



**bi-annual Bulletin**

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*A Center conducted by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

How seriously does the Roman Catholic Church regard other churches - as churches - in the ecumenical movement? When the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council rejected the draft prepared in advance for the Decree on the Church, and instead of saying that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is the actual Roman Catholic Church, they substituted for *is* the word *subsists*, they consequently opened the door to twenty years of theological speculation as to what they really intended to say. On March 4, 1986, an overflow audience of 120 theologians, students and interested participants heard Fr. Francis Sullivan, S.J. of the Gregorian University here in Rome deliver a sober, clear yet provocative paper on this question. We present the text in this issue. A subsequent consultation of Rome-based members of the Catholic Theological Society of America brought together an important group of theologians at the Centro for further study and discussion of the text. A forthcoming volume to be published by the Gregorian containing theological reflections twenty five years after the beginning of the Council will contain this paper.

Other important addresses presented at the Centro recently include: "The Ministry of Unity of the Bishop of Rome to the Whole Church" by Brother Max Thurian of the Taizé Community and Executive Secretary of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (April 11th); "Twenty Years after the Council: Current Prospects and Advances in Ecumenism" by the Rev. Pierre Duprey, P.A., Secretary of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Holy See (April 17th); and "Archbishop Ramsey, the Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow" by Prof. Owen Chadwick, President of the British Academy (April 28th), a program in cooperation with the Anglican Centre of Rome which is currently celebrating its twentieth anniversary.

The staff of the Centro Pro Unione was particularly gratified to have organized the lecture on the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome given by Frère Max Thurian, the text of which is also presented in this issue. (Both Fr. Sullivan's and Frère Thurian's texts will also be published in a forthcoming issue of *One in Christ*). Given the history of our own Founder, Fr. Paul Wattson of Graymoor and his arduous testimony to the Petrine office, we could not but feel that this fresh presentation of a long-standing ecumenical "obstacle" is a notable contribution towards continuing a fruitful dialogue where once there was polemic and discord. Frère Thurian's religious community, Taizé, stresses prayer as an essential foundation of true ecumenical progress. Fr. Paul played a foundational role in the now universal observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We hope that this line of discussion will be pursued in a prayerful, friendly way, whatever our continuing difficulties and even reservations. We realize that all in dedicated ecumenical dialogue are, to say the least, not of one mind on this matter. At least, may the serene tone and careful scholarship of his paper be reflected in our on-going discussions, both between, and also within our churches, always "speaking the truth (as we see it) in love."

The coming autumn issue of this *Bulletin* will contain the next update of our *Bibliography of Interchurch and Interconfessional Theological Dialogues*.

Charles Angell, S.A.  
Director

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VATICAN II'S DECISION TO SAY  
OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST NOT THAT IT "IS" BUT THAT IT  
"SUBSISTS IN" THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

A talk given at the Centro Pro Unione,  
on Tuesday, March 4th, 1986

by Francis A. Sullivan, S.J.\*

When I began teaching ecclesiology six years before the opening session of Vatican II, there was no doubt what was meant when one said: "The Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church." ("Roman" here means "in communion with Rome", and of course includes the Eastern Catholic Churches). Pope Pius XII had made it perfectly clear, both in *Mystici Corporis* (AAS 35, 1943, 221 ff.) and in *Humani Generis* (AAS 42, 1950, 571) that the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church were one and the same thing.

After Pope John XXIII had announced the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, a Preparatory Theological Commission was formed in 1960, with Card. Ottaviani, Prefect of the Holy Office, at its head, and Fr. Sebastian Tromp, chief collaborator in the writing of *Mystici Corporis*, as its secretary. From the texts produced by this commission, one can safely judge that the expectation of its members, carefully picked by the Holy Office, was that the bishops gathered at the council would in no case depart from the official teaching of the Popes. It seems clear they saw the role of the council as turning into conciliar doctrine what was already papal teaching.

Hence it is no surprise when we find the following statements in the *schema De Ecclesia* presented by this preparatory commission to the council in its opening session of 1962: "The Roman Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ... and only the one that is Roman Catholic has the right to be called Church" (AS I/4, 15).

Among the criticisms that were made of

this schema during the week that it was discussed by the council (Dec. 1-7, 1962; AS I/4, 126-391), one that was heard a number of times concerned this exclusive identification between the Mystical Body and the Catholic Church. As is well known, the frosty reception given to the whole schema was enough to convince the leadership of the council that it should be quietly withdrawn without even being put to a vote. So during the spring and summer of 1963 a new *schema De Ecclesia* was prepared, which, it must be said, did incorporate quite a lot of material from the previous one, while differing a great deal from it in tone and general approach.

On the question we are dealing with, the new schema followed the previous one in asserting that the one and only Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church; but it added the significant admission that "many elements of sanctification can be found outside its total structure", and that these are "things properly belonging to the Church of Christ" (AS II/1, 219-220). This last phrase at least implied that such "elements of sanctification" as are to be found outside the Catholic Church are ecclesial in nature; and that suggests that there is at least something of church beyond the limits of the Catholic Church.

This is the schema that was discussed for the whole month of November, 1963, and on which the bishops submitted their *modi*, or proposals for emendation. In the interval between the session of 1963 and that of 1964, a very considerable revision was made of the *schema De Ecclesia*, and it was while the Theological Commission was preparing the revised

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text that the question was raised within the commission itself, as to the consistency of maintaining on the one hand that the Church of Christ was simply identified with the Catholic Church, and then admitting that there were "ecclesial elements" outside of it. The solution arrived at was to change the text from saying that the Church of Christ is the Catholic Church, to saying that it *subsists in* it. The official explanation given to explain this change to the bishops was: "so that the expression might better agree with the affirmation about the ecclesial elements which are found elsewhere." (AS III/1, 177). Unfortunately for the commentators, no further elucidation was offered as to the precise sense in which the word "subsists" was intended to be taken.

