



## “Haec Ecclesia... subsistit in Ecclesia catholica” (LG 8): the subsistence of the Church of Christ as a starting point toward Catholic unity

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The Second Vatican Council taught that the Church of Christ “subsists in” (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 8), and that “elements” of sanctification and truth are found outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>. Ratzinger observed that the difference between *subsistit in* and *est* when describing the relationship between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church conceals the entire ecumenical problem<sup>2</sup>. Goyret observed that, from the dogmatic perspective, the expression *subsistit in* is the hinge upon which the entire ecumenical framework of conciliar doctrine is supported<sup>3</sup>. Maffei noted that the expression had an ecumenical importance from

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<sup>1</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *dogmatic constitution on the Church “Lumen Gentium”*, 21 November 1964.

<sup>2</sup> J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of the Constitution on the Church, Vatican II, “Lumen Gentium”», *L’Osservatore Romano* (2001), 5.

<sup>3</sup> “Dal punto di vista dogmatico, l’affermazione della *Lumen Gentium* sul *subsistit in* è la cerniera sulla quale poggia l’intero impianto ecumenico della dottrina conciliare”. P. GOYRET, «Ermeneutica conciliare ed ecclesologia contemporanea», *Annales theologici: Rivista della Facoltà di Teologia della Pontificia Università della Santa Croce* XXIII/2 (2009), 405–440, 414.

the moment it combined the Churches self-understanding with her evaluation of the ecclesial character of the other Christian communities, providing principles and criteria for the definition of the relationship between the Catholic Church and non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities<sup>4</sup>.

Given the undeniable ecumenical relevance of the expression it's no wonder that it's considered, in Ratzinger's words, a "disputed" expression<sup>5</sup>. Gerard Philips in his milestone commentary on *Lumen Gentium* predicted that rivers of ink would flow regarding it<sup>6</sup>, and he was correct.

The expression has raised two disputed questions:

First, what was the Council's intention in affirming the subsistence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church? What is the expression's redactional history and did it represent a break with previous teaching or that teachings development?

Second, what does the expression really mean? *Subsistere* is understood in three ways, and it's been debated whether the expression intends to express a full identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church or a nonexclusive one where the Church of Christ can subsist in other, non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities.

To shed light on the relevance and meaning of this expression this inquiry will briefly consider Pius XII's teaching on the subject by way of prelude, the birth of the expression in the Second Vatican Council, its post-Conciliar reception, and some concluding observations.

## 1. Prelude: *Mystici Corporis*

In Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* on the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943) he affirmed that

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. MAFFEIS, «Il dibattito sul significato della formula "subsistit in" (LG 8) tra esgesi testuale e interpretazione teologica», *Teologia: Rivista della facoltà teologica dell'Italia settentrionale* XXXVIII/1 (2013), 26–58, 26–27.

<sup>5</sup> J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

<sup>6</sup> "...farà scorrere fiumi di inchiostro." G. PHILIPS, *La Chiesa e il suo mistero nel Concilio Vaticano II: storia, testo e commento della costituzione Lumen Gentium*, Jaca Book, Milano 1989<sup>4</sup>, 111.

If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Roman Church—we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression “the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ”<sup>7</sup>

For Pius XII the Catholic Church and the Mystical Body of Christ are identical. If the Church is a body it cannot be said to be purely invisible and goes beyond simply being many Christian communities united by an invisible bond<sup>8</sup>. Pius XII invited members of those communities to “return” to the Catholic Church.

In *Humani Generis* he would later state that

Some say [erroneously] they are not bound by the doctrine, explained in Our Encyclical Letter of a few years ago, and based on the sources of revelation, which teaches that the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing<sup>9</sup>.

The majority of Catholic theologians in the period leading up to Vatican II also said the Mystical Body of Christ and the Catholic Church were one and the same, but some restricted the notion of Church and extended the notion of mystical Body either to heretics in good faith (Mura and Mersch) or to all of humanity (Sauras). This showed a need to clarify the relationship between the invisible ecclesial reality and the visible one. At the moment of *Mystici Corporis* there’d been a longstanding debate between Catholics and Protestants on whether the Church was essentially invisible, uniting her members by a purely spiritual bond, or had essential visible characteristics as well.

The adjective “Roman” in this context also warrants interpretation. An initial reading might conclude that it is referring to liturgical rite, but evidently the Roman Catholic Church refers to Catholics of other liturgical rites as well. A better reading would be that the primacy of the

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<sup>7</sup> *Mystici Corporis*, 13. Text from C. CARLEN (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals: 1939–1958*, The Pierian Press, Ypsilanti, MI 1990, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. n. 14.

<sup>9</sup> PIUS XII, encyclical concerning some false opinions threatening to undermine the foundations of catholic doctrine *Humani Generis*, August 12 1950, 27. Text from C. CARLEN (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals: 1939–1958*, The Pierian Press, Ypsilanti, MI 1990, 179.

Church of Rome is acknowledged and emphasized through the adjective “Roman” alongside the four classical *notae* of the Church. Packed into the expression “One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Roman Church” are also the qualities the “true Church of Jesus Christ” should exhibit. As a Body the Church is not something only spiritual, but visible, and the way to recognize it visibly is to exhibit those qualities. This approach to understanding the relationship between the Catholic Church and non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities is classic, founded on distinguishing between “true” and “false” churches.

The Orthodox also claimed to be the only true Church of Christ. Faced with the Catholic and Orthodox position the Protestants observed that Catholic and Orthodox positions reduced to nothing the ecclesiological depth of the Protestant Churches; the Anglicans said they “un-church us.”<sup>10</sup>

It’s also important to note that Sebastiaan Tromp, who would later become part of the doctrinal commission of Vatican II, helped draft *Mystici Corporis*. His contribution to understanding of the relationship between the invisible aspect and visible aspect of the Church would come under scrutiny, especially with regard to his influence over the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

## 2. From *est* to *subsistit in*: the birth of the expression

In the process of drafting possible schema for the dogmatic constitution on the Church the fathers and experts of the Second Vatican Council eventually arrived at the expression *subsistit in* to describe the relationship between the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church, and non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities.

### a. *First Schema: Aeternus Unigeniti*

A preparatory draft on the Church, *Aeternus Unigeniti* [AU], presented to the Council Fathers on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1962, proposed that only

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», in G. CALABRESE - P. GOYRET - O. F. PIAZZA (edd.), *Dizionario di ecclesiologia*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 2010, 1383–1408, 1386–1387.

one true Church of Christ exists, and it is the one professed by the Creed as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Therefore, only the Roman Catholic Church by right is called Church (*ideoque sola iure Catholica Romana nuncupatur Ecclesia*)<sup>11</sup>. Chapter 11 of the same draft, concerning ecumenism, affirmed that there are some elements of the Church that exist outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church (*elementa quaedam existunt Ecclesiae*)<sup>12</sup>.

The text was widely criticized for, among other reasons, declassifying non-Catholics, since not belonging to the Catholic Church was the same as saying they didn't belong to the Mystical Body of Christ, a valid concern considering *Mystici Corporis*' approach to the question. The doctrinal commission under Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani was asked to prepare another draft keeping those criticisms in mind.

