

QUAESTIO DISPUTATA
A RESPONSE TO KARL BECKER, S.J., ON THE MEANING
OF *SUBSISTIT IN*

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In a recent issue of L'Osservatore Romano Karl Becker argued that, contrary to a common interpretation of the change made in the drafting of Lumen gentium no. 8 from est to subsistit in, Vatican II never departed from its original affirmation of total identity between the Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. Fellow Jesuit Francis Sullivan responds to Becker's arguments.

L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO FOR DECEMBER 5–6, 2005¹ carried a substantial article by Father Karl J. Becker, S.J., professor emeritus of the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Gregorian University and since 1986 a consultant to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter, CDF), on the meaning of the change from *est* to *subsistit in* that was made in Vatican II's statement about the relationship between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. Both the 1962 original draft and the 1963 revised draft of the *Constitution on the Church* had simply identified them. The first draft had affirmed the doctrine of Pope Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis* that the Mystical Body of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church.² The 1963 draft had likewise said that the one Church of Jesus Christ is the Catholic Church.³ The revised text that was approved and promulgated in

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¹ Pp. 1, 6–7. The English translation, originally published in the weekly English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* of December 14, 2005, is printed in *Origins* 35.31 (January 19, 2006) 514–22. Numbers in parentheses in my text refer to pages in this issue of *Origins*.

² *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii Vaticani secundi*, 5 vols. (Vatican City: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–1978) 1, part 4, 15. All translations from the *Acta synodalia* are mine. Throughout the article, capitalization of *church* / *churches* will reflect usage in the documents quoted.

³ *Ibid.* 2, part 1, 220.

1964 said rather that the Church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church.⁴ The question Becker has raised is whether the change from *est* to *subsistit in* meant that the council no longer maintained that the Church of Christ is identified with the Catholic Church, but recognized that it is also present, though less fully, in other Christian Churches, so that the Church of Christ extends beyond the limits of the Catholic Church. His answer is no. He insists that the council never departed from its original affirmation of total identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. In this article I shall present his arguments and then explain why I do not think they warrant the conclusion he has drawn from them.

If I am not mistaken, Becker’s conclusion will come as a shock to many people, both Catholic and non-Catholic, especially those who are in any way involved in the ecumenical movement. I believe that among them there has been broad agreement with the judgment that Cardinal Willibrands, who was then president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, expressed 25 years ago, when he said, “In the formula inspired by *Humani generis* and above all by *Mystici Corporis*, the *est* was exclusive. . . . *Subsistit in* allows emphasizing both the conviction that the one and genuine Church of God is found in the Catholic Church, and the certitude that it nonetheless extends, though lacking its fullness, beyond the Catholic Church.”⁵

I do not think one can simply rely on this consensus and dismiss Becker’s position without giving careful consideration to the arguments he has presented for it. He has come to his conclusion on the basis of a serious study both of the *Acta synodalia* and of material in the Secret Vatican Archives to which he has had access. His 20 years as a consultor of the CDF and the prominent place given to his article in the Vatican newspaper are added reasons for taking his article seriously. The arguments he has presented for his position merit careful consideration. However, before discussing them, I shall mention one point in his article on which I agree with my former colleague. This has to do with the meaning of the Latin word *subsistere* as it was used in *Lumen gentium* no. 8.

Becker observes that there are three possible meanings of *subsistere*: “to be realized”; to “subsist” in the ontological sense that medieval Scholastics gave to the term; and “to remain, to be perpetuated.” He rejects the first of these, since it would imply that the Church is a purely idealistic reality, needing to be concretely realized. He rejects the second, since, as the Scholastics used the term, what subsists must exist in itself, not in another. He then affirms the meaning: “to remain, to be perpetuated,” as the one

⁴ *Lumen gentium* no. 8.

