

## *Subsistit in* as a Specific Determination of Substantial Being in *Lumen Gentium* 8

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Ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν ἡμεῖς ἠπορήκαμεν, ὑμεῖς αὐτὰ ἡμῖν ἐμφανίζετε  
ικανῶς τί ποτε βούλεσθε σημαίνειν ὅπου ἂν φθέγγησθε.  
δῆλον γὰρ ὡς ὑμεῖς μὲν ταῦτα πάλαι γινώσκετε, ἡμεῖς δὲ  
πρὸ τοῦ μὲν ᾠόμεθα, νῦν δ' ἠπορήκαμεν...

“Tell us plainly, then, since we are in perplexity, what you wish to indicate when you say ‘being.’ For it is clear that you have been aware of this all along, whereas we formerly thought we knew, but are now perplexed.”

Plato, *Sophist* 244a

### I. Introduction

The perplexity of Plato’s Stranger over this most basic metaphysical question is almost certainly shared by anyone who has tried to follow the many and varied post-conciliar efforts to determine the precise meaning of *subsistit in* as it is used in *Lumen Gentium* no. 8.<sup>1</sup> Surveying the literature on the subject, one might reasonably conclude that the expression can mean so many things that for all intents and purposes it means nothing in particular. The scholarly controversy centers on how much—if any—technical or metaphysical weight the term is intended to bear in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Despite the fact that *subsistere* carries a demonstrably technical metaphysical meaning in the Church’s dogmatic and theological tradition, scholars continue to disagree over whether *Lumen Gentium*

<sup>1</sup> “This is the single Church of Christ, which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Savior, after his resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd (Jn 21:17), and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority (cf. Mt 28:18 f.), which he erected for all ages as ‘the pillar and mainstay of the truth’ (1 Tm 3:15). This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in [*subsistit in*] the Catholic Church, which is governed by the Successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure.”

8 intends to convey anything ontologically specific by it. This situation is extraordinary inasmuch as we have a dogmatic constitution, whose very nature it is to clarify points of doctrine by way of definitive formulations, appearing to stand in need of clarification by the theologians whose speculative work it was presumably intended to guide.

Happily, authoritative amplifications of *subsistit in* have by no means been wanting. In fact the magisterium has repeatedly affirmed the technical and metaphysical character of *subsistit in*.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, these affirmations seem to have had remarkably little effect on those scholars who perseveringly insist that *Lumen Gentium*'s framers had no intention of situating the Church within an explicit order of being.<sup>3</sup> And while the debate has necessarily raised countless ancillary questions, the guiding, if not always explicitly stated, concern has remained largely the same: Is the Church of Christ to be identified *simpliciter* with the Catholic Church, or is the Church of Christ somehow more universal—more catholic—than the Catholic Church? The question has proven to be as vexed as it is important. For, if we grant as an article of faith that the Church is one, is not *Lumen Gentium* rightly charged either (in the best case) with excessive and culpable subtlety or (in the worst) with arrant nonsense in declaring the Church is somehow *in* the Church?

This article will conclusively demonstrate that *Lumen Gentium* cannot escape either of these charges if *subsistit in* does not convey a real ontological specificity. In other words, if this expression communicates only that the Church of Christ is somehow *in*, but not

<sup>2</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the book of Father Leonardo Boff: "The Church: Charism and Power"*: AAS 77 (1985), 758-759; CDF, *Declaratio de Iesu Christi atque Ecclesiae unicitate et universalitate salvifica*: AAS 92 (2000), 742-765; CDF, *Responsa ad quaestiones de aliquibus sententiis ad doctrinam de Ecclesia pertinentibus*, June 29, 2007: AAS 99 (2007), 604-608; CDF, *Commentary on the Document "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church: Notitiae 43 (2007), 398-415*. See also Jared Wicks, "Questions and Answers on the Responses of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith", *Ecumenical Trends*, vol. 36, no. 7 (July/2007), p. 1-7 & 15.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity*, Burns & Oates, London 2004, p. 65; Francis A. Sullivan, "Quaestio Disputata: The Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith", *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), p. 116-124; "Quaestio Disputata: A Response to Karl Becker, S. J., On the Meaning of *Subsistit In*", *Theological Studies* 67 (2006), p. 395-409; "The Significance of the Vatican II Declaration that the Church of Christ 'subsists in' the Roman Catholic Church", in R. Latourelle, ed., *Vatican II: Assessments and Perspectives, Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, 3 vols., Paulist, New York 1989, vol. 2, p. 272-287; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: the Human Story of God*, Crossroad, New York 1990; *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology, and the Church*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll (NY) 1995; Donato Valentini, "The Unicity and the Unity of the Church", in *Declaration Dominus Iesus*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Washington, D.C. 2011, p. 76; Umberto Betti, "Chiesa di Cristo e Chiesa Cattolica", *Antoniano* 61 (1986), p. 726-745.

