

## THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM*: OLD QUESTIONS, NEW CHALLENGES

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To begin our consideration of the *sensus fidelium*, I invite you to take a moment to assess what you think and imagine about it. (1) Where do you situate the *sensus fidelium* in your ecclesiology? What is its relationship to the hierarchical magisterium? (2) Who are the subjects of the *sensus fidelium*? The lay faithful? The Bishops? Theologians? All three together? Only Catholics? Only practicing Catholics? (3) How does the *sensus fidelium* operate within a theological epistemology? Is the *sensus fidelium* genuine knowledge, and what form of knowledge is it? Can it be critically tested? How is it affected by culture? Good. Remember your image of the church and your ideas about the *sensus fidelium*. You might want to draw on them later today and tomorrow as we continue to examine its meaning and application.

### *Introduction*

Recent studies on the *sensus fidelium* have indicated the role played by Yves Congar, O.P., in pointing to the importance of this concept in the pre-conciliar Church. In his pioneering *Lay People in the Church* and his later two-volume *Tradition and Traditions*, Congar discussed the meaning and importance of the *sensus fidelium*. Already in 1954, in *Lay People in the Church*, he wrote:

We speak of *sensus* or *consensus fidelium*, *sensus Ecclesiae*, *sensus catholicus*, *sensus fidei*; or, as in [Pius XII's] '*Munificentissimus Deus*', of *christiani populi fides*, *communis Ecclesiae fides*. The two sets of terms are not exactly equivalent: they belong to different moments in history and different points of view. But they suppose a common basis, which can be formulated thus: there is a gift of God (of the Holy Spirit) which relates to the twofold reality, objective and subjective, of faith (*fides quae creditur*; *fides qua creditur*), which is given to the hierarchy and the whole body of the faithful together...and which ensures an indefectible faith to the Church. This gift, we say, relates to the objective reality of faith, that is, the deposit of notions *and of realities* which constitute tradition (*id quod traditur Ecclesiae*; *id quod tradit Ecclesia*); correlatively, it relates to subjective reality, that is, to the grace of faith in the *fidelis*, or religious subject, the quasi-instinctive ability that faith has to see and adhere to its object. This subjective aspect of the grace of faith was specially considered by the great thirteenth-century scholastics. But the aggregate of what we have just briefly analyzed, which can be called the infallibility of the Church's faith, is a universal traditional belief.<sup>1</sup>

So much for the fact of the *sensus fidelium* in Congar. But how did he understand this significant theological fact?

The long quote just cited is found in the chapter entitled "The Laity and the Church's Prophetic Function." In Part Two of *Lay People in the Church*, Congar

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<sup>1</sup> *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, tr. Donald Attwater, rev. ed. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965), 288.

examined the laity and the three classical functions or *munera* of Christ that Vatican II would take up. Already in 1954 Congar had preferred to discuss ministry according to this threefold framework rather than using the then normal distinction between the power of orders and the power of jurisdiction. Moreover, he provided an overarching framework for understanding the priestly, kingly, and prophetic tasks of the Church. Congar distinguished between the structure of the Church and the life of the Church. The distinction is fundamental to Congar's ecclesiology. Structure points to what was given to the Church by Christ and his Spirit as indefeasibly constituting what the Church is. Structure includes the sacraments, the *depositum fidei*, and the hierarchy. These constitute the Church as given by Christ and therefore as inalienable. But there is also the other principle of the Church, that of life. It equally lays claim to constituting the Church, especially because it assures the accomplishment of the Church's mission and the achievement of its purpose. This vast realm includes the person's concrete vocation, the nature and qualities of one's ecclesial communities, the variety of theological schools, the liturgies and spiritualities of the church, and many other factors. Congar's approach introduced the possibility of flexibility, change, and the element of historicity into his theology of the church in a way that was hardly encountered elsewhere among Catholic ecclesialogists of the time.

Nor was Congar naïve about the ambiguities and possible missteps of the *sensus fidelium*. Right after the positive statement quoted above, he added:

Too much must not be attributed to the *sensus fidelium*...History tells us of the widespread failures of faith in the Christian people: in the East of the seventh century in face of Islam, in England and the Scandinavian countries in the face of the Protestant Reformation, in unhealthy enthusiasm here and superstitious devotions there, and so on. The treatise on theological criteria sets out to determine certain limits, certain rules or conditions within which the infallibility of the *sensus fidelium* is or is not certainly operative, as it tries to do also in respect of the Fathers, for they too were sometimes mistaken.<sup>2</sup>

The history of the *sensus fidelium* is, then, a checkered one. Just as there are instances when the pope and bishops faltered, failed, or overreached, so, too, instances can be adduced when theologians and the laity at large got it wrong.