⁵ Cardinal Johann Willibrands, “Vatican II’s Ecclesiology of Communion,” *One in Christ* 23 (1987)179–91, at 188.

that corresponds to the meaning of the word in both classical and medieval Latin. He adds: "This sense corresponds well to the doctrine of the council, according to which all the means of salvation instituted by Christ are found forever in the Catholic Church" (519 C). He might also have observed that this is the meaning that is suggested by the immediate context in which the term occurs.⁶ The paragraph begins by speaking of the Church that Christ founded and entrusted to Peter and the other apostles; it makes perfect sense to go on to say that this Church of Christ continues to exist in the Church that is governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him. The Decree on Ecumenism also confirms this meaning of *subsistit* by saying that it is in the Catholic Church that the unity which Christ gave to his Church subsists as something she can never lose.⁷

Having expressed my agreement with Becker on the correct translation of *subsistit*, I shall now explain why I do not agree with the thesis he defends in his article: that the change from *est* to *subsistit in* does not mean that Vatican II ever abandoned or even weakened its original assertion of total identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church.

As we have seen, the 1963 draft of the Constitution on the Church, while it no longer affirmed identity between the Mystical Body and the Catholic Church, still said "The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church," but it added the clause: "although outside its total structure many elements of sanctification can be found, which as things proper to the Church of Christ impel toward catholic unity."⁸ Becker's first argument to prove that the council did not depart from its original assertion of identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church is that in the discussion of this draft by the council in 1963, the bishops never questioned the statement: "Ecclesia Christi est Ecclesia Catholica." From this he concludes that they clearly believed that the Church of Christ is identified with the Catholic Church,

I must admit that it does seem strange that the prominent cardinals who, in the discussion of the 1962 draft, had objected to its assertion of identity between the Mystical Body and the Roman Catholic Church,⁹ did not likewise criticize the statement in the 1963 draft that identified the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church. However, in the discussion of the 1963 draft, at least two proposals were made that would have meant no longer saying "The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church." Becker himself

⁶ *Lumen gentium* no. 8, para. 2.

⁷ *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 4.

⁸ *Acta synodalia* 2, part 1, 220.

⁹ Umberto Betti, O.F.M., gives the references to such statements made by Cardinals Liénart, König, and Bea, in his "Chiesa di Cristo e Chiesa Cattolica," *Antoniano* 61 (1986) 726–45, at 730–31.

mentions the fact that Bishop Van Dodeward of Haarlem, speaking in the name of the bishops of The Netherlands, proposed changing “est Ecclesia Catholica” to “invenitur in Ecclesia Catholica.”¹⁰ However, he did not mention the fact that Cardinal Silva Henriquez of Chile proposed omitting the whole sentence that includes “Ecclesia Christi est Ecclesia Catholica,” saying: “The identification of the pilgrim Church with the Roman Catholic Church, described only in a sociological way, does not seem correct. At least it should be said that all this is closely connected with the problem regarding members, which is still disputed.”¹¹ Neither does Becker take account of the fact that several bishops, in commenting on the “elements of sanctification” that the 1963 draft said can be found outside the Catholic Church, said they should also be described as “elements of truth,” and expressed the view that the recognition of these elements as “proper to the Church” called for further reflection on the communities that provide them to their members.¹²

The 1963 draft also contained a new paragraph that described the many ways in which the Catholic Church knows itself to be joined with other Christians, mentioning their loving faith in Christ, their reception of baptism and other sacraments, and a certain bonding in the Holy Spirit, who works also in them with his saving power.¹³ Abbot Christopher Butler proposed the following addition to the text:

Nor must the fact be overlooked that these disciples of Christ, although they are separated from the full Catholic communion, are nevertheless joined together in communities or communions or even Churches. These communities or Churches are not purely natural societies, because they are drawn from principles that are evangelical and therefore supernatural, even though they are incomplete. Therefore the social and visible nature of the Church is in some way also reflected beyond itself in these communions. The reason for this addition to the text is that this truth can serve for the refining of the notion of the Church, since the Church extends beyond its limits not only in the souls of individuals but also socially in Christian communities.¹⁴

My response to Becker’s first argument, therefore, would be this: It is true that in the conciliar discussion of the 1963 draft, only two bishops proposed that the text be changed so that it no longer say, “The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church.” However, Abbot Butler and several bishops observed that the recognition of “elements of sanctification” such as sacraments outside the Catholic Church calls for further reflection on the

¹⁰ *Acta synodalia* 2, part 1, 433–34.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 2, part 2, 137.

