THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Roch Kereszty

“As the uniting Spirit affirms the distinct Persons of both Father and Son in the immanent Trinity, so also in salvation history the Spirit joins the many members by perfecting their unique individuality in a transcendent unity.”

The fashionable trend in academic circles of the last decades has considered the unity of the Church a later product of development, a unity forged through the suppression of alternative (and even heretical) Christian communities. In the beginning, many scholars maintain, there was no unified Christian Church, but rather, diverse groups of Christians with often opposing views, each of them claiming to derive their teaching and legitimacy from Jesus of Nazareth. What later became the early Catholic Church was the result of a power struggle in which one group prevailed and excommunicated the rival groups, in particular those with various forms of Gnostic tendencies. Thus, in the general contemporary climate of celebrating diversity, the unity of the Church is looked upon as a later, purely accidental result, as is the traditional distinction between orthodox and heterodox Christianities; the ancient Church, in other words, “sinned” against the tacit but all-pervading contemporary

principle of all-inclusivity.¹

My article cannot respond to the many aspects involved in this problem. I intend to treat only two issues: first, the historical link between Jesus of Nazareth and the development of unity in what is widely called catholic or mainline Christianity. Second, I will then briefly outline a Catholic theology of ecclesial unity.

1. THE ONE CHURCH AT THE BEGINNING OF HER HISTORY?

As is well known, the dates of the Proto-Pauline letters precede the written forms of the Gospels by one or two decades. It is also common knowledge that St. Paul passionately insists on receiving his Gospel (the only authentic Gospel) not from any human authority, but from Christ himself. Yet this same Paul admits that he went up to Jerusalem twice, first to confer with Peter (meeting James as well) and then again, after fourteen years, to present his Gospel to the “pillars”: James, Kephas, and John. His avowed purpose was to make sure that he “might not be running or have run in vain.” He proudly announced that “those of repute made me add nothing” and gave him “the right hand of fellowship (koinonia)” (Gal 1:11–2:10). In 1 Corinthians, Paul quotes the summary of the Gospel he received from those before him, and which he transmitted to the Corinthians in 50–51 AD. This Gospel regards Jesus: his death, burial, and Resurrection as the fulfillment of the Scriptures, as well as the list of the Risen Lord’s appearances (1 Cor 15:1–7).²

As Bill Farmer often expounded, this handshake between Paul and the three pillars, James, Peter, and John, is of paramount significance for assessing the earliest phase of Catho-

---


² In the same epistle, Paul also condenses the rite of the Lord’s Supper as he learned it from the Church before him and had confirmed by revelation from Jesus Christ (1 Cor 11:23–26).
lic Christianity. Most of the books of the New Testament were written by one of the above four, or at least depended on the traditions derived from them. Thus, Peter is the chief witness to the synoptic tradition and the source for 1–2 Peter, Paul to the Proto- and Deutero-Pauline Epistles, John to the fourth gospel and possibly to 1–3 John and the book of Revelation, and James to the Letter bearing his name. If the above facts are true, the content and genesis of the canonical books of the New Testament cannot be attributed to an uncontrolled growth process of Jesus folklore, since these four apostles/disciples were clearly in charge of discerning genuine Jesus traditions from distortions; they appear to be the guardians and authenticators of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For an adequate treatment of the canonical Jesus traditions, we would obviously need a lengthier separate study, but even this short summary suggests that what the canonical Gospels say about the beginnings of the Church has the backing of some of the first disciples of Jesus. Thus the historical link between Jesus and the origins of the Church that has survived as mainline or Catholic Christianity appear quite strong.

While there was a diversity of different and mutually antagonistic Christian communities in the early centuries of Christianity, in this article I will treat the nature and unity only of that form of Christianity which, under the control of these four disciples, produced the books of the New Testament, and thus directly determined the Church’s further development.

The synoptic Gospels present the Twelve as the beginning of the Church. They were chosen personally by Jesus, gathered around him in the “house” (most likely the house of Peter in Capernaum), instructed and trained by him, and then sent out in mission to Israel alone during Jesus’ earthly life. The number twelve indicates that Jesus planned to gather into one all of converted Israel, including the ten lost tribes of the North. When gradually it becomes clear that Israel as a nation either misunderstands and/or rejects Jesus’ message, he establishes his qahal/ekklesia out of the remnant of Israel built on Peter, who receives his rock-like solidity from faith in Jesus. Christ celebrates the New Covenant in his own blood with these twelve patriarchs of

the renewed Israel, who after the Resurrection will be sent out to proclaim the Gospel to the entire world. At the appearances of the Risen One and at Pentecost, the one universal Church is already present in the small group of disciples, ready to embrace the whole world with all its diversity of languages and cultures in order to integrate them into the converted “Israel of God.” Thus the one universal Church is not an abstraction or a later creation, but the concrete historical reality of the apostolic group trained and sent by Jesus, equipped with the one Gospel and the one Eucharist, in which the same Jesus in the same Holy Spirit will be present in the world unto the end of the ages.

This early self-understanding of the one Church explains the belief that comes to be expressed in some of the Pauline epistles and in early Christian authors, who know that the same Church exists in all the different places of the world. Paul, for instance, writes “to the Church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), and Clement begins his letter with an even more expressive formula: “The Church of God which lives in Rome to the Church of God which lives in Corinth.” The awareness that the one Church is present in every local church in which a local bishop gathers the community around the Eucharist has survived, in spite of being periodically eclipsed, throughout the entire history of the Church.

