

## QUAESTIO DISPUTATA

### FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE MEANING OF *SUBSISTIT IN*

FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, S.J.

*The author argues that the intention of the theological commission in proposing the change from “is” to “subsists in” was no longer to affirm full identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church, for the reason that such full identity contradicted the tradition followed by the popes and Western councils of recognizing the separated Eastern communities as churches. He supports his case with two statements by Joseph Ratzinger: one made as a professor of theology, the other as cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.*

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT AT VATICAN II the first draft of what became *Lumen gentium* followed the lead of Pope Pius XII in declaring full identity between the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. As a consequence of this identity, that draft also declared that only the Roman Catholic Church is rightly named church.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not so well known that this first draft of the Constitution on the Church included a chapter on ecumenism (chap. 11), which treated the relationship between the Catholic Church and the separated Christian communities. The draft said that in those communities “there exist certain elements of the church, especially Sacred Scripture and sacraments, that as efficacious means and signs of unity can bring about mutual union in Christ, and that as things by their nature proper to the church of Christ urge on to catholic unity.”<sup>2</sup>

FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, S.J., is professor emeritus of the Gregorian University, from which he earned his S.T.D. Specializing in ecclesiology and ecumenism, his recent publications include: “The One Church in Current Ecclesiology,” *Ecumenical Trends* 38 (2009); and “Infallibility,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (2009). He is preparing a study of the doctrine of Vatican II and the postconciliar magisterium on the role that non-Christian religions may play in the salvation of adherents of those religions other than Judaism and Islam.

<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (hereafter *AS*), 6 vols., vols. 1–4 with multiple parts (Vatican City: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–1978) I/4, 15

<sup>2</sup> *AS* I/4, 82. Translations from the Latin are mine.

The diary kept by Sebastian Tromp, secretary of the Preparatory Theological Commission indicates that the drafting of that chapter on ecumenism was assigned to Jan Witte of the Gregorian University, a pioneer among Catholic ecumenists.<sup>3</sup> It strikes me as not improbable that he may have been unhappy with the statement made in chapter 1 of the draft, that only the Roman Catholic Church is rightly named church. Whether my surmise is correct or not, the fact is that at the end of the paragraph that spoke of the separated Christian communities, he added a footnote that began: "Whatever be the nature of such a separated community, it is certain that in tradition the name 'churches' is often and constantly attributed to the separated Eastern communities; cf. the following documents of the church."<sup>4</sup> The footnote then gave the references to 18 conciliar and papal documents dating from 1074 to 1953, in each of which the separated Eastern communities are called churches.<sup>5</sup> It is obviously difficult to reconcile the statement that only the Roman Catholic Church is rightly named church with the consistent use, by popes and Western councils, of the term "churches" when referring to the separated Eastern communities.

During the second period (1963) of the council, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity presented its first draft of a Decree on Ecumenism, in which it spoke of the many interior and visible elements proper to the church that are found outside the limits of the Catholic Church. In this context it spoke of "separated churches and communities," declaring that actions of the Christian religion that are performed in them bring about the life of grace, and that the Spirit of Christ makes use of those churches and communities themselves as means of salvation.<sup>6</sup> Attached to the word "churches" here is the same footnote documenting the traditional use of "churches" for the separated Eastern communities that was already present in the chapter on ecumenism of draft 1 of the Constitution on the Church.

Since draft 1 of the Constitution on the Church had been severely criticized during its discussion by the council in 1962, a new draft initially

<sup>3</sup> Tromp's Latin *Diarium Secretarii* (1960–1962) has been published by Alexandra von Teuffenbach with a German translation: *Konzilstagebuch Sebastian Tromp SJ mit Erläuterungen und Akten aus der Arbeit der Theologischen Kommission, II. Vatikanisches Konzil*, vol. 1 (2 parts) (Rome: Gregorian University, 2006). Entries in this diary show that Witte was first named as *relator* for the chapter on ecumenism on July 14, 1961, and that after four revisions, he presented the final draft to Tromp on May 29, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> AS I/4, 88–90.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. At the end of this footnote Witte explained that its material had been drawn primarily from Congar's works: *Chrétiens désunis: Principes d'un "oecuménisme" catholique* (Paris: Cerf, 1937) 381–82; and "Note sur les mots 'Confession,' 'Eglise,' et 'Communion,'" *Irénikon* 23 (1950) 3–36, at 22–24. Tromp mentions the help Witte received from Congar; see *Konzilstagebuch I/1*, 302–3.