#### *b. Schema Lumen Gentium*

The new draft by a sub-commission of the doctrinal commission was entitled *Lumen Gentium*. It had been prepared by Gerard Philips even before *Aeternus Unigeniti* was first presented in the Council hall. With an improved outline by P. Parente it became the new schema adopted by the doctrinal commission on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

In the new schema it stated that this Church is the Catholic Church, governed by the Roman Pontiff and the bishops in communion with him, but also acknowledged that beyond her visible confines there were many elements of sanctification that, as things proper to the Church of Christ, impelled to Catholic unity<sup>13</sup>. The schema continued to identify the Church of Christ with only the Catholic Church, but added that it was possible to find many elements of sanctification outside the Catholic Church's visible structure.

It was sent to the Council fathers for discussion on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1963. Another sub-commission, incorporating discussions, presented a *textus emendatus* to the doctrinal commission on November 25-26<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The reference to the Roman Pontiff in the text was changed to the

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<sup>11</sup> AU, 7. Text taken from D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1387.

<sup>12</sup> AU, 51. Text taken from D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1387.

<sup>13</sup> The Phillips schema, 1,7. Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1387.

successor of Peter in order to show the formal reason for the succession, and, for ecumenical sensibilities, the expression “Roman Catholic Church” was changed to “Catholic Church.” A possible interpretation of this step was to unpack what previous Magisterium and drafts simply summed up by saying “Roman.”

The affirmation about the elements of sanctification was more strongly worded to not say elements “might be” found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church, but, rather, that they are, and elements of truth was added alongside the existing mention of elements of sanctification, describing them not as “things,” but as “gifts.”

Lastly the verb *est* regarding the Church (“is”) was changed to *adest* (“is found, is present”)<sup>14</sup>. Philips in a meeting with the doctrinal commission explained that *adest* was adopted because it was requested in the Council hall, and because with the change it could be reasonably affirmed that there are elements elsewhere.

H. Schauf proposed replacing *adest* with *est* for doctrinal clarity, a return to the original formulation. S. Tromp (who, as mentioned above, was instrumental in drafting Pius XII’s *Mystici Corporis*) replied by proposing *subsistit in* and that it was said exclusively about the Catholic Church, since elsewhere there are nothing more than elements. The revised text, including *subsistit in*, was presented to the Council fathers and approved on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1964<sup>15</sup>.

### c. *The Final Text of Lumen Gentium 8*

This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd, and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority, which He erected for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth”. This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1388.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1388–1389.

These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity<sup>16</sup>.

In the final text adopted by the Council fathers the singularity of the Church of Christ is affirmed, along with understanding the Catholic Church as one single church. It briefly summarizes the historical path of this single Church from the moment in which the Risen Lord entrusted her to the Apostles as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth,” something, therefore, meant to be firm in history. The continuity in history is also an unpacking of what is meant by the expression “Roman Catholic Church,” going beyond a simple reference to a Church *sui iuris*.

This Church is described as constituted and organized in the world as a society in reference to the affirmation at the beginning of the number that the Church is a complex reality composed of two elements: human-divine and spiritual-visible. Therefore, it is something perceptible, not just spiritual, divine, and invisible, an allusion to *Mystici Corporis*’ concern that the Church be considered erroneously as something purely spiritual and invisible.

Finally, the relationship is described between this Church and the Catholic Church. The Church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church. The reference to the Church being governed by Peter’s successor and the bishops in communion with him underscores the connection between them, Peter, and the Apostles. They have all received the charge of guiding and spreading the Church of Christ that “subsists” in the Catholic Church.

However, the Council also affirms that “many” elements of sanctification and truth are found outside this Church, while clarifying that they are gifts that belong the Church of Christ and impel toward Catholic unity. It’s important to note here that “Catholic” unity in this context refers to the catholicity of the Church that is professed in the Creed (one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church), not just the visible social reality referred to by the expression “Catholic Church.”

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<sup>16</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

### 3. Interpretation of the expression and Magisterial clarifications

Confusion regarding the meaning of the expression was not long in coming.

#### *a. Misconceptions of the Church of Christ (Mysterium Ecclesiae, 1973)*

In 1973 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF] published the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* and reminded Catholics that, in the question of seeking to re-establish Christian unity,

Catholics are bound to profess that through the gift of God's mercy they belong to that Church which Christ founded and which is governed by the successors of Peter and the other Apostles, who are the depositories of the original Apostolic tradition, living and intact, which is the permanent heritage of doctrine and holiness of that same Church. The followers of Christ are therefore not permitted to imagine that Christ's Church is nothing more than a collection (divided, but still possessing a certain unity) of Churches and ecclesial communities. Nor are they free to hold that Christ's Church nowhere really exists today and that it is to be considered only as an end which all Churches and ecclesial communities must strive to reach<sup>17</sup>.

The Church of Christ was understood by some to be visibly divided and spread among all Churches and ecclesial communities, implying that she fully existed nowhere, or that the Church of Christ was a point of arrival not yet reached in ecumenism. Both these misconceptions imply a denial that the Church is one and has persevered in unity throughout her history, albeit wounded by divisions.

The Catholic understanding of the Church of Christ is that she has continued to be One and complete since her foundation, not fragmented by the divisions among Christians to the degree that she is

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<sup>17</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 5 July 1973, 1.



no longer fully found anywhere. She is neither shattered and in need of re-assembly or something that will only be achieved in the future. Instead the Catholicity she is called to achieve is hindered by a lack of unity among Christians. The wounds to unity are also limits to her Catholicity in terms of extension.

*b. Ecclesiological relativism:* Notification on the book “Church: Charism and Power” by Fr. Leonardo Boff, O.F.M. 1985

In 1985 the CDF published a notification<sup>18</sup> on the book *Church, Charism, and Power* by Leonardo Boff and put the faithful on guard against an ecclesiological relativism found in the book that was based on an erroneous interpretation of LG 8. Ratzinger, who was involved in the discussions and subsequent notification saw it was not just the question of a single author, but, rather, of a vision of Church presented in a variety of ways and still found today<sup>19</sup>.

For Boff, as Ratzinger summarizes<sup>20</sup>, the “historical Jesus” never conceived of a Church or had the intention to found one. It only came about after the Resurrection when the eschatological tension of an immediate coming of the kingdom gave way to the “inevitable sociological needs of institutionalization.” In the beginning, according to Boff, the universal Catholic Church didn’t exist, just local churches with varying theologies and ministers.

Ratzinger also noted, recalling Boff’s work:

No institutional Church could, therefore, say that she was that one Church of Jesus Christ desired by God himself; all institutional forms thus stem from sociological needs and as such are human constructions which can and even must be radically changed again in new situations. In their theological quality they are only different in a very secondary way, so one might say that in all of them or

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<sup>18</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Notification on the book “Church: Charism and Power” by Father Leonardo Boff O.F.M.*, 11 March 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

at least in many, the “one Church of Christ” subsists; with regard to this hypothesis the question naturally arises: in this vision, what right does one have to speak at all of the one Church of Christ?<sup>21</sup>

If *Mysterium Ecclesiae* emphasized that the one Church of Christ was not a point of arrival for a fragmented Church, Boff’s misunderstanding was simply seeing multiple churches on a par with each other without a united starting point, particular churches with no pretension of being a universal Church.

The CDF notification said Boff’s ecclesiological relativism was based on an erroneous interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* 8<sup>22</sup>. Boff interpreted the expression *subsistit in* to mean that the one Church of Christ could also be present in other Christian Churches. The CDF responded that only elements of that Church could be found in other Christian Churches, not the Church herself, and that was the intention the Council teaching<sup>23</sup>. Boff’s vision saw the Church from the beginning as not just a Church, but particular churches organized by Our Lord’s disciples, not by the Lord himself. His erroneous interpretation of LG 8 led him to conclude that the subsistence of the Church of Christ didn’t have to only be in the Catholic Church.