This awareness has been threatened not only by the nationalist centrifugal tendencies of the Eastern churches, but also by the growing centralization of the Western Latin-rite Church. Paradoxically, too much emphasis on juridical unity eclipses not only the importance of diversity in the local churches, but also that deeper inner unity which derives from the local churches’ participation in the trinitarian communion. In what follows, I will thus investigate the theological principles of the Church’s inner unity that derive from her participation in the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

4. See Mk 14:17; Mt 26:20; Lk 22:14.
6. Ibid., 3, 9.
2. THE ONE CHURCH SHARING IN THE UNITY OF THE FATHER

From all eternity, the Father has decided to extend the unique sonship of his eternal Son to an innumerable multitude of human beings. This eternal fatherly love is the ultimate source for the creation of humankind and its home, the material universe. The fall of humankind has not altered the Father’s plan; he accounts for its sacrificial realization in the Cross of his Son. In this way, the Father reveals an even greater depth of his love: by sending his Son as an atoning sacrifice to rescue fallen humankind by his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. The Exultet of the Easter Vigil expresses with astonishing realism this inaestimabilis dilectio caritatis, “the love which exceeds all rational understanding”: ut servum redimeres, Filium tradidisti, “in order to rescue the slave, you handed over the Son.” On the Cross, then, we see the perfect revelation of the Father’s sacrificial love by which he glorifies the Son, so that the Son may glorify him. Here is the ultimate source of the Church’s all-encompassing and transcendental unity; it results from the Father’s drawing of all humankind to the Son, so that all may share in the Son’s filial relationship, and love and glorify the Father in union with the Son.

The participation in the Son’s divine filiation by all who open themselves to the Father’s call is not a metaphor; the entire Tradition understands it in an analogical sense, one in which the primum analogatum is the filial relationship between God the Father and the eternal Son: we are by grace what the Son is by nature. According to Paul, the first Christians addressed God as “Abba,” Father, in the Spirit:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received the spirit of adoption, through which we cry, “Abba, Father!” The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.  

---

(Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1972), 368–439.

8. Evidently, all decisions of the Father take place through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, but the decision to establish the Church originates from the Father.

9. Rom 8:14–16; see Gal 5:18. No subsequent criticisms could substan-
Paul’s entire theology of Christian life shows that for him our “adoption” is more than a legal notion. John, however, is even more explicit. He avoids the term adoption altogether and speaks rather about our birth “from God” (1:13). In his typical combination of crassly materialistic and sublimely spiritual language, John explains that the believer cannot sin, because he is born from God, and the seed of God remains in him (1 Jn 3:9). To be born of God, however, is equivalent to being born of the Spirit (Jn 3:5–6), and we know that we remain in God by the gift of his Spirit (1 Jn 4:13). John summarizes the mystery of our filial nature in these terms:

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 Jn 3:2)

Just as every gift comes ultimately from the one Father, and every member of the human race is a child or called to become a child of the same Father, we give thanks to him, worship, and glorify him through the Son in the Holy Spirit with one heart, mind, and voice. All the eucharistic anaphoras of the Church are directed to the one Father, and include a trinitarian doxology that glorifies the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Just as the Church has originated from all eternity in the plan of the Father, the Son will hand over the glorified Church, his Kingdom, to the Father, and thus God will be all in all (see 1 Cor 15:24–28).  

10. See the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen gentium (hereafter cited as LG), 2.
3. THE CHURCH SHARING IN THE UNITY OF THE INCARNATE SON

As said before, on the one hand it is the Son who hands over all creation, restored and sanctified, to the Father. But the giving is mutual; according to a biblically based patristic tradition, the parable of the banquet the rich man organizes for his son is the allegory of the wedding feast between the incarnate Son and the eschatological Church, with all of creation united to it. The latter is the purified and beautified Bride whom the Father has prepared for the Son from all eternity. The Father thus returns the Son’s gift to the Son, so that the reciprocal gift of all creation is taken up into the process of eternal generation and filiation, the giving and receiving between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit.\(^{11}\)

We have jumped forward to the completion of the Son’s work in God’s plan. In order to see the full work of the Son in our redemption, however, we need to start from the very beginning of salvation history. Since human beings are the substantial unity of body and soul, flesh and spirit, and since God the Father wanted to respect the needs of the human nature he created, he had to unite humankind to himself in a twofold unity by the twofold mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.\(^{12}\) For the Son’s Incarnation to be a real entrance into human history, a definite place and a definite point of time were necessary. It also had to be prepared and foreshadowed by a limited number of human beings and peoples. Thus, while the Father and the Holy Spirit aim at a universal unity that embraces the entire human race, the Son assumes one concrete, limited human nature as his own. He could not accept full solidarity with us unless he became one of us, bone from our bones and flesh from our flesh. Understandably, then, all of salvation history is directed at that one particular point of time and space, when and where the eternal Logos of the Father became man. Salvation history before Christ is a gradual process of narrowing the number of those who carry


\(^{12}\) “Had to unite” regarding God means only appropriateness rather than logical necessity.
the promise of salvation through God’s subsequent elections and rejections: from fallen Adam, the head of original humankind, through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, the Kingdom of Judah, the exiles in Babylon, the builders of the second temple, and the poor of YHWH (*anawim*), leading up to Mary and her son Jesus. This narrowing line of elections does not mean that the rejected are necessarily doomed to damnation. It is rather a process of divine pedagogy, in which God gradually accustoms humankind to live in his presence and shows them, through different figures, the many different features of the coming Messiah and the salvation he brings: for instance, the figures of Isaac, Moses, David, the heavenly Son of Man and the Suffering Servant, as well as the exodus from Egyptian slavery and the return of the remnant from the Babylonian exile.

