

# Subsistit in

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Last January the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie was giving one of the addresses in the service being held at Westminster Cathedral to mark the 25th anniversary of Vatican II's decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Referring to the ecumenical implications of the use of the words *subsistit in*, he said: 'After Vatican II the Church "subsisted" in the Roman Catholic Church, a small linguistic change, but a world apart in self-understanding.'<sup>1</sup> He was echoing the thoughts of Fr Grillmeier, the distinguished Jesuit theologian: these two words 'constituted a development of unforeseeable dimensions'.

Sadly, it appears that there are those in Rome engaged in preparing the *Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church* who would wish to change the words of the Council fathers. To understand properly what is going on we must go back over some familiar old ground.

*Lumen Gentium*, the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, states that the visible Church, structured hierarchically, and the invisible Church, the Body of Christ, are not to be thought of as two realities, but as one complex reality having a human and a divine element:

Haec Ecclesia, in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata, subsistit in Ecclesia catholica, a successore Petri et Episcopis in eius communione gubernata, licet extra eius compaginem elementa plura sanctificationis et veritatis inveniantur, quae ut dona Ecclesiae Christi propria, ad unitatem catholicam impellunt.<sup>2</sup>

In Fr O'Neill's translation:

This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity.<sup>3</sup>

It is essential to recall the circumstances surrounding this statement, very well known though these are. The original draft for discussion was presented on 1 December 1962. It was the work of a theological commission headed by Cardinal Ottaviani, Prefect of the Holy Office.

'On the whole the fathers were reserved in their praise of the draft,' according to Fr G. Phillips. That is in fact quite an understatement. On the first day Cardinal Liénart regretted that the Roman Church and the Mystical Body of Christ were so closely identified in it:

The relation of the Roman Church to the Mystical Body must never be stated as though the Mystical Body is totally confined within the bounds of the Roman Church. ... I am sad that those outside the Roman Church do not enjoy with us the supernatural gifts of which she is the dispenser, but I would not dare to say that they do not belong in any way to the Mystical Body of Christ, even though they are not incorporated in the Catholic Church. ... Therefore I earnestly beg that the article which makes the Catholic Church absolutely equivalent to the Mystical Body be deleted and that this schema be thoroughly revised so that the Church of Christ appears less under a juridical aspect but rather shines out in its mystical nature.<sup>4</sup>

In the next session of the Council, in autumn 1963, a second draft was presented. Where the original text read, 'The Roman Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ ... and only the one that is Roman Catholic has the right to be called Church'<sup>5</sup>, the new text stated that the Church which the creeds call one, holy, catholic and apostolic was the one entrusted to Peter's care, but added, significantly, 'Many elements of sanctification can be found outside its total structure.'<sup>6</sup>

Finally, on 16 September 1964, during the third session of the Council, a complete text was approved with 2114 placets, 11 non placets and 63 placets *juxta modum*. This stated that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successors of Peter, but was careful not to use '*est*' to express this reality. In a note of explanation it was pointed out that '*subsistit in* was used instead of *est* as an expression more in accordance with what is said elsewhere about ecclesial elements.'<sup>7</sup>

Clearly there had been a development in ecclesiology from the papal encyclicals *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and *Humani Generis* (1950). In the case of these Pius XII had written:

Some say that they are not bound by a doctrine, explained in our encyclical letter of a few years ago, and based on the source of revelation, which teaches that the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing. Some reduce to a meaningless formula the necessity of belonging to the True Church in order to gain salvation.

