



Lumen Gentium No. 8, and *Subsistit in*, Again

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Abstract

Francis A. Sullivan says that the one Church of Christ continues to exist perfectly in the Catholic Church, and is present imperfectly in other churches and ecclesial communities. However, he thinks *Lumen Gentium* 8 also enables us to say that the many churches, non-Catholic and Catholic, are all in the one Church of Christ, since to say the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church means no more than “continues to exist in” the Catholic Church. In this way, he denies the identity of the one Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. We point out that magisterial documents since Vatican II have consistently refused this proposal, and have instead spoken only of the one Church being present or operative, according to degrees, in non-Catholic churches and communities. We argue that while it is true there is “ecclesial reality” outside the Catholic Church, in that there are elements of truth and sanctification outside of her, the one Church of Christ of which Vatican II expressly speaks is the Church with all the gifts of unity and instruments for salvation with which Christ endowed it. The Catholic Church is not contained in any larger divinely willed and dominically instituted ecclesial reality, and it is without qualification the one Church of Christ and the one Church of Christ is without qualification the Catholic Church.

Keywords

subsists in; subsistence; particular churches; the one Church of Christ; elements of truth and sanctification; ecclesial communion

In light of recent documents from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Francis A. Sullivan has recently expounded his view again on the interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* no. 8 and what it means to say the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church.¹ In what

¹ Francis A Sullivan, S. J., “The Meaning of *Subsistit In* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” *Theological Studies* 69(2008), pp. 116–124. See earlier his “A Response to Karl Becker, S.J., on the Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” *Theological Studies* 67(2006), pp. 395–409.

follows, we first state his view as we understand it. Second, we try to show why it is unsatisfactory.

I. Sullivan's Position

1. Sullivan denies the identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church. He thinks this follows from saying with *Lumen Gentium* no. 8 that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, rather than saying that it is the Catholic Church, and from recognizing that there are many elements of sanctification and truth outside the Catholic Church, in non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities.

2. However, he thinks this non-identity of the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church depends very much on how one understands *subsistere*. It depends, he holds, on taking *subsistere*, with Karl Becker, to mean "to remain, to be perpetuated in."² He thinks that if *subsistere* is given a more philosophical sense, such that one is warranted in speaking of one "subsistence" of the Church of Christ, and according to which *Lumen Gentium* no. 8 would mean that in the Catholic Church the Church of Christ has "'being' in the form of an independent agent" (Ratzinger), or such that one is warranted in saying that "there is only one subsistence" of the Church of Christ, and that in the Catholic Church (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Notification on Leonardo Boff), then it is impossible to maintain (coherently, anyway) the non-identity of the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church, and that it is impossible (coherently) to speak of other churches outside the Catholic Church.³ Therefore, since *Lumen Gentium* no. 15 does speak of separated churches (as does *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 15, the Decree on Ecumenism), and since we presume coherence, *subsistere* must mean "continues to exist in." It cannot mean "has

² Sullivan, "The Meaning of *Subsistit In*," pp. 117–118; "Response to Karl Becker," pp. 396–397; Karl Becker, "The Church and Vatican II's '*Subsistit in*' Terminology," *Origins* 35.32 (Jan. 19, 2006), pp. 514–522, at 519. This article first appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Dec. 4–5, 2006.

³ Sullivan, "The Meaning of *Subsistit In*," pp. 118, 121; "Response to Karl Becker," p. 408. See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ecclesiology of the Constitution Lumen Gentium*, in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), pp. 123–152, at 147 (he also says "concrete agent"). For the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Notification on Leonard Boff's *Church, Charism, and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), see AAS 77(1985), pp. 756–762, at pp. 758–759: "Il Concilio aveva . . . scelto la parola '*Subsistit*' proprio per chiarire che esiste una sola '*subsistenza*' della vera Chiesa, mentre fuori della sua compagine visibile esistono solo '*elementa Ecclesiae*' che—essendo elementi della stessa chiesa—tendono e conducono verso la Chiesa cattolica . . ." Sullivan, "The Meaning of *Subsistit In*," pp. 117, 118, links talk of "one subsistence" to the German translation of LG 8, "hat ihre konkrete Existenzform in"—"has its concrete form of existence in."

its concrete existence in”—these formulations are very different for Sullivan.