The central event toward which salvation history leads, the Incarnation of the Son of God and his redemptive work, is raised up into God’s transcendent realm by Jesus’ Resurrection, and becomes contemporaneous to universal human history through the Holy Spirit, reaching both the past and the future. For our theme of Church unity, the essential point is to see that if God wanted to enter into the fullest solidarity with sinful humankind, it was for him most appropriate to become, in patristic terminology, the *Verbum abbreviatum*, the *Verbum infans*, the little child who is unable to speak yet contains in himself the fullness of divinity (Col 2:9). All the other limitations of Jesus’ life and mission in Judea, Galilee, and the outskirts of the surrounding territories derive from this one concentration of God in a limited human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The limitations of the Incarnation continue in the limitations of Church history, which include the fact that we have only one Holy Bible, the original languages of which will always be Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We have only one Holy Land, twelve original apostles with the one leader, Kephas, with whom (through his successors) we must remain in communion if we want to remain in communion with Jesus of Nazareth. Nor can we substitute tea and rice, or whiskey and crackers, for the eucharistic bread and wine, regardless of the culture in which we celebrate the Eucharist. These restrictions

---

point to the one contingent reality of the Incarnation, which sets limits to the necessary process of expressing the one Gospel in the language of different cultures. Thus, inculturation and Tradition are in a fruitful tension—the former allowing various adaptations to different cultures, the latter setting binding limits to differentiations.

4. THE CHURCH SHARING IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

While the mission of the Son, his Incarnation, and the redemption he brings require a restrictive unity of concentration, the mission of the Spirit (as mentioned above) extends the presence and saving action of the incarnate Son to all times and all places. The Holy Spirit is the one Person who is fully and equally present in the Father and the Son and, according to the Fathers of both East and West, he is the bond of unity in the Church. When Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the Church, the Spirit renewed and transformed all those who received him by making them into his Temple in whom he chose to dwell. As the encyclical Mystici Corporis of Pius XII asserts, he is numerice idem with the Father and the Son, but also in the (spiritually) living members of the Church. Numerice idem means that one and the same Spirit is present in his unique personal reality.

The unifying action of the Spirit works in different ways in the different activities of the Church. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the texts of the entire Bible speak about Christ. It is the Spirit who ensures that the Church remains faithful to the Word of God, and protects from error the definitions of the ecumenical councils, and those of the pope. At the same time, the Spirit is also present in the members of the Church and in those non-Christians who listen to the preaching of the Church and are inspired to accept her teachings as the unfolding and application of the teachings of Christ. If the Spirit does not help a person

---


15. Pius XII, Mystici Corporis (hereafter cited as MC), 62, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, De Veritate, q. 29, a. 4.
to accept the Church’s teaching as coming from God, even the words of the most eloquent preacher will remain ineffective; at best, his words will be received as words of human wisdom. The invisible mission of the Holy Spirit extends even beyond the visible and audible activity of missionaries, and prepares receptive souls all over the world to seek the truth and yearn for love.

It is by the Holy Spirit that the sacramental prayers of the Church become the prayers and sanctifying actions of Christ. At the same time, the Holy Spirit also works in the recipients of the sacraments and sacramental rites by enabling them to receive the grace of Christ fruitfully. We see most clearly this twofold action of the Spirit in the Holy Eucharist. By the invocation of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis), the words of Jesus in the institution account, recited by the priest, become the very words of Christ who changes the bread and wine into his own Body and Blood. Analogously, in the power of the same Spirit the recipients of the Eucharist are built up into the Body of Christ, the Church.

Being himself the communion of the Father and the Son, the Spirit builds up also the community of the Church. He unites the many members into the communion of the one Church by conforming to the Son individual persons of every color, language, and culture. They become the Body of Christ in the sense that Christ is present and active in them, so that his members share in his filial relationship to the Father, his love of the Father and love of people; they also appropriate the prayer of Jesus: “Abba, Father” (Mk 14:36). They form a unity with each other that surpasses the strength and intimacy of any natural bond, since one and the same Spirit inspires their wills and enlightens their minds. In Paul’s letters, to auto phronein, to think and desire the same thing, is a recurrent refrain (Rom 12:16; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:2). The source of this unanimity is the one Spirit, who therefore unites their thinking and willing with those of Christ (Phil 4:2; Rom 15:5). In the same way, Christians should have the same love (Phil 2:2) and should be of one heart and one soul. The first believers in Jerusalem lived in a community of shared material goods; each sold what he/she had and gave the proceeds to the apostles, who distributed to everyone according to their needs (Acts 4:32).

In uniting the many into one, the Holy Spirit does not abolish personal distinctions. As the uniting Spirit affirms the
distinct Persons of both Father and Son in the immanent Trinity, so also in salvation history the Spirit joins the many members by perfecting their unique individuality in a transcendent unity. He inspires the unique vocation of each individual in the Church, and distributes a variety of gifts for the building up of the Church. The Holy Spirit is not the principle of uniformity, but of unity in diversity within the Church. Paul explains this mystery in the following terms:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gift of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.\(^\text{16}\)

Yet the internal unifying role of the Spirit does not exclude but rather calls for the supporting role of external, apostolic authority. Paul encourages the flourishing of a wide range of different charisms, but gives directions to ensure harmony, order, and unity. He makes clear that his apostolic authority is beyond appeal, and obedience to his letter is the criterion for the authenticity of a charismatic (1 Cor 14:37).