¹² Betti gives the references to such interventions in his article “Chiesa di Cristo” 736–37.

¹³ *Acta synodalia* 2, part 1, 221.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 462.

Christian communities that have maintained these elements and provide them to their members. I suggest, therefore, that it would not have been without a basis in the conciliar discussion if someone in the subcommission appointed to revise the 1963 draft had raised the question whether, since the council recognizes those elements as “proper to the Church,” it also ought to recognize the ecclesial nature of the communities in which they are found, and in that case, whether it should continue to identify the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church.

Becker’s next argument is based on a fact he discovered in the Vatican archives: it was Fr. Sebastian Tromp, S.J., consultor of the Holy Office and secretary of the conciliar doctrinal commission, a man who had played a major role in drafting both *Mystici Corporis* and the 1962 schema on the Church, who suggested using *subsistit in* to express the relationship between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. Becker says: “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 Schemas. It is unthinkable that, at the last moment, he changed his mind” (518 A).

I am sure that anyone who knew Tromp as a colleague, as I myself did, would agree that he would not have changed his mind about the total identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. The question, however, is whether the doctrinal commission that accepted his suggestion, and the council that approved the change from *est* to *subsistit in*, understood it to mean what Tromp insisted it had to mean. Fortunately, Becker gives us the exact words that Tromp used in making his suggestion, so we know what he had in mind. Here is how Becker describes the way the change took place.

After the close of the conciliar discussion of the 1963 draft a subcommission was appointed for its revision; its chairman was Gérard Philips, who had drafted this text. A month later, on November 26, 1963, Philips presented the revised text to the full doctrinal commission. In this text, the phrase *est Ecclesia Catholica* had been changed to *adest in Ecclesia Catholica*. Philips explained that this change was made because it had been proposed in the council, and because it could then better be said that there are elements present elsewhere. As Becker points out, no one in the conciliar discussion had proposed the change from *est* to *adest in*. But, as we have seen, Bishop Van Dodeward had proposed the change to *invenitur in*. And there is good evidence that Philips and his subcommission saw those terms as equivalent. This is clear from the official *Relatio* explaining the revised draft, which used *adest in* and *invenitur in* as synonyms.¹⁵

We now come to Tromp’s intervention, about which Becker provides

¹⁵ Ibid. 3, part 1, 176.

information from a tape recording kept in the Vatican archives, of the discussion that took place in the plenary session of the doctrinal commission at which Philips presented the revised draft with *adest in*. Heribert Schauf, a member of the doctrinal commission, objected to *adest in* on the grounds that it was imprecise. Becker then quotes Tromp as saying: “Possumus dicere itaque: subsistit in Ecclesia catholica, et hoc est exclusivum” (said very forcefully) “in quantum dicitur: alibi non sunt nisi elementa. Explicatur in textu” (517C). We know, therefore, that it was Tromp who suggested the term *subsistit in*, and we also know that he strongly insisted it meant that the Church of Christ subsists exclusively in the Catholic Church and that outside it there are only elements. Obviously this meant that outside the Catholic Church there is nothing that can be called a church. For Tromp there was no yielding on the statement in the 1962 draft: “Only the one that is Roman Catholic is rightly called Church.”¹⁶