The one fact that is absolutely certain is that the decision no longer to say "is" - a decision ratified by the vote of the Council - is a decision no longer to assert such absolute and exclusive identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church as had been claimed by the previous *schemata*. The fact that the "many elements of sanctification and of truth" - these last words added by the commission at the same time - are explicitly recognized as "ecclesial" in nature, evidently suggests that there must be something of church out there. There would have been no point in making this change if the new term: "subsists in" were to be understood in the same exclusive sense that had been affirmed by the simple copulative "is".

Practically all commentators have seen in this change of wording a significant opening toward the recognition of ecclesial reality in the non-Catholic world. But much remained to be clarified, and I would venture a guess that more ink has been spilled on the meaning of "subsistit" than on any other single word in the documents of Vatican II. I would distinguish three questions that need to be answered, and to which I shall address myself:

1. What is the significance of this change from "is" to "subsists in" for our thinking about the Catholic Church?
2. What is its significance for our thinking about other Christian communities?
3. What is its significance for our thinking about the universal Church of Christ?

The first point I would make is that none of these questions can be given a satisfactory answer on the basis of this one text of *Lumen Gentium* alone. What we are seeking is the "mind of the Council" about some of the most basic questions relating to what the Decree on Ecumenism calls "the Catholic principles of ecumenism". The people working on the *schema De Ecclesia* were very much aware of the fact that at the same time a *schema De Oecumenismo* was being prepared, and

it was their intention to leave the ecumenical aspects of ecclesiology to be handled in that decree. Actually these two documents were promulgated on the very same day: Nov. 21, 1964. In the allocution which he gave on that occasion, Pope Paul VI, in addressing himself especially to the non-Catholic observers, made the explicit point that the doctrine on the Church in *Lumen Gentium* was to be interpreted in the light of the further explanations given in the Decree on Ecumenism (AAS 56, 1964, 1012-3). So we shall seek the answers to our questions in both of these documents, and in the official *relationes* given by the respective commissions to the council fathers.

We begin our first question by asking: how is the word "subsists" to be understood? The *relatio* that I have already quoted as giving the reason for the change gives us no further light on the way they intended "subsists" to be taken. However, the commission also provided a *relatio* that briefly summarized the contents of each paragraph of Chapter I. The second paragraph of n. 8, in which our phrase occurs, was summarized as follows: "Ecclesia est unica, et his in terris adest in Ecclesia Catholica, licet extra eam inveniuntur elementa ecclesialia" (There is but one Church, and on this earth it is present in the Catholic Church, although ecclesial elements are found outside of it" (AS III/1, 176). Here the word that corresponds to "subsistit in" is the very simple "adest in". This, I think, is a good reason for not following those commentators who have interpreted the word "subsistit" in the light of a philosophical notion of *subsistentia*. One went so far in this direction as to suggest that the Catholic Church is to other Christian communities what *ens subsistens* (the divine Being) is to created beings. Another philosophical approach is to imagine that the Church of Christ is being thought of here as a kind of "platonic idea" which has its "concrete form of existence" in the Catholic Church. Some German translations actually lend themselves to such an interpretation.

However, most commentators, and I believe rightly, reject the idea that "subsists" is being used here in any such technical philosophical sense. It is a good working rule that, in the absence of clear indications to the contrary, terms used in conciliar documents are meant to be taken in the ordinary sense that the word has in common usage. If one looks up the word *subsisto* in a Latin lexicon, one finds that the primary meaning is: "to stand still, to stay, to continue, to remain," etc. That such is actually the correct meaning of the word in our passage is confirmed both by the context, and by other places in the conciliar documents where the same word occurs.

If one reads the whole paragraph (8 b) one

sees that the Church of Christ which is said to subsist in the Catholic Church is not an ideal church, needing to be concretely realized in this world, but is the historical church of the New Testament: the church that Jesus entrusted to Peter and the other apostles to be propagated and governed. It makes excellent sense to say that this church continues to exist, and that it is still to be found in the Catholic Church, the one, namely, that is governed by the successors of Peter.

Other passages confirm this interpretation of the word "subsist", especially two that occur in the Decree on Ecumenism. In n. 4 c we are told that "the unity which Christ gave to his Church can never be lost, and it subsists in the Catholic Church." Later on, in n. 13 b, the Decree speaks of the Anglican Communion as one of the separated Christian communities in which Catholic traditions and institutions "ex parte subsistere pergunt": "at least in part continue to exist."

But the all-important question, on which we are seeking the mind of the Council, is still to be answered: namely, *how*, in exactly what way, does the Church of Christ subsist in the Catholic Church? I believe the answer to this question is found in the Decree on Ecumenism. No. 2 of this decree gives us the best description to be found anywhere in the documents of the council, of the kind of unity that Christ gave to his Church. There we see that while it is essentially a communion of faith, hope and love, whose principal cause is the Holy Spirit, the Church is also intended to be visibly united in the profession of the same faith, the celebration of the same sacraments, in the fraternal concord of one people of God. In order to bring about and maintain such unity, Christ endowed his Church with a threefold ministry of word, sacraments and leadership, first entrusted to the apostles with Peter at their head, and then continued in the college of bishops under the Pope.

If we keep in mind this description of the unity which Christ gave to his Church, we can see how significant is the statement in the same Decree, no. 4 c: "We believe that the unity with which Christ from the beginning endowed his Church is something it cannot lose; it subsists in the Catholic Church, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time."