<sup>6</sup> AS II/5, 414.

prepared by Gérard Philips of the University of Louvain was presented for discussion in 1963. While this was different from draft 1 in many respects, it continued to follow the doctrine of Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis* by saying: "The church of Christ is the Catholic Church," adding, however, that "many elements of sanctification can be found outside its total structure" and that these are "things properly belonging to the church of Christ."<sup>7</sup> After the conciliar discussion of this draft, a subcommittee of the Theological Commission was appointed to revise it. I think it is not unlikely that the documentation already provided to the council about the "frequent and consistent" practice of popes and councils of referring to the separated Eastern communities as churches may have convinced the members of this subcommittee that the text ought not to say "the church of Christ is the Catholic Church," since this statement affirming full identity between the church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church would exclude the separated Eastern churches from the church of Christ. Whatever may have convinced the subcommittee to propose the change, it is certain that the revised draft presented to the full Doctrinal Commission on November 26, 1963, now said: "The Church of Christ is present in (*adest in*) the Catholic Church."<sup>8</sup> *Adest in* does not say that the church of Christ is present exclusively in the Catholic Church. Indeed, if that were what it meant, it would be hard to explain why the subcommittee chose no longer to say *est*. The reason given for the change was that it could then better be said that there are elements of the church outside the Catholic Church.

Karl Josef Becker has shown, from a tape recording of the meeting of the Doctrinal Commission on November 26, 1963, that when it was objected that *adest* was imprecise, Sebastian Tromp proposed the term *subsistit in*. He insisted that "this is exclusive, inasmuch as it is said that elsewhere there are only elements."<sup>9</sup> It is not evident where Tromp had seen the term "only elements." The first draft of *Lumen gentium* had said that in the separated communities there exist "certain elements" of the church, and the second draft said that outside the structure of the Catholic Church "many elements" of sanctification can be found. Becker argued that, because the members of the Doctrinal Commission accepted Tromp's term, they must have agreed with his interpretation of it as meaning that the church of Christ subsists exclusively in the Catholic Church, and that outside it there are only elements of the church.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> AS II/1, 219–20.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Josef Becker, S.J., "The Church and Vatican II's *Subsistit in* Terminology," *Origins* 35 (2006) 517. The minutes of such meetings are not in *Acta Synodalia*. In his footnote Becker says that this text came from the papers of the members of this commission.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 518.

However, their further revision of the draft of the Constitution on the Church shows that they did not agree with Tromp's interpretation, because the revision went on to say that non-Catholic Christians receive baptism and other sacraments "in their own churches or ecclesiastical communities."<sup>11</sup> The commission justified the use of these terms by saying: "The elements that are mentioned regard not only individuals but also communities; precisely in this fact is located the foundation of the ecumenical movement. Papal documents regularly speak of the separated Eastern 'churches.' For Protestants the recent Pontiffs use the term 'Christian communities.'"<sup>12</sup>

During its third period (1964) the council also discussed the revised draft of the Decree on Ecumenism, which again contained the footnote documenting the tradition of referring to the separated Eastern communities as churches.<sup>13</sup> Chapter 3 of this draft had the title: "Churches and ecclesial communities separated from the Roman apostolic see." In the conciliar discussion objection was made to the use of the word "church" of any but the Roman Catholic Church. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity responded to that objection:

The twofold expression "churches and ecclesial communities" has been approved by the council, and is used in a completely legitimate way. There is indeed only one universal church, but there are many local and particular churches. It is the custom in Catholic tradition to call the separated Eastern communities churches—local or particular ones to be sure—and in the proper sense of the term. It is not the business of the council to investigate and decide which of the other communities ought to be called churches in the theological sense.<sup>14</sup>

The same chapter also included a section entitled: "The special position of the Eastern churches." A paragraph of this section that began, "everyone knows with what great love the Christians of the East celebrate the sacred liturgy," went on to say: "Through the celebration of the holy eucharist in each of these churches, the church of God is built up and grows."<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to see how the church of God that is built up by the celebration of the Eucharist in the separated Eastern churches could be exclusively the Roman Catholic Church.

The question toward which this discussion has been leading is this: what impact did the attention given by Vatican II to the practice of the popes and Western councils of referring to the separated Eastern communities as churches, and the recognition by the council of those Eastern communities as churches, by whose celebration of the Eucharist the church of God is built up and grows, have on the postconciliar interpretation of the change from saying that the church of Christ is the Catholic Church to saying that

<sup>11</sup> AS III/1, 189.