Throughout Church history, many of the early charisms have survived, while the appearance of new ones has time and again renewed the vigor of the Church. The relationship between the charismatics and those who possess the charism of apostolic mission, namely the popes and bishops, has not been without tension. The apostolic charism’s mandate is to preserve in time and space the identity of the contemporary Church in doctrine, morality, sacraments, and church order with the Church of the apostles. The task of other charisms, on the other hand, aims at adapting the local church to changing situations, removing ossi-

---

16. 1 Cor 12:4–11. See also 1 Cor 12:27–14:40; Rom 12:3–21.
fied non-apostolic traditions and practices, reinvigorating devotion and community life, and promoting the fertile encounter of Gospel and culture. Charismatic leaders and movements were at times suppressed, but more often than not they have been accepted and “tamed” by the hierarchy in order to prevent polarization and sectarianism in the one Church. I mention only a few: St. Benedict, St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Ignatius of Loyola, the liturgical and ecumenical movements, and the charismatic (Pentecostal) communities: all of these succeeded in revitalizing and reforming much in the Church as they were gradually integrated into her unifying structures.17

5. DIVIDED CHRISTIANITY AND UNITY

The doctrine regarding the unity of the Church seems to stand in irreconcilable opposition to the empirical fact of separated Christian communities, each of which claims to be the Church founded and willed by Jesus Christ (or at least one in basic accord with his intention). After centuries of insistence on the validity or insignificance of this mutual separation (for many think spiritual unity alone is necessary), since the first half of the twentieth century a great number of Christian denominations have come to acknowledge, to varying degrees, the need for some form of visible unity. The ensuing ecumenical movement, however, included substantially opposing goals. Since most of the Protestant denominations lack a sacramental vision of the Church, they have been seeking only stronger spiritual ties. If they perceived that Christ intended a visible unity for his Church, they saw the one Church of Christ only as a future task. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, on the contrary, have considered themselves to be the one true Church of Christ while regarding each other as sister churches, since both possess apostolic succession.

17. Just as in the time of Paul, the criterion for the authenticity of a charismatic movement or person remains subjection to the charism of hierarchy. Even if unjustly suppressed, they safeguard unity by their subjection. Very often, patient obedience matures the movement or person, so that at the right time their initiatives bear ample fruit. We need to think only of the example of the great theologians at Vatican II, such as Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and John Courtney Murray.
and the reality of the Holy Eucharist. The Anglican Communion has traditionally considered herself as the *via media*, the authentic middle way, between Catholics and Protestants.

The Second Vatican Council had the complex task of formulating the Catholic Church’s self-understanding in the presence of non-Catholic observers who shared the above-mentioned views. The Council, understandably, debated the relationship between the one Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church at great length, as well as the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations. The final statement is very carefully formulated:

This Church (the unique Church of Christ) constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the Successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside her visible structure. These elements, however, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, possess an inner dynamism toward Catholic unity. (LG, 8)

The teaching of the Council in this text and other related passages may be summarized in the following points:

1) The Church of Christ does exist as a recognizable and visible historical reality. This position is opposed to the Protestant view, which believes that the Church of Christ will exist only in the future as a result of the union of the churches, as well as to the belief that all Christian churches are equally the Church of Christ.

2) The verb *subsistit* ("subsists") was chosen over *est* or *adest* ("is" or "is present") to stress the qualitatively unique realization of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church. The verb *est* would have been misunderstood as if only the Catholic Church had ecclesial reality; the term *adest* would have left the way open to the interpretation that the Church of Christ may be present in other churches as well. The term *subsistit* was known by most of the conciliar Fathers to denote a subject which, or who, exists in itself. According to Ratzinger, the Fathers were saying, “The being of the Church as such extends much farther than the Roman

---

18. Unlike *Mystici Corporis*, which spoke in an undifferentiated way about those who are “truly members of the Church,” *Lumen gentium* admits various degrees of belonging to the one Church of Christ (14).
Catholic Church, yet in the latter she has in a unique way the character of an independent subject.”19 The Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis redintegratio (hereafter cited as UR), uses a different conceptuality than subsistence to describe the unique character of the Catholic Church; she possesses “the fullness of grace and truth,” as well as “all the fullness of the means of grace” (3).

3) Nevertheless, non-Catholic Christian churches and ecclesial communities also have some ecclesial reality, since they have elements of truth and sanctification.20 The Decree on Ecumenism explains this in greater detail:

[S]ome, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God, the life of grace, faith, hope, and charity, along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements. (UR, 3)

Therefore, the Holy Spirit can use these Christian churches and ecclesial communities as a means of salvation.

4) The ecclesial reality of these Christian churches and ecclesial communities, however, derives from the fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church, and impels these Christian churches and ecclesial communities toward catholic unity (UR, 3; LG, 8).


20. The Declaration Dominus Iesus by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (6 August 2000) clarifies the theological distinction between non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities: “Therefore, there exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. The Churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular Churches. Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy, which, according to the will of God, the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire Church. . . . The lack of unity among Christians is certainly a wound for the Church; not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but ‘in that it hinders the complete fulfilment of her universality in history’” (17).
Thus, a doctrine of analogous participation is implicit in the conciliar teaching. The Church of Christ is realized in a qualitatively unique way in the Catholic Church, but not only with regard to the Church as the means of salvation (as it has often been misunderstood); the Catholic Church is also the rightful “possessor” or subject of the “fullness of grace and truth.”