His argument for this last point is as follows: “If it is in the Catholic Church that the church of Christ ‘is concretely found on earth,’⁴ how could there be any concretely existing ‘true particular churches’ except the particular Catholic churches?”⁵ The argument seems to be that, if the Church of Christ is “concrete” only in the Catholic Church, then not only can it not be “concrete” in non-Catholic churches, but these “churches” cannot even really be churches. How does this conclusion follow? He seems to be supposing that a particular, concrete church, in order to be a church, must be contained within the concrete Church of Christ. Thus, if only the Catholic Church is this Church of Christ, concretely, then all other non-Catholic “churches” are both outside the Church of Christ and not even really churches.

3. He thus thinks that *subsistere* does in fact mean “continues to exist in,” and not “has its concrete existence in,” although he grants that of course the Church of Christ exists fully only in the Catholic Church. He would allow us to say, further, that while the Church of Christ subsists in non-Catholic churches, it does not do so fully or perfectly.⁶

4. Sullivan thinks as well that saying that “elements of sanctification and truth” are to be found outside the Catholic Church is compatible with recognizing that there are true particular churches outside the Catholic Church. But he thinks that saying that “only elements of sanctification and truth” exist outside the Catholic Church is not compatible with saying that there are true particular churches outside the Catholic Church. Saying “only elements” is therefore equivalent to saying that the Church of Christ “has its concrete existence” only in the Catholic Church. Since this is false, we should not say “only elements,” and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith misspoke in its Notification on Leonardo Boff in 1985.⁷

5. Sullivan thinks it true to say that the Church of Christ “continues to exist in,” is “present and operative in,” the non-Catholic churches

⁴ This is the claim of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church” at question 2; see *Origins* 37(2007), pp. 134–136, at p. 135.

⁵ Sullivan, “The Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” p. 121; similarly: “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’” (p. 118); “Response to Karl Becker,” pp. 403.

⁶ Sullivan, “The Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” pp. 120, 121; “Response to Karl Becker,” p. 403. That the Church of Christ is present in non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities is the teaching of John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* no. 11.

⁷ Sullivan, “The Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” p. 118; “Response to Karl Becker,” pp. 407–408; *The Church We Believe In: One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 30–31.

(and ecclesial communities), although of course it exists fully only in the Catholic Church.⁸ He thinks this way of speaking fits with saying the Church of Christ “continues to exist in” the Catholic Church, but not with saying it “has its concrete existence in” the Catholic Church, for with the latter sense, remember, there are no churches outside the Catholic Church, and so no churches outside the Catholic Church for the one Church of Christ to be operative in.

6. Last, Sullivan thinks that, because *subsistere* means what he says it does (and because it is not true that only elements exist outside the Catholic Church), then the one Church of Christ can be said to be “in and from” all of the particular churches, Catholic and non-Catholic.⁹

7. He thinks this is implied by *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 15, too.¹⁰ If one says that *subsistere* means “subsistence” in the philosophical sense, however, one cannot say this.

II. Why Sullivan’s Position is Unsatisfactory

A (ad 6). The Church is not formed out of non-Catholic churches

We begin with the sixth point. Sullivan wants to say that the universal Church, the one Church founded by Christ, is both in and formed from churches that are not in communion with Rome.

He argues from *Lumen Gentium* no. 23, which teaches that the universal Church is both present in and formed from particular churches. Then, he notes that Eastern churches are recognized as churches by the Council and in post-conciliar documents. Whence he concludes that the universal Church is formed out of both Catholic and non-Catholic churches. In this way, the universal Church, the Church founded by Christ, is a container within which both the Catholic Church and the Eastern churches are encompassed. Moreover, this recognition that non-Catholic churches are churches and compose the one Church of Christ is the very reason, according to Sullivan, that the Council said “subsists in,” and not “is” in *Lumen Gentium* no. 8. This asserts, and was meant to assert, the non-identity of the Catholic Church and the universal Church, the Church founded by Christ.