Congar knew that theologians, at least from Melchior Cano (1509–60), were aware of the fact of the *infallibilitas in credendo* of the whole church. Such infallibility, as distinguished from the magisterium's *infallibilitas in docendo*, was never seriously called into question before Vatican II. The infallibility of the whole church *in credendo* might have been hemmed in by distinctions such as "active" and "passive" infallibility, a "teaching church" and "a learning church," but since the influential nineteenth-century theologians Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), Giovanni Perrone (1794–1876), and especially John Henry Newman (1801–90), this *infallibilitas in credendo* was increasingly understood as a positive, contributory role of the faithful in determining the faith. At the very least, the consultation of the faithful by Pius IX in preparation for the definition of Mary's Immaculate Conception (1854) and by Pius XII in preparation for the definition of Mary's Assumption (1950) had sealed the case for a meaningful teaching of the *sensus fidelium* as an active *infallibilitas in credendo*. When Vatican II opened, some form of the doctrine was

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 288–89.

undeniably part of the church's understanding of the tradition. What more can be said, then, about the nature and the function of the *sensus fidelium* in the life of the church according to Vatican II?

The German Catholic theologian Wolfgang Beinert has defined the *sensus fidelium* as "a free gift granted to all in the church that imparts to them an interior agreement with the object of faith, and in whose power the church as a whole expresses its consensus of the faith, knowing and confessing the object of faith in unanimous agreement with the church's teaching office and with the science of theology."<sup>3</sup> What I hope to accomplish in this paper is to develop the conditions needed for properly understanding the *sensus fidelium* and for effectively integrating it into the life of the Church.

### A. A Listening Church

At this point in the reception of the *sensus fidelium* by the post-conciliar church, the old distinction of a "teaching" and a "learning" church is thoroughly unhelpful. The late Frederick E. Crowe has left us three seminal essays on the priority of learning in the church—at all levels. In "The Magisterium as Pupil: The Learning Church," he wrote: "Perhaps as a result of Pope John XXIII's initiative, we had in Vatican II a council in which the learning process was more explicit perhaps than it had ever been before, but we do not seem to have kept up the momentum. And so we continue to lay enormous stress on the teaching function, and very little on the learning function."<sup>4</sup> The key, of course, is for all in the church to be listeners, for the church to be an *ecclesia audiens*. Listening is no easy process. It is active and demanding. It requires openness to the other and courage in the face of the possibly new, frankness in posing questions, the discipline of attending to each other and respecting one another, and finally the humility to acknowledge another's insight.

The priority of listening was emphasized in Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, when it opened with the words: "Hearing the word of God with reverence (*Dei verbum religiose audiens*) and proclaiming it with faith" (art. 1).<sup>5</sup> Later, in article 10 it

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<sup>3</sup> "Theologische Erkenntnislehre," in *Glaubenszugänge. Lehrbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. W. Beinert, 3 vols. (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1995), 1:167–82, at 169 ["4.5 Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen"]; see also idem, "Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen in der systematischen Theologie," in *Mitsprache im Glauben? Vom Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen*, ed. Günter Koch (Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 51–78, at 59 (trans. mine).

<sup>4</sup> "The Magisterium as Pupil: The Learning Teacher," *Developing the Lonergan Legacy: Historical, Theoretical, and Existential Themes*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 283–93, at 288. The other two studies are "The Responsibility of the Theologian, and the Learning Church" and "The Church as Learner, Two Crises, One *Kairos*," both in *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, ed. Michael Vertin (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 172–92 and 370–84 respectively. The challenge was taken up admirably by Margaret O'Gara and Michael Vertin in their co-authored "The Holy Spirit's Assistance to the Magisterium in Teaching: Theological and Philosophical Issues" in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, vol. 51: *Fifty-first Annual Convention, San Diego, June 6–9, 1996* (CTSA, 1996), 125–42.