The doctrinal commission accepted Tromp’s suggestion to say *subsistit in*. Becker argues that it also accepted his understanding of it. But in fact there is good evidence that it did not agree with his understanding of it. For, having accepted the change from *est* to *subsistit in*, the doctrinal commission went on to approve another change that the subcommission had made in the section dealing with the various ways in which the Catholic Church knows itself to be joined with other Christians. The 1963 draft had said of them: “They lovingly believe in Christ, Son of God and Savior, they are sealed with indelible baptism, indeed they recognize and receive all or at least some of the sacraments.”¹⁷ The revised text said: “They are sealed with baptism, by which they are joined with Christ, and indeed they recognize and receive other sacraments in their own Churches or ecclesiastical communities.”¹⁸ The two previous drafts had recognized the presence of sacraments outside the Catholic Church. Here, for the first time, a conciliar text uses the terms “Churches” and “ecclesiastical” of the communities in which those sacraments are received. The *Relatio* given for this text shows that the doctrinal commission realized that this language, of which Tromp could hardly have approved, needed to be justified. It said: “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.’”¹⁹

If one considers the fact that the draft in which *est* had been changed to *subsistit in* was the first one that spoke of “Churches” and “ecclesiastical communities” that are found outside the Catholic Church, one can hardly escape the conclusion that the doctrinal commission did not agree with

¹⁶ Ibid. 1, part 4, 15.

¹⁸ Ibid. 3, part 1, 189.

¹⁷ Ibid. 2, part 1, 221.

¹⁹ Ibid. 204.

Tromp, who had forcefully insisted that *subsistit in* must be understood to be *exclusivum*, with the consequence that outside the Catholic Church there could be nothing but elements.

Becker seems to think that Philips agreed with Tromp, for after saying that it is unthinkable that Tromp changed his mind about the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, Becker says, "Mons. Philips, adjunct secretary to the Commission, wrote in his book, 'There [i.e. in the Catholic Church] we find the Church of Christ in all its fullness and vigor'" (518 A). Philips's own words were: "Il est à présumer que l'expression latine: *subsistit in* (l'Église du Christ *se trouve dans* la Catholica) fera couler des flots d'encre. Nous serions tentés de traduire: c'est là que nous trouvons l'Église du Christ dans toute sa plénitude et toute sa force."²⁰ Becker apparently takes this to mean that Philips agreed with Tromp that *subsistit in* had the same meaning as *est*. But to say that it is in the Catholic Church that the Church of Christ is found in all its fullness and all its strength does not imply that the Church of Christ is found exclusively in the Catholic Church, or that outside it there are only elements. In this same work, Philips gave a detailed justification of the phrase: "in their own Churches or ecclesiastical communities," which the subcommission that he chaired had introduced into the text.²¹

Becker's final observation concerning the history of *Lumen gentium* is: "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 elements in other Christian communities. But if this hypothesis is granted, then the justification for the change would be terminological and not doctrinal" (518 A–B).

However, the theological commission did explain why the change from *est* to *subsistit in* was made: "so that the expression might be in better accord with the statement about the ecclesial elements that are present elsewhere."²² I would say that the key word here was "ecclesial." Reflection on the ecclesial nature of those elements had led to the recognition of the ecclesial character of the communities in which they were given and received. That the justification for this change was not merely terminological is brought out by the reason given for the use of the terms "churches and ecclesiastical communities." As we have seen above, the *Relatio* said: "The elements that are mentioned regard not only individuals, but also communities; precisely in this fact is located the foundation of the ecu-

²⁰ 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.

²¹ *L'Église et Son Mystère* 1:203–5.

²² *Acta synodalia* 3, part 1, 177.

menical movement.” I suggest that what motivated the approval of the change from *est* to *subsistit in* was that it would make it possible for the council to acknowledge the fact that outside the Catholic Church there are not only elements of the Church, but that there are churches and ecclesial communities. As Tromp clearly saw, if the Church of Christ is exclusively identified with the Catholic Church, there can be nothing but elements outside it. I conclude that the doctrinal commission that approved this change must have understood it to mean no longer claiming an exclusive identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church.

