

SENSUS FIDELIUM AS A SOURCE FOR THEOLOGY

This workshop began with a presentation by Edmund Dobbin which attempted some conceptual clarifications of the notion *sensus fidelium*. The presentation dealt first with the history of the theological concept *sensus fidelium* and then concluded with some constructive proposals.

Sensus fidelium achieved its widest theological currency during the nineteenth century within the context of the theology surrounding the definition of the Immaculate Conception. The papal Bull speaks of the perpetual *sensus ecclesiae* which flows from an accord or a confluence (*conspiratio*) of the convictions of the faithful and their pastors. (“ . . . *perpetuus Ecclesiae sensus, singularis catholicorum Antistitum ac fidelium conspiratio.*”) Hence *sensus fidelium* was viewed by Newman and others as a component of *sensus ecclesiae* (the *conspiratio*). During the nineteenth century “magisterium” was coming to be applied exclusively to the papal/episcopal teaching office, and the sharp distinction between *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* was in place. Even Newman assumed this distinction but he emphasized the active, dynamic aspect of the *conspiratio*, whereas the more general trend was to view it more passively as a source to which the magisterium could turn in defining doctrines which lacked explicit warrants in the Scriptures and Fathers of the Church. In Newman’s words, “as compensation for whatever deficiency there might be of patristic testimony in behalf of various points of the Catholic dogma.”

Before the 19th century *sensus fidelium* appeared in texts on theological sources, but the concept was not employed commonly in theology. Authors generally cite Melchior Cano’s (d. 1560) *De Locis Theologicis* as the point of departure for the systematic usage of *sensus fidelium*. The provenance of the notion then becomes apparent in Cano’s connection of it with the question of tradition as a source of apostolic truth distinct from the written Scriptures—the context was Trent’s response to the Lutheran *sola scriptura*. Cano lists the “present common consent of the faithful” as one of four criteria for determining whether a doctrine or practice belonged to apostolic tradition from the beginning. Using Cano as a historical pivot point and following his argument and historical references, it becomes clear that the earlier history of *sensus fidelium* merges with the broader related issues of consensus and reception in the church. For example, in making his case Cano cites Augustine several times to the effect that universal consent of the church, even without explicit approbation of councils, is the surest sign of apostolic tradition and truth.

The roles of consensus and reception (especially reception viewed as a kind of retrospective consensus) have been pervasive—though often subtle—in the life of the church, influencing the emergence of such basic church structures as apostolic succession, the canon of Scripture, the acceptance of the Roman See as the

"apostolic see" par excellence, the recourse to general councils, etc. The piety, belief and liturgical life of the "faithful" were an active and integral part of the process of reception. Cano recognized this in his treatment of *sensus fidelium*. Only with the virtual identification of tradition with the activity of the "teaching Church," which Congar situates since the beginning of the eighteenth century, does the *sensus fidelium* become a basically passive reality, a source to be tapped for doctrinal definition at the discretion of the "teaching Church."

Vatican II's definition of the church as "The People of God" has initiated a corrective to this virtual marginalization of the "faithful." The Council prefers the term *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) but explicitly includes the faithful in this *sensus*: "Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,' it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* 12). The included quote is from Augustine. Clearly this is a retrieval of the earlier notion of consensus.

Surveying the history of consensus and reception it becomes evident that the emphasis has traditionally been placed on the objective content of consensus, the truth itself universally assented to, rather than on the subjective instinct or capacity for achieving and assuring that consensus. (In other words, the interest was in the objective *consensus* rather than the *sensus*.) Congar often stresses this point and he shows that, when the emphasis did shift from the content (*traditum*) to the active power of discerning and handing down tradition (*tradens*), it was in terms of the "teaching Church" as the exclusive agent of tradition.

Newman's appeal to "a sort of instinct, or *phronēma*, deep in the bosom of the mystical body of Christ" suggests a vision of the church as a "community of *phronēsis*." The emphasis shifts to the whole church as a discerning body. The collective faith of the church possesses an active "discerning eye" for truth. Lonergan's brief essay "Dialectic of Authority" was offered as a succinct illustration of such a "community of *phronēsis*." Implied in this vision of the church is the recognition of a kind of proportionality between the church's power of spiritual discernment (*sensus fidei*) and its communal authenticity. This correlation of *sensus fidei* with communal authenticity accentuates the difficulty involved in using consensus as a criterion of truth in concrete cases. Today we are acutely aware of the historical and cultural conditioning of ideas and attitudes. A secular social environment can subtly precondition whole segments of the church to distorted reception of tradition. On the other hand, rigid traditionalistic indoctrination can result in widespread consensus which is not necessarily the result of communal authenticity. Hence opinion polls are of very limited value in discerning a true *consensus fidelium*.