What follows explicitly from this profession of faith on the part of the Council - this is without doubt the force of the opening words: "we believe" - is that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church with that unity, both spiritual and visible, described in UR n. 2. Neither the separation between East and West in the 11th century nor the divisions of Christianity since the 16th, has meant the

loss of such unity. It subsists; it is still to be found intact in the Catholic Church. This does not mean that there is no ecclesial unity at all to be found in other Christian Churches, nor indeed that there is no real, though imperfect communion still binding all the baptized and their communities together. But the Decree goes on to say, with complete frankness, that our separated brethren and their churches do not enjoy the kind of unity which Christ intended his Church to have. Such unity subsists in the Catholic Church, and in it alone (UR 3 e).

What I believe follows implicitly from this, is that it is the mind of the Council that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church not only with the unity that Christ intended his Church to have, but with all its inalienable properties intact. To say that the Church of Christ subsists means that it still exists with all those gifts with which Christ endowed it. To say that it subsists in the Catholic Church means that it is in the Catholic Church that it is to be found still existing with all its essential properties: its oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. This does not mean, of course, that they are found there is a state of eschatological perfection. We have already seen the Council express its hope that the unity of the Church will continue to increase until the end of time. LG 48 c describes the Church in this world as endowed with a holiness that, while real, is still imperfect. UR 4, 10 admits that the divided state of Christianity hinders the Church from achieving the fullness of its catholicity. But, while imperfectly achieved, these are properties which the Church of Christ can never really lack. To say that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church then means that it continues to exist there with all those gifts which it can never lose.

Another statement of the Decree on Ecumenism that suggests the mind of the Council on our question is the assertion: "It is through the Catholic Church alone that the whole fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained" (UR 3 e). This does not mean that there are not many such means of salvation present and effectively used in other Christian churches and communities; this is explicitly recognized in the same context. But at the same time it is said, in general, of the separated communities, that "we believe they suffer from defects" in this regard. From this it follows that it is in the Catholic Church alone that the Church of Christ subsists with that fullness of the means of salvation which Christ entrusted to the apostolic college.

To sum up: I believe we have a clear answer, in the Decree on Ecumenism, to the question as to how the Council intends us to understand

the statement that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. It means that the Church of Christ has continued and will continue to exist until the end of time with all its inalienable properties and with all the means of salvation with which Christ endowed it, and it is precisely in the Catholic Church that it continues so to exist.

Of course it must be kept in mind that this is a question of institutional integrity: of fullness of the means of salvation; or to put it another way, we are talking about the Church as *sacramentum*, not as *res sacramenti*. There is no question of denying that a non-Catholic community, perhaps lacking much in the order of sacrament, can achieve the *res*, the communion of the life of Christ in faith, hope and love, more perfectly than many a Catholic community. The means of grace have to be used well to achieve their full effect, and the possession of a fullness of means is no guarantee of how well they will be used.

I would also like to point out that I do not think that the interpretation which I propose as corresponding to the mind of the council as to how the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church would certainly follow from the mere use of the word "subsistit" in LG 8. The word "subsistere" by itself does not necessarily connote such structural integrity as is claimed for the Catholic Church. In fact, the Council used the same word, with the qualifier "ex parte", "partially" or "incompletely", when it said that certain Catholic traditions and institutions "subsist" in the Anglican Communion (UR 13 b). This has to be kept in mind if the question is raised whether the Church of Christ can be said to "subsist" also in other Christian churches. I would say that if one is going to use such language, one must be careful to qualify one's statement in some such way as the Council itself qualified its statement about the Catholic traditions that "subsist" in the Anglican Communion.

Another point that seems important to make is that the Council surely means to say that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church with such structural or institutional integrity that it cannot lack an authoritative magisterium capable of settling dogmatic questions in a definitive and eventually infallible way. The thesis of a recent book by the Basque Jesuit Luis Bermejo: *Towards Christian Reunion*, is that the dogmatic decisions of the Western Catholic Councils, and specifically those of Vatican I, have no claim to infallibility, because the Church of Christ is no longer exclusively identified with the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore only a truly ecumenical consensus of the whole Christian world would enjoy the privilege of infallibility. The problem is that Bermejo builds his thesis on the dropping of

the word *est* - which does mean abandoning the exclusive identification of Church of Christ with Catholic Church - but he never seriously examines the question as to what the Council meant by its alternative assertion: that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. He does not consider the implications of the Council's statement that the unity which Christ gave to his Church cannot be lost and that it subsists in the Catholic Church. If the unity of the Church is essentially its unity in faith, then the Church can never lack the effective means to promote and safeguard such unity, and this ultimately involves its capacity to settle questions about faith definitively and with a divine guarantee of truth in its ultimate decisions.

We come now to our second question: what is the significance of the change from "is" to "subsists in" for our thinking about the rest of the Christian world? It hardly needs to be said that we cannot depend for our answer to this question on the statement of LG 8 alone, which speaks of the presence of elements of sanctification and truth outside the Catholic Church: elements which are said to be gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ.

At this point it seems necessary to consider the interpretation which the CDF has given of this text in the *Notificatio* which it published just a year ago concerning Leonardo Boff's book *Church Charism and Power*. In criticizing the statement of Boff to the effect that the Church of Christ subsists also in other Christian churches, the Congregation offered the following interpretation of the mind of the Vatican Council (I quote the Italian, which is the official version, published in the AAS 71, 1985, 758-9): "Il Concilio aveva invece scelto la parola 'subsistit' proprio per chiarire che esiste una sola 'sussistenza' 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 (LG 8). Il Decreto sull'Ecumenismo esprime la stessa dottrina (UR 3-4), la quale fu di nuovo precisata nella Dichiarazione *Mysterium Ecclesiae* n. 1 (AAS 65, 1973, 396-398).

I must confess I am not sure how to translate the phrase: "esiste una sola sussistenza della vera Chiesa"; taken literally it would mean: "there exists only one subsistence of the true Church". In any case, what does seem clear is that the CDF is interpreting the Council to mean that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church in so exclusive a way that outside of her limits there can be found *only elements of Church*.

