

## QUAESTIO DISPUTATA

### THE MEANING OF *SUBSISTIT IN* AS EXPLAINED BY THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

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*Much discussed since Vatican II is the question whether, in making the change from saying that the church of Christ is the Catholic Church to saying that it subsists in it, the council intended no longer to claim strict identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church. Francis Sullivan discusses the explanations of "subsists in" provided in recent documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.*

VATICAN II'S SECOND DRAFT of the Constitution on the Church asserted that the church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church. The third draft emended this assertion to say that the church of Christ "subsists in" (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church. Gérard Philips predicted, in his commentary on *Lumen gentium* published shortly after the council's close, that this Latin expression "would cause floods of ink to flow."<sup>1</sup> His prediction has proved true. The first question that has caused much ink to flow is, How should the Latin *subsistit* be translated into modern languages?

As a general rule, one can presume (unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary) that, when a council uses a Latin word, it uses that word according to its meaning in classical Latin. Latin dictionaries define *subsistere* as "to remain, to stand firm, to continue to exist," etc. Many modern European languages have a word that corresponds to *subsistere* and shares

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard Philips, *L'Église et son mystère au IIe Concile du Vatican: Histoire, texte, et commentaire de la constitution "Lumen gentium,"* 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1967) 1:119.

the same meaning, for example, the English “subsist,” the French *subsister*, the Spanish *subsistir*, and the Italian *sussistere*. As one would expect, those who translated the conciliar text into those languages have rendered *subsistit* by the corresponding modern word that means “continues to exist.” However, those who translated the conciliar text into German translated *subsistit in* with such phrases as *ist verwirklicht in* (is realized in), or *hat ihre konkrete Existenzform in* (has its concrete form of existence in). These translations are based on the meaning that “subsistence” came to have in Scholastic philosophy, rather than on the classical Latin meaning of *subsistere*. I believe it was the German translation that led some theologians to interpret “subsists” in *Lumen gentium* no. 8 in the philosophical sense of “subsistence.” One example of this interpretation can be seen in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s essay from 2000, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” which has now been included in a collection of his writings published by the Association of the Former Students of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Here he wrote: “The term *subsistit* derives from classical philosophy, as it was further developed in Scholasticism. . . . *Subsistere* is a special variant of *esse*. It is ‘being’ in the form of an independent agent.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, theologian Karl Becker, S.J., who for many years served as a consultor of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter CDF) while Ratzinger was its prefect, offered good reasons for taking the term “subsists in” in *Lumen gentium* no. 8 to have the original meaning of the Latin word. He discussed the meaning of this term in an article published in the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*.<sup>3</sup> There he proved from a tape recording kept in the archives of Vatican II that it was Sebastian Tromp, S.J., secretary of the council’s Doctrinal Commission, who had suggested the use of “subsists in.” Becker named three possible interpretations of *subsistit in*: “to be realized in,” “to subsist in the ontological sense of the Scholastics,” and “to remain, to be perpetuated in,” and he explained why neither of the first two would make good sense in the context. He then invoked Tromp’s knowledge of Latin in favor of understanding “to subsist in” to mean “to remain in, to be perpetuated in.” He wrote: “S. Tromp, as an excellent Latinist, knew well that in classical Latin and even more in medieval Latin, this was the real meaning of the word. And this sense corresponds well to the doctrine of the

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005) 147.

<sup>3</sup> *L’Osservatore Romano*, December 5–6, 2005, pp. 1, 6–7. An English translation, “The Church and Vatican II’s ‘*Subsistit in*’ Terminology,” is available in *Origins* 35(2006) 514–22.

council according to which all the means of salvation instituted by Christ are found forever in the Catholic Church.”<sup>4</sup> I believe that the German translation of *subsistit in*, which lends itself to the philosophical meanings rejected by Becker, has given rise to confusion about the meaning of the council’s statement that the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. This confusion can be seen in the several explanations of this statement given in documents issued by the CDF.