Nevertheless, the one Church of Christ is participated in to varying degrees by other Christian churches and ecclesial communities as well. According to Dominus Iesus, only the churches that possess apostolic succession and, therefore, a valid episcopacy and the valid Eucharist, are churches in the proper sense of the word, while those lacking these elements but preserving other elements of the Church are referred to as ecclesial communities.

The conciliar teaching leaves open the way to affirm the empirical fact that not only can non-Catholic Christian individuals grow to a greater perfection of faith, hope, and love than a Catholic person, but a non-Catholic local community may also have a more intense life of grace, faith, hope, and love than a particular Catholic parish.

6. AN ATTEMPT TO FURTHER CLARIFY THE MEANING OF SUBSISTIT: THE CHURCH AS SUBJECT

After a heated discussion in the Theological Commission of the Council, Fr. Sebastian Tromp proposed the crucial verb subsistit regarding the Catholic Church, which was quickly and unanimously accepted. The members of the Commission and the vast majority of bishops were sufficiently versed in scholastic theology to know that subsistit is the mode of being of a subject, and they must have also been aware of the tradition that the one hypostasis, the one subject of the Son, is said to “subsist” in the christological definition of the Council of Chalcedon.

As we seek further to determine the meaning of the Church as an independent subject, we must start with the notion

21. Obviously, we cannot speak of the Church as a perfect institution in the customary sense of the word. The conciliar text means only that this Church has the full ecclesial order, all the sacraments, and the entire Gospel of Christ and, consequently, the fullness of grace and truth.

22. See Heim, Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology, 74–75.
of a juridical subject, one ultimately based on the unity of human nature. A juridical person is the association of natural persons (companies, sovereign states, international organizations) for a definite purpose, with collective duties and privileges, and acknowledged as such by competent legal authority. Such a person is recognized in law as one subject of action and responsibilities. Their legally designated representatives are entitled to represent the juridical subject, with consequences for his or her representative actions or omissions for the whole community. Such legal-speak would be artificial and absurd without a common rational and free human nature. Those who share this nature are capable of setting common goals, and one individual can justifiably represent the entire association.

In civilized countries, the Church and her organizations also enjoy the status of legal persons. Yet as subject, the Church universal expresses a transcendent, qualitatively higher unity, even though her unity includes the qualities of a juridical person. The basis for the unity of the Church is not merely human nature, but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in different ways and to different degrees in her every member, as we have seen above. The role of the Holy Spirit in the Church is an extension (a mission, in traditional terminology) of his intra-trinitarian role as the bond that unites Father and Son in their mutual difference. The Holy Spirit is also the bond that unites every member of the Church into the one Spouse of Christ, and unites the Spouse to Christ as one Body and one Spirit. Mystici Corporis speaks more extensively than Lumen gentium about the role of the Spirit in the Mystical Body of Christ:

[The Holy Spirit] is entire in the Head, entire in the Body, and entire in each of the members. To the members he is present, and assists them in proportion to their various duties and offices, and the greater or less[er] degree of spiritual health which they enjoy. It is he who, through his heavenly grace, is the principle of every supernatural act in all parts of the Body. It is he who, while he is personally present and divinely active in all the members, nevertheless in the inferior members acts also through the ministry of the higher members. Finally, while by his grace he provides for the continual growth of the Church, he yet refuses to dwell through sanctifying grace in those members that are wholly severed from the Body. (MC, 57)
Thus, the encyclical continues, the principle of the unity of the Church is “something not of the natural but of the supernatural order; rather it is something in itself infinite, uncreated: the Spirit of God, who, as we quoted the Angelic Doctor above, ‘is numerically one and the same, fills and unifies the whole Church.’”

While *Mystici Corporis* does not hesitate to quote Pope Leo XIII’s statement in *Divinum illud munus* that “as Christ is the Head of the Church, so is the Holy Spirit her soul”(6), *Lumen gentium*, realizing the difference between the function of the soul of the human being and the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church, transforms the plain affirmation of *Mystici Corporis* into a comparison:

In order that we might be unceasingly renewed in him, he has shared with us his Spirit who, existing as one and the same being in the Head and in the members, gives life to, unifies, and moves through the whole body. This he does in such a way that his work could be compared by the holy Fathers with the function which the principle of life, that is, the soul, fulfills in the human body. (*LG*, 7)

Human persons are singular entities of the same human nature, and therefore the unions based on the commonality of this nature create only limited forms of unity. In a family, city, nation, or international organization, individuals can be united in goals, using the same means to realize those goals; some of them may also develop a certain empathy for each other, but they cannot exist within each other. In the Church of Christ, however, as said above, the numerically identical Holy Spirit is present in each living member and in Christ, the head of the members. Therefore, to the extent that we cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are truly present in Christ and Christ in us. In fact, in some mysterious way we also become united with each other at the deepest level of our unique subjectivities so that, while actualizing our unique individuality, we become one ontological subject, the Spouse of Christ. Thus, the Church is one dual ontological subject: Christ the head and his ecclesial body, which is also his spouse. This union of the two in one

is the result of their mutual love, a union realized imperfectly on earth and perfectly in heaven.24 Isaac of Stella summarizes the entire tradition about the joint activity of this dual subject: the Bride never acts without her Bridegroom.25 The Son may be called the principal actor in the sacraments, since the sacraments are the official ecclesial acts by which Christ continues his worshipping and sanctifying activity. But even there the Son acts in response to the invocation of his Church, an invocation which the Son takes up in his prayer to the Father from whom the Son’s sanctifying action has its origin.