My first observation is that while in this context the Council *mentions* only elements, the conciliar text certainly does not say "only elements"; the word in the text is *plura* (many),

not *sola*. Secondly, it is a fundamental principle of exegesis that one judges the meaning of a text in the light of the whole document, and we have already quoted Pope Paul VI to the effect that the doctrine about the Church in *Lumen Gentium* is to be understood in the light of the explanations given in the Decree on Ecumenism. The CDF claims that its interpretation of the text is confirmed by that Decree. With all due respect, I do not see how one can justify such a claim.

But, before looking at the Decree on Ecumenism, there is an important text of *Lumen Gentium* itself that sheds light on this question. In no. 15, LG describes the many ways in which the Catholic Church is linked or joined with non-Catholic Christians. It declares that these Christians, consecrated to Christ by their baptism, also recognize and receive other sacraments *in their own churches and ecclesiastical communities*. It is particularly noteworthy that this phrase was added to the text, as the official *Relatio* tells us, in response to many requests of the bishops. This *Relatio* goes on to say: "The elements which are mentioned concern not only individuals but their communities as well; in this fact precisely is located the foundation of the ecumenical movement. Papal documents regularly speak of separated Eastern 'Churches'. For Protestants recent Pontiffs have used the term 'Christian communities'" (AS III/1, 204).

It is obvious that the Conciliar Theological Commission did not share the view that outside the Catholic Church there exist only *elements of Church*.

What is to be said of the claim that the interpretation of the CDF is confirmed by the Decree on Ecumenism? I do not see how such a claim can stand up against the explicit recognition of the salvific role not only of the ecclesial elements and "sacred actions of the Christian religion" found among our separated brethren (UR 3 b-c), but also of their churches and ecclesial communities as such (*Ipsae Ecclesiae vel. communitates*). UR 3 d declares that these "are by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation, for the Holy Spirit has not refrained from using them as means of salvation."

It did not escape the notice of some less ecumenically minded bishops that this text was clearly attributing a salvific role not just to the sacraments that might be found in non-Catholic communities, but to these churches and communities as such. This occasioned a *modus* proposing that the text be amended to say rather: "In these communities means of salvation are preserved which the Holy Spirit has not refrained from using, etc." The response of the Commission is as follows: "Wherever valid means of salvation are being

used, which, as social actions, characterize those communities as such, it is certain that the Holy Spirit is using those communities as means of salvation" (AS III/7, 36).

Finally, the whole of Chapter III of the Decree on Ecumenism would have to be dropped, if it were true that outside the Catholic Church there can be found nothing but "*elements of the church*". The very title of this chapter makes this clear: it reads: "Churches and Ecclesial Communities separated from the Roman Apostolic See". In the first part of this chapter, entitled "The special position of the Eastern churches", these churches, while not in full communion with Rome, are certainly recognized as "particular churches" in a theological, and not merely conventional sense of the term.

What about the others that are called "ecclesial communities"? The distinction is based on what may be called a principle of "eucharistic ecclesiology": i.e. there is not the full reality of church where there is not the full reality of the eucharist. However, the very term "ecclesial" suggests a recognition that these communities have an ecclesial, that is, churchly character. The *Relatio* that explains the use of these terms puts it as follows: "It must not be overlooked that the communities that have their origin in the separation that took place in the West are not merely a sum or collection of individual Christians, but they are constituted by social ecclesiastical elements which they have preserved from our common patrimony, and which confer on them a truly ecclesial character. In these communities the one sole Church of Christ is present, albeit imperfectly, in a way that is somewhat like its presence in particular churches, and by means of their ecclesiastical elements the Church of Christ is in some way operative in them" (AS III/2, 335).

In other words, while the Council did not hesitate to speak of the separated Eastern Churches as "particular churches" without qualification, it was the mind of the Commission that the western communities that lack the full reality of the Eucharist - without attempting to decide which ones these were - still have a truly ecclesial character, and are at least analogous to particular churches of the one Church of Christ.

This leads us to our final question: how then are we to think about the universal Church of Christ? As far as the Eastern Churches are concerned, which Pope Paul VI repeatedly referred to as "sister churches", one very significant statement is that "by the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches the Church of God is built up" (UR 15 a). I do not know how one could take the term "Church of God" here to refer exclusively to the Catholic Church. And if that is impossible,

then it must mean that there is one Church of God that embraces the particular churches of both East and West, even though at present they are not in full communion with one another.

Can it be said that the universal Church in some way also embraces the "ecclesial communities"? If we understand the universal Church as essentially the communion of the particular churches "in which and from which the universal Church has its existence" (cf. LG 23 a), and if one accepts the fact that in the actual state of divided Christianity both of these terms: "communion" and "churches" admit greater or less fullness, I believe that one can think of the universal Church as a communion, at various levels of fullness, of bodies that are more or less fully churches. Such a view is by no means identical with

the one excluded by the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, which insists rightly that "we cannot imagine that Christ's Church is nothing more than a collection (divided, but still possessing a certain unity) of churches and ecclesial communities" (AAS 65, 1973, 398). The Church of Christ is certainly something more than any such "collection" (*summa*); it is a real communion, realized at various degrees of density or fullness, of bodies, all of which, though some more fully than others, have a truly ecclesial character.

I am convinced that such a view is consistent with our belief that we belong to that Church in which alone the one true Church of Christ subsists with all those properties and structural elements that are gifts of Christ to his Church, and which, by his enduring grace, it can never lose.

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## THE MINISTRY OF UNITY OF THE BISHOP OF ROME TO THE WHOLE CHURCH

A talk given at the Centro Pro Unione,  
on Friday, April 11th, 1986

by Frère Max Thurian\*

Any ecumenical reflection on the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome to the whole Church can only be based on an understanding of the ministry of Peter as it is described in the texts of the New Testament. Our concern is to know how the ministry of Peter is perpetuated in the Church today, in particular in the ministry proper to the Bishop of Rome.