However, Sullivan’s use of *Lumen Gentium* no. 23 is illegitimate. *Lumen Gentium* no. 23 is speaking of Catholic particular churches, Catholic dioceses. The universal Church, the Church founded by Christ, is both present in them and comprised of them, i.e. comes

⁸ Sullivan, “The Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” pp. 119–120; “Response to Karl Becker,” pp. 407–408.

⁹ Sullivan, “The Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” p. 123.

¹⁰ Sullivan, “Response to Karl Becker,” pp. 406–7.

from them: “in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church.”¹¹ That is, it is from Catholic dioceses each of which recognizes the primacy of Peter, each of which enjoys that catholic unity willed by Christ the founder (*Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 3¹²), that the one, universal Church is constituted, constituted in the very way Christ constituted it, and with all the endowments with which he graced it.

However, the Eastern churches cannot be said to be particular churches from which the universal church is similarly constituted. For these churches do not recognize the primacy of Peter, which *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 3 envisages as one of the means of salvation with which the Church of Christ is endowed.¹³ And therefore, the universal Church, the Church founded by Christ, constituted in the very way he constituted it, is certainly not formed out of them. The Church founded by Christ, continuing to exist as he founded it, it can be formed only from churches that preserve the unity he gave to it—Catholic unity—and from churches that embrace the Petrine ministry as Catholics understand it, for the Church Christ founded he entrusted to Peter and his successors.

B (ad 7). The appeal to *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 15

In no. 15 of the Decree on Ecumenism, the Eastern churches seem to be spoken of as comprising the one Church. It is Sullivan’s inference that they are so spoken of. However, we think the inference he draws

¹¹ Here is the statement in context: “This collegial union is apparent also in the mutual relations of the individual bishops with particular churches and with the universal Church. The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful. The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model [*ad imaginem*] of the universal Church, in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church. For this reason the individual bishops represent each his own church, but all of them together and with the Pope represent the entire Church in the bond of peace, love and unity.”

¹² “Nevertheless, 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 who through Him were born again into one body, and with Him quickened to newness of life—that unity which the Holy Scriptures and the ancient Tradition of the Church proclaim. For it is only through Christ’s Catholic Church, which is ‘the all-embracing means of salvation,’ that they can benefit fully from the means of salvation. We believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, in order to establish the one Body of Christ on earth to which all should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God. This people of God, though still in its members liable to sin, is ever growing in Christ during its pilgrimage on earth, and is guided by God’s gentle wisdom, according to His hidden designs, until it shall happily arrive at the fullness of eternal glory in the heavenly Jerusalem.”

¹³ Sullivan recognizes just this point in *The Church We Believe In*, p. 52.

does not follow simply and necessarily from the text as he seems to think.

Yes, it seems that the Eastern churches and the Catholic Church are spoken of at least indirectly as comprising the one Church of God (*Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 15): “through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these [Eastern] Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature.” For the Eucharist certainly builds up the particular church, and if in doing that it is building up the one Church of God, how can that particular church not in some way help comprise the one Church of God?

The answer is that they might “comprise” it only “imperfectly,” which would be an attempt to say what is better said in other language that they are in only imperfect communion with the one Church of God as founded by Christ. Thus, it should be said that the Eucharist of the Eastern churches can certainly build up the one Church of God, even if the Church of Christ does not subsist in them. Why must we put things this way? If the one Church established by Christ subsisted in the Eastern Orthodox Churches we would find in them all the things Christ gave the Church he established. However, we do not; for we do not find the ministry of Peter exercised in them. Therefore, we cannot speak of the one Church of Christ as subsisting in them.