This interpretation would later spur debate about whether the identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church was exclusive or not. LG 8 focused on the relationship between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church, but the relationship between the Church of Christ and non-Catholic particular Churches and ecclesial communities was not fully explored, being limited to affirming that, beyond the visible confines of the Catholic Church, many gifts of the Church of Christ understood to be elements of sanctification and truth were found.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

<sup>22</sup> See “The Structure of the Church” in CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*.

<sup>23</sup> See “The Structure of the Church” in CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*.

*c. Ecumenical clarifications*

In 1992 the CDF sent a letter to bishops regarding aspects of the Church understood as communion, *Communio Notio*<sup>24</sup>. The letter clarified the Churches and ecclesial communities separated from the Catholic Church are wounded:

Since, however, communion with the universal Church, represented by Peter’s Successor, is not an external complement to the particular Church, but one of its internal constituents, the situation of those venerable Christian communities also means that their existence as particular Churches is *wounded*. The wound is even deeper in those ecclesial communities which have not retained the apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist. This in turn also injures the Catholic Church, called by the Lord to become for all “one flock” with “one shepherd”, in that it hinders the complete fulfilment of its universality in history<sup>25</sup>.

Even a particular Church is only the fruit of elements of the Church of Christ if it does not have full communion with the Bishop of Rome. The same applies for an ecclesial community because it lacks something even more necessary for full communion: apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist.

Due to having apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist the Orthodox Churches, for example, are true particular Churches, even though, for a lack of communion with the successor of Peter, they are wounded particular Churches, and their existence outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church also wounds the Church of Christ as an obstacle to fully bringing about her universality in the world<sup>26</sup>. This last point is important for understanding the true obstacle to the Church of Christ carrying out her mission in history: an inability due to the wounds and separations to fully bring about her catholicity. This is why

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<sup>24</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, letter *Communio Notio*, 28 May 1992.

<sup>25</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Communio Notio*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1391.

LG 8 makes a point of teaching that the gifts, elements of sanctification and truth of the Church of Christ, even when found outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church are an impetus toward Catholic unity.

The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity's *Directory*<sup>27</sup> on ecumenism in 1993 reiterated that the fullness of means subsist only in Catholic Church:

[Catholics] confess that the entirety of revealed truth, of sacraments, and of ministry that Christ gave for the building up of his Church and the carrying out of its mission is found within the Catholic communion of the Church<sup>28</sup>.

It's important to note here that the emphasis shifts from identity to fullness of means. Everything possibly needed is found in the Catholic communion. The expression *subsistit in* as opposed to *est* seeks to capture this distinction without denying the importance of identity.

Finally, St. John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*<sup>29</sup> taught that the Catholic Church through the action of the Holy Spirit has been preserved in unity for two thousand years despite the failings of her members, failings that have obscured God's plan, but not destroyed her substantial unity. To the degree that the *elementa Ecclesiae* are found in separated Churches and ecclesial communities the Church of Christ is "effectively present" in them and constitute the objective basis for an imperfect communion (n. 11). He also underscores, expounding on LG 15, that the link between the Catholic Church and baptized Christians constitutes a "true union in the Holy Spirit" (n. 11). There is a communion between all Christians and a true union of the Holy Spirit between all the validly baptized.

*Ut Unum Sint* also speaks of not only an exchange of ideas, but of gifts (n. 28), and of the possibility of *communicatio in sacris* in particular cases due to the special communion of local Orthodox Churches

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<sup>27</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 25 March 1993, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1391.

<sup>29</sup> JOHN PAUL II, encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* on commitment to ecumenism, 25 May 1995, 11. Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1392.

with the Catholic Church (the Eucharist, Penance, and Anointing of the Sick; n.46)<sup>30</sup>.

In 2000 the CDF’s sent a letter to bishops regarding the expression “Sister Churches”<sup>31</sup> and reminded them that the universal Church, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, is not just sister, but mother of all particular churches<sup>32</sup>. “Sister churches” refers to particular Churches with a valid Episcopate and Eucharist, whether in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church or not, such as the Orthodox Churches.

The CDF’s *Dominus Iesus*, speaking of the unity and unicity of the Church<sup>33</sup>, says that the Church is a salvific mystery, since through her Christ continues his presence and work of salvation. She is one unique Church, and her unity and unicity will never diminish. The Church founded by Christ is in historical continuity with the Catholic Church due to apostolic succession.

The declaration explains that *subsistit in* seeks to harmonize two doctrinal affirmations:

on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that “outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth”<sup>34</sup>.

In footnote 56 it reiterates what was said in the Notification on Boff’s book<sup>35</sup>: the expression *subsistit in* is meant to say that there is only one subsistence of the true Church and the Church of Christ does not subsist in non-Catholic local Churches and ecclesial communities. In n.17 the teachings presented in *Unitatis Redintegratio* [UR]<sup>36</sup> are

<sup>30</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1392.

<sup>31</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *note on the expression «Sister Churches»*, 30 June 2000.

<sup>32</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *note on the expression «Sister Churches»*, 10. Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1392.

<sup>33</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *declaration Dominus Iesus on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, 6 August 2000, 16–17.

<sup>34</sup> LG 8; cf. *Ut unum sint* 13, LG 15, and *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Notification on “Church: Charism and Power”*.

<sup>36</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *decree on ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21 November 1964.

summarized: the requisites for a separated Christian community to be considered a local Church or ecclesial community, and the wounds to Christian unity caused by divisions between Christians. *Dominus Iesus* was not well received by non-Catholic Christians<sup>37</sup>.

*d. Alexandra von Teuffenbach's 2002 dissertation on LG 8*

In 2002 Alexandra von Teuffenbach published a doctoral dissertation<sup>38</sup> on LG 8 under the direction of Karl Becker. Teuffenbach stated in her dissertation that many of the mistakes and debates regarding the expression *subsistit in* are due to approximative translation.

In German the official translation was “verwirklicht in”: “realized in.” In classical Latin the verb *subsistere* means “abides in” or “remains in.” In some authors an opposition is accepted, and an acceptable translation would be “remain despite,” “abides, even though.” In a certain sense for both the Latin period and the Medieval one the phrase in question could be translated as the Church of Christ “remains/abides/continues” in the Catholic Church. For von Teuffenbach the philosophical significance of *subsistit in* leaves no room for other interpretations, and also seems to confirm what tradition has always maintained: the identification between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. In her analysis it was not used to show a recognition of the Catholic Church when faced with the other Churches, but, rather, to affirm that only the Catholic Church fully expressed the Church of Christ, despite the fact that elements proper to the Church of Christ were found outside her in other Churches. LG 8, she concludes, should be interpreted in the light of the Jesuit S. Tromp’s view of the Church not be seen as contrary it: a full and exclusive identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1393–1394.

<sup>38</sup> A. VON TEUFFENBACH, *Die Bedeutung des subsistit in (LG 8): zum Selbstverständnis der katholischen Kirche*, Theologie, Utz, Wiss, München 2002. The title translated into English is *The Meaning of “subsistit in” (LG 8): Concerning the self-understanding of the Catholic Church*.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. E. BRANCOZZI, «Considerazioni ecclesiologicalhe ed implicazioni ecumeniche relative alle recenti risposte della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede», *Firmana: Quaderni di Teologia e Pastorale, Istituto Teologico Marchigiano sede Fermo - Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose. 'S. Alessandro e Filippo' XVI/1 fasc. 43 (2007)*, 147–158, 150–152.

