in the AAS 71, 1985, 758-9): 'Il Concilio aveva invece scelto la parola "subsistit" proprio per chiarire che esiste una sola "sussistenza" della vera Chiesa, mentre fuori della sua compagine visibile esistono solo "elementa Ecclesiae" che - essendo elementi della stessa Chiesa - tendono e conducono verso la Chiesa Cattolica (LG 8). Il Decreto sull'Ecumenismo esprime la stessa dottrina (UR 3-4), la quale fu di nuovo precisata nella Dichiarazione *Mysterium Ecclesiae* n. 1 (AAS 65, 1973, 396-398)'.

I must confess I am not sure how to translate the phrase: 'esiste una sola sussistenza della vera Chiesa'; taken literally it would mean 'there exists only one subsistence of the true Church'. In any case, what does seem clear is that the CDF is interpreting the Council to mean that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church in so exclusive a way that outside of her limits there can be found *only elements of Church*.

My first observation is that while in this context the Council *mentions* only elements, the conciliar text certainly does not say '*only elements*'; the word in the text is *plura* (many) not *sola*. Secondly, it is a fundamental principle of exegesis that one judges the meaning of a text in the light of the whole document, and we have already quoted Pope Paul VI to the effect that the doctrine about the Church in *Lumen Gentium* is to be understood in the light of the explanations given in the Decree on Ecumenism. The CDF claims that its interpretation of the text is confirmed by that Decree. With all due respect, I do not see how one can justify such a claim.

But, before looking at the Decree on Ecumenism, there is an important text of *Lumen Gentium* itself that sheds light on this question. In no. 15, LG describes the many ways in which the Catholic Church is linked or joined with non-Catholic Christians. It declares that these Christians, consecrated to Christ by their baptism, also recognize and receive other sacraments *in their own Churches and ecclesiastical communities*. It is particularly noteworthy that this phrase was added to the text, as the official *Relatio* tells us, in response to many requests of the bishops. This *Relatio* goes on to say: 'The elements which are

mentioned concern not only individuals but their communities as well; in this fact precisely is located the foundation of the ecumenical movement. Papal documents regularly speak of separated eastern "Churches". For Protestants recent Pontiffs have used the term "Christian communities" (AS III/1, 204).

It is obvious that the Conciliar Theological Commission did not share the view that outside the Catholic Church there exist *only elements of Church*.

What is to be said of the claim that the interpretation of the CDF is confirmed by the Decree on Ecumenism? I do not see how such a claim can stand up against the explicit recognition of the salvific role not only of the ecclesial elements and 'sacred actions of the Christian religion' found among our separated brethren (UR 3b-c), but also of their Churches and ecclesial communities *as such* (*Ipsae Ecclesiae vel communitates*). UR 3d declares that these 'are by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation, for the Holy Spirit has not refrained from using them as means of salvation'.

It did not escape the notice of some less ecumenically minded bishops that this text was clearly attributing a salvific role not just to the sacraments that might be found in non-Catholic communities, but to these Churches and communities as such. This occasioned a *modus* proposing that the text be amended to say rather: 'In these communities means of salvation are preserved which the Holy Spirit has not refrained from using, etc'. The response of the Commission is as follows: 'Wherever valid means of salvation are being used, which, as social actions, characterize those communities as such, it is certain that the Holy Spirit is using those communities as means of salvation' (AS III/7, 36).

Finally, the whole of Chapter III of the Decree on Ecumenism would have to be dropped, if it were true that outside the Catholic Church there can be found nothing but '*elements of the Church*'. The very title of this chapter makes this clear: it reads: 'Churches and Ecclesial Communities separated from the Roman Apostolic See'. In the first part of this chapter, entitled 'The special position of the Eastern Churches', these Churches, while not in full communion with Rome, are certainly recognized as 'particular Churches' in a theological, and not merely conventional sense of the term.

What about the others that are called 'ecclesial communities'? The distinction is based on what may be called a principle of 'eucharistic ecclesiology': i.e. there is not the full reality of Church where there is not the full reality of the Eucharist. However, the very term 'ecclesial' suggests a recognition that these communities have an ecclesial, that is, churchly character. The *Relatio* that explains the use of these terms puts it as follows: 'It must not be overlooked that the communities that have their origin in the separation that took place in the West are not merely a sum or collection of individual Christians, but they are constituted b

social ecclesiastical elements which they have preserved from our common patrimony, and which confer on them a truly ecclesial character. In these communities the one sole Church of Christ is present, albeit imperfectly, in a way that is somewhat like its presence in particular Churches, and by means of their ecclesiastical elements the Church of Christ is in some way operative in them' (AS III/2, 335).

In other words, while the Council did not hesitate to speak of the separated eastern Churches as 'particular Churches' without qualification, it was the mind of the Commission that the western communities that lack the full reality of the Eucharist – without attempting to decide which ones these were – still have a truly ecclesial character, and are at least analogous to particular Churches of the one Church of Christ.

This leads us to our final question: how then are we to think about the universal Church of Christ? As far as the eastern Churches are concerned, which Pope Paul VI repeatedly referred to as 'sister Churches', one very significant statement is that 'by the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches the Church of God is built up' (UR 15a). I do not know how one could take the term 'Church of God' here to refer exclusively to the Catholic Church. And if that is impossible, then it must mean that there is one Church of God that embraces the particular Churches of both East and West, even though at present they are not in full communion with one another.

Can it be said that the universal Church in some way also embraces the 'ecclesial communities'? If we understand the universal Church as essentially the communion of the particular Churches 'in which and from which the universal Church has its existence' (cf. LG 23a), and if one accepts the fact that in the actual state of divided Christianity both of these terms: 'communion' and 'Churches' admit greater or less fullness, I believe that one can think of the universal Church as a communion, at various levels of fullness, of bodies that are more or less fully Churches. Such a view is by no means identical with the one excluded by the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, which insists rightly that 'we cannot imagine that Christ's Church is nothing more than a collection (divided, but still possessing a certain unity) of Churches and ecclesial communities' (AAS 65, 1973, 398). The Church of Christ is certainly something more than any such 'collection' (*summa*); it is a real communion, realized at various degrees of density or fullness, of bodies, all of which, though some more fully than others, have a truly ecclesial character.

I am convinced that such a view is consistent with our belief that we belong to that Church in which alone the one true Church of Christ subsists with all those properties and structural elements that are gifts of Christ to his Church, and which, by his enduring grace, it can never lose.