<sup>13</sup> AS III/2, 303–04.

<sup>15</sup> AS III/2, 311.

<sup>12</sup> AS III/1, 204.

<sup>14</sup> AS III/7, 35.

it subsists in it? There is surely no need of my telling the reader that the meaning of this change has become a *quaestio disputata* among Catholic theologians. What it comes down to is whether the decision of Vatican II to say “subsists in” rather than “is” means that there has been a real change in Catholic doctrine from that of Pius XII who insisted that the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are “one and the same thing.”<sup>16</sup> I have already published two articles in this journal defending the view that it does mean a change from that doctrine.<sup>17</sup> Since then Christopher Malloy has published an article in the *Thomist*,<sup>18</sup> and Lawrence Welch and Guy Mansini have published one in *New Blackfriars*,<sup>19</sup> both of which have been very critical of my position. On the other side, Karim Schelkens has argued in favor of my view.<sup>20</sup> Here I will not enter into a discussion of those articles, but will offer some further thoughts stimulated by reading a lecture that Joseph Ratzinger gave shortly after the close of Vatican II, in which he had participated as a *peritus*.

Ratzinger gave this lecture in 1966 at a meeting of the Lutheran World Federation’s Strasbourg Institute for Ecumenical Research. It was originally published in *Oecumenica*,<sup>21</sup> and Ratzinger included it in his volume *Das Neue Volk Gottes*,<sup>22</sup> along with his other previously published writings on the church. It is not included in the French translation of *Das Neue Volk Gottes*,<sup>23</sup> nor has an English translation of the German volume been published.

In that talk to Lutherans Ratzinger discussed the problem of the identification of the Body of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church, on which Pius XII insisted in his encyclicals *Mystici Corporis* and *Humani generis*. He concluded his discussion of Pius XII’s doctrine:

<sup>16</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 42 (1950) 571.

<sup>17</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “A Response to Karl Becker, S.J. on the Meaning of *Subsistit in*.” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 395–409; and “The Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) 116–24.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Malloy, “*Subsistit in*: Nonexclusive Identity or Full Identity?” *Thomist* 72 (2008) 1–44.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence J. Welch and Guy Mansini, O.S.B., “*Lumen Gentium* No. 8 and *Subsistit in* Again,” *New Blackfriars* 90 (2009) 602–17.

<sup>20</sup> Karim Schelkens, “*Lumen Gentium*’s ‘*Subsistit in*’ Revisited: The Catholic Church and Christian Unity after Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) 875–93.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Theologische Aufgaben und Fragen bei der Begegnung lutherischer und katholischer Theologie nach dem Konzil,” *Oecumenica* (1969) 251–70.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Theologische Aufgaben und Fragen bei der Begegnung lutherischer und katholischer Theologie nach dem Konzil,” *Das Neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969) 225–45.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Le Nouveau Peuple de Dieu*, trans. Robert Givord and H el ene Bourboulon (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971).

Ever since, in the dispute about the baptism of heretics, the Roman point of view about the validity of heretical baptism prevailed, the Christian character of heretics was also recognized, so that an unqualified identification between the Catholic Church and the Body of Christ was no longer possible.<sup>24</sup>

He then began his discussion of the answer that Vatican II gave to this problem:

Moreover, as a result of further developments, especially the schism of 1054, there came about a further restriction of the identification. The official language of the church had never ceased to call the separated Eastern churches *ecclesiae*, despite their separation. This is a matter of fact that has never been worked out in systematic theology, but which for that very reason should be called all the more important. Alongside the singular of the one church which is an article of faith, there stood always, even in times when it was not reflected upon, even in the texts of Pius XII, a plural that broke open this singular and, without being noticed, ruled out an unconditional identification between the *Catholica* and the Body of Christ.