coextensive with, the Catholic Church, then we are left with neither a genuine development of doctrine, nor a radically new ecclesiology, but with a tautological non-explanation. This largely negative conclusion is necessarily related to the more positive or constructive task of establishing not only the identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, but also the quite specific metaphysical sense in which *subsistit in* must be taken. So far from representing a shift away from a strict identification of Christ's Church with the Catholic Church, *subsistit in* gives that identification an even more definitive ontological signification.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, *subsistit in* is not "weaker" than *est*, but rather discloses the precise way in which the Church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church.

## II. *Quid sit "Haec Ecclesia?"*

From the time of the Council until the present there has been a considerable number of influential theologians who understand *subsistit in* to mean something less determinative than *est*. Francis A. Sullivan, to take a prime example, maintains that *subsistere* denotes nothing more technical or precise than "continues to exist in"<sup>5</sup>—a perfectly serviceable translation if the word is considered in itself. And, indeed, if the *unica Christi Ecclesia* that subsists in the Catholic Church were described only in terms of abstract qualities, notes, or characteristics, then surely there would be nothing less controversial than to say that these "continue to exist in" the Catholic Church, for

<sup>4</sup> For a representative range of metaphysical readings of *subsistit in*, see, Malloy, "Subsistit In: Nonexclusive Identity or Full Identity?," *The Thomist* (72) 2008, 1-44. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*," in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 123-52, at 147; and Cardinal Avery Dulles, "Letter to the Editor," *America* 197.9 (October): 43. Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology*, 315. Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967-1969), 1:150. F. Ricken, "Ecclesia . . . universale salutis sacramentum," *Scholastik* 40 (1965), 373. Stephen A. Hipp, "'Est', 'Adest, and 'Subsistit in' at Vatican II," *Angelicum* 91 (2014), 727-794. Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole, *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 127-129. Lawrence J. Welch and Guy Mansini, O.S.B., "*Lumen Gentium* No. 8 and *Subsistit in* Again," *New Blackfriars* 90 (2009): 612-613. Lawrence J. Welch, *The Presence of Christ in the Church: Explorations in Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2012), 100. Robert Fastiggi, "The Petrine Ministry and the Indefectibility of the Church," in Steven C. Boguslawski and Robert L. Fastiggi, *Called to Holiness and Communion: Vatican II on the Church* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2009), 175-176.

<sup>5</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, "Quaestio Disputata: The Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith", *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), p. 116-124; "Quaestio Disputata: A Response to Karl Becker, S. J., On the Meaning of *Subsistit In*", *Theological Studies* 67 (2006), p. 395-409.

any such qualities are either essential attributes or proper accidents of the Church. In other words, if the *unica Christi Ecclesia* were either a spiritual reality or a constellation of essential attributes that finds concrete expression in the Catholic Church (as well, presumably, in any genuinely ecclesial communion), then there could be no difficulty over the meaning of *subsistere*. But the immediate context of *Lumen Gentium* 8 simply does not allow for any such quasi-Platonist reading.

In fact, the *unica Christi Ecclesia* is identified less by its theological marks than by the historical events and persons that constitute its appearance in history: “This is the single Church of Christ, which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Savior, after his resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd (Jn 21:17), and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority (cf. Mt 28:18 f.), which he erected for all ages as ‘the pillar and mainstay of the truth’ (1 Tm 3:15).” It is impossible to overlook the fact that the historical details cannot be identified with just any ecclesial body or communion. The Church, as it is described here, is not reducible to a *koinonia* centered on Christ, formed by scriptural preaching, and vivified by valid sacraments. The first church-founding act of the risen Christ is, by this account, the commissioning of Peter. Peter’s office, along with those of the apostles, appears as a *sine qua non* of the Church’s existence and identity as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth.”