What we can do is take the language the Council used for individuals, speaking of “full incorporation” and therefore implying that there are degrees of incorporation (*Lumen Gentium* no. 14, *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 3), and use it of separated churches.¹⁴ If however we say that these churches are simply “incorporated,” or “fully incorporated” into the Church of Christ, then, like saying the Church of Christ subsists in them, we will imply that the Petrine ministry can both be and not be recognized as belonging to the Church established by Christ. In still other words, we can speak of these churches as in “imperfect communion” with the Catholic Church, as does *Ut Unum Sint* no. 11. We can speak, as Sullivan does, of degrees of “theological communion.”¹⁵ This way of speaking both preserves the uniqueness of the Catholic Church as the only place where the Church of Christ continues to be found in its wholeness and respects the real relation of separated churches and non-Catholic Christians to the Catholic Church.

Thus, it is important that the way of speaking in *Unitatis Redintegratio* is only indirect. The Council nowhere says directly that the one Church of Christ, the universal Church, is composed of Catholic

¹⁴ This way of speaking elides the question of membership as classically posed by such theologians as Robert Bellarmine and Francisco Suarez, for whom membership was an all or nothing question, a way of speaking embraced also by Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis*.

¹⁵ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, pp. 57, 60.

and non-Catholic particular churches. It nowhere gives the impression that the universal Church is being thought of as a container in which all the churches (and much less all the ecclesial communities) are placed in the same way.

C. The Catholic Church is not contained

If we say that the one Church is formed out of Catholic and non-Catholic churches, therefore, we are thinking of the one Church as a container, within which there is, among other things, the Catholic Church. This is the direction Sullivan's articles seem to lead. The magisterial documents since the Council have consistently refused this proposal, and have instead spoken of the one Church being present or operative, according to degrees, in non-Catholic churches and communities. The implications of the first way of speaking are worth developing.

If we say the one Church founded by Christ is formed out of Catholic and non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities, then it is possible to be in one part of it, some non-Catholic part, and not discover things like the papacy or the sacrament of orders or the sacrament of reconciliation. And yet, one is supposed to be in the one Church established by Christ. Can this one Church both have and not have a Petrine office? We will, perhaps, seek more simply for the things held in common. Such things as the Petrine office, then, do not necessarily belong to the one Church established by Christ. They might be thought to be for the *bene esse*, but not the *esse* of the Church. If this is not acceptable, however, then it is not acceptable to think of the one Church as a container in which, among other things, there is also the Catholic Church.

Then again, if non-Catholic churches and communities are in the one Church, then it would seem not only that their members have a real and positive relation to the Church of Christ, but that they simply and without qualification are incorporated in this one Church. It would seem, in other words, as if the talk of degrees of incorporation enabled by the Council is unnecessary—all Christians of whatever communion are fully incorporated in the one Church.

D (ad 5). The Church of Christ is operative in non-Catholic churches and communities

It is indeed legitimate to say, as Sullivan wants, that the universal Church, the Church founded by Christ, is present and operative in

non-Catholic churches (and ecclesial communities).¹⁶ But it is not legitimate to say, we have argued, that the universal Church, the one Church founded by Christ, is formed “from” them.

However, we should observe that saying that the Church of Christ is in or operative in non-Catholic Churches is the same thing as saying that the Catholic Church is in or operative in them,¹⁷ if indeed the Church of Christ—the Church as founded by Christ—is formed out of particular Catholic churches, and those alone (since those alone have all gifts with which Christ endowed the Church).

As we have said, Sullivan thinks that the Council could not have said “churches” in *Lumen Gentium* no. 15 if “only elements” were said (as it was not in fact said) or meant (as we think the case, see below) in *Lumen Gentium* no. 8. Now, when *Lumen Gentium* no. 15 speaks of the Church’s relation to non-Catholics, it says that the Church recognizes the sacraments they receive in “their own churches.” The “their own” (*propriis*) seems significant. “Their own” is not “our.” Since the churches of these non-Catholics are “their own,” it cannot be supposed that the Church is being thought of as relating to some part of itself. That is what would follow, however, if the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, and the Church is comprised of all groups that are called “churches.” So, since the first is undeniable, the second must be false: and calling the Eastern churches “churches” does not mean that in *Lumen Gentium* no. 15 the Council thinks the Church is speaking of parts of herself.