She later presented her findings in Italian at a gathering of the *Associazione Teologica Italiana* in Agnani in September of 2003<sup>40</sup>. L. Sartori, present at the gathering, later published a critique of her thesis in 2004<sup>41</sup>. His main criticism was her hypothesis that a single theologian (S. Tromp), even an authoritative one, could have conditioned the work of the council.

Alexandra von Teuffenbach, in his opinion, had isolated the expression from the rest of the conciliar documents and did a reading of this single passage of the document without taking the broad context in which it was inserted into account or the openness it wanted to build with the separated Churches. He did not contest her exegesis, but, rather, sustained that relativization in the Catholic Church in favor of the recognition of elements of the Church of Christ present in other Churches is a topic found in many other council texts. LG 8 is not the only passage where the concept is presented; for example, in many points of *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>42</sup> and in UR 3-4 it finds its first authoritative application. This, in Sartori’s mind, is an incorrect method.

Sartori also noted that she took little account of the “in” that comes after *subsistere*, a word that immerses it in its historicity and contingency, nor did she take into account that the affirmation concludes with stating that many elements derived from the Church of Christ are found outside the Catholic Church. If the numeric perspective is considered it seems the Roman Catholic Church is presented as fullness and integrality, not as an exclusive unicity that doesn’t allow for degrees of participation. For Sartori this is shown in the second chapter of LG, where a net alternative between who is in and who is out of the Church is abandoned in favor of a new discourse connected to degrees of belonging and closeness to the Church. There is no longer a clear line of demarcation, but a closeness to which every man is invited<sup>43</sup>. A method of trying to read the Council via the Council should also involve UR where

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<sup>40</sup> A conference posteriorly published in D. VITALI (ed.), *Annuncio del Vangelo, forma Ecclesiae*, ATI library 11, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 2005, 395–403.

<sup>41</sup> L. SARTORI, «Forum ATD», *Rassegna di Teologia XLV/2* (2004), 279–290.

<sup>42</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. LG 14-17.

the expression is used again and applied in such a way that it offers a first interpretation<sup>44</sup>.

The director of von Teuffenbach's dissertation weighed in by way of an article in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 2005<sup>45</sup>. According to Becker the bishops never questioned the phrase *Ecclesia Christi est Ecclesia Catholica*; they clearly believed that the Church of Christ is identical to the Catholic Church.

Becker noted that *Aeternus Unigeniti* says the one Church of Christ is the Catholic Church (cf. n. 7):

Docet igitur Sacra Synodus et sollemniter profitetur non esse nisi unicum veram Iesu Christi Ecclesiam, eam nempe quam in Symbolo, unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam celebramus. ...ideoque sola iure Catholica Romana nuncupatur Ecclesia

The schema also mentions *elementa Ecclesiae* (in *Aeternus Unigeniti*, n. 51, 1 and 3). Chapter XI of the schema *De Oecumenismo* (a precursor to *Unitatis Redintegratio*), also mentions the *elementa*. Therefore, *est* and *elementa* existed side by side and *elementa* wasn't a motive for changing *est*. For Becker attempts to explain or translate the term *subsistit in* which do not take this affirmation of faith into account cannot be justified from the Acts.

From the very beginning S. Tromp had defended the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, maintaining and reinforcing this conviction in the conciliar schemata. It is unthinkable that he changed his mind at the last moment. Mons. Philips, adjunct secretary to the Commission, wrote in his book "...there (that is, in the Catholic Church) we find the Church of Christ in all its fullness and vigour..."<sup>46</sup>.

No explanation was ever given for the change from *est* to *adest*, and from *adest* to *subsistit*. It is possible that some saw in the term *est* the possibility of denying or of not giving sufficient attention to ecclesial

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<sup>44</sup> In addition to Sartori see also E. BRANCOZZI, «Considerazioni ecclesiologiche ed implicazioni ecumeniche», 152–154 regarding this point.

<sup>45</sup> K. BECKER, «An Examination of Subsistit in: A Profound Theological Perspective», *L'Osservatore Romano* (2005), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. G. PHILIPS, *La Chiesa e il suo mistero*, 111.



elements in other Christian communities. If this hypothesis is granted, then the justification for the change would be terminological and not doctrinal. The phrase *subsistit in*, in Becker’s opinion, cannot possibly be interpreted in a way that would contradict the meaning of *est*. This is completely clear from both the opinions of the Council Fathers and the responses of the Secretariat.

There are three possible interpretations of the phrase *subsistit in* according to Becker<sup>47</sup>:

1. “To be realized in”: nobody sees the Church of Christ as a purely idealistic or spiritual reality. But if it is conceived as a complex reality, both spiritual and visible, entrusted to the leadership of the apostles under Peter and his Successors, then the question arises as to what difference there is between *est* and *subsistit in*.
2. “To subsist” in a Scholastic sense: The scholastics knew *subsistere*, but not *subsistere in*. And *subsistere* meant for them *existere in se, non in alio*<sup>48</sup>. Does it mean to say that the Church of Christ exists in itself in the Catholic Church?
3. “To remain, to be perpetuated in”: S. Tromp, as an excellent Latinist, knew well that in classical Latin and even more in Medieval Latin this was the real meaning of the word. And this sense corresponds well to the doctrine of the Council, according to which all the means of salvation instituted by Christ are found for ever in the Catholic Church.

K. Becker defended his student to the point of denying that *Ut Unum Sint* (specifically, n. 11) conformed to the ecclesiological doctrine of the council. In his mind the team that drafted the encyclical did not understand with sufficient depth the full meaning of Vatican II. Saint John Paul II, in his opinion, would have never considered such a text if he had known it was deformed regarding LG 8<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> K. BECKER, «An Examination of Subsistit in».

<sup>48</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *STh*, I q 29 a 2c.

<sup>49</sup> Becker’s critics would use this problematic affirmation to great effect against him. See, for example, E. BRANCOZZI, «Considerazioni ecclesiologiche ed implicazioni ecumeniche», 152.

*e. Hermeneutics of discontinuity and continuity*

Just a few months after Becker's article Pope Benedict XVI, in an address to the Roman Curia, identified two predominant hermeneutics at play regarding the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council<sup>50</sup>:

...two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarreled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit...

*a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture* [emphasis mine]...risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. ...

[a] *hermeneutic of reform*, [emphasis mine] of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us...

The debate around the expression *subsistit in* is not just due to difficulty in understanding the text, but also ecclesiologies facing off against each other. Each ecclesiology cites the authority of Vatican II and, at least implicitly, tries to show its validity by showing itself to be the faithful interpretation of the Council.

It has also become a sparring point between the diverse hermeneutics of Vatican II: those insisting on the novelty of Vatican II's teaching in regard to past teaching and those who say it should be interpreted in line with Vatican I and the other Pontifical documents published between the councils<sup>51</sup>.

F.A. Sullivan would publish a critique of Becker's article in 2006<sup>52</sup>. Becker, according to Sullivan, claimed that the changes made after *Aeternus Unigeniti* (specifically, the addition of mentioning that there are some elements of the Church found in the separated brothers and Christian communities) did not make the bishops question their conviction that the Church of Christ is exclusively the Catholic Church.

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<sup>50</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia offering his Christmas greetings*, 22 December 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. A. MAFFEIS, «Il dibattito sul significato della formula "subsistit in"», 26–27.

<sup>52</sup> F. A. SULLIVAN, «Quaestio Disputata a Response to Karl Becker, SJ, on the Meaning of Subsistit in», *Theological Studies* 67/2 (2006), 395–409.