Significantly, paragraph 8 twice uses the demonstrative pronoun, *haec*. It is *this* Church that is more than the sum of its *elementa*, but is instead an organic unity that is identifiable by its special dominical establishment as a society in history (*in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata*.) The repetition of the demonstrative underscores the fact that what Christ established is indistinguishable from the historical existence of *this* particular society organized according to *this* particular polity. The only Christian communion that could be identified with this description of the *unica Christi* is the Roman Catholic Church. By their own doctrinal standards, no other ecclesial communion would even wish to be so identified. And even though all Christians accept on the authority of Scripture that the Church is the “pillar and mainstay of the truth,” apart from the Catholic Church, no particular society of Christians—*in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata*—has ever supposed it referred unambiguously to themselves. The fear, therefore, that the exclusive identity of the “one Church of Christ” and the Catholic Church threatens the bond of charity between Christians of differing communions is, therefore, wholly unfounded. This is because in both principle and practice no organized body of Christians could recognize itself in this description of the Church.

The Reformed creeds and confessions, to take but a single instance, confirm the point. The Belgic Confession (1566), the oldest doctrinal

standard of the Christian Reformed Church, says nothing at all about those characteristics or founding acts by which the *unica Christi Ecclesia* is identified in *Lumen Gentium* 8.<sup>6</sup> Peter's commission as shepherd of the universal Church, to say nothing of a dominically established apostleship, has no bearing on a classically Reformed ecclesiology. In other words, by the standard of their own confessional statements, no Reformed Christian ought to feel slighted by the exclusive identity of the Church of Christ *as it is described in Lumen Gentium* 8 and the Catholic Church. It appears the only Christians taking umbrage at exclusive identity are Roman Catholic theologians. And while this continues to have unhappy repercussions within the Catholic Church, it is typically regarded as a "tempest in a teapot" to Christians of other confessions.

### III. *Subsistere*: a Determination of *Esse*

If, given the immediate context of *Lumen Gentium* 8, there are incontrovertible reasons to suppose that the *unica Christi Ecclesia* has a relation of identity to the Catholic Church, then it may well be asked why the council fathers did not simply put *est* where we find *subsistit in*. This question is, of course, the subject of more scholarly debate and magisterial teaching than any other single expression found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. To rehearse here the history of those debates and the consequent magisterial clarifications would be to no purpose when excellent accounts already abound. Prescinding from the metaphysical questions, I endeavored to

<sup>6</sup> The whole of Article 27 of the Belgic Confession, titled, "On the Holy Catholic Church," runs thusly: "We believe and confess one single catholic or universal church—a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as appears from the fact that Christ is eternal King who cannot be without subjects. And this holy church is preserved by God against the rage of the whole world, even though for a time it may appear very small in the eyes of men—as though it were snuffed out. For example, during the very dangerous time of Ahab, the Lord preserved from himself seven thousand men who did not bend their knees to Baal. And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith." One point is particularly relevant here: that the visibility of the Church—its concrete historical existence as society established by Christ and endowed with apostolic authority centering on Peter as its principal shepherd—is not an essential attribute or constitutive principle of the Church. Related to this, it is worth noting that the framers of the Belgic Confession are at least as concerned with the great chasm fixed between the Church from the world—between the order of grace and that of nature—as with its largely invisible universality. However unsound or false the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* must be to orthodox Calvinists, what it implicitly denies them is of no consequence to their doctrine of the Church.

show in the section above the absurdity of proposing that the Church which Christ, following his resurrection, established as a concrete and particular society with Peter as its shepherd and the apostles as its authoritative teachers, subsists in, say, the Dutch Reformed Church. This much, at least, is certain: whatever *subsistit in* might mean, it cannot mean something less than *est*. It cannot refer to something that is both in the Catholic Church and mysteriously beyond it, since the description of the Church of Christ is concrete and historical and therefore empirically impossible to identify with any other ecclesial communions. No other Christian society answers to this description.