<sup>5</sup> Translations of the documents of Vatican II are noted in each instance. Here Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), 750.

reminded the bishops that although they were entrusted with the task of teaching with authority, the charge could only be fulfilled if they listened to God's word carefully: "The teaching authority is not above the word of God but stands at its service...it devotedly listens (*pie audit*), reverently preserves and faithfully transmits the word of God."<sup>6</sup> The ideal of the "listening church" is to become a church in dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Over fifty years ago, Paul VI called us to this task in *Ecclesiam suam* (1964).<sup>8</sup> Believing, proclaiming, and teaching all begin with "listening" and come to fruition in dialogue. The observation of the International Theological Commission's document "*Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church" is to be welcomed: "It is only natural that there should be a constant communication and regular dialogue on practical issues and matters of faith and morals between members of the Church."<sup>9</sup>

## ***B. The Sensus Fidei Fidelium and Ecclesiology***

### *1. People of God*

The teaching of Vatican II regarding the *sensus fidelium* should not be isolated from the Council's broader ecclesiological accents. If this teaching is to make a difference in the church's life, it must be understood as an indispensable element in its self-understanding. Of particular importance to the meaning of the *sensus fidelium* is the teaching of Vatican II on the People of God, and yet, the reception of Vatican II's teaching remains incomplete. By the early 1980s it was viewed by some as dangerous for its supposed advocacy of democratizing tendencies and its use by liberation theologians. Ideas such as *communio* or sacrament, valid on their own terms, were used to weaken or exclude the influence of the church as the People of God.<sup>10</sup> But the teaching on the People of God stubbornly holds out and from time to

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<sup>6</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., *The Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:975.

<sup>7</sup> See Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006); idem, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 207–38; Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, "Dialogstrukturen in der Kirche und die Communio-Theologie des Zweiten Vatikanums," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 41 (2012): 602–15; and Peter Walter, "Aufrichtiger und geduldiger Dialog," in *Die grossen Metaphern des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Ihre Bedeutung für heute*, eds. Mariano Delgado and Michael Sievernich (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 81–100.

<sup>8</sup> "The Dialogue," articles 58–117 (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1964) 27–47.

<sup>9</sup> "*Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church," §124, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html) (accessed on June 19, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Dario Vitale has reviewed the post-conciliar discussions of the ecclesiology of Vatican II in his "Il periodo postconciliare," *Popolo di Dio* (Assisi: Citadella Editrice, 2013) 153–91. In particular, he points to the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985 as the catalyst for neglecting the church as the People of God in favor of the church as communion, especially in official Vatican publications. Recently, Walter Kasper also pointed out certain limitations of the theology of the People of God in the years immediately following the Council. See *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, tr. Thomas Hoebel (New York: Bloomsbury T.&T. Clark, 2015), 119–26, at 124 ("The Church as 'People of God'—The Theocentric and

time reemerges to claim its centrality in the ecclesiology of Vatican II.<sup>11</sup> Recently, in *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis stressed how the People of God and Christian faith are open to fuller expression in the diverse cultures of the world: “The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture...In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face” (nos. 115–116).<sup>12</sup>

Vatican II insisted on the character of the church as the mystery of the Trinity’s self-communication to humankind in history. The first chapter of *Lumen gentium*, entitled “The Mystery of the Church,” goes on to delineate the reciprocal roles of Father, Son, and Spirit in the divine plan for the church and its realization in history. Central to the Council’s insights into the nature of the church are the many images and theological concepts it employed. Among these a unique place was given to the image of the People of God. Vatican II envisioned the church as the People of God by taking the idea from its place of origin in the chapter on the laity and giving it a privileged place as Chapter Two, before the subsequent chapters on the hierarchy, the laity, and consecrated life in the church.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the church as People of God does not exclude other images that also elucidate the life and mission of the church. What function, then, does the image of the People of God exercise in the ecclesiology of Vatican II?

First, the People of God has a double perspective. It is an idea taken from religious sociology that communicates specific knowledge about Israel as God’s covenant people in history and how the first Christians understood themselves in relation to historic Israel. But it is also a powerful metaphor that acts on the imagination of believers and so stirs them to think creatively and entertain other visions for the church, visions of co-responsibility, collaboration, and participation. Second, the Council wanted to emphasize the church as situated in history, not its timeless and unchangeable character, so often emphasized up until then. As a pilgrim people, the church journeys through human history from its beginning to its eschatological conclusion.

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Doxological Architecture of the Church”). It should be noted that the framers of the 1983 Code of Canon Law showed no such hesitation when they entitled Book II “The People of God” (canons 204–746). However, in his “Introduction” to Book II, Robert J. Kaslyn wrote: “The ecclesiology of *communio* thus establishes the foundation for synthesizing the various images used to describe the Church—for example, as the people of God, as sacrament, as the Body of Christ.” *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, eds. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York: Paulist, 2000), 244.

<sup>11</sup> “The People of God” appears in 11 of the 16 documents of Vatican II. Two recent ecclesiologies that have developed the central idea of the People of God are Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God*, tr. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); and Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> “The Joy of the Gospel,” (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013), nos. 112–114 (“A People for Everyone”) and 115–18 (“A People of Many Faces”).