It needs to be stressed that our understanding of the New Testament is closely bound up with that of the first Christians during the early centuries of the Church. The New Testament is not a book which fell out of the blue, and which we only need to read in order to understand, without any need for external help. The New Testament is the result of a living, oral tradition which was not exhausted the moment the various apostolic authors confided their testimonies to paper. Moreover, the Churches of the second century which, under the action of the Holy Spirit, determined the list of the Gospels, Epistles and the other texts that compose the New Testament, found no contradiction between what the life of their faith really was at that time, both in their doctrine and in their structure, and the documents they chose as canonical for it. On the contrary, they discovered the seeds of their conceptions of dogmatic truth and ecclesial existence in the texts of the New Testament, which were regarded as authoritative for all Christians in the future. These texts can thus only be understood in all their profundity in the light of the apostolic tradition of the first centuries of the Christian era, as expressed by the Fathers of the Church, and as enshrined in the great liturgies, "credos" and councils.

The form of the historical narratives of the Gospels was also influenced by the faith

and life of the Early Church, which gave great authority to the Twelve Apostles and to Peter in particular, as foundations of the Church and ministers of Christ's mission. For us, the Gospel narratives and their early interpretation in the apostolic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, have the same normative authority: the writers of the New Testament knew what a profound meaning Jesus had given to his words and actions.

Our first task will therefore be to elucidate the meaning of three main Gospel narratives, namely:

- a) in St. Matthew (16:13-25), the text concerning *the faith of Peter, Rock of the Church*, who stands at the gate of the Kingdom of God;
- b) in St. Luke (22:24-34), the text on *Peter, converted servant*, who strengthens his apostolic brothers; and
- c) in St. John (21:15-19), the text regarding *Peter, universal pastor* for the love of Christ and to the point of martyrdom.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The faith of Peter, Rock of the Church

The most important text concerning Peter, and one that has received thousands of commentaries, is clearly Matthew 16:13-25. Some of its verses that are decisive for an understanding of the meaning and ecclesial significance of this unique document need to be underlined:

"(Jesus said to his disciples): 'But you, who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ,' he said, 'the Son of the living God'. Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a *happy man!* Because it was *not flesh and blood* that revealed this to you but *my Father* in heaven. So I now say to you:

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You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven!" (Mat. 16:13-19).

And in the following passage we read: "Then, taking him aside, Peter started to remonstrate with him, 'Heaven preserve you, Lord,' he said, 'this must not happen to you'. But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to my path, because the way you think is not God's way but man's.'

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" (Mat. 16:22-24).

In this account of St. Matthew, we can distinguish two parts that are so contrastingly opposed to each other that it is clear this conceals a very precise purpose: on the one hand, the confession of Peter about the Son of the living God; and, on the other, Peter's outrage at the thought of the suffering death of Jesus. The ecclesial meaning of the person and mission of Peter (the rock and the keys) is founded by Matthew on the opposition between the two parts of the narrative. On the one hand, Peter has a sense of divine realities; he is inspired by the Father; he is blessed by Christ ("You are a happy man..."); he becomes the "rock of the Church". But on the other hand, Peter's way of thinking is not God's but man's; he is rebuked by Christ ("Get behind me..."), and called "Satan".

For Matthew, and for the Church he represents, Peter is very clearly at the centre of ecclesial life, but the reminder of his frailty is as important as the basic affirmation of his faith. Peter represents and expresses the Church; he is its mainstay due to his unwavering faith. But he can only perform this fundamental role by also participating in the human drama of the faith, which is constantly exposed to doubts and temptations. At the heart of the Church of believers, St. Matthew does not see in St. Peter a perfect or ideal man, but rather a real man, with all his problems, difficulties and misfortunes. Perhaps Matthew feared that Peter would be over-idealized by the ecclesial community and that it would be given a sense of security more by the force of a human authority than by the faith of a frail being who has no other power than the constant support of Jesus Christ. The true centre of the Church is to be found in the risen Christ: He is the "cornerstone" on which the rock of Peter rests. Never, not even for an instant, will Peter be able to substitute for this sole, this fundamental "cornerstone"

on which the whole edifice of the Church is built. Peter, in his human but believing frailty, makes the unique force of Christ more transparent than any authority that enforces the obedience of the faithful by its power.

As in the case of St. Paul (2 Cor 12:9), grace is sufficient to Peter to achieve his fulfilment; the power of God is at its best in his weakness as a man.

Peter carries out an important ministry in the ecclesial community. But that ministry is all the more effective, the more it makes transparent the one grace of God, the one presence of Christ and the one authority of the Spirit. Without a close communion between his frail humanity and the force of Christ, the ministry of Peter risks standing in the way of the dissemination of the Holy Spirit. A Pope like Gregory the Great, convinced of being Peter's successor, could write humbly to the Patriarch of Alexandria: "My honour is the honour of the universal Church. My honour is the resolute strength of my brothers... May the words that swell vanity and injure charity disappear!" (Epist. VIII,30: P.L. 77,933 C).

The primacy of Peter, which is evident without exception in all the synoptic Gospels, is thus clearly affirmed as a primacy founded on the faith in Christ which is born from the revelation of the Father himself ("Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven", Mat. 16:17). The faith of Peter makes him the solid rock which forms the foundation of the ecclesial community. By its transmission, his faith maintains the unity of the Church. It enables him to receive the ministry of the gates of the Kingdom. By the faith that Christ gives him, he has it in his power to admit believers to eternal life. Peter receives from Christ, due to his faith, the service of the stability and cohesion of the Christian community, and the ministry of communion and unity in the Church as a whole. It was in this way that the Fathers of the Church understood the role of Peter in the universal community of believers.