E (ad 4). That it is not incorrect to represent the Council’s teaching by saying that “only elements” exist outside the Church

When Sebastian Tromp proposed to the rest of Doctrinal Commission that the text say that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic

¹⁶ *Ut Unum Sint* no. 11. It might be noted that this passage seems to assume quite naturally the identity of the Church of Christ 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. For this reason the Second Vatican Council speaks of a certain, though imperfect communion. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* [no. 14] stresses that the Catholic Church “recognizes that in many ways she is linked” with these Communities by a true union in the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 3 seems to have something of this point in mind:

It follows that the separated Churches and Communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means 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 which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Church.

Church rather than saying that it is the Catholic Church, he said at the same time that this is meant “exclusively,” and that “only elements” are found outside the one Church.¹⁸ The text of *Lumen Gentium* says merely that “elements” (not “only elements”) exist outside the Church. As we have seen, Sullivan thinks this difference is important. For him, to say “only elements” as Tromp does would mean nothing can be called a church except the Catholic Church. This can seem to be plausible. For the 1962 schema, which has the *est*, remember, says that only the Catholic Church can be rightly (*iure*) called “Church.” Contrariwise, the text which first introduces *subsistit in*, and says “elements” (but not “only elements”), in speaking of non-Catholics, says of their sacraments that they are received “in their churches or ecclesial communities,” and this survives to the final text at *Lumen Gentium* no. 15.¹⁹ On the other hand and to the contrary, when the Commission defends this usage, it says that it is right to say “churches” because the *elementa* that the Catholic Church recognizes as possessed by non-Catholics “not only regard individuals but also communities,” and goes on to remark that “pontifical documents speak generally of the separated Eastern ‘churches.’”²⁰ The “elements” were understood from the beginning to be possessed by individuals and also by communities. Thus, it seems that for the Commission, anyway, saying only “elements,” and even saying “only elements,” would not mean another group cannot be called a church.²¹

It can be observed that the text of 1962, where it is said that only the Catholic Church can rightly be called “Church” means, in context, the Church given over by Christ to be ruled by Peter and his successors. That is, it means “the Church founded by Christ and *as* founded by Christ.” There is a certain sense, therefore, in saying that only that Church can rightly (*iure*) be called “Church.” That is, in context, what is being spoken of is the Church of Christ with all the instruments of sanctification he gave it, and with the unity he desired for it.²²

¹⁸ Karl Becker, “The Church,” p. 517.

¹⁹ See Francisco Gil Hellín, *Lumen Gentium. Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis in ordinem redigens schemata cum relationibus necnon patrum orationes atque animadversiones* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), the third schema, at nos. 7 and 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, third schema at no. 15, note D: “Elementa . . . non tantum individuos respiciunt, sed etiam communitates. . . Documenta pontificia passim de ‘Ecclesiis’ orientalibus separatis loquuntur.”

²¹ Sullivan quotes this text twice in “Response to Karl Becker” (400, 401), but does not seem to notice that saying “elements” supposes such things as he thinks can be indicated only by saying “ecclesial elements” or “churches.”

²² See Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, p. 28.

F. What it means to call the churches “churches” and ecclesial communities “ecclesial”

For the churches, it is a recognition of the observation of Henri de Lubac that the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church.²³ Wherever there is a full and valid celebration of the Eucharist, therefore, there must be a “church.” Defects there may be, of both the theological or moral order, but it cannot be that “the whole treasure of the Church” is made present at mass, and that the assembly there gathered is “called” to its Lord, and that we yet refuse to say “church.”

As for “ecclesial” communities in which “elements” of the Church were recognized, we have forgotten how liberating these words were at the time of the Council, since the distinction between such communities and the Church preserved the sense that, after all, we are bound to confess that it is the Lord who by his gifts defines the Church in its fullness and perfection, and so defines what counts as “Church,” and yet, at the same time, can recognize and name those elements of Protestant communions that really are from the Church, really do lead to the Church, really do have their efficacy from the Church, and so provide a basis from properly ecumenical discussion between Christian bodies. As the Doctrinal Commission said in explaining that the *elementa* regard communities, “precisely in this is located the principle of the ecumenical movement.”²⁴