While the *elementa* outside the Catholic Church are not a thematic concern of this article, their existence is frequently advanced as an argument against the relation of identity. The commonness of this line of thinking is itself reason enough to treat it briefly here, if only to provide (with apologies to John Calvin) an “external help” to my principal arguments. That these *elementa* should somehow be an embarrassment to claims of identity reveals a profoundly mistaken view of what an element actually is. While an aggregate may be the sum of its parts, an organic unity is by definition irreducible to its constitutive elements. The elements of an organic whole may be found outside the thing itself, but insofar as they are separate they have lost their organic character. At best, they may be combined into new aggregates, but they can never re-form themselves into a genuine whole. Were that possible, we could discern no formal difference between an aggregate and an organic unity. An element is *ipso facto* a constitutive part a substance, that is, of an actually and independently existing unity. The elements of the Catholic Church which exist outside her visible boundaries cannot, *qua elementa*, constitute an ever-expanding number independent “churches,” but only communicate an imperfect participation in that organic whole of which they are properly elements.

To return to the meaning of *subsistit in*, the question at this juncture is not so much whether the *unica Christi Ecclesia* as it is identified in *Lumen Gentium* 8 is the Catholic Church, for it is manifest that that description cannot plausibly be taken to refer to any other Christian communion—nor does any such communion identify itself in this way. Rather, given the identity of the *unica Christi Ecclesia* and the Catholic Church, there remains only the matter of what *subsistit in* communicates that the simple *est* does not. According to a recent article by Christian Washburn, “many scholars on both sides of the *subsistit in* controversy assert the term is used in its *ordinary* sense of ‘to exist’ or ‘to continue to exist...’<sup>7</sup> The problem with this is

<sup>7</sup> Christian Washburn, “The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Subsistit in*,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 22 (2015): p. 145-175.

that *subsistere* does not seem ever to have had an “ordinary” sense at all. The closest we can get to *subsistere* in “the state of nature” is in a military context. In representative classical authors, *subsistere*, never denotes simple existence. Vergil, Caesar, and Livy (to name the more important authors) typically use it in its literal sense of “taking a stand, “standing fast,” or even “making a stand against.”<sup>8</sup> If there were an “ordinary sense” in which *subsistere* meant simple existence<sup>9</sup> one would expect to find it used by the writers in whose works the Latin language took its classical form. Yet that expectation must be disappointed, as it seems never to have been meant in some more general sense. *Subsistere* does indeed include the notion of existence, but it is the concrete existence of particular things, like nations, anchors, and cables—things that have *substantial* existence and stand firm against other substantial things which threaten them.

So, to subsist is not just “to be,” but rather to be in a determinate manner, or according to a particular mode. Again, this is the way it is used in its least philosophical sense. Yet its later and more technical employment in metaphysics and theology is in complete continuity with its pre-philosophical signification. This is not surprising, for, at least in classical philosophical realism, metaphysics purports to offer an explanatory account of the being of things. Metaphysics, in other words, is not noetically independent of ordinary experience, but is the science by which the ontic grounds of that experience are disclosed. When Caesar tells us that in the midst of the tempest, “neither the anchors nor the cables could hold fast (*subsisterent*),” he is not saying that these things could not go on merely existing, but that they were unable to hold fast in their proper tasks of anchoring and binding. To hold fast or to stand firm is not any sort of existing, but the kind of existing that things as such “go on doing.”<sup>10</sup>

This means that the supposed conflict between *subsistere* in its “ordinary” and metaphysical senses appears to have no foundation in

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Livy’s *History of Rome*, Book 27: *Maxime movit patres Hasdrubalis transitus in Italiam, vix Hannibali atque eius armis subsistentem*. Here, we are told, Italy is only “with difficulty” (*vix*) “withstanding” (*subsistentem*) Hannibal’s Carthaginian forces. Perhaps more to the point (since we are concerned here, not with human beings, but with the “thinghood” of the Church), in Book V of *The Gallic War*, Caesar describes the dramatic scene in which *neque ancorae funesque subsisterent, neque nautae gubernatoresque vim tempestatis pati possent*. Here the term clearly means something like “hold fast.”

<sup>9</sup> That is, prior to its having acquired a more technical or even metaphysical meaning.