The council was able to take account of these facts, and it did so above all with two statements. (1) It renounced the *est* that meant total identification (*corpus Christi est ecclesia Romana catholica*)—an identification that, as already shown, contradicts basic facts of Catholic tradition. For this reason, in the place of *est* it put the far more roomy *subsistit* (*haec ecclesia . . . subsistit in ecclesia catholica*). With this term it sought to bring out the dialectical character of the identification, its inner openness and incompleteness. (2) The council consciously took account of these hitherto unconsidered facts and spoke explicitly of churches and communions or ecclesial communities. In this way it expressly named what might be called the twofold “overhang” that the simple *est* excludes and the *subsistit* enforces.<sup>25</sup>

This was Ratzinger’s interpretation of *subsistit in* in 1966. He understood *subsistit* to have been chosen because it was *weiträumigere*, “far more roomy” than *est*, and thus brought the doctrine of the council into coherence with the fact that for 900 years the popes and councils had continued to recognize the separated Eastern communities as churches. However, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 1985, while Ratzinger was its prefect, gave a very different interpretation of *subsistit in*. This was given in a critical Notification on Leonard Boff’s *Church, Charism, and Power*.<sup>26</sup> Rejecting Boff’s statement that the church of Christ can be said to subsist in other Christian churches, the CDF gave the following interpretation of the choice of the word *subsistit*.

The council, rather, had chosen the word *subsistit* precisely to make it clear that there exists only one subsistence of the true church, whereas outside its visible structure there exist only elements of church which, being elements of the church itself, tend and lead toward the Catholic Church (LG 8).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ratzinger, *Das Neue Volk Gottes*. 235, my translation.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 235–36.

<sup>26</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 77 (1985) 756–62. The document is in Italian.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 758–59, my translation.

To assert that outside the Catholic Church there exist only elements of church means that outside the Catholic Church nothing exists that can rightly be called church. This, of course, was asserted in draft 1 of the Constitution on the Church, reflecting the doctrine of Pius XII. But Vatican II took account of the fact that popes and Western councils had consistently referred to the separated Eastern communities as churches, and it followed that tradition by describing them as churches by whose celebration of the Eucharist the church of God is built up and grows. In its Notification on Boff the CDF obviously gave no weight to that long-standing tradition.

If one asks what led the CDF to an interpretation of *subsistit in* as meaning that outside the Catholic Church there exist only elements of church, I would suggest that the answer lies in its statement: "The council had chosen the word *subsistit* precisely to make it clear that there exists only one subsistence of the true church." The use of "subsistence" shows that the CDF was taking *subsistit* to have the technical meaning it came to have in the development of Christian theology, when Western theologians chose the Latin word *subsistentia* to express the notion expressed by the Greek word *hypostasis*. This development gave to the word *subsistere* a new metaphysical meaning that it does not have in classical Latin, where it means "to remain," "to continue to exist." If one asks what led some theologians, especially German ones, to understand *subsistit in*, in *Lumen gentium* no. 8, to have the technical meaning it came to have in Christian theology, I would suggest that this was the result of how it was translated in the German editions of the documents of Vatican II.

The German language does have words that mean "to continue to exist" (*bestehen* and *fortbestehen*), and they were used to translate *subsistit* where this word twice occurs in the Decree on Ecumenism.<sup>28</sup> However, the German translations did not use either of these words for *subsistit* where it appears in *Lumen gentium* no. 8. The translation provided during the council by its Press Office used the phrase, *hat ihre konkrete Existenzform in* ("has its concrete form of existence in"). The translation approved in 1966 by the German bishops had *ist verwirklicht in* ("is realized in").<sup>29</sup> This version was also used in the text and commentary on the documents of Vatican II published as a supplement to the 1966 edition of *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. The text has *ist verwirklicht in*, but in his commen-

<sup>28</sup> In the Decree on Ecumenism, no. 4, we find: "Christ bestowed this unity on his church from the beginning. We believe that it subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose." And in no. 13: "Among those in which Catholic traditions and institutions continue to subsist, the Anglican communion occupies a special place."

<sup>29</sup> Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds., *Kleines Konzilkompendium* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1967) 131.



tary, Aloys Grillmeier followed the earlier version, saying: “Die konkrete Existenzform dieser von Christus gestiftete Kirche ist die katholische Kirche”<sup>30</sup> (“The concrete form of existence of this church founded by Christ is the Catholic Church”). If it is in the Catholic Church that the church of Christ is realized or has its concrete form of existence, then it would follow that the one subsistence of the church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church. The CDF, presumably with the agreement of Ratzinger, its prefect, drew the conclusion that outside the Catholic Church there exist only elements of the church.