<sup>13</sup> On *Lumen gentium*, see Giuseppe Alberigo, “Major Results, Shadows of Uncertainty,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4: *Church as Communion, Third Period and Intersession, September 1964–September 1965*, eds. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Louvain, Peeters, 2003), 617–40, esp. 617–21.

Finally, I propose that the People of God as idea and image is wrapped up with the function of acting as the horizon for the other images and ecclesiological statements. Apropos, Gilles Routhier has written: “The image of the People of God established as it were the horizon against which the various particular questions in ecclesiology must be situated.”<sup>14</sup> The term People of God is both its content as an idea and image and its added function as horizon.<sup>15</sup> The content functions as the horizon for the whole of *Lumen gentium* and so a certain surplus value accrues to it. The fundamental content of the idea and image of the People of God is the radical equality of all the baptized and the priesthood or priestly quality of the whole church. The advantage of understanding the People of God in the ways just described is that it frees the church to be open to changes that help it realize its mission in new and changing conditions.

It should be clear that much work still needs to be done to understand the full meaning and implications of the church as the People of God. Many laudable efforts have been made to date, but a *consensus theologorum* is still by and large lacking. It remains my firm conviction that greater agreement on the importance of the idea and image of the People of God is imperative for further progress in ecclesiology and for the acceptance of the *sensus fidei fidelium* in particular.

## 2. The Tria Munera

Another important aspect of the church as People of God concerns *Lumen gentium*'s use of the “threefold offices” of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. This division was promoted by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) and was taken up by the nineteenth-century German Catholic canon lawyers Ferdinand Walter (1794–1879) and George Phillips (1804–1872), who incorporated it into their ecclesiologies. The so-called *tria munera* schema was Vatican II's preferred way of expressing both the place and role of office and ministry in the Church, as well as the dignity of the laity in the People of God. All believers participate in Christ's activities of teaching and witnessing, of sanctifying life, and of leading in family, society, and church. Vatican II viewed the *tria munera* schema as preferable not only because it avoided a dichotomy between the laity and officeholders in the church, but also because it offered a better explanation of the nature of authority itself in the church than the distinction between two separable “powers”—orders and jurisdiction. The twofold schema, which emerged in the 11th century among canon lawyers, always had difficulties holding sacramental activity, governance, and magisterium together in a fundamental unity. The bishops at Vatican II in the end preferred the more descriptive and flexible threefold schema over the standard orders-jurisdiction distinction. It has unimpeachable biblical warrant in the covenant

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<sup>14</sup> See “La recezione dell'ecclesiologia del Vaticano II: Problemi aperti,” in Associazione teologica Italiana, *La chiesa e il Vaticano II: Problemi di ermeneutica e recezione conciliare* (Milan: Edizioni Glossa, 2005), 3–45, at 9. I also want to point to Dario Vitale and his recent *Popolo di Dio* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2013), from whom, too, I have learned much about the current *status quaestionis* of the People of God.

<sup>15</sup> On the epistemological function of an “horizon,” see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), *passim* (see “Horizon(s)” in the Index, 385–86).

prerogatives listed in Exodus 19:6 and 23:22, explicitly repeated in 1 Peter 2:9 (“But you are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own’”), as well as the advantage of a clearly christological formulation. But the twofold schema has continued to be employed in the post-conciliar period, leaving many unanswered questions about the relationship of the two schemas to one another. Are they compatible? Does one have priority vis-à-vis the other?

These nagging questions cast doubt over the explanatory power of the *tria munera* schema where it is used in the documents of Vatican II. They are fundamental questions and until they are answered more satisfactorily, the prophetic activity of the *sensus fidelium*, for example, will continue to have a fragile hold and will be viewed as a merely secondary exercise by the laity. Furthermore, it is precisely in those passages that refer to the prophetic, sanctifying, and leadership functions of the laity that Vatican II broke new ground in its teaching regarding the inalienable dignity of each believer, of her or his right to collaborate in the mission of the church, and of his or her right to participate in the life of the church at all levels. The real task is to better explain the underlying unity of activity between officeholders and the laity and their mutual relations.<sup>16</sup>

One other question regarding the *tria munera* involves the relationship of teaching, sanctifying and leading among themselves. Can these three activities really be so neatly compartmentalized? Doesn't one activity *eo ipso* involve the other two? Is preaching, for example, only an exercise of the *munus propheticum*, or isn't it also sanctifying, and doesn't it at the same time provide direction or leadership to the community receiving it? Aren't the sanctifying sacraments, which take place in the context of a rite that includes announcing the word of God, also proclamatory? What are the implications for spirituality when all three are seen as simultaneously active? In this area, too, much more reflection is needed. Without deeper reflection on these points, I fear the *sensus fidelium* as an exercise of a prophetic activity by all believers will be tenuous.