During a visit to the United States in 1987 the President of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, Cardinal Willebrands, spoke at length, in a carefully nuanced address, about *subsistit in*:

It is clear, at the very least in the immediate context of the Council, this change from *est* to *subsistit in* was conditioned

not only by the ecclesiastical study of elements of the Church or of traces of the Church. There was a parallel reflection on the places in the Body of Christ of Christians not living in communion with the Holy See. This aimed at opening up somewhat the position of *Mystici Corporis* on the membership of the Church, keeping its essential insight, but interpreting it by a theological reading in an ecumenical context. ... To state without qualification that the Church of God in this world *est* the Catholic Church amounted to restricting the meaning of the word Church in a way which contradicted ecclesial practice. ... The insistence of the text on the role of the Holy Spirit in non-Catholic communities forbids denying to these communities as such all proper ecclesial reality. ... It is in the community, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, etc., that grace is given, and belonging to the Church takes place there.<sup>8</sup>

A somewhat different interpretation of the wording of the Council document had been offered on 11 March 1985 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

The Council chose the word *subsistit* precisely to make clear that there is only one subsistence of the true Church, while outside her framework there exist only *elementa ecclesiae* which, being elements of the same Church, tend and lead towards the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup>

However, *Lumen Gentium* did not say 'only elements' but 'many elements', and these elements are not called *elementa ecclesiae* but *elementa plura sanctificationis et veritatis*. Fr F.A. Sullivan SJ, Professor of Ecclesiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, commented:

What seems clear is that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the faith is interpreting the Council to mean that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church in so exclusive a way that outside of her limits there can be found only elements of the Church. ... With all due respects, I do not see how one could justify such a claim.<sup>10</sup>

Of course the Church is zealous in safeguarding the truth, but some aspects of curial government are disquieting. One cannot help remembering the words of Pope Paul VI on 21 September 1963: 'Let the Roman Curia not be a bureaucracy, as some wrongly judge it, pretentious and apathetic, merely legalistic and ritualistic, a jousting field of hidden ambitions and intractable antagonisms, as others judge it to be.' In the recently adopted new constitution of the Roman Curia the CDF 'is explicitly given prior judgement over other curial documents that infringe its area of competence.'<sup>11</sup> But Pope John Paul II, in the preface to the new constitution, wrote: 'Power in the Church should be exercised as a form of service, so that the main attribute of authority

should be its pastoral character.’

Fr Congar has written: ‘The modest but very important words, *subsistit in*, enabled the ecclesiology of *Mystici Corporis* to be corrected, or rather, perfected.’<sup>12</sup> But in August 1986 the Revd Albert Outler, who had been a Methodist observer at the Council, was asserting that official ecumenism was dead, in part because ‘Romans in high places are re-exegeting *subsistit in* as if it had always meant *est*’.

At the end of 1989 Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the CDF, sent a draft copy of the *Universal Catechism* to bishops round the world, and 30 May 1990 was the deadline set for responses. The six bishops who examined the draft on behalf of the United States bishops’ conference called for substantial revision:

The bishops criticise at length a mistranslation of a Vatican II text on the Catholic Church’s understanding of itself in relation to other Christian Churches, a matter of great ecumenical sensitivity. For whereas Vatican II’s constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, says that the ‘unique Church of Christ ... subsists in the Catholic Church’, the catechism says that it ‘exists’ in the Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup>

Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, President of the US bishops’ conference, has requested that a second draft of the Catechism be circulated, with a reasonable timetable for consultation.

Reminiscing about the slow implementation of the Council’s documents on Christian unity, Albert Outler wrote, rather sadly: ‘Shades of Cardinal Ottaviani. Shades of Professor Edmund Schlink murmuring “What did I tell you?”’ As the Catholic Church in England moves into the post-Swanwick age, let us hope that this cynicism is not justified.

1 Cf. *The Tablet*, 27.1.90, vol. 244, p. 123.

2 cap. I, art. 8. *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II: Constitutiones, Decreta, Declarationes*, Vatican City 1966, p. 105.

3 A. Flannery OP ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin 1975, p. 357.

4 *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii oecumenici Vaticani II*, I/4, pp. 126f.

5 *AS* I/4, p. 15.

6 *AS* II/1, pp. 219f.

7 *AS* III/1, p. 177.

8 *One in Christ*, 1987:3.

9 *AAS* 1985, vol 77, N8, pp. 758f.

10 *One in Christ*, 1986:2.

11 Cf. *The Tablet*, 9.7.88, vol. 242, p. 795.

12 A. Stacpoole ed., *Vatican II by those who were there*, London 1986.

13 Cf. *The Tablet*, 14.4.90, vol. 244, p. 492.