But this is hardly compatible with what Ratzinger had said in 1966, when he described *subsistit* as a “far more roomy” term than *est*, allowing for the existence of the Eastern communities as churches separated from the Catholic Church. It would seem necessary to conclude that in the meanwhile he had become convinced that the translation of the documents of Vatican II approved by the German Bishops’ Conference was correct in taking *subsistit* in *Lumen gentium* no. 8 to have the metaphysical meaning it came to have in the development of Christology. In fact, in a discourse “On the Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen gentium*” that he gave in February 2000 at a meeting organized by the Committee for the Celebration of the Jubilee Year, Ratzinger made it clear that this is how he had come to understand the term. Explaining *subsistit* as it was used in *Lumen gentium* no. 8, he said:

The word *subsistit* derives from classical philosophy, as it was further developed in Scholasticism. It corresponds to the Greek word *hypostasis*, which has a central role in Christology to describe the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. *Subsistere* is a special case of *esse*. It is “being” in the form of an independent subject. That is what is at issue here. The Council wished to tell us that the church of Christ, as a concrete subject in this world, can be encountered in the Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup>

Here Ratzinger makes it clear that his interpretation of “subsists in” is based on the assumption that the German translation of *Lumen gentium* no. 8 was correct in giving the term the meaning it came to have in the development of Christology. However, what the CDF said in 1985 differs significantly from what Ratzinger said in his discourse of 2000. In the Notification on Boff, the “one subsistence” of the church of Christ in the Catholic Church led to the conclusion that outside it there are only elements of church. But in his 2000 discourse he went on to say: “Although the church

<sup>30</sup> English translation given in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967–1969) 1:150.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “L’Ecclesiologia della Costituzione *Lumen Gentium*”; the text is given in Italian and Spanish on the Vatican website; an English translation is given in Stephan Otto Horn and Vincenz Pfnür, eds., *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005) 123–52, at 147.



is only one and *subsists* in a unique subject, it is also true that outside of this subject there exist ecclesial realities—true local churches and diverse ecclesial communities.” He attributes this situation to sin (presumably the sin of schism) and concludes: “Because sin is a contradiction, this difference between *subsistit* and *est* cannot finally be resolved from the point of view of logic.”<sup>32</sup>

In my view, the difficulty results from taking *subsistit* in *Lumen gentium* no. 8 to have the meaning it came to have in Christology, rather than its ordinary meaning in classical Latin: “to continue to exist.” In fact, this latter is the meaning the CDF took the term to have in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which it also issued in 2000. Here it said:

The Catholic faithful *are required to profess* that there is a historical continuity—rooted in the apostolic succession—between the church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church. . . . With the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: 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 her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth,” that is, in those churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup>

Here the CDF has taken *subsistit*, as used by the council in *Lumen gentium* no. 8, to have the ordinary meaning that *subsistere* has in classical Latin, and has added the qualifiers “fully” and “only” to the affirmation that the church of Christ continues to exist in the Catholic Church. The addition of those qualifiers is justified by statements that the council made in the Decree on Ecumenism. In *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 4 it said that the unity with which Christ endowed his church subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose; and in no. 3, that our separated fellow Christians are not blessed with that unity which Christ wished to bestow, and that it is only through Christ’s Catholic Church that the whole fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. These statements fully justify the claim that it is only in the Catholic Church that the church of Christ continues fully to exist. To say this does not deny that the church of Christ continues to be present, though less fully, because of the lack of communion with the successor of Peter, in churches that have maintained true apostolic succession in the episcopate and the valid Eucharist. In fact, *Dominus Iesus* went on to say:

The churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united with her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> CDF, “‘*Dominus Iesus*’: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” *Origins* 30 (2000) 209–19, at 216.

succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular churches. Therefore the church of Christ is present and operative also in these churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the primacy, which, according to the will of God, the bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire church.<sup>34</sup>

When Cardinal Ratzinger presented that Declaration to the press, he invited Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, a long-time consultor to the CDF and high official of Opus Dei, to present its ecclesiological contents. Here is how Ocáriz explained what was said in *Dominus Iesus* about the meaning of *subsistit in*.