The rock on which the Church is built is first and foremost Christ himself. If the first of the Apostles received the name of Peter (Petros = rock), it was by virtue of his confession of faith in Christ. He took his name Peter from the Christ he confessed: "Peter (Petrus) comes from *petra* (meaning rock) - writes St. Augustine - and not *petra* from Peter; just as Christ does not come from Christian, for it is only on the basis of Christ that one can speak of Christian... It is on myself, the Son of the living God, that I will build my Church. I will build you on me, and not myself on you" (Sermon 76.I,1: P.L. 38,479).

The apostle Simon received the name of Peter by virtue of his faith in the rock that is Christ: "It is not for having raised the dead or healed a cripple that he was called thus - says St. John Chrysostom - but it was for having manifested his faith in an authentic confession that he received this name: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (*In inscriptione Actorum II*: P.G. 51,86); or again: "On this rock, that is, on the faith of the confession" (*In Matt.*: P.G. 58,534).

Precisely because of his confession of faith in the rock that is Christ, the first of the apostles became the figure of the whole Church that confesses Christ: "For Christ is the rock and the Christian people are Peter" (Augustine, *Sermon* 76,I,1). It is "as if he represented the person of the Church" (*Retract.* I,20). "Only Peter - as Augustine points out - has deserved to play the role of the whole Church" (*Sermon* 295,II,2: P.L. 38,1349).

Similarly, and in an equally direct albeit different way, in Peter who confesses the faith and receives the promise from Christ, it is all the apostles who also receive, in Matthew 18:18, the same promise of binding and loosing, and are called the foundation of the Church (Eph. 2:20).

"The Church - says St. Jerome - is built on Peter. Although this same foundation may elsewhere be accomplished on all the apostles, who all receive the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, and although the strength of the Church may equally be assured on the foundation of them all, nonetheless only one is elected from among the Twelve in order that the establishment of a head may remove any occasion for schism" (*Adv. Jov.*: P.L. 23,247).

The attribution of the word of Christ to the Bishops, and particularly to the Bishop of Rome and the Bishops of the great apostolic sees, translates the consciousness of the Fathers that Peter and the other apostles continue to sit on their thrones through the succession of Bishops, the constant foundation of the Church which, in her entirety, confesses Christ by means of Peter.

An ecclesial reading of Matthew 16 thus emphasizes three aspects of the Church's confession of faith:

- firstly, a community aspect: it is the whole Church that confesses faith in Christ;
- secondly, a collegial aspect, expressed in the college of the apostles who are constituted as the foundation of the Church; and
- thirdly, a personal aspect, expressed in the person of the apostle Peter, who on the one hand embodies the faith of the whole Church, and, on the other, is established as the principle of unity ("Origo unitatis", says Cyprian) of the Church in her confession

of faith.<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Father John Paul II expressed the same biblical and patristic conception of the role of Peter in his homily for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul in 1984:

"You are Peter" (Mt. 16:18). Jesus pronounces these words near Caesarea Philippi. He says them to Simon Peter, but his inward eye, the gaze of his spirit are turned to the Father...

He sees that in Peter's reply the faith, born from the Revelation, has by now reached its maturity - and he says: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it' (Mt. 16:18).

Thus the Church was founded on the rock of the faith, which has its origin in God himself: in the Father. In human words - as in the words of Peter a moment before - this faith expresses the Truth that comes from God.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Peter, pastor of pastors

The second important narrative concerning Peter is that in the Gospel of St. Luke (22:24-34). Here we find expressed, firstly, the condition of servant (*diaconon*) of those called to govern in the Church, and, secondly, the specific role of Peter as Pastor of his brothers - his fellow apostles and pastors - because, after having denied Jesus, he had been converted and returned to him. This text of Luke affirms the *primacy of Peter the servant thanks to his conversion to Christ*.

"A dispute arose also among them about which should be reckoned the greatest, but he (Jesus) said to them, 'Among pagans it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are given the title Benefactor. This must not happen with you. No; the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves...'

'Simon, Simon! Satan, you must know, has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers.' 'Lord,' he answered, 'I would be ready to go to prison with you, and to death.' Jesus replied, 'I tell you, Peter, by the time the cock crows today you will have denied three times that you know me.'" (Lk. 22:24-26, 31-34).

Once again, in this text, the ministry of Peter appears in the dialectic of the humble service of the deacon (*diaconon*) and the grave responsibility to "strengthen your brothers"; in the opposition between the one who may deny his Master and the one who may be converted thanks to the prayer of Jesus.

Jesus, we are told by the text, has prayed for Peter so that his faith may not fail, for

it is the foundation of his whole ministry. Thanks to this prayer of Christ for Peter and his faith, he may always be converted (*epistrep-sas*, Lk. 22:32), return to God, and turn towards Christ. And, thus fortified by the grace of the Holy Spirit, he may transmit this force to his brothers, and strengthen in the faith the other apostles, the other ministers of the Church of Christ.

In Peter, therefore, the Church recognises a man who had been tempted to weaken in his faith, but who was liberated by the efficacious prayer of Jesus and charged with the great mission of helping the other leaders of the Church not to fall into the same temptation of discouragement, not to abandon their faith, and to remain firmly in communion with Christ. Peter, sifted by temptation, experienced a moment of weakness, but did not lose his deep faith in the Lord. Christ's prayer for him triumphed, and made him capable of strengthening in fidelity all his brothers in the Church, especially those who exercise a pastoral ministry in the Christian community.

This narrative of Luke recognises once again the primacy of Peter, but does so here in a functional sense, which consists in strengthening his brother apostles in the faith and the ministry, thanks to Christ's prayer which protects from temptation and permits the conversion of the heart and the return to God.