### 3. A Restored Understanding of the Church as Communion

An indispensable condition for understanding the *sensus fidelium* is the restoration of a correct understanding of what Vatican II meant by *koinonia* or *communio*. As numerous commentators have remarked, the notion has been so theologically reconfigured as to render its original intent all but indecipherable.<sup>17</sup> The task is imperative because in the thought of Vatican II the church as People of God and as *communio* are intimately connected to one another. If you misunderstand one member of the pair, you distort the other. At the same time, the Council's teaching on

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<sup>16</sup> See Anthony Ekpo, “The *Sensus Fidelium* and the Threefold Office of Christ: A Reinterpretation of *Lumen Gentium* No. 12,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015): 330–46.

<sup>17</sup> See Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 52–74; Joseph A. Komonchak, “Toward an Ecclesiology of Communion,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4: *Church as Communion, Third Period and Intersession, September 1964–September 1965*, eds. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Louvain: Peeters, 1993), 1–93; David McLoughlin, “*Communio* Models of Church: Rhetoric or Reality?” in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 181–90.

episcopal collegiality is a concretion of this underlying *communio* ecclesiology. *Communio* without collegiality is ecclesial doctetism; collegiality without *communio* can become ecclesiastical power-grabbing.

Perhaps no one has captured the urgency of fully reinstating the *communio* ecclesiology of Vatican II more emphatically than Wolfgang Beinert, who has written the following:

It is imperative that those who hold office in the church...make every effort to assure that what the majority of the bishops at the Second Vatican Council held regarding *communio* ecclesiology will become a reality in the church today. Some of the particular points of such a program would include more effective connections between the primatial and the collegial exercise of the magisterium, the fostering of forms for their common search for truth, the strengthening of the competencies of the local churches, respect for the principle of subsidiarity in all the relevant dimensions of the church, the frank admission and Christian validation of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) that the faithful find themselves in today, and the rapid changes that occur daily in their life-world.

It is decisive that a conversion to an ecclesiology of communion be securely anchored in canon law. Individual gestures of good will or the toleration of privileges are not enough. There must be clarity regarding the structural and institutional elements which themselves need to be better explained. It must also not be forgotten that channels of communication must be established that admit the right of action from below toward the top. There must also be reflection as to how lay Christians can become (ecclesial) subjects. Here, impulses from feminist theology can be of help. In all of this, the hierarchical structure of the church is in no way being called into question. All that is sought are (institutional) forms that are transparent and fruitful.<sup>18</sup>

Much has been written on the content of the teaching about *communio* and its importance for understanding the Council correctly, but correct understanding alone will not restore *communio* to the day-to-day life of the church. We have lost the experience of *communio* that imbued the church of the first millennium, and that experience will not be easy to recover. Concrete practices will be the primary way to retrieve a communal mentality. Several means have been suggested in recent years, especially by Catholic canon lawyers disappointed by the absence of meaningful references to the *sensus fidelium* in the Code of Canon Law of 1983. These means include improved parochial and diocesan pastoral councils, more frequent use of the diocesan synod, and calls for the holding of national synods. Until the faithful have an experience of being vested partners in the life of the church, a genuinely communal mentality will continue to elude us.

I propose two other actions that can lead to the genuine experience of *communio* in the 21st century. The first is the recovery of the process employed by the American hierarchy in drafting the Pastorals *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our*

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<sup>18</sup> "Die Rezeptionsgeschehen in der Kirche," *Stimmen der Zeit* 214 (1996): 381–92, at 390–91 (trans. mine).