Further proof that this was what the doctrinal commission had in mind is seen in its response to the amendments proposed by the bishops concerning the change from *est* to *subsistit in*. In his footnote no. 33 Becker quotes this response, but I do not think he recognized its significance, since in his text he merely says that these amendments were rejected. But there are three points in the response that are significant: (1) Only 13 bishops had proposed going back to *est*. This shows that almost all the bishops approved the change to *subsistit in*. (2) The commission said that to return to *est* would give the text a restrictive meaning. Therefore they understood *subsistit in* to be less restrictive. (3) “After an extended debate, the commission chose the term *subsistit in*, to which solution all present agreed.”²³ So the change from *est* to *subsistit in* was decided by the whole doctrinal commission, not just by the subcommission chaired by Philips. And in due course the council approved the text of *Lumen gentium* with *subsistit in*.

Becker next turns to the Decree on Ecumenism, where he believes he finds evidence that the Secretariat for Christian Unity saw in the phrase *subsistit in* no change or weakening in the doctrine according to which the Church of Christ is the Catholic Church. He limits his discussion of the decree to what is said in chapter 1 about the Catholic Church, and to the responses given by the Secretariat to some objections raised by bishops to what was said in the decree. Since these responses seem at first sight to offer stronger support for Becker’s thesis than do the passages he cites from chapter 1 of the decree, I shall discuss them first.

The first of these objections aimed at what was said in the second sentence of the decree’s introduction: “One and only one Church was founded by Christ the Lord, but many Christian communions claim to be the true inheritance of Jesus Christ.” The objection was: “It would seem that the Catholic Church is included among those communions, which is false.” The response was: “Here only the fact, as seen by all, is to be described. Later on it is clearly affirmed that only the Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ.”²⁴

If one asks where in the Decree on Ecumenism it is “clearly affirmed

²³ Ibid. 3, part 6, 81.

²⁴ Ibid. 3, part 7, 12.

that only the Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ,” one has to reply that nowhere in the text is the Catholic Church expressly described as “the one true Church of Christ.” This fact drew proposals from two other bishops for the emendation of the text: They wanted it to say “more clearly” or “more expressly” that only the Roman Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ. One of these wanted the text also to say that all are obliged to seek this one true Church, so that they might recognize it and enter it to obtain salvation.²⁵ The Secretariat’s reply to these two bishops was substantially the same as that to the first objection noted above. To one bishop it said: “What is required is brought out in the whole text.” To the other it said: “The text supposes the doctrine expounded in the constitution *De Ecclesia*” (*Unitatis reintegratio* no. 1; hereafter *UR*).²⁶ In other words, one has to look for statements that at least implicitly or equivalently affirm that the Catholic Church is the one true Church of Christ. As examples of such statements I would suggest the following: “It is only through Christ’s Catholic Church, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be found” (*UR* no. 3). “We believe that the unity which Christ bestowed on his Church from the beginning subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose” (*UR* no. 4). On the other hand, “Our separated fellow Christians, whether considered as individuals or as communities and churches, are not blessed with that unity which Christ wished to bestow” (*UR* no. 3). In other words, it is only in the Catholic Church that the Church of Christ continues to exist with the fullness of the means of grace and with the unity that Christ wants his Church to have. This justifies calling it the “one true Church,” and saying that all are obliged to seek this Church, and, if they recognize it, they should enter it for their salvation. But in the same place the decree also says: “Our separated brothers and sisters also celebrate many sacred actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the condition of each church or community, and must be held capable of giving access to that communion in which is salvation.” Since the Catholic Church is not the only church in which salvation can be found, it follows that to recognize the Catholic Church as the “one true Church” is not the same as to claim that the Church of Christ is found exclusively in the Catholic Church.

Becker quotes the response given by the Secretariat to another bishop asking for greater clarity in the text. Referring to what was said in *UR* no. 2 about the unity of the Church, the bishop said: “The unicity of the Church

²⁵ *Ibid.* 15.

