

COLUMNISTS

Body of Christ includes all Christian churches

The bishops of the Church of England have given the only major response thus far to Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical, *Ut unum sint* ("That They All May Be One"). In that encyclical the pope issued a remarkable, indeed unprecedented, invitation to the pastoral leaders and theologians of the various separated churches to suggest ways to improve the manner in which the papal office is exercised.

The bishops concluded their response with a reference to one of the most important teachings of the Second Vatican Council, namely, that the Body of Christ is larger than the Roman Catholic Church and the churches that are in communion with Rome.

In doing so, the council took a major step beyond the teaching of Pope Pius XII that the Catholic Church and the Body of Christ are "one and the same." The clear implication of that teaching was that non-Catholic Christian churches are not in the Body of Christ.

Actually the teaching of Pius XII was even more restrictive than that. In his 1950 encyclical, *Humani generis*, he unwittingly limited the Body of Christ to Latin rite, or Roman, Catholics: "the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same" (n. 44). Roman Catholics are inclined to forget that there are more than 20 million other Catholics who are not Roman Catholic. They belong



essays in
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By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

to one or another non-Roman, non-Latin church (for example, the Maronite Church or the Greek Catholic Church), each of which is in communion with the Bishop of Rome and is, therefore, part of the Catholic communion of churches.

On the other hand, even that language ("Catholic communion of churches") is alienating for Anglicans. They, too, embrace the name Catholic; just as Roman and Eastern rite Catholics do and, therefore, are unwilling to concede the name Catholic exclusively to the Roman Catholic Church and the non-Latin churches that are in communion with Rome.

The bishops of the Church of England insist in their formal response to *Ut unum sint* that they "gladly accept that there is already a 'real but imperfect' communion between Christians and between ecclesial communities given in our common bap-

tism." This is consistent with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that there are "varying degrees" of incorporation into the Body of Christ (Decree on Ecumenism, n. 3).

In other words, it is not a matter of all or nothing, as the pre-Vatican II theology and papal encyclicals portrayed it.

At the council, the issue was joined in the debate over which verb would be used in article 8 of *Lumen gentium*: the copulative verb *est* ("is") or the more inclusive *subsistit in* ("subsists in").

The choice of *subsistit in* was indicative of the council's refusal simply to reaffirm the teaching of Pius XII that the Catholic Church (Roman or otherwise) is identical with the Body of Christ.

For the council, the Body of Christ "subsists in" the Catholic Church, but is not simply coextensive with it. The council's teaching constituted a major theological shift from exclusiveness to inclusiveness. The bishops of the Church of England applaud that shift because "it reveals an openness on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to the presence of elements of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church outside the bounds of the Roman Catholic communion."

But then they raise a word of caution. The bishops note that the textual change from *est* to *subsistit in* "has been interpreted in different ways both within the Ro-

man Catholic Church and elsewhere, with commentators seeing it either as an inclusive or an exclusive expression. It therefore needs a common agreement between us on how it is to be understood." Otherwise, they insist, "a major ecumenical obstacle remains."

It is important to point out that there was no misunderstanding on the part of the council fathers regarding the significance of that change of verbs. The more militant members of the conciliar minority recognized it and fought the change strenuously. Most other members of the minority were more realistic, especially the curialists and their allies. "After the bishops return to their dioceses," they said to themselves, "we'll put everything back the way it was."

That mentality has driven much of the reaction to Vatican II over the past three decades: The conciliar minority (and present day sympathizers) never accepted their defeat on issues like this one and have worked tirelessly to win back, largely through administrative means, what was lost on vote after vote at the council itself.

In light of that reality, the Anglican bishops were right to put the question to Rome: is the council's original intent still valid? Or are we back to Pius XII?

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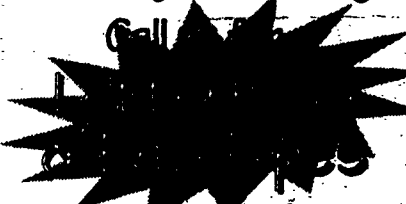
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