*Response*<sup>19</sup> and *Economic Justice for All*<sup>20</sup> in the 1980s. Real consultation of all constituents in the church on urgent social, ethical, and pastoral issues has the potential to reconnect the contemporary church with the church of the first millennium and its communal mentality. The second suggestion is to reopen the issue of the role of all diocesan parties in the process of the appointment of a bishop. In a study devoted to the question of the selection of bishops, German Catholic theologian Gisbert Greshake offered an historical overview of the process in the first millennium, followed by a number of conclusions and suggestions for the present church.<sup>21</sup> Drawing widely on historical studies, Greshake showed how, locally and regionally, the process involved three parties in the case of a diocese in need of a bishop, and reflected a threefold structure of *communio* as it relates to office in the church: the faithful or the laity, the local presbyterium, and the bishops of the province to which the local church in question belonged. The *communio ecclesiarum* of the first millennium was triadic, not dyadic – not simply the local church and the universal.<sup>22</sup> It included the local church, the regional church or the ecclesiastical province, and the supra-regional church. This triadic structure was the way in which the church preserved the Christological and the pneumatological dimensions of the church. If we in the West are to recover an understanding of the church as *communio ecclesiarum*, we must retrieve this triadic structure: the local church or diocese, the regional church, including the Bishops' Conference, and the primatial see of Rome. For the health of the church, no one element should be isolated from the others. When these two actions are implemented, the faithful will begin to have a real sense of ownership and co-responsibility in the church. Calls by some, including Ormond Rush, to relate the theology of the local church to the theology of the *sensus fidelium* are in the same vein and can only strengthen an ecclesiology of *communio*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> See "Bischofsernennungen im Lichte einer Theologie des kirchlichen Amtes und einer Communio-Ekklesiologie," in *Zur Frage der Bischofsernennungen in der römisch-katholischen Kirche*, ed. Gisbert Greshake (Munich/Zurich: Schnell und Steiner, 1991), 104–39. See also, idem, "'Zwischeninstanzen' zwischen Papst und Ortsbischöfen. Notwendige Voraussetzungen für die Verwirklichung der Kirche als 'communio ecclesiarum,'" in *Die Bischofskonferenz. Theologischer und juristischer Status*, eds. Hubert Müller and Hermann Josef Pottmeyer (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989), 88–115, esp. 104–106.

<sup>22</sup> Greshake was also influenced by the doctoral dissertation for the Pontifical Oriental Institute of John D. Faris (*The Communion of Catholic Churches: Terminology and Ecclesiology* [Brooklyn, NY: Saint Maron Publications, 1985]) in which the author defends the antiquity and legitimacy of the patriarchal churches, and thus of a tripartite structure of the church. Faris gives particular attention to the authentic teaching of Vatican II in *Lumen gentium* and *Orientalium ecclesiarum* defending the constitutionality of the particular churches of the East with their office of patriarch.

<sup>23</sup> "The Church Local and Universal and the Communion of the Faithful," in *A Realist's Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph Komonchak*, ed. Christopher Denny (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, [forthcoming]).

### C. The Sensus Fidei Fidelium: Revelation, Believing, and Human Cognition

Another series of questions concerns the relationship of the *sensus fidei fidelium* to revelation and to our understanding of revelation. How is the *sensus fidelium* related to human cognition and what kind of knowledge is it?

#### 1. The Importance of Dei Verbum of Vatican II for Understanding the Faith

In early articles on Vatican II's teaching on the *sensus fidelium*, scholars focused attention on *Lumen gentium* 12, where the teaching is presented at the greatest length.<sup>24</sup> Because article 8 of *Dei Verbum* never explicitly uses the phrases *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium*, its teaching was passed over. More recently, the importance of *Dei Verbum* for the ecclesiology of Vatican II has been noted. Recent commentators, including the authors of the International Theological Commission's "Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church," have noted the presence of the reality itself in the text.<sup>25</sup> The appropriate section from *Dei Verbum* reads as follows:

The expression "what has been handed down from the apostles" includes everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and to grow in faith. In this way the church, in its teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that it is and all that it believes.

This tradition which comes from the apostles progresses (*proficit*) in the church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit. There is growth in understanding (*crescit...perceptio*) of what is handed on, both the words and the realities they signify. This comes about through contemplation and study by believers, who "ponder these things in their hearts," both through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience (*ex intima spiritualium rerum quam experiuntur intelligentia*), and through the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, receive the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries advance, the church constantly holds its course towards the fullness of God's truth, until the day when the words of God reach their fulfillment in the church.<sup>26</sup>

This pioneering passage makes clear that the *sensus fidei fidelium* is more than a static *locus theologicus* for the content of revelation. Instead, it emphasizes the dynamic character of revelation itself by speaking about the church growing into "the fullness of God's truth." The faithful perform an indispensable role in more deeply perceiving this truth and more effectively applying it to life. The *sensus fidei fidelium* is a living, dynamic deepening of the understanding of divine truth that proceeds throughout history as humankind (and the cosmos) moves toward its eschatological goal.

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<sup>24</sup> Further observations follow in LG 35 (the *sensus fidei* on the family and society), in GS (the *sensus fidelium* on marriage), and PO 9 (on the responsibility of presbyters to attend to the gifts and insights of the faithful, i.e., their *sensus fidei*).

