

The History of the Word "Subsistit" in Lumen Gentium

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How would the average Catholic spontaneously respond to the question: "Where is the Church instituted by Jesus Christ to be found today?"

Many would surely struggle for an answer. It appears somehow anti-ecumenical to say simply: "In the Catholic Church". The self-confidence of having chosen the right thing, the gratitude for belonging to a divinely founded community, to stand up for it, perhaps even to suffer for it, or – in a good sense – to fight for it, has been almost completely lost. Today, we prefer to speak more ambiguously, less sharply, less clearly and, in the end, less convincingly. This is not only true of the average Christian, but also of statements made by cardinals and bishops. Sometimes it seems as if there is ultimately no real difference between the various churches.

The Catholic Church, however, has never seen it that way. On the contrary, she has always made the exclusive claim of being the true Church. The Church Fathers defended the true Church against schismatic groups and defined the qualities of the true Church of Christ. Even the concession that there are elements of the Catholic Church present in other communities is not seen to imply the presence of churches. No Church Father has ever declared that on account of the "elements of sanctification and of truth" found in other ecclesial communities, the exclusive identification of the Church of Christ with the Church governed by the Bishop of Rome should be lost.

Generally, positions are clarified only once they are attacked. At the time of the Reformation, therefore, the position of the Catholic Church as the one and only Church of Christ was emphatically defended by St. Robert Bellarmine. He formulated in one sentence the Church's essential qualities as coming forth from her 1500 years of history. The qualities of the true Church are: unity of faith, of sacraments and of government by the Bishop of Rome.

When the Second Vatican Council was called, therefore, the Church had known nearly two thousand years of unanimous consent on the question of the absolute identification of the Catholic Church with the Church of Christ. Now tradition in the Catholic Church is normative, so something spectacular must have happened for that claim of the Catholic Church to be given up. For it seems that Catholics today no longer have to believe themselves to be in the one and only true Church of Christ.

No one would have rejected this statement more than the secretary of the Theological Commission of the Second Vatican Council, the Jesuit Fr. Sebastian Tromp. One of his overall priorities at the Council was to achieve a condemnation of indifferentism and, consequently, a declaration of absolute identity between the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ. For Tromp, "indifferentism" meant the "equalization" (Gleichmacherei) of all Christian denominations or indeed of all religions. He especially opposed the three-branch-theory (already condemned in 1864) which supposes that the Church of Christ is split up into three branches, the Roman-Catholic, the Anglo-

Catholic and the Greek-Catholic. It was precisely to avoid such a position that both the First and Second Vatican Councils consciously dropped the adjective "Roman" when referring to the Catholic Church. The Councils did not want to back a theory that even today enjoys great popularity and during the last council, Tromp repeatedly highlighted the problem as soon as there was any attempt to use the adjective "Roman".

As the council did not want to make any dogmatic statements and therefore condemn any theories, Tromp had to couch his move against indifferentism in a positive terms.

All seven drafts prepared for the first chapter of a conciliar constitution on the Church were modified by Tromp himself. In each of them he insisted on the following addition: "Therefore this Sacred Assembly teaches and declares solemnly that there is only one Church of Christ which we ourselves celebrate in the Creed as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, which the Saviour himself bought on the Cross ... and which the Risen Lord entrusted to Peter and his successors to govern, which alone rightly can be called the (Roman) Catholic Church."

Tromp was successful. The text was adopted for the first draft, which was proposed to the Conciliar Fathers in the autumn of 1962. The Central Commission approved it without difficulties. There was only one modification to Tromp's proposal, at the request of Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne: "the Risen Lord" was changed to "after his resurrection". The text remained unchanged even after Gerard Philips, a theologian from Louvain, had revised and shortened the Schema of the Theological Preparatory Commission. No one objected to Tromp's sentence.

In the autumn of 1963, so many proposals for changing the text were coming in that the Commission had to be divided into sub-commissions, each of which was responsible for one section. One of these sub-commissions dealt with the sentence that Tromp had inserted into the conciliar document. Although there is nothing in the acts of the sub-commission about changes requested by bishops, the sub-commission reformulated the sentence entirely.

This procedure did not correspond to the usual conciliar working method and was unprecedented. Usually the commission put its draft together with the original before the Council Fathers— they could then approve the text, propose changes or reject it. In Tromp's case, the sentence was simply changed. It was stripped of all its solemnity and it no longer resembled a definition. Nevertheless its core content remained: "The Catholic Church is the Church of Christ." Furthermore, the Commission substituted the Latin *est* (is) with *adest* (is present / is there).