Sullivan objected that while it was true that only two bishops proposed no longer saying that the Church of Christ “is” the Catholic Church, the Abbot C. Butler and other bishops observed that the affirmation of elements of sanctification were a cause for reflection by the synod fathers about Christian communities and elements that were proper to the Church<sup>53</sup>.

Becker also noted that S. Tromp from the beginning had defended the total identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church and had maintained and reinforced this conviction in the conciliar outlines. Sullivan observed that this doesn’t mean the other members of the doctrinal commission and the council shared his opinion. The 1967 draft still speaks of “Churches” and G. Philips translated *subsistit in* as “is found in.”<sup>54</sup>

Becker also noted that a motive for changing *est* to *adest* and *adest* to *subsistit* was never given, therefore it seems possible that with *est* some had seen the possibility of denying or not sufficiently taking into consideration the presence of ecclesial elements in Christian communities. Therefore, the motive in that case would be terminological and not doctrinal. Sullivan responded that the doctrinal commission did explain why: because it better fit with the affirmation of ecclesial elements found elsewhere. Therefore, Sullivan concluded, there was a doctrinal motive<sup>55</sup>.

Lastly, Sullivan observed that Becker claimed that UR maintained that the Catholic Church is the only “true” Church of Christ, to which Sullivan objected that that was not found anywhere in UR, only in a response of the secretary of the doctrinal commission to the *modi* suggested for the first chapter of the decree. Since salvation is found in other Churches and ecclesial communities to say that the Catholic Church is the only “true” Church of Christ does not in fact lead to the Church of Christ being found only in the Catholic Church<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1395.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1396.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1396.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1396.

*f. Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine on the church 2007*

In 2007 the CDF published responses regarding some questions concerning *subsistit in* and *elementa Ecclesiae*<sup>57</sup>:

First response (*did Vatican II change doctrine on the Church*): the Council did not change and had no intention of changing doctrine on the Church, only to develop it, deepen it, and present it more broadly. From this it can be inferred that a hermeneutic of continuity is the correct way to interpret conciliar teaching.

Second response (*How should the expression "...subsistit in..." be understood*): subsistence in LG 8 refers to the perennial historical continuity and permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church, in which is concretely found on this earth the Church of Christ. Indirectly this alludes to Catholic belief that the Catholic Church possesses all the elements of sanctification and truth available, whereas the other Churches and ecclesial communities do not.

Third response (*Why the expression subsistit in and not simply est*): not to say there is not full identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church, but motivated by the fact that outside her confines there are numerous elements of sanctification and truth that as gifts of the Church of Christ impel toward Catholic Unity.

Fourth response (*Why does Vatican II refer to the Eastern Churches separated from full communion as "Churches"*): the council wanted to accept the traditional use of the term, and states that those ecclesial communities that have apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist merit the title of particular or local Churches, even though they lack something, namely, communion with the Catholic Church, which is one of its internal constitutive principles. The *Responses* speaks of "Catholic Church" regarding communion, whereas it is quoting *Communiois Notio*, which says "communion with the universal Church, represented by Peter's successor"<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine on the church*, 29 June 2007.

<sup>58</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Communiois Notio*, 17.3.

Fifth response (*Why are the Christian communities born from the Reform of the sixteenth century not called “Churches”*): these communities do not have apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders and, therefore, lack a constitutive element of the Church<sup>59</sup>.

*g. Reception of the CDF’s 2007 Responses*

Malloy commented in 2008 on the *Responses* in the light of the hermeneutics at play:

... until the 2007 intervention the vast majority of theologians (with the exceptions of Ottaviani, Tromp, Scheffczyk, Becker, Ratzinger, and others) interpreted the decree in harmony with the following claim: There is not a full identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. As is well known, Pius XII, following what was presumed and not questioned by the tradition, taught a full identity. Paul VI did not refrain from expressing the identity<sup>60</sup>.

Malloy sees four general categories of denial of a full identity, each involving some real distinction between the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ, with some positions being mutually compatible<sup>61</sup>:

1. The Church of Christ exists nowhere on earth. Even the sum of Christian communities cannot be considered the Church of Christ. It is an eschatological ideal or goal for which Christians must hope any labor but does not or cannot have a concrete “subsisting” realization in history.
2. She is all Christian communities taken together as forming one Church of Christ. No “church” on her own forms the Church Christ founded. Therefore, it is beneficial to have contrasting expressions of faith. Out of diverse witnesses (once denounced with anathemas) arises the plenitude of the “Body of Christ.”

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. D. VALENTINI, «Subsistit in», 1394.

<sup>60</sup> C. J. MALLOY, «Subsistit In: Nonexclusive Identity or Full Identity?», *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 72/1 (2008), 1–44, 7–8. In *Ecclesiam Suam* Paul VI describes those who are in the household of God--the Catholic Church.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. C. J. MALLOY, «Subsistit In: Nonexclusive Identity or Full Identity?», 8–13.

3. The Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church but could and/or does subsist in other, non-Catholic Churches. The CDF criticized Boff for this view.
4. The Church of Christ continues to exist fully in the Catholic Church alone, but also exists, in lesser and varying ways, in other Christian churches and communities. There is a non-exclusive identity: “not full,” “not total,” “not exclusive.” For Sullivan non-Catholics have one relation to the Church of Christ and another relation to the Catholic Church, claiming an implicit affirmation of this in *Ut Unum Sint* 11.

In 2008 F.A. Sullivan also critiqued the *Responses*<sup>62</sup>. He believed that the German translation of *subsistit in* lent itself to the philosophical meanings rejected by Becker and caused confusion regarding the meaning of the expression, a confusion seen in several CDF documents. He also sees Ratzinger as having fallen into this interpretation in his 2000 conference on the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*.

Sullivan sees this confusion in three CDF documents<sup>63</sup>:

In the 1985 CDF notification regarding L. Boff the German meaning is used: that the Church of Christ “has its concrete existence in,” implying that in the Catholic Church is has its one and only subsistence.

In *Dominus Iesus* the CDF uses the classical Latin sense of “continues to exist in,” but without any language implying that it continues to exist only in the Catholic Church, just that it exists fully only in the Catholic Church<sup>64</sup>.

Sullivan sees the 2007 CDF document as conflating the two meanings already mentioned in the second *quaesito* with the expression “perduring, historical continuity” and the commentary on that document going back to the 1985 meaning and not using the meaning of *Dominus Iesus*:

In other words, following the German translation of *subsistit*, the CDF concludes that the church of Christ “has its concrete existence”

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<sup>62</sup> F. A. SULLIVAN, «Quaestio Disputata the Meaning of Subsistit in as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith», *Theological Studies* 69/1 (2008), 116–124.

<sup>63</sup> F. A. SULLIVAN, «Quaestio Disputata...» (2008), 118.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. F. A. SULLIVAN, «Quaestio Disputata...» (2008), 119–120.

only in the Catholic Church. The church of Christ and the Catholic Church are essentially identical, and outside the Catholic Church there are only elements of church.

On the other hand, in its Commentary the CDF follows *Dominus Iesus* in saying that beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church there are “true particular churches.” This obviously contradicts the assertion of the Notification that outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church there are “only elements of church.” Neither is it clear how the existence of such “true particular churches” is compatible with the description of the Catholic Church as the unique historical subject in which the church of Christ concretely exists. The Orthodox Churches can hardly be said to be particular churches of the Catholic Church. If they are not, of what universal church are they particular churches? It would seem that they must be particular churches of the church of Christ, which must then continue to exist beyond the limits of the Catholic Church and not be simply identical with it<sup>65</sup>.