²⁶ I am taking the English translations of conciliar documents from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990).

should be more clearly expressed. It is not sufficient to stress the unity of the Church as is done in the text.” The Secretariat replied: “From the whole text there clearly appears the identification of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, although, as is right, the ecclesial elements of other communities are brought out. The Church governed by the successors of the Apostles with the successor of Peter as their head is explicitly said to be the ‘unique flock of Christ’ and the ‘one and only Church of God.’”²⁷ I suggest that this response has to be understood in the light of the section of the decree to which the objection refers. What is described in *UR* no. 2 is the original unity that Christ gave to his Church, and that was maintained while it could reasonably be said that only sect-like groups had separated themselves from the great Church. Then, certainly, “the one and only Church of God” was identified with the Catholic Church, and only elements could be found outside it. But the next section, *UR* no. 3 begins: “Even in the beginnings of this one and only church of God there arose certain rifts, which the apostle strongly condemned. But in subsequent centuries much more extensive dissensions made their appearance and large communities came to be separated from the full communion of the catholic church.” The fact that some of those “quite large Communities” maintained apostolic succession in the episcopate and the valid celebration of the Eucharist makes it impossible to consider them merely sects. It seems to me that identifying the Church of Christ exclusively with the Catholic Church during the second millennium would mean claiming that in 1054 the Church of Christ simply ceased to exist in the East. On the contrary, Roman Pontiffs have continued to refer to the separated Eastern communities as Churches, and general councils held in the West have done so as well.²⁸

I must now say something about the argument for his thesis that Becker draws from what is said about the Catholic Church in chapter 1 of the Decree on Ecumenism. After quoting several of its passages he concludes: “These principles put forward by the council in the first chapter of *Unitatis Redintegratio* mirror exactly the doctrine of *Lumen Gentium*: 8: The church of Christ is and always will be the Catholic Church” (518 C). In other words, confident that he had proved that the change from *est* to *subsistit in* had meant no departure from the council’s earlier assertion of identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church, Becker is equally confident that what is said about the Catholic Church in chapter 1 of the Decree on Ecumenism confirms his interpretation. I can only say I find no proof of this in the passages he quotes from chapter 1. On the other hand,

²⁷ *Ibid.* 17.

²⁸ Note 19 in *Unitatis redintegratio* refers to such statements made in three of those councils.

he says nothing about what is said in no. 3 of this same chapter about the separated churches and communities. There the decree says, “It follows that the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation whose efficacy comes from that fullness of grace and truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church.” It is difficult to understand how Becker can claim that the Secretariat for Christian Unity totally identified the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, when it so clearly recognized that non-Catholic churches and communities are used by the Holy Spirit as means of salvation.

This is all the more difficult when one compares Becker’s thesis with what is said in chapter 3 of the decree, of which he likewise makes no mention in his article. Chapter 3 is entitled: “The Churches and Ecclesial Communities separated from the Apostolic Roman See.” Here the council observes: “It is a pleasure for this synod to remind everyone that there exist in the east many particular or local churches, among which the patriarchal churches hold first place, and many of which are proud to trace their origins back to the apostles themselves” (*UR* no. 14). In the same section the goal of dialogue is described as “restoring the full communion that is desired between the Eastern Churches and the Catholic Church.” During the discussion a bishop objected to the use of “Churches” in referring to the separated Eastern communities. He said: “There is only one Church, namely the Catholic; non-Catholic communities cannot be called Churches in the proper sense.” The Secretariat responded: “The use of the twofold expression, ‘Churches and ecclesial (or separated) communities’ has been approved by the Council and is altogether legitimate. Certainly there is one universal Church, but there are many local or particular Churches. In the catholic Tradition it is customary to call the separated Eastern Communities Churches—local or particular, to be sure—and in the proper sense. It is not the business of the Council to determine which among the other communities should be called Churches in the theological sense.”²⁹

Becker makes no effort to explain how his thesis is compatible with what is said in the first part of chapter 3 of *Unitatis redintegratio* about the separated Eastern Churches, or with what is said in the second part of the chapter about the separated communities in the West. He does, however, discuss what the Secretariat said in its *Relatio* to justify the term “ecclesial” which it applied to these communities. It said:

²⁹ *Acta synodalia* 3, part 7, 35.

