

# COLUMNISTS

## Body of Christ inclusive of former outsiders

One of the most difficult theological questions that has challenged the Catholic Church since the dawn of the ecumenical movement is that of the relationship between itself and the other churches in the Body of Christ. Before the Second Vatican Council it was simply taken for granted by most Catholics that the Catholic Church is the "one, true Church of Christ."

Indeed, the Catholic Church did not even recognize the other Christian communities as "churches" in those days. They were regarded instead as heretical sects (as in the case of Protestants, with whom Anglicans were carelessly linked) or as schismatic communities (as in the case of the Orthodox).

Every individual outside the Catholic Church — Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox, Jews, and all others — were simply lumped together as "non-Catholics." Christians among them were expected to "return" some day to the already existing unity of the Catholic Church.

As the ecumenical movement began to make a positive impact on Catholic theology in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in the writings of the late Cardinal Yves Congar, non-Catholic Christians came gradually to be seen not only as individuals but as members of distinct Christian communities.

The Second Vatican Council confirmed the pioneering work of scholars like Congar. It pointed out that the Catholic Church does not seek the "re-



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essays in  
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turn" of non-Catholic Christians to the pre-existing unity of the Catholic Church, but rather the "restoration" of Christian unity (Decree on Ecumenism, n. 1).

The council also referred to non-Catholic Christians as more than individuals. They belong to "separated churches" which "have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation" (n. 3). In fact, the Holy Spirit uses them "as means of salvation, which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church."

These churches, through faith in Christ and baptism, are brought into "a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church."

But that conciliar teaching still did not specify the exact relationship between the Catholic Church and these other "separated churches." What does "imperfect communion" entail? Are these

other churches part of the Body of Christ or not? Is the Catholic Church alone the "one, true Church of Christ"?

In addition to its Decree on Ecumenism, the council also addressed this daunting problem in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, better known by its Latin title, *Lumen Gentium*.

Article 8 reads in part: "This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church..."

Two things stand out in this text: (1) the Catholic Church is no longer spoken of as the "Roman" Catholic Church, because there are other, non-Roman Catholic churches that are also in union with the Bishop of Rome (the Maronites and the Melkites, for example); and (2) the Body of Christ is no longer taken to be identical with the Catholic Church. There are other churches in the universal church than the Catholic Church alone. In other words, the Body of Christ is larger than the Catholic Church.

In the previous draft of article 8, the copulative verb "is" equated the Body of Christ with the Catholic Church. Had the verb "is" remained in the final text, the council would have simply reaffirmed the pre-Vatican II idea that the Catholic Church and the Body of Christ are "one and the same" (as in Pope Pius XII's encyclicals, *Mystici Corporis*, 1943, and *Humani Generis*, 1950).

By substituting the verb "subsists in" for the verb "is," the council thereby en-

larged the scope of the Body of Christ. The church literally "stands under" the Catholic Church, but it may also "stand under" other Christian churches as well.

Some of the more conservative bishops at the council immediately recognized the great significance of this change of verbs. Right up to the end of the debate, 13 of them demanded that "is" remain in the text. Nineteen urged the formula "subsists in an integral way" in the Catholic Church, and 25 others preferred "subsists by divine law" in the Catholic Church.

But the council's Theological Commission unanimously held fast to "subsists in," thereby deliberately leaving open the question of the relation of the one church (the Body of Christ) with the many churches (including now even the Catholic Church itself).

As Cardinal Jan Willebrands, the former president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, put it, "The conclusion is that whoever belongs to Christ belongs to the church, and hence that the limits of the church are coextensive with those of belonging to Christ."

Thanks to the council, the day of regarding Anglicans, Orthodox, Protestants, and separated Orientals as outside the Body of Christ is over, and so, too, one hopes, is the day of regarding them as second-class members of that body.

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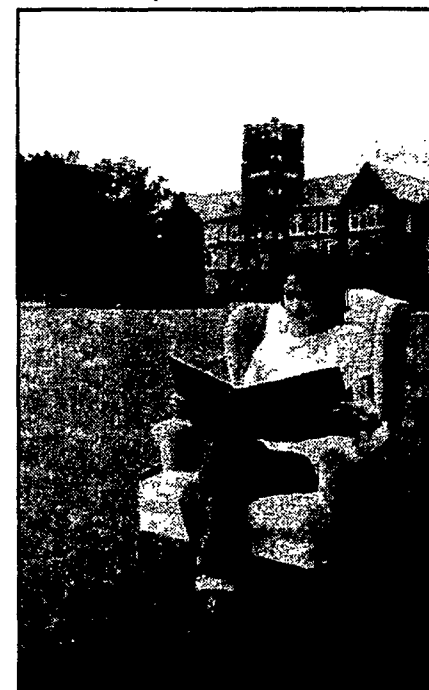
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