Goyret offers a classification of interpretations of the expression that also takes the hermeneutics of conciliar interpretation into account:

*1. Extensive interpretation*<sup>66</sup>

An extensive tendency in interpretation, inspired by a hermeneutic of discontinuity, reads the expression as presenting many possibilities of subsistence. The Church’s unicity is reserved to the Church of Christ, understood exclusively in her transcendent reality. In her concrete history she subsists indifferently in the diverse Christian confessions. This approach, clearly seen in Boff’s work, was spread as the new position adopted by Vatican II regarding ecumenism.

There also exist some frameworks of institutional fraternity among Christian confessions based on an ecclesiology that acknowledges the “maternity” of the Church of Christ while the Christian churches are sisters, since each equally participates in the single ecclesiality as

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<sup>65</sup> F. A. SULLIVAN, «Quaestio Disputata...» (2008), 123.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. P. GOYRET, «Ermeneutica conciliare ed ecclesiology contemporanea», 415–416.

diverse “subsistences.” Among non-Catholic exponents of this thesis is E. Jüngel. He refers to Trinitary terminology in which the single divine being “subsists” in three distinct persons. Likewise, for him, the single Church of Christ can subsist in diverse Christian churches.

An analogous position that affirms multiple subsistences without acknowledging the fullness in the Catholic Church or any other is present in some frameworks of ecumenical dialog. The LG affirmation is seen as legitimizing, on the part of the Magisterium, the attitude of all partner in the dialogue being equal, not only on the part of the subject in dialog, but also in terms of ecclesial ontology. The subsistence does not exist fully in any Church, and its fullness is the purpose of ecumenical dialogue. This last thesis menaces the unicity of the Church and risks dissolving it either in the historical multiplicity of fully constituted Churches or in the current absolute lack of full ecclesiality.

F.A. Sullivan, in a more moderate position, but one difficult to share in an eccesiological milieu that is communion-sacrament based, sustains that the only in the Catholic Church is there a full subsistence, but the concept of “subsistence” does not necessarily have the connotation of the structural integrity that is characteristic of the Catholic Church. For that reason he denies the exclusivity of the subsistence in the Catholic Church, and says the affirmation of the Church of Christ only subsisting in the Catholic Church is not part of conciliar doctrine.

## *2. Restrictive interpretation*<sup>67</sup>

As a reaction to the menace of “ecclesiological relativism” some sustain the identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church to be absolute and exclusive. They try safeguarding the unicity of the Church but leave no space, perhaps unwittingly, for the existence of Churches outside of hierarchical communion with the Catholic Church.

The more extreme authors see in the expression a total break with the tradition that preceded it and deny the text’s legitimacy. Some criticize the term itself, since it doesn’t have its original metaphysical significance, and say it is poorly formulated and leads to a break with tradition.

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. P. GOYRET, «Ermeneutica conciliare ed ecclesiologia contemporanea», 417–418.



Other authors see the passage from *est* to *subsistit* in as unnecessary, because the elements of truth found outside the Catholic Church are there *per accidens*, wrapped in error and therefore are not only not elements of sanctification but are also obstacles to salvation because they contribute to making the error more credible.

Among the “strict” positions adopted in the milieu of a more rigorous method we find K. Becker, who based himself on on the study done by his student, Alexandra von Teuffenbach.

## Conclusions

Philips noted that Church unity should be understood dynamical-ly as a force emanated by the Holy Spirit and infused into the Church. If Christ is one his Church ought to be, and it should be more and more each day: that for him in a nutshell is ecumenism in its entirety<sup>68</sup>. The divisions between Christians impede Catholic unity, which is why the relationship between the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church, and other Christian confessions, whether particular churches or ecclesial communities, must be clearly understood. All believers share an imperfect certain unity, but the catholicity to which they are all called, for which we profess the Church *Una* to also be *Catholica*, is hindered by a wounded unity. LG 8 states clearly that the *elementa Ecclesiae*, wherever they are found, “are forces impelling toward catholic unity.”

The Church’s catholicity is not a simple as visibly belonging to the Catholic Church in a uniform way. Even now the Catholic Church consists of members of diverse liturgical rites, cultural characteristics, and theological outlooks. Catholicity implies a completeness of doctrine, a mission called to share the Gospel with everyone, and a place for everyone. The fullness of unity and the fullness of catholicity go hand in hand.

### *a. CDF Clarifications and their reception*

In Catholic theological circles there is still an unfortunate tendency to consider clarifications by the CDF as simply theological positions,

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<sup>68</sup> “...ecco in gremio tutto l’ecumenismo.” G. PHILIPS, *La Chiesa e il suo mistero*, 111.

not Magisterial clarifications. F.A. Sullivan's series of articles regarding the topic have all analysed the articles this way and see the CDF and related authors, such as Ratzinger, to have vacillated between the three possible meanings of the expression *subsistit in*. It seems, at least implicitly, that Sullivan is interpreting doctrinal developments in a hermeneutic of discontinuity instead of trying to find the continuity between them. To be fair he may be trying to demonstrate conflation that do not leave space for theological interpretation and application.

For example, Schelkins, commenting on the CDF *Responses* of 2007, observed<sup>69</sup>:

The *Responses* apparently promote and propagate a “hermeneutics of continuity,” their opening question and answer sounding like this: “Did the Second Vatican Council change the Catholic doctrine on the Church? . . . The Second Vatican Council neither changed nor intended to change this doctrine, rather it developed, deepened and more fully explained it.” Even when admitting the notion of development of doctrine one finds in the *Responses* little appreciation for discontinuity (and certainly not contradiction) in church history. This reveals the underlying and very complex debate on the matter of defining the precise role, place, and function of historical thinking within Catholic theology.

At a second microlevel, then, the question remains as to how *subsistit in* is to be understood within the context of Vatican II and whether the CDF's interpretation remains valid from the viewpoint of historical-critical reconstruction. Put within the larger context as sketched above, the CDF appears to be not merely interested in the interpretation of *subsistit*, but rather uses *Lumen gentium* no. 8 as a *pars pro toto* in defence of its underlying hermeneutical principles. . . .

Schelkin's argumentation is very reminiscent of Biblical arguments for favoring historical-critical exegesis of Biblical texts while discarding their theological and spiritual significance as largely irrelevant.

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<sup>69</sup> K. SCHELKENS, «Lumen Gentium's “Subsistit in” Revisited: The Catholic Church and Christian Unity after Vatican II», *Theological studies* 69/4 (2008), 875–893, 882.

Just as solid Biblical scholarship takes the literal and spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture into consideration, the CDF is clarifying the Church’s faith regarding the relationship between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church, which, in turn, sheds light on the relationship with extra-Catholic ecclesial realities (non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities) and how the Church of Christ is active in them. Magisterial clarifications go beyond simply being another theological position: they articulate the faith theology seeks to understand.

*b. Ecclesiological relativism is still a danger*

Despite Magisterial clarifications ecclesiological relativism, even among Catholic theologians, continues to be a real danger. Brancozzi, for example, believes that the ecumenical path of recent years has shown the unsustainability of the so-called “theology of return”: an attempt to reunify the Churches through the return of the diverse communities into the Catholic Church understood as the single and true Church. According to him the Catholic Church ceased proposing a movement of *tout court* return when she realized that an enormous amount of believers had lived fully, even heroically, their Christianity in confessions diverse from the Catholic one<sup>70</sup>.