The Declaration then takes up another important teaching of the Second Vatican Council and offers the precise interpretation of it: the unique church “subsists” (*subsistit*) in the Catholic Church governed by the Successor of Peter and by the other bishops. With this assertion, Vatican II wished to say that the unique church of Jesus Christ *continues to exist* despite the divisions among Christians; and, more precisely, that it is only in the Catholic Church that the church of Christ subsists in all its fullness, while outside its visible structure there exist “elements of sanctification and truth” that belong to the church itself. At this point the text of *Dominus Iesus* recalls that some non-Catholic Christian communities retain, among those “elements of sanctification and truth,” the valid Eucharist and the valid episcopate, and therefore are particular churches, that is to say, portions of the unique People of God in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is present and operative (*Christus Dominus* no. 11), as is the case with the Orthodox churches. There exists, therefore, one sole church (subsisting in the Catholic Church) and at the same time there exist true particular churches that are not Catholic. We are not dealing with a paradox: there exists one sole church of which all the particular churches are portions, even though in some of these (i.e., those that are not Catholic) there is not the fullness of church insofar as their union with the whole is not perfect, due to the lack of full communion with the one who, by the will of the Lord, is the principle and foundation of the unity of the episcopate and of the whole church.<sup>35</sup>

The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* was issued on September 5, 2000. Less than three weeks later the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an interview that Cardinal Ratzinger had given in order to reply to criticisms that had been raised against that Declaration, especially by the Lutheran Eberhard Jüngel.<sup>36</sup> In response to remarks made by Jüngel with regard to *subsistit*, the Cardinal replied:

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ocáriz’s presentation, along with others, can be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000905\\_dom\\_inus-iesus-ocariz\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000905_dom_inus-iesus-ocariz_it.html).

<sup>36</sup> This was originally published with the title: “Es scheint mir absurd, was unsere lutherische Freunde jetzt wollen,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 22, 2000. *L’Osservatore Romano*’s October 8 issue carried an Italian translation, and an English translation is provided in Christian Geyer, “Ratzinger on *Dominus Iesus*,” *Inside the Vatican* 9.1 (January 2001) 112–18. From what the

I was present during the Second Vatican Council when the word *subsistit* was chosen, and I can say that I understand the expression quite well. Unfortunately, it is impossible to go into detail in an interview. In an encyclical, Pius XII had said that the Roman Catholic Church “is” the sole church of Jesus Christ. That appeared to express a total identity, such that, outside the Catholic community, there was no church. However, that is not the case. According to Catholic doctrine, shared obviously by Pius XII, the local churches of the Eastern Church separated from Rome are authentic local churches; the communities which resulted from the Protestant Reform were created in a different manner, as I have just said. For these, the church exists in the moment in which the event takes place. . . .

With the word *subsistit* it was also intended to mean that, although the Lord maintains his promise, there exists another ecclesial reality outside the Catholic community, and it is that very contradiction which is our greatest incitement to pursue unity.<sup>37</sup>

To be noted is the consonance between Ratzinger’s reply to Jüngel in 2000 and his 1966 address to the Lutheran World Federation’s Strasbourg Institute for Ecumenical Research. On both occasions he made it clear that the change from “is” to “subsists in” was motivated by the intention no longer to claim total identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church, for the reason that such exclusive identity is contradicted by the long-standing tradition, shared by Pius XII, of recognizing the separated Eastern communities as authentic local churches. On the other hand, there is an interesting difference between the two statements as to whether “is” or “subsists” is the “broader” term. In 1966 Ratzinger had described “subsists” as a “far more roomy” term than “is.” In the interview of 2000 he said:

The concept expressed by “is” (“to be”) is broader than that expressed by “subsist”; “subsist” is a very precise manner of being, that is, to be a subject which exists in itself. The Council Fathers thus wished to say that the being of the church is a broader entity than that of the Roman Catholic Church, but that in this last the church’s being acquires, in an incomparable way, her true and proper character as subject.<sup>38</sup>

This last sentence I would interpret to mean that the church of Christ is a broader entity than the Catholic Church because there are other churches in which the church of Christ also exists, but that it exists in a unique way in the Catholic Church. If that is correct, I believe it is substantially the same explanation of the relationship between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church that was presented, though in different terms, in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*.

---

interviewer said, one can conclude that Jüngel had complained that in *Dominus Iesus* the Catholic Church was claiming the exclusive right to be the Church, whereas in his opinion the statement of Vatican II that the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church did not assert any such exclusivity.