### THE NOTIFICATION CONCERNING LEONARDO BOFF

The first of these explanations was given in the Notification published by the CDF in 1985 concerning Leonardo Boff’s *Church, Charism, and Power*,<sup>5</sup> in which Boff had expressed the opinion that the church of Christ can subsist in other Christian churches. Rejecting this opinion as “exactly contrary to the genuine meaning of the conciliar text,” the CDF wrote: “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 of its visible structure there exist only elements of Church which, being elements of the church itself, tend toward the Catholic Church.”<sup>6</sup>

Two points in this explanation of *subsistit* suggest that it was based on the German translation noted above (“has its concrete existence in”) and thus has the meaning the term came to have in philosophy: (1) “only one subsistence” and (2) the assertion that outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church there exist “only elements of the church.” If the church of Christ “has its concrete existence” in the Catholic Church, and therefore the Catholic Church is its “one and only subsistence,” it would follow that outside the Catholic Church there can be no other churches, but only “elements of church.”

I see two problems with this explanation. First, the conciliar text does not say that outside the Catholic Church there are “only [solo] elements of church.” Second, in *Lumen gentium* the council went on to recognize the fact that when other Christians receive such “elements of the church” as sacraments, they receive them “in their own churches or ecclesiastical communities” (*Lumen gentium* no.15). This recognition shows that the council can hardly have meant to say that the church of Christ is so identified with the Catholic Church that, beyond its limits, only elements of the church can be found.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 519.

<sup>5</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985; orig. publ. 1982)

<sup>6</sup> Acta apostolicae sedis 77 (1985) 758–59 (my translation from the Italian).

### THE DECLARATION *DOMINUS IESUS*<sup>7</sup>

In *Dominus Iesus* (2000) the CDF gave an explanation of “subsists in” significantly different from the one it gave in 1985. In *Dominus Iesus* it says:

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>8</sup>

In this explanation, *subsistit* is clearly understood to have the meaning it has in classical Latin; it expresses historical continuity between the church founded by Christ and the modern Catholic Church. Thus it is translated “continues to exist in.” However, this phrase is qualified by two words: “fully” and “only.” The declaration does not say that the church of Christ continues to exist *only* in the Catholic Church. It says that it continues to exist *fully* only in the Catholic Church. “Fully” can well be understood in the light of what is said just above in the same section of *Dominus Iesus*: that “the promises of the Lord that he would not abandon his church . . . mean, according to Catholic faith, that the unicity and unity of the church—like everything that belongs to the church’s integrity—will never be lacking.” To say that the church of Christ continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church means that the Catholic Church alone has preserved everything that belongs to the church’s integrity, such as the unity that is preserved though the communion of all its bishops with the pope, along with the fullness of the means of grace. This interpretation is confirmed by the Decree on Ecumenism, which says that the “unity of the one and only Church which Christ bestowed on his Church from the beginning . . . subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time” (*Unitatis redintegratio* no. 4). On the other hand, the same decree says: “Our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as communities and churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those whom He has regenerated. . . . For it is through Christ’s Catholic Church, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained” (*ibid.* no. 3).

<sup>7</sup> “*Dominus Iesus*: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” *Origins* 30 (2000) 209–19.

<sup>8</sup> *Dominus Iesus* no. 16, *Origins* 216; emphasis added.

While insisting that the church of Christ continues to exist fully in the Catholic Church alone, the CDF in *Dominus Iesus* no. 16 explicitly recognized that outside the Catholic Church there are not merely elements of church, but there are churches and ecclesial communities in which these elements can be found. In fact, the declaration went on to say: “The churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to 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 those churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church.” In the light of this statement, one can hardly deny that the church of Christ continues to exist, though not fully, in the Orthodox churches. Understanding “subsists in” to mean “continues to exist in,” one can also say that the church of Christ subsists—though not fully—in the Orthodox churches. There is a similarly qualified use of “subsists” in the Decree on Ecumenism, where the council says that the Anglican Communion occupies a special place “among those in which Catholic traditions and institutions continue in part to subsist.”<sup>9</sup>

#### RESPONSES TO SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE DOCTRINE ON THE CHURCH<sup>10</sup>

In Responses to Some Questions, issued in summer 2007, the CDF returned to the question of the meaning of “subsists in.” The second question to which it responded is, What is the meaning of the affirmation that the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church? It responded: “In Number 8 of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* *subsistence* means this perduring historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church, in which the church of Christ is concretely found on this earth.”<sup>11</sup>