Brancozzi observed that the ecumenical meeting at Canberra in 1991 proposed a path based on acknowledging that every Church has her way of understanding unity, its ideal form, and some decisive elements for bringing about communion. These ecclesiological traits are developed in centuries of tradition based on specific theological principles. Those theological principles depended and still depend on the historical context in which they arose. At Canberra this was summarized as the so-called “communion in reconciled diversity.” This model is inspired in the “unity of reconciled diversity” proposed by H. Meyer in 1974 and sustained particularly by the World Lutheran Federation.

The Canberra proposal is also based on the research of H. Fries, K. Rahner, and H. Meyer which said that a possible unity could move based on the following principle: the fundamental truths of Christianity

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. E. BRANCOZZI, «Considerazioni ecclesiologicalhe ed implicazioni ecumeniche», 156–157.

should be binding for all the particular Churches of the future, united Church, and it's illicit for any particular Church to refute a proposition considered binding dogma for another Church. In this view Church unity requires a differentiated agreement on the fundamental truths of Christianity proclaimed in Scripture, the Apostolic and Nicene-Constantinoplan Creeds, and taking into account the historical re-elaboration to which this information is inevitably subjected. In other words, the agreement should be total regarding the nucleus of revelation, but must also know how to contemplate the differences of specific doctrinal forms proper to each Church. According to Brancozzi if unity is thought as the uniformity of styles and ecclesial attitudes it should be concluded that such unity probably never existed in the Church, given the great differentiation of the primitive communities (an argument reminiscent of Boff's). If we admit this hermeneutical principle the theological question shifts to the rapport between the faith professed and the ecclesial form considered adequate for expressing that faith. When John Paul II in UUS 95 discussed the possibility of rethinking the forms in which the Petrine ministry was exercised he offered a budding path of research in this direction that has been favorably received in the ecumenical world. The Vatican II fathers knew it would be a long and difficult road. This is why they all proposed the path to take at the end of GS (n. 92): unity in the necessary, liberty in the dubious, and charity in everything<sup>71</sup>.

The danger of ecclesiological relativism is mistaking division (bad) simply for diversity (good). Ratzinger noted that the divisions between Christians went beyond logic and relativistic dialectics. For him the difference between *subsistit* and *est* contains the tragedy of ecclesial division. Although the Church is only "one" and "subsists" in a unique subject there are also ecclesial realities beyond this subject. They are true local Churches and different ecclesial communities:

Because sin is a contradiction, this difference between *subsistit* and *est* cannot be fully resolved from the logical viewpoint. The paradox of the difference between the unique and concrete character of

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. E. BRANCOZZI, «Considerazioni ecclesiologiche ed implicazioni ecumeniche», 157–158.

the Church, on the one hand, and, on the other, the existence of an ecclesial reality beyond the one subject, reflects the contradictory nature of human sin and division<sup>72</sup>.

This division (something bad) is something totally different from the relativistic dialectic described above where the pains of Christian division are lost and in fact don't present a rupture, but, rather, variations on a single theme where all the variations are right and wrong in a certain way (a diversity that is, therefore, not bad, but good):

An intrinsic need to seek unity does not then exist, because in any event the one Church really is everywhere and nowhere. Thus Christianity would actually exist only in the dialectic correlation of various antitheses<sup>73</sup>.

Ecumenism in this view would be the fact that in some way all recognize each other as fragments of Christian reality: “Ecumenism would therefore be the resignation to a relativistic dialectic, because the Jesus of history belongs to the past and the truth in any case remains hidden”<sup>74</sup>.

*c. Catholic Unity is thanks to God, not Catholics*

Ratzinger had a valuable insight that helps see Catholic Unity as something for which we should give thanks to God, not just Catholics, making it clear that Catholic cannot take any credit for unity<sup>75</sup>. For him the Council's vision is different from a relativistic dialectic. The fact that in the Catholic Church is present the *subsistit* of the one subject Church is not the merit of Catholics, but of God, “which he makes endure despite the continuous unworthiness of the human subjects.” Catholics cannot boast; they only can admire the fidelity of God in shame and gratitude. The effect of their sins can be seen: the whole world sees divided and opposing Christian communities reciprocally claiming truth

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<sup>72</sup> J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

<sup>73</sup> J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

<sup>74</sup> J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

<sup>75</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of Vatican II...».

and frustrating the prayer of Jesus on the eve of his Passion: “Whereas division as a historical reality can be perceived by each person, the subsistence of the one Church in the concrete form of the Catholic Church can be seen as such only through faith.” The Council, aware of this paradox, said the duty of ecumenism was seeking true unity and entrusted it to the Church of the future.

This insight is important for understanding that simply being Catholic is not enough to achieve full Christian unity. Catholics wound unity just as much as non-Catholics. If the Catholic Church has not been completely compromised it is thanks to God.

#### *d. Imperfection and woundedness*

Maybe imperfection is not the ideal descriptor for the communion and division that currently exists among Christians. Perhaps more ecumenical impetus could be found by seeing Christian unity as *wounded*<sup>76</sup>. The Mystical Body in its lack of full Christian unity is wounded by sin, not just imperfect and flawed. Like a patient risking an amputation her wounded extremities are endangered of being severed, but she is still sound and functional. A wounded extremity strains to draw vital strength from its body and is more or less endangered by gangrene and necrosis depending on the severity of its wounds. However, in the case of the Mystical Body the danger is not one of wounded extremities risking the life of the Body, but of wounded extremities being lost.

Christian unity is actually wounded<sup>77</sup>, mangled by her divisions, messy and bloody. The wounds to unity were not premeditated and surgical, but brutal and violent. A wounded unity reminds us that something needs healing, and the edges and contours of those wounds are not easily diagnosed and treated. Healing deep wounds and mangled limbs is long, painstaking work, but it is necessary if the Church wants the world to know that in her members she is One (cf. John 17:20-23).

The visible elements of truth and sanctification beyond the visible confines of the Catholic Church are ecclesial realities, and that ecclesiality is the bond, imperfect, wounded, and messy, that continues

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Communio Notio*, 17.

<sup>77</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Communio Notio*, 17.

to exist between all validly baptized Christians. The Catholic Church believes that she continues to be healthy despite the limits to her unity and catholicity, but not whole without full Catholic unity between all Christians. The choice of *subsistit in* instead of *est* is the difference between wounded members and members completely severed from the Mystical Body.

*Mysterium Ecclesiae* in 1973 affirmed that the Church of Christ is not completely dead, crippled, or dismembered. She is “living and intact”<sup>78</sup> and Catholics believe they belong to that living and intact Church. The Church of Christ in this moment of history strives to be whole, but acknowledges she is incomplete without the full healthy communion of all validly baptized Christians.

*e. Identity, means, and presence*

The Church’s self-understanding, traced in the path from *est* to *subsistit in*, is a progressive understanding of identity, what she is, and what she is possesses in comparison to other ecclesial realities. The Catholic Church “is” the Church of Christ, and “is fully” the Church of Christ, a continued invitation to the extra-Catholic ecclesial realities to achieve their fullness in Catholic communion as the one Church of Christ.

This truth revolves around three notions, in which the distinction between *est*, *subsistit in*, and *adest* are shown to be facets of the rich and complicated relationship between the Church of Christ and all ecclesial realities, Catholic or otherwise:

1. *Identity (est)* is a question of whether an ecclesial reality *is* the Church of Christ, and the relationship between ecclesial realities and the one Church of Christ. Does the one Church of Christ even exist, and can an existing ecclesial reality be that Church? It is evident from this inquiry that the question is far more complex than simply establishing full or partial, exclusive or inclusive identity between the Church of Christ and ecclesial realities.