### 3. Peter, universal pastor

The third important gospel narrative is the one at the end of the Gospel of St. John (21:15-19), in which Jesus asks Peter three times "Do you love me?", entrusts him with the task of feeding his sheep, and announces to him his martyrdom. This text of John affirms the primacy of Peter pastor and martyr for the love of Christ.

"After the meal Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of Jonah, do you love me more than these others do?' He answered, 'Yes Lord, you know I love you'. Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs'. A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of Jonah, do you love me?' He replied, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you'. Jesus said to him, 'Look after my sheep'. Then he said to him a third time, 'Simon son of Jonah, do you love me?' Peter was upset that he asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and said, 'Lord, you know everything; you know I love you'. Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. I tell you most solemnly, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.' In these words he indicated

the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God. After this he said, 'Follow me!'"

Three times, in other words in a very solemn form, the Risen Lord entrusted to Peter the charge of the whole flock of the Church. In the light of the parable of the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:1-28), Peter is able to understand that this role given to him means his total self-dedication so that the flock may have life in abundance. Jesus simultaneously announces to Peter his role as universal pastor and martyr for the faith. Peter must follow Christ in everything: "Follow me!"

Peter thus receives from Christ a ministry which concerns all the members of the people of God. He is the universal pastor, sign of the sole Pastor and Bishop of our lives, the risen Christ: "You had gone astray like sheep, but now you have come back (i.e. you have been converted, (*epestraphete*) to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (1 Pt. 2:25). Peter is charged to help Christians to this conversion and this return to the supreme Shepherd of souls, but to perform this ministry he has to give his own life and follow Christ to the end, to martyrdom.

Peter is charged with a threefold mission: firstly, that of constantly standing on the threshold of the Church with the keys of the Kingdom, as witness to the faith that the Church must safeguard if it is to remain itself; secondly, that of strengthening in their faith and ministry those who share pastoral responsibility with him in the Church; and thirdly, that of leading all the followers of the one and sovereign Shepherd to the pasture of the faith. All the apostles share this threefold mission, but it is Peter who performs it *par excellence* and as a sign for everyone.

This unique and fundamental mission of Peter is, like that of the other apostles, transmittable. To be sure, as the initial foundations of the Church, their vocation is unique. But it does contain transmittable elements. To refuse to affirm the transmissibility of the apostolic charge would be to open up a breach between the role of the apostles and that of their successors; it would be to consider the post-apostolic Church as a different Church from the apostolic Church. Yet there is only one Church and this Church shall always need to know what it must believe in; it shall always have a need for ministers strengthened and confirmed in their charge; it shall always be the universal flock of the one Shepherd. The oneness of the Church and its identical nature between Pentecost and the *Parousia* implies the permanence of the apostolic function, and of that of Peter in particular. The apostles must have successors, and Peter too must have successors, since the primacy of Peter, which is so evident in the New Testament,

is not the expression of a personal favour of Jesus towards him, but a disposition of ecclesiological type.<sup>4</sup>

Before proceeding to some more systematic reflections on the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome, I would like first of all to quote a paragraph from an address given by John Paul II to the Roman Seminary on 3 March 1984, in which he spoke of his own ministry with great frankness and remarkable humility:

"It is said - and this is true - that the Pope is Vicar of Christ. It is true and I accept it with all humility. I accept it all the more readily after Vatican II, because in the documents of the Council this same definition of Vicar of Christ is attributed to all the bishops: each bishop is Vicar of Christ for his Church. The Pope is Vicar of Christ for the Church of Rome and, due to the vocation and characteristic of this Roman Church, he is also Vicar of Christ for the universal Church. The attribution, the phrase, in question is undoubtedly a strong one: a phrase that arouses trepidation. I must tell you that I prefer not to abuse this phrase, and to use it only rarely. I prefer, indeed, to say "Successor of Peter"; but I prefer even more to say "Bishop of Rome". That other phrase should be reserved for the most solemn moments in which the Church has to present herself in her christological identity, in her christological dimension, as body of Christ. In this circumstance and in this context the phrase "Vicar of Christ" seems more justified.

But I have told you all this to be able to tell you another thing: if it is true that the phrase "Vicar of Christ" is so demanding for the Pope and so demanding for each bishop in relation to his Church, there is another phrase which is even stronger and which refers to each one of us as priests. This phrase tells us that we must act "in persona Christi". It is far stronger to say "in persona Christi" than to say "Vicarius Christi": it implies, in addition, identification, unification and intimacy. It refers to each one of us as priest or as future priest: to act "in persona Christi".<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. The universal ministry of the Bishop of Rome

The Church accorded recognition to the Church of Rome and its Bishop for their *de facto* and *de jure* primacy at a very early date. The difficulty of relations between the Churches made the existence of a prototype Church necessary: a Church which could serve as a model of unity, and to which the other Churches could refer to maintain themselves in reciprocal communion. The theological reasons for the primacy of Peter over the other apostles played a major role in this, but it is undoubtedly the case that the need for the unity of the local

Churches, and for a prototype Church to which they could conform, played an equally important role. The local Church of Rome and the Bishop of Rome are proposed as models to the other local Churches and bishops so that they may recognise a type of Church and a type of bishop, a type of ecclesial unity, which may inspire them, stimulate them and reunite them in the shared perception of the same model. This need for Rome really to serve as the prototype Church, and for the Bishop of Rome really to serve as the model bishop, was deeply felt in the ancient Church.

Yet for Rome thus to be accorded primacy, she needed to have ecclesial life in its fullness. The early local Churches looked to Rome not only because they found in her the Church of the first of the Apostles, but because they saw in her the Church of the martyrs, of Peter and Paul and a host of others, the living and exemplary Church, mother of missionaries and martyrs.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Christian unity can only be achieved and maintained thanks to a universal ministry of unity.<sup>6</sup> For centuries, all of us belonged to the catholic Church. That Church recognised in the Bishop of Rome the first patriarch, whose essential ministry it was to arouse the unity of all the Churches. Why cannot we rediscover together this unity, symbolized and protected by the ministry of the Bishop of Rome?