<sup>25</sup> Nos. 46, 67 and 82.

<sup>26</sup> Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2:974 (adapted slightly). Still to be recommended is the commentary on this passage by then Professor Joseph Ratzinger, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 3:184–90.

Wolfgang Beinert has pointed out how Vatican II has expanded the very notion of the *sensus fidei fidelium* when compared to the classical notion of a *locus theologicus*. In an historical presentation of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, he characterized the first period as one of being a witness to the tradition, while the second was that of the *sensus fidelium* as an echo of what the magisterium taught, and the third as a witness to the church's dogma when other sources were not available. Finally, at Vatican II we must say even more: the *sensus fidelium* is a deepening of the understanding of the faith and of the praxis of the faith.<sup>27</sup> Vatican II's understanding is that the *sensus fidei fidelium* not only witnesses to Christian truth but contributes to the emergence of that truth.

## 2. Sentire/sensus and Cognition

I asked above how human cognition is related to believing, or how *sentire* is related to *credere*. I begin with a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. It is his prayer before the crucifix of San Damiano, and shows that as early as the 13th century the terms *sensus* and *cognitio* were already closely linked to one another:

Most High, glorious God,  
Enlighten the darkness of my heart  
And give me true faith (*fidem rectam*), certain hope, and perfect charity,  
Sense and knowledge (*sensum et cognitionem*), Lord,  
That I may carry out your holy and true command.<sup>28</sup>

St. Francis did not move in theological circles, so his relating *sensus* with “knowledge” gives us a window into what the ordinary, unlettered Catholic of his day would have understood as the way to carry out God's will. After God's initiative and the gift of the theological virtues, Francis adds *sensus* and “knowledge”—words that point to how God's will is to be put into practice. These two terms illuminate one another and move the believer to action—to obeying God's will. They pertain to the order of practical, not primarily speculative, knowledge.

The term *sensus* is elusive and evocative. It is not simple “feeling,” “intuition,” or “blind groping,” but is grounded in a true grasp of the faith and its contents. As practical knowledge, and unlike theological discourse, its way of knowing is not especially formal, self-reflective, or self-critical. It is pre-reflexive, global, and broadly comprehensive knowledge.<sup>29</sup> It doesn't stop to investigate its processes or the complex questions it is generating. It hones in on how faith is to be lived in truth and incorporated into the whole fabric of one's life and the life of the church. It is

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<sup>27</sup> See “Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen in Theologie und Dogmengeschichte. Ein Überblick,” in *Der Glaubenssinn des Gottesvolkes – Konkurrent oder Partner des Lehramts?* QD 151, ed. Dietrich Wiederkehr (Freiburg: Herder, 1994) 66–131, at 87–109.

<sup>28</sup> The Latin text can be found in Kajetan Esser, *Opuscula sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis* (Grottaferrata: Editiones Ad Claras Aquas, 1978), 224 and the English in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1: *The Saint*, eds. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York/London/Manila: New City Press, 1999), 40.

<sup>29</sup> The ITC's “*Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church” prefers the language of “a sort of perception (*aisthesis*)” (§49), “connaturality” (§§50–51), and speaks of “a natural, immediate and spontaneous reaction” to revealed truth (§54), and “a vital instinct or a sort of ‘flair’ by which the believer clings spontaneously to what conforms to the truth of faith and shuns what is contrary to it” (§54).

impatient with minutiae and shows little difficulty with entertaining a multitude of doubts and problems while embracing lived faith quietly and confidently.

### 3. Experience

The *sensus fidei fidelium* pertains to the broad range of knowledge gained from experience. According to Walter Kasper: [The *sensus fidei*] “comes not from abstract theological reflection but from the lived experience of faith.”<sup>30</sup> The category of experience is widely invoked by contemporary theologians, even though differences in understanding it can be found. It is a specific form of cognition that is based on expertise, learning by doing, by trial and error, and from insights gained from shared human activity. In particular, experience-based cognition has helped retrieve the ancient idea of *praxis* as perfective of the human agent and perfective of her or his society, an insight that is at the heart of a broad range of liberation theologies. Contemporary Catholic theology would be impoverished without the category of experience and its contribution. The *sensus fidelium*, too, draws on the richness of experience and experience-based knowledge, refusing to be constrained within the confines of logical, scientific, and discursive reason – however beneficial and indispensable this form of cognition is.