G (ad 2 and 3). What “subsists in” means

Becker and Sullivan say it means “continues to exist in.” Maximilian Heim²⁵ and Ratzinger²⁶ say it means “has its subsistence in,” “exists concretely in.” Becker and Sullivan argue that Tromp, a master of classical Latin, would have taken *subsistere* in its classical sense—“to continue to exist it.” Heim says that Tromp, a professor of fundamental theology, must have intended the word to have its scholastic sense, indicating a substance’s manner of being, whereby it possesses its being in itself, and not in another.²⁷ Ratzinger says that all the Council fathers, trained as they were *modo scholastico*, would have understood immediately

²³ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986 [French, 1953]), chapter 4. See also the second chapter of the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.

²⁴ Hellín, *Lumen Gentium*, third schema at no. 15, note D: “in hoc praecise situm est principium motionis oecumenicae.”

²⁵ Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger*, pp. 314–6.

²⁶ Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology,” pp. 147–8.

²⁷ Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger*, p. 315, note 458.

that *subsistere* is narrower in meaning the *esse*, and that it indicates the way of being of what the Greeks styled an *hypostasis*.²⁸ Moreover:

Subsistere is a special variant of *esse*. It is “being” in the form of independent agent. This is exactly what is concerned here. The Council is trying to tell us that Church of Jesus Christ may be encountered in this world as a **concrete agent** in the Catholic Church.²⁹

Ratzinger’s observation, coming as it does from a participant in the Council, seems weighty.³⁰ It remains even so that the Doctrinal Commission did not express itself with all the fullness we might now desire on the meaning of the change. We are not, however, without resource. It may well be that the word has the sense Sullivan says it does, but that, in the larger context of *Lumen gentium*, it has also the sense Ratzinger thinks nicely captured in the scholastic vocabulary.

So, first, as to “concrete existence.” The text of *Lumen Gentium* has it that “the sole Church of Christ, the one “entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care,” the Church “constituted and organized as a society in the present world,” the Church previously characterized in the immediately foregoing sub-paragraph as a “complex reality,” visible and spiritual, “structured with hierarchical organs”—this is the Church that subsists in the Catholic Church. But then, as organized in a society, visible, structured, the Church in question seems to be quite concrete. And so, if it subsists in the Catholic Church, it presumably subsists “concretely,” which is to say “has its concrete existence” there.

Second, as to the Church of Christ being thought of as an “agent,” this is everywhere presupposed where there is talk of the Church

²⁸ Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology,” p. 148, note 18. Karim Schelkens, “*Lumen Gentium*’s ‘Subsistit In’ Revisited: The Catholic Church and Christian Unity after Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 69(2008): 875–893, thinks to find yet another interpretive key in the October 2, 1963 intervention of Bishop Jan van Dodewaard. He wants it to be said that the Church, understood as the universal medium of salvation, “is found” (*inveniri*) in the Catholic Church. Schelkens says van Dodewaard establishes a distinction between the Church as the universal means of salvation from the Catholic Church as but the “concrete form” of this universal means. This distinction is continued, he claims, after *inveniri* has become *adest*, and *adest* has become *subsistit in*. The universal means, moreover, extends beyond the concrete form. However, the only thing van Dodewaard recognizes here as existing beyond the *universale medium* or *totalem compaginem* of the Church are elements of truth and sanctification. He rather implies the identity of the Catholic Church and the Church as the universal means of salvation. Van Dodewaard’s text can be found in Hellín, 1048–1049.

²⁹ Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology,” p. 147. Emphasis original.

³⁰ See Christian Geyer’s interview with Ratzinger, “Ratzinger on *Dominus Iesus*,” *Inside the Vatican* 9(2001): 112–118, at 114: “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.” The interview originally appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 22, 2000, pp. 51–52.

speaking, doing, acting, as in the next sub-paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* no. 8.

But the *concreteness* of the existing, and the characterization of the Church as *agent*—we submit that these are the only two conceptual notes that Ratzinger’s understanding of “subsists” adds to Sullivan’s.