This complexity is compounded by the fact that the Church is a complex reality composed of human, divine, spiritual, and invisible

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<sup>78</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 1.

aspects (cf. LG 8). She acts visibly and humanly, but also spiritually and divinely. Depending on ecclesiological outlook either

- a) no single Church “is” the Church of Christ,
- b) there “are” multiple Churches of Christ,
- c) there “are” pieces to be assembled in the future to “become” on Church of Christ.

The Catholic position, Magisterially speaking, is that the Catholic Church is the Church of Christ. The one Church of Christ exists and subsists in the Catholic Church. It’s debated whether that identity is exclusive or non-exclusive, but the Church, through the CDF’s *Responses* in 2007, stated clearly that there is full identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church.

2. *Means (subsistit in)*, understood in this case to be elements of sanctification and truth, along with the question of whether any ecclesial reality, Catholic or not, possesses them all or is required to possess them. The very language of possession shows an important distinction between identity and simple possession and provenance, and it seems this relationship revolves around the expression *subsistit in*, especially with regard to fullness of means, but also related to the notion of *elementa Ecclesiae*, as the CDF’s *Responses* of 2007 also pointed out.

If elements of truth and sanctification are lacking in any ecclesial reality it begs the question of how to acquire all of them for the good of salvation, both for the members of those ecclesial realities and those they are called to evangelize. A lack of truth or means for sanctification is an ecumenical call to action that ecclesiological relativism cannot effectively answer because that relativism sees only a legitimate diversity to be mutually understood and reconciled, not a division to overcome.

3. *Presence* of the Church of Christ. The effective or operative presence of the Church of Christ in extra-Catholic ecclesial realities revolves around a relationship described by *adest*. If the Church of Christ is effectively or operatively present in extra-Catholic ecclesial realities a possible interpretation of Saint John Paul II’s affirmation of “effectively present” (cf. *Ut Unum Sint* 11) would be that of an agent exercising an efficient causality over another subject. In this case it would be a causality of enlightenment (truth) and sanctification. LG 8 described the *elementa Ecclesiae* as “gifts belonging” to Church of Christ (*quae*



*ut dona Ecclesiae Christi propria*), implying provenance and agency, not identity.

It's important to understand that at play here is the existence of the one Church of Christ, *unam* as we profess in the Creed unique and united. Local and particular Churches, Catholic or otherwise, possess a great ecclesial cohesion because they retain apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, but if they are lacking “communion with the universal Church, represented by Peter’s successor” they are a wounded particular church lacking an internal constitutive principle<sup>79</sup>.

Therefore, even the greatest extra-Catholic ecclesial cohesion—namely, a local or particular Church not in full communion with Peter’s successor and, through that communion, the universal Church—show elements of sanctification and truth that also represent the agency of the Church of Christ, producing an imperfect communion and true union of the Holy Spirit between all validly baptized Christians, but a lack of visible and full Catholic unity and communion.

The Church of Christ is active through her gifts, but not easy to simply declare present beyond the visible confines of the Catholic Church. Sacred Scripture, valid sacraments, apostolic succession, etc., are elements and gifts belonging to her, wherever they are found, so it continues to be an open question of whether this entails the presence of agent (Church of Christ) or her agency (her actions through her gifts). However, in the light of an identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church it seems to lean more toward affirming the presence of the Church of Christ’s action and agency.

*f. A framework for achieving Christian unity*

The expression *subsistit in*, along with the notion of *elementa Ecclesiae*, embraces all these notions (identity, means, and presence), but ultimately underscores the essential features of an ecumenical framework that can lead to a full restoration of Christian unity:

1. The Church of Christ already exists. She is One in the sense that Church is professed in the Creed to be *Unam*. She is not a future point of arrival, but, rather, has endured in history.

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<sup>79</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Responses...* (2007).

2. She is hindered in fully bringing about her catholicity through the wounds of division between Christians. The wounds to her unity do not mean that she is not living and intact.
3. Elements of sanctification and truth are found in non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities. They are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ that impel toward Catholic unity. Those extra-Catholic ecclesial realities, no matter how cohesive, are lacking something because all elements of truth and sanctification are not found in any given extra-Catholic ecclesial reality. Truth and sanctification can be found in them through these gifts, but not the whole truth no every means available.
4. The Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, which means the Catholic Church is the Church of Christ. The Church of Christ, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, is found there, and the fullness of truth and means for sanctification as well.
5. The goal of ecumenism is for all Christians to achieve full Catholic communion. The Catholic Church is the visible ecclesial reality toward which they should tend because the Church of Christ subsists in her. Full Catholic communion would respect any legitimate diversity (liturgical rite, cultural traditions, juridical arrangement, theological patrimony) that doesn't contradict the substantial unity to which she is called, or risk discarding elements of truth and sanctification possessed by the Church of Christ.
6. As a complex reality that is human, divine, visible, and spiritual (cf. LG 8) this involves something visible, so that they would may know that Christians are one (cf. John 17:20-23), not just something spiritual and invisible. This visible and full communion has classically been described as a full visible communion of doctrine, worship, and governance (full communion between all bishops, including the Bishop of Rome as the head of the college of bishops).
7. Without full and visible Catholic communion the Church of Christ's mission is hindered, because visible divisions contradict the Lord's desire that his disciples be one and sow confusion regarding the importance and necessity of certain truths and means for sanctification.

8. The wounds to unity are the result of sin, and are not easily delineated or discussed in neat logical categories that risk losing site of important nuances in ecumenism. Formulating a logical, clean structure to understand and clarify the issues at hand is not easy in the light of the *mysterium iniquitatis*. It requires grace, prayer, humility, and painstaking work.

**Summary:** In the documents of the Second Vatican Council a deliberated exact expression is found that seeks to affirm the unity and singularity of the Church while respecting the elements of truth and sanctification found in every Christian confession: the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8). The goal of this inquiry is to consider the clarifications intended by the expression *subsistit in*, including its theological and philosophical meaning. It considers: the conciliar process of formulating the expression; its post-Conciliar reception; ulterior Magisterial clarifications regarding its interpretation; its theological contribution to understanding the relationship between Christian confessions, Church unity, and Church catholicity; and its suitability for ecumenical dialogue at the theological level.

**Sommario:** Nei documenti del Vaticano II troviamo una espressione ponderata e precisa con la finalità di affermare la unità e unicità della Chiesa e di rispettare gli elementi di santificazione e di verità che si trovano in ogni confessione cristiana: la Chiesa di Cristo sussiste nella Chiesa Cattolica (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8). Nello studio ci proponiamo di considerare le precisazioni su cosa si intende con questa espressione, compreso il valore filosofico e teologico del termine *subsistere*. Prenderemo in considerazione l'*iter* della sua formulazione conciliare; la recezione post-conciliare della medesima e le ulteriori precisazioni sulla sua interpretazione; il contributo teologico della espressione alla comprensione del rapporto tra le confessioni cristiane, l'unità della Chiesa, e la cattolicità della Chiesa; e la sua adeguatezza per il dialogo ecumenico a livello teologico.

**Key Words:** Vatican II, ecclesiology, *subsistit*, *Lumen Gentium*, unity, ecumenism.

**Parole chiave:** ecclesiologia, *subsistit*, *Lumen Gentium*, unità, unicità, ecumenismo.