<sup>37</sup> Geyer, “Ratzinger on *Dominus Iesus*” 114.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Seven years after that Declaration was issued, the CDF, whose prefect was now Cardinal William Levada, issued a document entitled “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church,” followed by its own “Commentary” on these “Responses.” I have discussed both parts of this document in an earlier article<sup>39</sup> and need not go into detail on them here; suffice it to say that in both the “Responses” and the “Commentary,” the CDF maintains that the change from saying that the church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church to saying that it *subsists in* it, meant no change from the previous doctrine, which asserted the full identity between the church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, to the question in “Responses,” “Why was the expression *subsists in* adopted instead of the simple word *is*”? the answer is: “The use of this expression, which indicates the full identity of the church of Christ with the Catholic Church, does not change the doctrine on the church.”<sup>40</sup> Likewise the “Commentary” repeats the statement made in the Notification of 1985, that “the council chose the word *subsistit* specifically to clarify that the true church has only one ‘subsistence,’ while outside her boundaries there are only *elementa ecclesiae*,” and adds: “It does not follow that the identification of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church no longer holds.”<sup>41</sup>

In this, its most recent treatment of the question concerning the significance of Vatican II’s decision to say that the church of Christ *subsists in* the Catholic Church rather than that it *is* the Catholic Church, the CDF insists that this change of terms means no change from the doctrine of full identity between the church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. It repeats what it had said in 1985, to the effect that the term “subsists in” rather strengthened that identification, since it meant that outside the Catholic Church only elements of church could be found.

At this point I believe a theologian has the right to ask what evidence there is to support the claim that the intention of the Theological Commission that proposed this change was to affirm, or to strengthen, the doctrine of full identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church. The CDF does not supply any such evidence in support of its position. I will now offer evidence that I believe will support two propositions: (1) that the intention of the Theological Commission in proposing this change was no longer to affirm full identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church, and (2) their reason for making this change was their recognition that the doctrine of full identity was irreconcilable with the fact that popes

<sup>39</sup> Sullivan, “Meaning of *Subsistit in*” 120–24.

<sup>40</sup> CDF, “Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church,” *Origins* 37 (2007) 134–36, at 135.

<sup>41</sup> CDF, “Commentary on Doctrinal Congregation Document,” *ibid.* 137–39, at 137–38.

and Western councils had consistently spoken of the separated Eastern communities as churches.

Regarding the first proposition: The *Acta Synodalia* show that in the conciliar debate on this passage, Bishop Van Dodewaard of Haarlem, speaking in the name of the bishops of The Netherlands, expressed dissatisfaction with the paragraph in which it was said that the church of Christ is the Catholic Church. He proposed that the text should say:

The Sacred Synod believes and professes that there is one only church of Jesus Christ, which in the Creed we celebrate as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. . . . This universal medium of salvation *is found* in the Catholic Church, governed by the Roman Pontiff and the bishops in communion with him, although outside its total structure many elements of truth and sanctification can be found.<sup>42</sup>

Karim Schelkens, relying on information contained in the Archive Philips, has pointed out that Bishop Dodewaard was a member of the subcommission that revised *Lumen gentium* no. 8, and that it was he who drafted the new text in which *est* was changed first to *invenitur in* and then to *adest in*.<sup>43</sup> The whole subcommission approved the change from *est* to *adest in*. Two conclusions can be drawn from this change of wording. The first is that the commission no longer intended to affirm exclusive identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church. If it had intended to continue to affirm full identity between them there would have been no reason to make the change from *est*, since *est* already expressed such identity. To say that the church of Christ is present in the Catholic Church does not affirm such identity. Second, the choice of *adest in* is a good reason to judge that, when the commission accepted Tromp's suggestion to use *subsistit in* in place of *adest in*, they had in mind the meaning that *subsistere* has in classical Latin, i.e., "to continue to exist." Those who had proposed using *adest in* could easily accept *subsistit in*, taking it to have its ordinary meaning, because to the idea of "being present in," *subsistit in* would simply add the nuance of "continuing to be present in." On the other hand, if the subcommission had thought that *subsistit in* would be understood to mean "is realized in," or "has its concrete form of existence in," which in effect would mean returning to the affirmation of identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church, it is inconceivable that they would not have offered strong resistance to using *subsistit in*. However, in her doctoral dissertation, directed by Karl Becker, Alexandra von Teuffenbach concluded from the minutes of that meeting and the corresponding entry in Tromp's diary, that there was no debate about the

<sup>42</sup> AS II/1, 433–34, emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Schelkens, "Lumen Gentium's 'Subsistit in' Revisited" 888 n. 44.

expression *subsistit in*, since “the whole process of including this word, which was so controversial later on, probably lasted less than a minute.”<sup>44</sup>

If one reads the whole paragraph in which “subsists in” appears, one will see how perfectly the meaning “continues to exist in” fits the context. The paragraph begins by speaking of the unique church of Christ, which after his resurrection our Savior entrusted to Peter and the other apostles to be governed and spread. It then says that this church, constituted and organized as a society in this world, subsists in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him. There would be no change of meaning if, instead of “subsists in,” one used “continues to exist in.” As is said in *Dominus Iesus*, “subsists in” expresses the historical continuity between the church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church. But, of course, *Dominus Iesus* brings out the uniqueness of the Catholic Church by affirming that it is in the Catholic Church alone that the church of Christ continues *fully* to exist.