The notion of communal *phronēsis* suggests that we view consensus more as a *formal* than as a material criterion of truth, i.e., more as a principle operative in the attainment of truth than as a datum assuring truth already in possession.

The role of consensus in the validation of truth claims is well illustrated by Jürgen Habermas' contention that every event of human communication tacitly presupposes as a normative ideal the striving for free, undistorted, unbiased and universally open communication. Habermas' ideal event of communication is not

so much a utopian blueprint as a formal imperative which we implicitly presuppose when we communicate or dialogue and which is a principle operating for the successful outcome of our communication. Habermas' principle, in effect, heightens consciousness of group bias and facilitates the movement toward consensus. Habermas makes us aware that the power of judgment in theoretical and practical matters rests more than we tend to recognize on potential agreement with others. What is involved is not an illusory Archimedean universal viewpoint but rather confidence that unbiased, open communication on an ever-widening scale is a precondition for truth. Such respect for consensus would be one of the operative virtues in a community of *phronēsis*. Consensus, when it emerges from such a process of *phronēsis*, is compelling both as an intrinsic experience of truth and value, on the one hand, and as the satisfaction of the participants that the conditions for successful communication have been fulfilled, on the other hand. In this view the ideal of universal consensus takes on the already/not-yet eschatological character of the Gospel itself.

Two reasons are proffered for retaining the distinction between *sensus ecclesiae* and *sensus fidelium* in a community of *phronēsis* where the dichotomy between *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* has been attenuated. First, it preserves the possibility for healthy dialectical interaction between the leadership of the institution and the People of God, advocated by Newman and Lonergan. Second, it calls attention to the manifold forms of consensus in the life of the church. A consensus of the faithful has its typical locus in the concrete worship and social praxis of the church. It does not come to expression—at least originally—in the technical and generally abstract categories of theological scholarship or dogmatic definition. The *sensus fidelium* is generally fostered by simple, practical proclamation of Jesus' message, in uncomplicated, yet powerful narrative forms and evocative concrete illustrations and personal witness, reminiscent of Jesus' own ministry. Such "concrete universals" evoke the authentic Christian praxis of which the *sensus fidelium* is the "discerning eye." The "abstract universals" often employed by theologians and Church leaders in the processes of theological reflection and the formulation of doctrines and dogmatic definitions, constitute more derivative forms of discourse. Each of these more specialized types of discourse is endowed with its distinctive authoritative character—scholarly competence in the one case, and the charism of pastoral oversight of the tradition, in the other. Ideally, in a church of *phronēsis* these activities interact in reciprocity with one another and with the *sensus fidelium* providing sharper focus, clearer formulation, a critical component and, in some cases, a deeper penetration for the church's full collective discernment, the *sensus ecclesiae*.

This emphasis of the "formal," dynamic aspect of tradition (the *tradens*) assumes that the apostolic tradition (the *traditum*), enshrined in biblical texts and carried through the centuries via various genres of tradition (e.g., narrative, ritual, doctrine, creed, dogma, symbol, poetry, hymn, etc.), comes alive in the Christian celebration and praxis as the living tradition which grounds the *sensus ecclesiae*. The *episcopoi* (overseers), whose special ministry is to guard and preserve the apostolic tradition, fulfill this ministry most especially by fostering a vital *sensus fidelium*. When the bishops responsibly see to it that the tradition in all of its symbolic power is brought to bear on the life of the whole church, then in a kind of

reciprocity they share in the collective discernment which emerges, and when they speak in the name of the church, their words, backed by the lived faith conviction of the community, possess an aura of authority which mere appeal to juridical claims could never match.

The respondent, John Britt, offered several applications of *sensus fidelium* and then moderated the general discussion. Issues raised included: the need to clarify the distinction between *sensus ecclesiae*, as employed in the definition of the Immaculate Conception, and *sensus fidei*, as used in *Lumen gentium*; who are the "faithful"?; how to deal with group biases and ideologies in fostering and discerning a *sensus fidelium*; the need to preserve the traditional emphasis on the "material" aspect of tradition while recognizing the role of consensus as a formal operating principle of tradition.

EDMUND J. DOBBIN, O.S.A.
Villanova University