Therefore, whether Tromp was thinking of Gredt’s *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae* (as Heim suggests³¹) or whether he contented himself more modestly with some lexicon of classical Latin (Sullivan), it does not make any difference, since from the context of *Lumen Gentium* we end up with the notion proposed by Ratzinger, by Heim, and by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its Notification on Boff and elsewhere. It could not be said, therefore, that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in either its Notification (1985), or *Dominus Iesus* (2000), or the Responses to Some Questions (2007) has either derogated from the teaching of the Council or been confused as to what was really meant.

H (ad 1). Identity and non-identity

If *subsistere in* means “has its concrete existence in,” Sullivan holds, then the Church of Christ is identical with the Catholic Church, and there are no non-Catholic churches. There is, however, more than one way to conceive non-identity. There is the non-identity of a part and a whole. That is how Sullivan seems to shape things up. The Catholic Church is not exactly the same thing as the Church of Christ because it is only a part of it.

There is also the way the Council conceives of non-identity. The Church founded by Christ and as founded by Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, but the Catholic Church does not exhaust, as it were, absolutely all ecclesial reality; no, elements of the Church and sometimes even churches exist outside her. There is ecclesial being outside the one and unique Church. But there is no subsistence of the one and *unique* Church founded by Christ except singularly, uniquely. And that is in the Catholic Church. The elements are not self-sustaining, and so one is tempted to think of the distinction between substance and accident. That is not quite right, however, since the elements are “outside” the one Church, the one subsistence. It is a distinction, one may say, whose difficulty matches the difficulty of thinking coherently about a reality marred by sin.³²

Sullivan’s proposal is in the interest of respecting non-Catholic Christians. If there are churches and ecclesial communities outside the Catholic Church then we cannot interpret *subsistit* to mean that

³¹ Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger*, p. 315.

³² Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology,” p. 148.

the Church of Christ is fully identical with the Catholic Church. We agree, but only if that means that the Council acknowledges the existence of ecclesial reality outside the Catholic Church.³³ There is true ecclesial reality outside the boundaries, social and institutional, of the Catholic Church. Because of this, however, Sullivan also wants also to deny that the Church of Christ subsists only in the Catholic Church. We do not agree at all. The Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, and only there, and in this sense, moreover, is fully identical with the Catholic Church.³⁴ True, the Church of Christ must continue to exist, in some degree, in particular Churches and ecclesial communities separated from the Catholic Church.³⁵ However, saying that the Church of Christ subsists only in the Catholic Church because she alone has all the things that Christ gave the Church, does not mean that every church and ecclesial community outside the Church is not really a church or is not really an ecclesial reality.

This can be put in terms of the unicity of the Church. To deny that there exists only one subsistence of the Church of Christ is to deny the unicity of the Church. The commentary on the Responses to Some Questions makes this very point stating that the unicity of the Church:

would be compromised by the proposal that the Church founded by Christ could have more than one subsistence. If this were the case we would be forced, as the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* puts it, to imagine “the Church of Christ as the sum total of the Churches or the ecclesial Communities – which are simultaneously differentiated and yet united”, or “to think that the Church of Christ no longer exists today concretely and therefore can only be the object of research for the Churches and the communities.” If this were the case, the Church of Christ would not any longer exist in history, or would exist only in some ideal form emerging either through some future convergence or through the reunification of the diverse sister Churches, to be hoped for and achieved through dialogue.³⁶

³³ This is how Ratzinger speaks in “Ratzinger on *Dominus Iesus*,” p. 114: “The Council Fathers thus wished to say that the being of the Church as such 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.”

³⁴ This is how Ratzinger speaks in “Ecumenism at a Standstill? Explanatory Comments on *Mysterium Ecclesiae*,” in *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) pp. 228–237, at 230: “No translation can fully capture the sublime nuance of the Latin text [of *Lumen Gentium*] in which the unconditional equation of the first conciliar drafts—the full identity between the Church of Jesus Christ and the Roman Catholic Church—is clearly set forth . . .” Even here, he says “the equation is not mathematical” (231).

³⁵ Sullivan, “The Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” pp. 123–4

³⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Commentary on the Document “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church,” *Origins* 37(2007), pp. 136–139, at 137.