<sup>10</sup> In her superb doctoral dissertation, *Die Bedeutung des subsistit in (LG 8): Zum Selbstverständnis der katholischen Kirche* (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2002), Alexandra von Teuffenbach alone amongst the theologians provides a more or less comprehensive lexicographical survey of *subsistere* as it is used by classical Latin authors (see, especially, pp. 90-99). Nevertheless, the fuller implications of the continuity between the poetic, pre-philosophical meaning of *subsistere* and its later metaphysical signification—so devastating to the special pleading of those who insist on an “ordinary” meaning of *subsistere* as “existing”—are not fully drawn out.

the actual history of the word. Its use in metaphysics remains rooted in its commonsense and poetic signification. The primary and literal meaning of any word must always be the very ground of its further differentiation by philosophy and theology if these disciplines intend to say anything at all about being or beings.

It is necessary at this point to be explicit about the way in which *subsistere* signifies a determinate mode of existence in properly philosophical and theological contexts. Rather than looking yet again to the older scholastic writers, it may be useful to look to a more contemporary work by an emphatically modern Catholic thinker to see what philosophers and theologians typically mean by subsistent being. In 1964, the very year *Lumen Gentium* was promulgated, the Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan wrote a Latin treatise on the Trinity which he used for his classes at the Pontifical Gregorian University. In the *Pars Systematica* of his *De Deo Trino*, Lonergan devotes an entire section to the meaning of *subsistere*. Thanks to the formal or stylistic economy imposed on him by the Gregorian's still-scholastic methodology, Lonergan's explanation is uncharacteristically lucid:

Many things are said to be, but they do not exist in the same way. There are chimeras, but these are only in the mind, and thus are conceptual beings. There are possible beings, but they are only in the potency of an agent or even of matter, and are therefore what *can be* rather than what *are*. There are accidents, but their mode of being is to be in something else, and therefore they "are in" rather than simply are. There are the constitutive principles of being, such as essence and existence, matter and form, substance and accident, potency and act; none of these themselves are, but by them something is. But besides all of the above, which are in a qualified way, namely, in the mind, or in the potency of something else, or in another, or as that by which another is, there are those things that are first and foremost said to be—minerals, plants, animals, humans, angels, God, the Father, the Son, the Spirit. Since all of these simply are and truly are, they are rightly given the special designation "subsistent."

A subsistent, then, is that which is, it is distinguished from conceptual beings, possibles, accidents, and the constitutive principles of being.<sup>11</sup>

If the *unica Christi Ecclesia* of *Lumen Gentium* 8 indeed subsists, it either has a *per se* existence ontologically independent of the Catholic Church, or it is the Catholic Church. Because orthodox Christianity knows but a single Church, only the latter alternative is conceivable. In other words, *the "One Church of Christ" cannot be a constitutive principle of the Catholic Church or of any ecclesial communion.*

<sup>11</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *The Triune God*. Robert M. Doran, Daniel Monsour, eds., and Michael G. Shields, trans. (Toronto: Published for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College by University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 241.



### III. Conclusion

At this point, the significance of *subsistit in* for the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* comes into full view. If initially *est* was tried and found wanting for the purposes of the dogmatic constitution, it could not have been because there was predominant intention to break with the Church's traditional self-understanding, especially as it had been most recently set down in Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis Christi*.<sup>12</sup> As we have already seen, it makes no sense to suppose that the term was employed because it was more ecumenically open. It is also clear that the literal and pre-philosophical meaning of *subsistere* cannot be taken to mean simply "to exist," but "to stand," "stand firm," etc.—essentially to stand or be as this individual thing, or substance. It is a "that which is" in an unqualified way, unlike the modes of being found in conceptual beings, possible beings, accidents, and the constitutive principles of being. So rather than attenuating the *est* of *Mystici Corporis Christi*, *subsistit in* intensifies it by identifying a precise way in which being is predicated of the *unica Christi Ecclesia*. Put simply, Pius's *est* is further determined as an "*est qua...*" The Church of Christ has no existence other than its concrete and subsistent existence in the Catholic Church. The notion that Christ's Church "continues to exist in," or is constitutive of, any number of churches or communions leaves us finally with a chimerical being which no actual body of Christians could recognize as the Church.

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting in this connection that Henri de Lubac's *Méditation sur l'Église*, (Paris, 1953), translated as *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1956), by all accounts so influential on the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, was deeply indebted to Pius's encyclical, which it cites more than any other magisterial document. The dangers Pius saw generally in the (derisively-named) *nouvelle théologie*, and de Lubac's work in particular, concerned mostly the relation of the supernatural to the natural order. De Lubac's ecclesiology does not seem to have been a matter of especial concern to the pope.