The most recent Popes, and especially John Paul II, have succeeded in fostering understanding of the spiritual and pastoral character of the universal ministry of unity; in so doing, they have prepared well for our common endeavours in the search for unity in the future. To be sure, Protestants have for four centuries lived in Churches which have rejected the authority of the Bishop of Rome. On the other hand, Catholics have sometimes been able to interpret the role of the Pope in a sense which does not always correspond to the requirements of tradition. It is therefore important that we should proceed together, in an open spirit of spiritual and theological communion, to discover anew the profound sense of the universal ministry of unity in the Church.

We may, in this regard, distinguish five themes for reflection on the Pope which might help us to gain a better understanding of his role in the universal Church. This does not exhaust the doctrine concerning him, but may facilitate access to an ecumenical understanding of his ministry.

Firstly, the Pope is a *local bishop*; he is Bishop of the Church of Rome. On the basis of his incorporation in and service to a particular Church we may understand his universal ministry. Whatever may develop his ministry as a local bishop shall foster the understanding

non-Catholics have of the universal function of the Pope.

Secondly, the Pope is *the Patriarch of the West*, the first of the patriarchs. The patriarchal ministry of the Pope extends to the whole Church of the West. This must therefore be considered as constituting a whole, as a communion of the particular Churches of the West. The current division between them must be considered as a wound to the Church of the West, which must be healed within that Church, within that cultural environment. Ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the other Churches in the West thus has a quite different character than the dialogue with the Churches of the East, whether in communion or not with Rome. With these, the Church of Rome can enter into dialogue as with sister Churches, whereas with the ecclesial communions of the West it is rather a case of pursuing a dialogue within a Church wounded by unfortunate historical events. Further reflection on the patriarchate of the West could illuminate our path towards unity.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, the role of the Pope as *arbiter within the college of bishops* should be recalled. He has the responsibility for maintaining unity between all the bishops of the local Churches, so that the universal unity of the Church of Christ may be fostered. If the bishops gathered in council or synod fail to formulate their unity, or are faced by a grave crisis which could divide the Church, then it is up to the ministry of the Bishop of Rome to proclaim to them the Word of Christ to which they must give their assent.

Fourthly, we should recognise that *a servant of the servants of God has a prophetic charism*, according to which he has the duty of guiding the universal Church and giving it new perspectives. To this end, it is essential that the Pope

should be free of any theological, ecclesiastical or political pressure: he must be able freely to enter into dialogue with his one Lord, Christ, without being tied to any system, whatever it be. This charismatic freedom of the Pope is essential to his ministry. For he is not just a universal president of the bishops and the Churches: he is the first servant of Christ and must speak in the name of his Lord to help the other servants of Christ. "You in your turn - said Jesus to Peter - must strengthen your brothers" (Lk. 22:32). In his prophetic freedom the Bishop of Rome is really the *servus servorum Dei*.<sup>8</sup> In the light of these reflections on the Pope's charismatic and prophetic freedom, ecumenical dialogue should be aimed at developing the teachings of Vatican Councils I and II on the universal ministry of unity.

Fifthly, and lastly, in a world which is gradually becoming unified, *the Church has a need for a minister who may speak in her name to all human beings together*. One of the major roles of the Pope is to represent the whole Church in her dialogue with the world. He may thus become, in the name of Christ and the universal Church, a messenger of peace and justice among men, a means and a sign of reconciliation. Who could contest the need and the usefulness of such a ministry?

Here, then, are some of the ways in which ecumenical dialogue could be pursued. This universal ministry is very onerous, and whatever may be our confessional allegiance we are called to pray for the person to whom it is entrusted, so that he may be sustained by his Saviour in his difficult task, and so that the Holy Spirit may guide him in finding the necessary words and actions to help all Christians to rediscover the unity wished by Christ.

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#### Footnotes

1. Cf. *Il servizio di Pietro: appunti per una riflessione interconfessionale*. Leumann (Torino): Elle Di Ci, 1978; O. Cullmann, *Petrus. Jünger, Apostel, Märtyrer. Das historische und das theologische Petrusproblem*. München: Siebenstern, 1987; J.-M. Tillard, *L'évêque de Rome*. Paris: Cerf, 1982; J.-J. von Allmen, *La primauté de l'église de Pierre et de Paul: remarques d'un protestant*. Fribourg Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1977; J. Ratzinger (Hrsg.), *Dienst an der Einheit: zum Wesen und Auftrag des Petrusamts*. Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1978; R.E. Brown et al., *Saint Pierre dans le Nouveau Testament*. Paris: Cerf, 1974.

2. Cf. Groupe des Dombes, *Le ministère de communion dans l'Eglise universelle*. Paris: Le

Centurion, 1988.

3. *Osservatore Romano*, 30 VI-I VII 1984.

4. Cf. von Allmen, *op.cit.*

5. *Osservatore Romano*, 5-6 III 1984.

6. Groupe des Dombes, *op.cit.*

7. Cf. Gregory the Great, quoted by Groupe des Dombes, *op.cit.* p. 31.

8. Cf. Groupe des Dombes, *op.cit.* § 158, p. 102-103.

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Puglisi, J. F.

A bibliography of interchurch and interconfessional theological dialogues / J.F. Puglisi, S.J. Voicu. — Rome, Italy : Centro pro unione, 1984.

260 p. ; 28 cm.

1. Christian union conversations—Bibliography. I. Voicu, S. J. II. Title.  
Z7845.LP83 1984 016.28'0042—dc19 85-119787  
(BX8.2) AACR 2 MARC

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