In this explanation of “subsists in,” it seems to me that the CDF has conflated the two meanings discussed above. The words “perduring historical continuity” correspond to the meaning that *subsistit* had in classical Latin and suggest that the CDF is following the explanation of “subsists in” given in *Dominus Iesus*. As we have seen above, to say that it is in the Catholic Church alone that the church of Christ continues fully to exist allows one to recognize that it is present, but without such fullness, at least in other “true particular churches.” But the words “in which the church of

<sup>9</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 13; the Latin text has “ex parte subsistere pergunt.”

<sup>10</sup> CDF, Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church, *Origins* 37 (2007) 134–36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

Christ is concretely found on this earth,” which reflect the German translation of “subsists in,” are consistent with the explanation the CDF had given in its Notification on Boff. The difference between the two is that *Dominus Iesus* allows the presence of other Christian churches, but the Notification allowed only *elements* of church to exist outside the Catholic Church. If it is in the Catholic Church that the church of Christ “is concretely found on this earth,” how could there be any concretely existing “true particular churches” except the particular Catholic churches? And how could the church of Christ be “present and operative” in other churches and ecclesial communities?

As I noted above, when the word “subsists” is understood to mean “continues to exist,” one can say that the church of Christ subsists, though not fully, in the Orthodox churches, for the reason that since they are “true particular churches,” the church of Christ must continue to exist in them. But in its Response to the Second Question the CDF goes on to say, “The word ‘subsists’ can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone.”<sup>12</sup> Here the CDF has evidently returned to the philosophical meaning of the term, which admits only one “subsistence.” By conflating the two previous explanations that were based on two different translations of *subsistit*, the CDF’s recent document seems not to have clarified the issue.

The third question to which the CDF responds in this recent document is, Why was the expression *subsists in* adopted instead of the simple word *is*? The CDF replies: “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. Rather, it comes from and brings out more clearly the fact that there are ‘numerous elements of sanctification and of truth’ that are found outside her structure, but that ‘as gifts properly belonging to the church of Christ, impel toward Catholic unity.’”<sup>13</sup>

Here we are told that the statement that the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church “indicates the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church.” But the original statement, “The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church,” already indicated this full identity. What then was the reason for the change? It is evident from the official reports given to the council fathers when this emended text was presented to them, that the intention of the subcommission in proposing this change was to say that the church of Christ *is present in* the Catholic Church, rather than that it *is* the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> While the word “is” clearly expressed full identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church, the phrase “is present

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Relatio no. 8, “De Ecclesia visibili simul ac spirituali,” *Acta synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, III/1 (Vatican City: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–[1978]) 176.

in” would not do so. Nor is there any good reason for thinking that the acceptance of “subsists in” in place of “is present in” meant returning to a statement of full identity. Becker has argued that this was the intention of Tromp in proposing the term “subsists in,” but, as I have shown in my response to his article, there are good reasons to conclude that the Doctrinal Commission did not agree with Tromp’s view that “subsists in” must be understood in so exclusive a sense that outside the Catholic Church there are only elements of the church.<sup>15</sup> When the council discussed the emended text, some bishops called for a return to the original text, which said, “The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church.” One reason the Doctrinal Commission gave for rejecting this amendment was that returning to *est* (is) would give the text a restrictive meaning.<sup>16</sup> The refusal to return to *est* on the grounds that this would give the text a restrictive meaning shows that the intention of the Doctrinal Commission in using *subsistit in* instead of *est* was to give the text a less restrictive meaning than it had when it said, “The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church.” In other words, the conciliar discussions provide clear proof that, by the change from “is” to “subsists in,” the Doctrinal Commission really intended to change the meaning of the text.