The competent sub-commission was not able to have the revised text printed but had to submit it to the plenary assembly of the Theological Commission. And so, in the presence of many theologians and bishops, the first articles of the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, were discussed on 25th and 26th November at 4 p.m. Philips chaired the debate. Each paragraph was

read and a rather quick discussion ensued as to whether or not it should be amended. Not everyone agreed on article 8. It was proposed that they re-insert *est* instead of *adest*, to which the sub-commission made no objection. Tromp alone proposed *subsistit* instead of *adest* – successfully. On 21st November 1964, the complete text of *Lumen Gentium* was approved, with 2151 votes in favour and 5 against.

It would seem, therefore, that the enormous change that has taken place in the self-understanding of the Catholic Church over the last forty years has in fact been based on a single word inserted into the Constitution – practically unnoticed and unwilling by any of the Council Fathers – at the instigation of a theologian whose manifest intention was to achieve exactly the opposite.

For forty years, no one has known who pleaded in favour of this formulation, nor what is really meant by it. In the official English translation of *Lumen Gentium* we read: “This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him.” The German translation renders *subsistit* as *is verwirklicht in* (“is realized in”), and it is especially this version that has had a profound theological impact – a translation at which every Latin teacher would shake his head.

“Realize” in Latin is *ad effectum perducere* or *adducere*, whereas the correct translation of *subsistere*, and thus the sense of its English equivalent, “subsist”, is to “remain standing”, “stand still”, “resist” and “remain”. Originally the word was used in Classical Latin to describe an army that does not recede an inch in the face of attack. In the Middle Ages it became more and more an equivalent of *esse* (“to be” / “to subsist”).

If we transfer this to the text of *Lumen Gentium*, the following becomes clear: the Catholic Church – despite all attacks – remains the Church of Jesus Christ. This is the sense in which the Latinist Tromp understood the word *subsistit*. In 1921, Tromp had defended his doctoral thesis on the Roman notion of sacrifice. He wrote, disputed and taught in Latin, and he knew exactly what *subsistit* means. But the real dilemma in the long discussion does not lie in its translation: it lies in an erroneous interpretation of the Council which supposes that the latter wanted to change doctrine, attack the Tradition of the Church and even put into question the Church’s self-understanding. A great number of theologians have attempted to interpret this word and their logic is practically always the same: without being familiar with the conciliar acts, they have ascertained that first the text read *est*, then *subsistit*. From this it has been deduced that the Council did not want to say *est* and instead wrote *subsistit*. The reason for this was that, with the first draft, the more “conservative” side had won, whereas with the second version the more “open” theologians had prevailed. *Subsistit*, therefore, can only be a mollification of *est*.

Also in this context, the general presupposition is that there was a kind of “changing of sides” during the Council: the predominant power of the Roman Curia and the Holy Office was forced to retreat by the more open bishops of

the universal Church. Thus, interpreters of subsistit claim the Council wanted to assert the identity between Catholic Church and Church of Christ less harshly than the Preparatory Commission.

However, when the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* was read in the Conciliar Aula, the bishops were dealing with one of the most important topics of the Council – the role of the college of bishops. Hardly any notice was taken of the revised text of the first chapter. Karl Rahner, an attentive observer, said at a press conference on the schema concerning the Constitution on the Church, “from a purely doctrinal standpoint, no special surprises are to be expected”. Later on, he added: “In this context, one has to deal with the difficult ecumenical question of the relationship between non-Catholics and even non-Christians to the Catholic Church ... without obscuring the self-understanding of the Catholic Church to be the Church of Christ.”

In reality, however, the Church’s self-understanding has been obscured to such a degree that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued documents about it in 1973, 1985 and most recently in 2000, in *Dominus Jesus*. The Congregation has given various limits of interpretation which, especially in Germany, arouse severe protest. They are seen as a retrograde step to pre-conciliar times, and nothing short of treason. But true ecumenism cannot consist of unclear declarations which diplomatically avoid contentious points; and certainly it cannot be founded on misinterpretations – even if these last for nearly forty years. In the history of the Church, theological opinions often go astray, Councils never.

“Only the Truth Liberates” (Nur Wahrheit befreit): this was the title of an article by the distinguished Lutheran theologian Eberhard Jüngel, published in response to *Dominus Jesus*, accusing the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of looking backwards, to before Vatican II. It is, however, a characteristic of the Catholic Church to stay true to itself and to explicate its doctrine without changing it or throwing it overboard.

Sebastian Tromp once said in an interview: “I know we have to strive not to give offence to our separated brethren and not to widen the gap. I am of the opinion that we help the cause of unity most effectively and are able to regain it by means of a bright and clear exposition of the truth. We must not talk to our separated brethren primarily in a way that pleases them, but in a language that they understand. This is not easy, because Protestantism has many faces. But the Church must also speak to her separated brethren in her own language. She cannot talk in seven frames of mind all at the same time. If the Church does not speak her own language, these difficulties will only increase.”