It must not be overlooked that the communities that have their origin in the separation that took place in the West are not merely a sum or collection of individual Christians, but they are constituted by social ecclesiastical elements which they have preserved from our common patrimony, and which confer on them a truly ecclesial character. In these communities the one sole Church of Christ is present, albeit imperfectly, in a way that is somewhat like its presence in particular churches, and by means of their ecclesiastical elements the Church of Christ is in some way operative in them.³⁰

Becker attempts to weaken the force of this statement by insisting on the qualifiers: "albeit imperfectly," "somewhat like," "in some way." He seems embarrassed to observe that Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, said, without such qualifiers, "The elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities, in a degree which varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church. To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian Communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them."³¹ Since this papal statement affirming the effective presence of the Church of Christ in other Christian communities is obviously hard to reconcile with his thesis that the Church of Christ is totally identified with the Catholic Church, Becker ends his discussion of it by saying: "It is certainly now the duty of theology to clarify definitively the meaning of this phrase" (520 B).

Becker does try to reconcile his thesis with another statement in the Decree on Ecumenism, but he does this in a long endnote. Referring to his own statement affirming the "total identification of the church of Christ with the Catholic Church" (519 B), he says in his note 42:

This complete identification is often called into question these days with a citation from *Unitatis Redintegratio* 15.1, which is speaking about the separated Oriental churches: "Hence through the celebration of the Eucharist in each of these churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature, and through concel-eration the communion among them is made manifest."³² This text has been used to prove that Vatican II by using the term *church of God* was admitting the existence of a church larger than the church of Christ or the Catholic Church. Now it is not easy to interpret this phrase. There was significant resistance to it on the floor of the council, and the responses of the secretariat are not clear. . . . The great difficulty in the text is the fact that St. John Chrysostom, who is being quoted here, was talking about the Eastern churches within the Catholic Church before the separation of Eastern Christians, and the quote, therefore, proves nothing about the issue that it is cited in connection with. Finally, the phrase "*Ecclesia Dei*" occurs again in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, No. 3 . . . and here definitely signifies the Catholic Church. So if the norm is observed according to which "what is obscure is to be

³⁰ Ibid. 3, part 2, 335.

³¹ *Ut unum sint* no. 11.

³² He also quotes the Latin, which I have omitted.

interpreted by what is clear,” then the position of the secretariat in this discussion is clear, beyond any doubt.

I would make several comments on this note. First, it is true that those who agree with Cardinal Willebrands’s interpretation of *subsistit in* have seen in the statement that the Church of God is built up by the celebration of the Eucharist in the separated Eastern Churches a confirmation of their understanding that the Church of God extends beyond the limits of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, I do not know of anyone who does not identify the Church of God with the Church of Christ. Second, most of the objections that bishops made to this statement were based on the position that Becker defends in his article. Examples are: “The Church of God is the Catholic Church, which itself does not grow when separated churches use its goods.” “The separated churches of the East cannot simply be called Church of God; the true Church of God is the Catholic Church.” The Secretariat responded: “These objections are drawn from an ecclesiological doctrine that does not take sufficient account of the sacramental character of the Church itself, as it is declared in the Constitution *De Ecclesia* of Vatican II. Cf. *De Ecclesia*, cap. III, p. 69, n. 26.”³³ Becker says this response is not clear; one thing that seems clear to me is that the Secretariat was not impressed by the objections that were based on the total identification of the Church of God with the Catholic Church. Third, the “great difficulty” that Becker sees in the council’s statement is the irrelevance of the passage from the writings of St. John Chrysostom to which the text refers. But there is no reason to think that the statement depends on that patristic text; it is not even quoted; it is merely referred to in a footnote. Lastly, Becker appeals to the place in *UR* no. 3 where *Ecclesia Dei* signifies the Catholic Church. As I pointed out above, in that place the decree speaks of the time prior to the separation of large communities from full communion with the Catholic Church, when the Church of God was simply identified with the Catholic Church. To sum up: I would say, as Becker does, that the position of the Secretariat in this discussion is clear; but it is also clear to me that the Secretariat did not recognize the cogency of the objections that were based on the thesis Becker is defending.