#### THE CDF’S COMMENTARY ON ITS “RESPONSES”<sup>17</sup>

In its Commentary on Responses to Some Questions, the CDF went back to the explanation of “subsists in” given in its Notification on Leonardo Boff, rather than to the explanation given in *Dominus Iesus*. The Commentary does not mention this more recent explanation, but rather quotes the one of 1985, which said that “the council chose the word *subsistit* specifically to clarify that the true church has only one *subsistence*, while outside her visible boundaries there are only *elementa ecclesiae*.” The Commentary offers this explanation of the change from “is” to “subsists in”:

What the council fathers simply intended to do was to recognize the presence of ecclesial elements proper to the church of Christ in the non-Catholic Christian communities. It does not follow that the identification of the church of Christ with the Catholic Church no longer holds. . . . The change from *est* to *subsistit in* takes on no particular theological significance of discontinuity with previously held Catholic doctrine. . . . Continuity of subsistence implies an essential identity between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church. The council wished to teach that we

<sup>15</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “Response to Karl Becker, S.J., on the Meaning of *Subsistit in*,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 395–409.

<sup>16</sup> Schema constitutionis De Ecclesia, Relatio de particularibus, ad num. 8, *Acta synodalia* III/6 81.

<sup>17</sup> CDF, Commentary on the Responses, *Origins* 37 (2007) 136–39.



encounter the church of Jesus Christ as a concrete historical subject in the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, following the German translation of *subsistit*, the CDF concludes that the church of Christ “has its concrete existence” only in the Catholic Church. The church of Christ and the Catholic Church are essentially identical, and outside the Catholic Church there are only elements of church.

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

How then are we to understand the continued existence of the church of Christ after the eleventh-century separation between the Eastern and Western churches? It seems to me that we must begin with the understanding that the universal church of Christ concretely exists as a communion of particular churches. As Vatican II teaches, it is in and from the particular churches that the universal church of Christ exists (*Lumen gentium* no. 23). Since that is the case, the answer to the question about the continued existence of the church of Christ after the eleventh-century separation will depend on the kind of communion among the particular churches that is believed necessary in order for the church of Christ to continue to exist “in and from” them. Those who believe that only perfect communion among the particular churches allows the continued existence of the church of Christ “in and from them,” will conclude that, since the eleventh century, the church of Christ has subsisted in the Catholic Church alone. That would seem to be the thinking behind the position taken by the CDF in its Response to the Second Question, where it said, “The word ‘subsists’ can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone precisely because it refers to the mark of unity that we profess in the symbols of faith.”<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, those who believe that the real but imperfect communion between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches is sufficient for

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 137–38.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 135.



the church of Christ to continue to exist “in and from” them will believe that, while the church of Christ continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, it has continued to exist, at least in part, where there are true particular churches. This line of argument would seem to have been behind the CDF’s position in *Dominus Iesus*, where it said that the church of Christ continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church. It also corresponds to the understanding the Council of Florence in 1439 expressed regarding the continued existence of the church of Christ since the eleventh century. In its declaration of restored union, that council said: “The wall of separation that divided the western and eastern church has been removed.”<sup>20</sup> Note that they did not say “churches” but “church” (in the Greek version *ekklesian* has one definite article.) They evidently believed that the one church of Christ had continued to exist despite the “wall of separation” that had divided it into Western and Eastern.

Finally, the Commentary on the Responses insists that the change from *est* to *subsistit in* does not signify that the Catholic Church has ceased to regard itself as the one true church of Christ. But it does not explain how we are to understand this claim now that we recognize the Orthodox churches as “true particular churches.” The reason the CDF gave in *Dominus Iesus* for calling the separated Eastern churches “true particular churches” is that they have maintained apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist. Appropriately, then, the Catholic Church continues to regard itself as the “one true church” for the reason that it alone has maintained both the fullness of the means of grace that Christ bestowed on his church, and the unity of one church through the communion of all its particular churches with the See of Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the pastoral care of his whole flock. However, this claim to be the “one true church” in no way excludes the recognition that the church of Christ is present and operative in the separated churches and ecclesial communities, and that the Holy Spirit makes use of them as means of grace and salvation for those who belong to them. One would look in vain for such positive statements about non-Catholic churches and communities in any papal document prior to Vatican II. This is just one of the reasons for questioning the claim that Vatican II did not change what had been Catholic doctrine on the church.

<sup>20</sup> Council of Florence, Session 6, July 6, 1439, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 1:524.