Either we affirm the one subsistence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church or we end up denying that the Church which Christ founded remains and lives today with all gifts that Christ gave it – including its unity – from the beginning. If we think of multiple subsistences of the Church of Christ then we will think that the one Church of Christ does not have the unity that Christ willed it to have and we will, in turn, misconceive the primary reason for ecumenism as having to do with overcoming this lack of unity in the one Church of Christ.³⁷

Furthermore, to affirm multiple subsistences is to overlook the fact that the Church of Christ cannot lose her unity without losing something essential to her mission. How can the Church of Christ lose the unity that Christ intends it to have and still remain in the nature of a sacrament and an instrument “both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race”?³⁸

The unicity of the Church willed by Christ is bound up with the indefectibility of the Church. She is indefectible, in part, because she will never be lacking in what she needs to fulfill her mission. Unity is necessary for the Church’s mission otherwise she cannot be the saving sacrament of unity.

III. Conclusion

The Council Fathers taught in *Unitatis Redintegratio* no. 4 the gift of unity that Christ bestowed on the one Church was something that remained in the Catholic Church and could never be lost:

... when the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion have been gradually overcome, all Christians will at last, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, be gathered into the one and only Church in that unity which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning. We believe that this unity 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.

Sullivan acknowledges that the Catholic Church has the unity and the institutional integrity that Christ wants the Church to have but

³⁷ Sullivan comes very close to saying this in *The Church We Believe In*, p. 65:

“If the Church is to be found even where ecclesial communion is not as full as it ought to be, we have to admit that the church, as it exists today, does not have the unity that Christ wants it to have. However, if we have to admit that the Church is not as holy as it ought to be, can we not also admit that it is not as one as it ought to be? Indeed, is not this admission the basic reason for the ecumenical movement?”

³⁸ *Lumen Gentium* no. 1.

affirms at the same time that the Church of Christ does not have the unity that Christ wants it to have because the Church of Christ is still found where ecclesial communion is not as full as it should be in particular churches and ecclesial communities.³⁹ Then it follows that if there is but one subsisting of the Church, it subsists as something incoherent, or that there are many subsistences. This second alternative leads one to think of the Church of Christ as existing in fragments and of the ecumenical task having to do with re-assembling those fragments so that the Church of Christ might regain her lost unity and oneness. On the contrary, the disunity among Christians does not shatter the unity of the Church of Christ but hampers the Church's pursuit of the fullness of catholicity. Therefore we read in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4:

Nevertheless, the divisions among Christians prevent the Church from attaining the fullness of catholicity proper to her, in those of her sons who, though attached to her by Baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her. Furthermore, the Church herself finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in all her bearings.

And *Dominus Iesus* no. 17:

The lack of unity among Christians is certainly a wound for the Church; not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but "in that it hinders the complete fulfillment of her universality in history.

Holding firmly to the one subsistence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church helps us to see and understand that the task of the ecumenical movement bears upon the Church's catholicity. "Full unity and full Catholicity", in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "go together".⁴⁰

We forget today how at the time the recognition of ecclesial elements outside the Catholic Church was thought to be a great breakthrough of positive ecumenical significance; maintaining only the subsistence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church was thought to be sober and newly modest. Today, on the other hand, it seems that every attempt to recognize the continued perfect and full and identifiable existence of the Church of Christ, and this in accordance with the promises of Christ, is thought to be yet another exercise of Roman imperialism.

³⁹ Sullivan, *A Church to Believe In*, p. 65.

⁴⁰ Ecumenical meeting, Apostolic journey to Cologne on the Occasion of XX World Youth Day, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050819_ecumenical-meeting_en.html (accessed March 20, 2008) See also the Homily for the Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul on 29 June 2005, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050629_sts-peter-paul_en.html (accessed March 20, 2008).

We think the position we have outlined, the position we think to be that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is coherent. It respects the ecclesial reality of non-Catholic churches and communities. It is the opposite of ecclesial relativism and so accepts the dominical promises to the Church at face value. It both makes ecumenical discussion possible and calls for it.

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