In the shepherding, preaching, and liturgical prayers of the Church, Bridegroom and Bride always act together, always supporting one another, but to varying degrees and in different forms of cooperation. While in the sacramental action the principal celebrant is Christ, and the Church’s action mediates it, the Church is the acting subject of the liturgical prayers and of the other sacramentals, but in union with her Bridegroom. When the words of Scripture are proclaimed in the Church, they are always the words of the incarnate Word, while in preaching or teaching, the Church explains the words of Christ with varying degrees of efficacy and authority, which depend on the office of the minister (deacon, priest, bishop, pope) and on his natural abilities and personal holiness. Thus, the Spouse of Christ depends much more on the individual ministerial action in the above functions than in the sacraments. Yet while the immaculate Spouse of Christ may be seriously hindered and even prevented in many local churches from an effective proclamation of the Word, and her face can be at certain times and places marred by the sins and failings of her ministers, she will never lose the words and presence of the Bridegroom who supports her by the Holy Spirit. In the dogmatic definitions of ecumenical councils and popes, the explications of the Word will be preserved from error by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit of the Bridegroom will always renew and reform the Church, so that the reflected light of Christ’s truth and holi-

24. See St. Augustine, Sermo 341:9, 11: “The same one is called bridegroom insofar as it is head, and bride in so far as it is body. They appear to be two but in fact they are one.”

ness may shine in greater splendor.

The Spouse is both virgin and mother: her virginal union with Christ is fertile. To the extent that the Spouse cooperates with Christ in giving birth in baptism, nourishing the faithful by the Word and the Eucharist, helping them pray the Divine Office, strengthening them against temptations and enabling their good acts, the Spouse acts as mother, mediating the supernatural life of grace to the faithful.26

7. EXTERNAL FORMS OF UNITY IN THE CHURCH

Not only does the unity of the triune God determine the unity of the Church, but human nature plays a role as well. In the Incarnation, God the Son became flesh, a visible and tangible human being who speaks, listens, and acts in the world through his bodily actions and suffers through his human body and soul. The Church continues the sanctifying action and Passion of Christ in her sacraments, teaching, and community life. Just as Christ has a body, so too does his Mystical Body express his presence and activity as well as her own in visible, tangible, and audible forms. It is in this sense that Lumen gentium, 1 declares that “the Church is in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God.” We find a concise summary of this sacramental activity in Acts 2:42:

They [the first community in Jerusalem] devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

The unity of faith requires common external structures, such as written documents (Creed; Scripture; and episcopal, conciliar, and pontifical documents), a commonly accepted magisterium, unity of faith in preaching and unity within a plurality of theologies. These structures not only express the one object of faith (the triune God insofar as he shares his life with us in the

26. See Gal 4:26–31; Rev 12:17. Augustine tells the catechumens (Sermo 398:1): “You will have God for father when you will be given birth by mother Church.”
history of salvation); they also aim at forming one and the same inner attitude, the “obedience of faith,” a personal surrender in trust to God. Here we touch upon the paradox of faith. As the trusting surrender of mind, will, and heart to God, faith in the biblical sense is the most personal act of an individual, since it elevates the person’s unique, subjective center to God. Yet faith is also a profoundly communitarian act, since individuals actualize in themselves (to varying degrees and intensity) the loving surrender of the one Spouse of Christ. This is true also about the act of faith of those in non-Christian religions who respond positively to the offer of grace, yet remain unaware of their profound inner relationship with the one Church-Spouse. Thus the external manifestations of the faith express, deepen, and strengthen this inner ecclesial spirit in which all the living members of the Church participate in the love and worship of Christ and his one Spouse. The common sacramental rituals (the same words and symbolic actions) express the sanctifying words and actions of Christ, the one High Priest, and of his Spouse, while promoting the participation of the faithful.

The empirical forms of community life, such as the shepherding activity of the pope, bishops, and priests, parish and diocesan communities, international gatherings, and smaller ecclesial communities all serve the formation and intensification of the communion of love whose source is the Holy Spirit. This communion is not only an open circle, but is called to be a perennially growing one, attracting and embracing by her mystery of mutual love and support all those who are still outside of full communion. Its ultimate aim is to let the dough of all humankind rise so that all who accept the inspiration of the Holy Spirit are united in one universal and visible brotherhood. Thus the Church, precisely because she is the sacrament of union with God, is also the sacrament of the unity of all humanity. The more the members of the Church are united to Christ in the Holy Spirit, the more their love will attract outsiders as they see that this unity encourages and actualizes the unique values of each nation, culture, and individual. This all-embracing love gives birth to, and nourishes the missionary activity of, the one Church.
This is the title of the “Decree on Ecumenism” of the Second Vatican Council. The word “recomposition” better expresses the Latin redintegratio than the usual translation as “restoration.” The Council intended to express by the term its intention to work for corporate unity, in which the liturgical and organizational structures of other Christian denominations (to the extent they conform to the nature of the unity willed by Christ) could be integrated into the one Catholic Church of Christ. The special status of those Anglican clergymen and laity who have recently established full communion with the Catholic Church has shown how far the Holy See is ready to go in respecting and accepting most of the Anglican liturgy and church order.  