In support of my second proposition, that the reason for the change from *est* to *subsistit in* was the recognition that the doctrine of full identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church was irreconcilable with the fact that popes and Western councils had consistently spoken of the separated Eastern communities as churches, I rely upon the testimony of Ratzinger. Although I have already quoted his statements on this question, they bear repeating here. In 1966 he said:

The official language of the church had never ceased to call the separated Eastern churches *ecclesiae*, despite their separation. That is a matter of fact that has never been worked out in systematic theology, but which for that very reason should be called all the more important. Alongside the singular of the one church which is an article of faith, there stood always, even in times when it was not reflected upon, even in the texts of Pius XII, a plural, which broke open this singular and, without being noticed, ruled out an unconditional identification between the *Catholica* and the Body of Christ.

The council was able to take account of these facts, and it did so above all with two statements. (1) It renounced the *est* that meant total identification (*corpus Christi est ecclesia Romana catholica*)—an identification which, as already shown, contradicts basic facts of Catholic tradition. For this reason, in the place of *est* it put the far more roomy *subsistit* (*haec ecclesia . . . subsistit in ecclesia catholica*). With this term it sought to bring out the dialectical character of the identification, its inner openness and incompleteness. (2) The council consciously took account of these hitherto unconsidered facts and spoke explicitly of churches and communions or ecclesial communities. In this way it expressly named what might be called the twofold “overhang” which the simple *est* excludes and *subsistit* enforces.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Maximilian H. Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007) 75, where Heim refers to Von Teuffenbach’s dissertation: *Die Bedeutung des ‘subsistit in’ (LG 8): Zum Selbstverständnis der katholischen Kirche* (Munich: Wissenschaft, 2002) 392.

<sup>45</sup> Ratzinger, “Theologische Aufgaben und Fragen” 235–36.

Then, in 2000, in the interview in which he responded to Jüngel, he said:

I was present during the Second Vatican Council when the word *subsistit* was chosen and I can say that I understand the expression quite well. Unfortunately, it is impossible to go into detail in an interview. In an encyclical, Pius XII had said that the Roman Catholic Church “is” the sole church of Jesus Christ. That appeared to express a total identity, such that outside the Catholic community there was no church. However, that is not the case. According to Catholic doctrine, shared obviously by Pius XII, the local churches of the Eastern Church separated from Rome are authentic local churches. . . . With the word *subsistit* it was also intended to mean that, although the Lord maintains his promise, there exists another ecclesial reality outside the Catholic community, and it is that very contradiction which is our greatest incitement to pursue unity.<sup>46</sup>

With this testimony of Joseph Ratzinger I rest my case. In my view, the interpretation of *subsistit in* given in *Dominus Iesus*, namely, that it is only in the Catholic Church that the church of Christ continues fully to exist, is the one that faithfully expresses the doctrine both of *Lumen gentium* and of *Unitatis redintegratio* on the relationship between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church. Gérard Philips—who certainly was in a position to know what the Theological Commission had in mind—in his commentary on *Lumen gentium* gave an explanation of *subsistit in* that is substantially the same as that given in *Dominus Iesus*. Philips’ comment was: “One can presume that the Latin expression *subsistit in* (the Church of Christ is found in the *Catholica*) will make floods of ink flow. We would be inclined to translate: it is there that we find the Church of Christ in all its fullness and all its strength.”<sup>47</sup>

On the question of the interpretation of “subsists in” in *Lumen gentium* no. 8, I suggest that Catholics would do well to adhere to the interpretation the CDF gave in *Dominus Iesus*, rather than to the one it gave in its “Commentary on Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church.”

<sup>46</sup> *Inside the Vatican* 9 (January 2001) 114.

<sup>47</sup> Gérard Philips, *L’Église et son mystère au IIe Concile du Vatican: Histoire, text, et commentaire de la constitution “Lumen gentium,”* 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1967) 1:119 (my translation).