Toward the end of his article, Becker sums up his thesis by saying: “The Catholic Church has always defended her total identity with the Church of Christ, and she has continued to do so since the Council” (519 C). To support his final point, he invokes three documents issued by the CDF: *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), “Notification on the Book ‘Church: Charism and Power’ by Father Leonardo Boff, O.F.M.” (1985), and *Dominus Iesus*

³³ *Acta synodalia* 3, part 7, 679. The section of the draft *De Ecclesia* to which the Secretariat refers is found unchanged in *Lumen gentium* no. 26.

(2000). The passage Becker cites from *Mysterium Ecclesiae* simply repeats the statement in *Lumen gentium* no. 8, that the Church Christ founded and entrusted to Peter and the other Apostles subsists in the Catholic Church. In its “Notification” of 1985, the Congregation did offer an interpretation of *subsistit in*. Rejecting the one given by Boff, it said: “But the council had chosen the word *subsistit* exactly in order to make clear that one sole ‘subsistence’ of the true church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only *elementa Ecclesiae* exist; these—being elements of the same church—tend and conduct toward the Catholic Church (*Lumen gentium* no. 8).”³⁴ Here, it seems to me, we do have an interpretation that corresponds to the way that Tromp understood *subsistit in*, that is, that the Church of Christ subsists so exclusively in the Catholic Church that outside it there are only elements. In fact, however, Vatican II nowhere said that outside the Catholic Church there are *only* elements of the church. On the contrary, it recognized the presence and salvific role of churches and ecclesial communities that are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. Becker apparently sees no difference between the interpretation of *subsistit in* that was given by the CDF in 1985, and the one it gave 15 years later in *Dominus Iesus*, for he simply refers to the latter document as summarizing the affirmation of *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (520 A).

However, in *Dominus Iesus* the CDF has given an interpretation of *subsistit in* that is quite different from the one it gave in the “Notification” on Boff’s book. Now it says:

With the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two different 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. . . . 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 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.³⁵

It does not seem possible to recognize the Orthodox and other separated Eastern Churches as “true particular churches,” in which “the Church of Christ is present and operative,” and still insist that outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church “only *elementa ecclesiae* exist.” Hence it

³⁴ I have quoted this text as given in Becker’s article in *Origins*. The original, in Italian, is published in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 77 (1985) 758–59.

³⁵ Declaration *Dominus Iesus* nos. 16–17; *Origins* 30.14 (September 14, 2000) 216.

is incomprehensible to me that in footnote no. 56 of *Dominus Iesus*, the CDF quoted that statement from its 1985 “Notification” as though it were consistent with what it was now saying about the separated churches that have maintained apostolic succession and the valid Eucharist.

In his conclusion, Becker reflects on the use of “ecclesial” to describe the elements present in non-Catholic communities, and the use of “church” to describe some of those communities. He finds the way that these terms were used by Vatican II to be “open to question.” He asks, “What is intended with the name *church*, and how is it to be demonstrated that it is theologically correct to apply the name to non-Catholic Christian communities?” (520 C). My answer is that this could not be demonstrated if Becker’s interpretation of *subsistit in* were correct, because then we would have to hold that the Church of Christ is exclusively identified with the Catholic Church, from which the only theologically correct conclusion would be the one affirmed in the (rejected) 1962 draft of the Constitution on the Church: “Only the one that is Roman Catholic is rightly called Church.”