Even though significant achievements have highlighted the last fifty years of ecumenical relations, substantial roadblocks remain, and hope for their removal in the near future is diminishing. While the main impediments to full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are of a historical and psychological nature, the major obstacle in the dialogue with Protestant Christians is a different understanding of church unity. For most Protestants, the unity willed by Christ is primarily and essentially the invisible unity of the one true faith in Jesus Christ. They believe that the unity of external forms (such as the same faith, sacraments, and ministry) are desirable goals to achieve, and that only when this goal is reached will the one visible Church begin to exist. Most of them, however, do not see the urgency of this task, since they are convinced that what is really important, the unity of hearts and minds, has already been achieved to a large extent. They are nevertheless most ready to forge with us personal friendships and join in some common projects for promoting human rights and, in particular, social justice.  

The Catholic Church had scrupulously avoided any official involvement in ecumenical work until the preparation of

27. See Pope Benedict XVI, Anglicorum coetibus.

28. Nevertheless, few Protestants, except for the evangelicals, share the full measure of the pro-life stance of the Catholic Church.
the Second Vatican Council, since the popes believed that formal membership in the World Council of Churches would give the impression that the Catholic Church was one of many denominations seeking to establish the one Church of the future. The Catholic policy of having only official observers at the WCC was continued after the Council as well, but in 1968 the Catholic Church became a member of, and substantial contributor to, the Faith and Order Commission, which has successfully worked for a rapprochement among the beliefs of many different denominations.

Beginning with John XXIII, through Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now with Francis, each pope has considered visible Christian unity a most urgent and essential task. The ensuing Catholic ecumenical activity has been at times influenced by the desire to seek the lowest common denominator in faith and practice, but its best manifestations have been motivated by genuine Catholic faith in Church unity. For us, Christ and the Church, as well as faith in Christ and faith in the Church, stand or fall together. The Incarnation and Redemption are not only past historical events, but theandric (divine-human) acts of the God-man. Jesus did not simply return to heaven from where he sent the Holy Spirit to inspire the New Testament books and dwell in our hearts. He has extended his incarnate, risen presence through time and space by a visible and organized community, built on the apostles who were with him and witnessed his teaching, Passion, and Resurrection. After receiving the Holy Spirit, they were sent by him to the ends of the earth. Christ continues his sanctifying action through the sacraments and his preaching through the Church until the end of time. As Jesus is the sacrament of God in the sense that his humanity is the visible expression of his godhead, so is the Church analogously the sacrament of Christ, a visible sign communicating his presence and sanctifying action to the world. Therefore, just as the humanity of Christ is essential to our redemption, so is the visible Church indispensable to the extension of his redemptive work through space and time. The visible mission of the apostles and their successors, as well as the invisible action of Christ in the Holy Spirit, together form the one Church built by Christ. The Holy Spirit’s action is, of course, universal, and his grace is offered to each human being, but the radiating center of his activity is the Holy Eucharist in which Christ continues to breathe his Holy Spirit
upon the world. Thus we can understand the urgency that animates the Catholic Church to work for this visible sacramental unity, to draw all men and women through the preaching of the Word of Christ to the one Eucharist, in which Christ remains present with us until the end of this age.

At the same time, we are aware, as Unitatis redintegratio, 3 says, that “some, even very many, of the most significant elements or goods which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.” The Holy Spirit does not refrain from using these “elements or goods” as “means of grace” which “must be held capable of giving access to the communion in which is salvation.” The Council Fathers, however, add that their “efficacy comes from that grace and truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

What kind of supra-personal subject, then, is the Church, whose significant elements exist in separation from her? In the natural realm, no such ontological subject exists whose essential components could live and “generate eternal life” in separation from the subject. This contradiction results from the sins of her members, but it also reveals God’s power and mercy: sin could not fully destroy the unity that was wounded by human sinfulness.29 The “means of salvation” in other Churches and ecclesial communities retain their life-giving ability from their inseparable union with the Catholic Church. Similarly, those who belong in good faith to a separated community may receive a greater measure of the fullness of grace that radiates from the Eucharist of the Catholic Church than a lukewarm Catholic does.

9. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

In the post-Tridentine period, catechisms stressed the apologetical value of unity in the Catholic Church just as much as the marks of holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. It was explained that only the Catholic Church teaches and professes everywhere

the same doctrine, celebrates the same sacraments, and has the same unified church order of priests, bishops, and pope. Such argumentation retains some value even today, but it omits what is most meaningful for our age, which prefers experience to abstract knowledge. If the Church is one supra-personal subject whose every member is animated by the same Spirit and united to the personal body of Christ as members of his ecclesial Body, then she must be the object of a powerful and unique experience.

At the same time, the Christian theologian knows that in this life God and his grace cannot be directly experienced, but only mediated by the direct experience of our own body and soul as they are affected by the action of Christ upon us through his Holy Spirit. These effects of the spiritual experience are not unique in themselves. Very similar feelings, moods, and even religious visions can be produced by drugs or electronic stimulation of the brain. Thus, only if we discern the actions and attitudes that Paul calls the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the realm of experience can we conclude that the Holy Spirit is at work in that person. These fruits are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). Our conclusion will be confirmed if we find that an individual or a community practices these virtues while being the object of hatred and persecution. Wherever the Cross is accepted, not only in passive resignation but in hope and love, and wherever it generates a deeper faith and love, the Spirit of Christ is most likely at work there. Additional signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit are the unanimity in which every member of a community believes in the same mysteries of the Christian faith and embraces the same moral ideals. Paul never stops repeating to his faithful to “think the same in accord with Christ Jesus,” and to “have the same attitude in yourselves that is also in Christ Jesus.” 30 In brief, wherever we see the attitude of Christ and perhaps even some features of his personality realized, we can conclude that this given individual or community is inspired by the Spirit of Christ.

The experience of unity in history has always been weakened by the offenses of church members, lay and clerical, who have disturbed the peace of the Church by power struggles,

30. Rom 15:5; Phil 2:5; see also Rom 12:16; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:2.
dissensions, and at times separation of themselves from the one body of Christ. Human sinfulness and petty disagreements have prevented many from finding their way to the one Church of Christ. Yet those who travel to different countries and continents experience the universal and catholic character of the Church’s unity. They will find everywhere the pattern of the Cross of Christ, as well as the abundance of life flowing from the Cross, experienced by persons and communities of different races, cultures, and age groups. From Jesus’ post-Resurrection commands in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts, through the captured Polycarp of Smyrna’s prayer for the Church scattered throughout the world, to Augustine’s insistence on one Church that speaks the languages of each nation, to the “world church” today, which in fact has spread out all over the world, the unity of the Church has always been seen as all-embracing, that is, catholic. 

CONCLUSIONS

The Church is both one and uniquely one: una et unica. Its unity transcends that of any other community or institution since she participates in the trinitarian communion and extends the mystery of the one Incarnation and Redemption in space and time to the ends of the earth and the end of human history. All who belong to the Church belong to the one family of the Father, since they have been reborn by grace as his own children. They are inserted into the one Body of the incarnate and risen Son, who is the head of his Body, the Church. He lives, acts, and suffers in and through his Body, prays to the Father, and offers himself in, through, and with his Church.

The union between Head and Body, however, is not a pantheistic oneness, but the result of the loving personal union of Christ the Bridegroom with his Bride, the Church. Far from absorbing the Church into himself, Christ, in his love, creates the Bride out of the immaculate Virgin Mary and the innumerable multitudes of forgiven sinners. Thus, the Church is an autonomous ontological subject, the Beloved of Christ, whom he associates with all his activities. In fact, Christ sustains her existence,

31. Mt 28:18–20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:46–49; The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 8.
finds delight in hearing her voice, preserves her purity of mind and heart (teaching and morality), listens infallibly to her petitions, and lifts her up to himself.

The creation of the Bride, her union with Christ, and her ontological cohesion as one Bride out of many individual brides is the work of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son, uniting both while preserving their unique personhood, so is his unifying presence within the Church. He is fully in Christ and fully in the Church while personally present in every (spiritually) living member of the Church. His activity unites Christ with the Church and unites every member with Christ and with each other while preserving and actualizing the members’ personal uniqueness and differences. His radiance and call reach every human being, and results in either acceptance or rejection. This unifying and individualizing work of the Spirit begins on earth, but fully penetrates, purifies, and transforms the members only in Heaven. The heavenly Church, featuring Mary and the saints, is the immaculate Bride in full beauty and splendor; on earth the living members are only imperfectly and partially Bride, because sin is not quite extinct in them, nor are their bodies glorified.

Since the Son himself has become flesh and his Spouse consists of human beings who are spirit and flesh, the union between the Church and Christ must also be both spiritual and fleshly, a visible community that expresses and mediates the invisible, direct spiritual relationship. This Church, the Body of Christ, his Spouse, “set up and organized in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church” (LG, 8). Her external organs of community life and service operating on the universal, regional, and local levels express and mediate the inner attitude of love. The inner acts of faith are expressed and reinforced by the identical professions and documents of faith, while the sanctifying action of Christ and the Church is communicated by the common signs of the sacraments and sacramentals.

Although the Church cannot lose the sanctifying action of the sacraments and the Gospel of Christ because of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, love of God and neighbor can be frozen in many of her ministers and people, such that even their faith grows cold. The Church bars those who are in grave sin from the very heart of the Church, the Eucharist; at the same time,
however, she prays for the sinners, carries the burden of their sins, confesses them to God as her own, and bears their shame. In this way, sinners are both separated from and embraced by the Church with a special love.

A contradiction similar to that of sin is introduced into the Church by heresy, the stubborn rejection of some truths that have been revealed by God. For this reason, groups or communities have separated themselves from the unity of the Church, yet they have retained “many elements of truth and sanctification” of the Catholic Church. Those persons who have joined or have lived in these separated communities in good faith may obtain salvation by using these means of grace (such as baptism, Scripture, ecclesial communities). Even on earth they may already be in vital union with the Catholic Church if the same Holy Spirit which animates the Catholic Church is present and active in them. This, then, is the contradiction: the Church established by Christ subsists as one autonomous subject in the Catholic Church, yet many of her own “elements of truth and sanctification” exist outside of the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. They are separated from the Catholic Church, yet somehow they still belong to her. Sins on both sides caused the separation, but the grace operating in them draws everyone toward catholic unity.

The unity of the Church is one of the Church’s four traditional marks, which appear together for the first time in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” There is an intrinsic unity, a certain perichoresis among these four marks. The unity of the Church is holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Church unites us in the one Holy Spirit to the one holy Christ. The unity of the Church is also catholic in that it aims to unite every human being, race, and culture to Christ and to each other. Hers is also an apostolic unity, since it unites every member and every Catholic church throughout the earth and throughout history with the original Church of the apostles.32

\[ \text{ROCH KERESZTY, O. CIST., is adjunct professor of theology at the University of Dallas.} \]

32. The four marks of the Church are always both an existing gift and a challenging task to work on every day of our lives.