### 4. Participatory Knowledge

As practical and experience-based, the *sensus fidelium* is also participatory knowledge. Though some truths can be known by scientific observation and objective reason, such a procedure for discovering truth is not the only form. More general in human affairs is what Avery Dulles pointed to as participatory knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Some truths can only be known by the knower being immersed in them and by living from them. Dulles spoke of inhabiting and dwelling in them. Knowledge by participation is particularly true when we humans are in search of religious truth. Objective or scientific distance can actually be a hindrance to coming to know in this realm of truth.

The vehicle for discerning and sharing participatory knowledge is the symbol, with its effects of transforming us and influencing our behavior for the good by uniting us to itself. The vehicle for understanding and expressing participatory knowledge is hermeneutical interpretation, which draws us and the totality of our lives into its self-expressive, holistic, and integrative process. Is there any wonder, then, that the complex and polyvalent knowledge characteristic of the *sensus fidelium* refuses facile and complete analysis? Little wonder, too, that such rich knowledge defies an easy identification of its subjects. I continue to resist all attempts to identify only practicing and committed Catholics and Christians as its subjects. Instead, it includes all who are struggling to live their lives in pursuit of and in accord with Christian truth as they inhabit it. This is especially the case when they are struggling with the vast array of issues that promote or restrict human dignity. In the final

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<sup>30</sup> *The Catholic Church*, 407, no. 55.

<sup>31</sup> “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41 (1980): 51–73, at 60–65.

analysis, there is only one subject of the *sensus fidelium* we can clearly identify—the whole church as guided by the Holy Spirit.

### 5. The “Object” of Faith

The “object” of the *sensus fidei fidelium* is the whole content of Christian truth. This observation draws on the teaching of Vatican II regarding the nature of revelation, especially in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Vatican II did not envision faith as the sum total of divine truths taught in the Scriptures and by the living tradition, but as God’s dialogue with humankind in history. In the words of *Dei Verbum*: “By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of love speaks to men and women as friends and enters into their life, so as to invite and receive them into relationship with himself” (No. 2).<sup>32</sup> Propositional truth gives way to terms that speak about revelation as inter-personal and dialogical communication. After Vatican II the priority resides with faith as God acting on the believer and drawing him or her into God’s own life in complete trust (*fides qua*). This insight about faith helps elucidate the *sensus fidei fidelium*, too, inasmuch as it points toward the mysterious process of being embraced by God’s truth and life prior to all reflection on its concrete content or application in human acts (*fides quae*). All attempts, then, to formally spell out faith’s contents necessarily operate within the *fides qua* itself as the only adequate context of interpretation. Faith cannot be reduced to concepts or terms but seeks to express itself in worshipful trust, service, and acts of justice and love. This does not reduce the *sensus fidelium* to unreasoned speech, but to speech that respects the limits of understanding and how the divine self-communication in grace and truth is expressed. To some extent these “limits” are transcended in our human searching and in our faculty of imagination. If we employ words, as we ultimately must, then we do so in a way that goes beyond the boundaries of speech.

### 6. Certitude and Epistemological Reserve

From at least the 1400s, theologians did not hesitate to attribute infallibility to the whole church in its truth claims. The entire *populus christianus* was infallible in what it believed and what the hierarchy taught in its name. This insight eventually was turned into the expression *sensus* or *consensus fidelium omnium* familiar to us today. However, in the wake of the Reformation and the wars of religion, not to mention the effects of the scientific revolution and the claims of Enlightenment thinkers, the idea of infallibility became identified with the human quest for certitude. René Descartes’ foundationalist epistemology became the ideal of the certitude of religious knowledge in matters of faith as well. The pursuit of such ecclesial certitude reached its apex in the 19th century and at Vatican I in particular. In such a church, nothing less than complete certitude will suffice. In our postmodern condition we do not seek such certitude and the claim to it strikes us as epistemological hubris. We are content with less than absolute certitude, feeling more at home in a world of ideas, values, and truth claims that constitute a coherent world for us. In changed circumstances that valorize epistemological reserve, I often think that the view of

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<sup>32</sup> Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2:972 (adapted slightly).

Joseph R. Lerch, S.J., in the 1967 edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* was prescient. It is a teaching quite appropriate to our age and temperament:

When the question of the competence in these matters of the magisterium is posed, it is usually in the context of the infallibility of the magisterium: can the pope or a council infallibly define the truth or falsity of a certain proposition? Yet infallibility is not the only category that can be opposed to falsity. Between it and error there is the whole domain of sufficient certitude, guaranteed by the divine assistance that accompanies the exercise of spiritual authority without rendering it necessarily and absolutely infallible. The Catholic, accepting in faith the competence of the divinely instituted pastoral ministry, can rest assured that these men do not seriously err in carrying out their ministry without demanding that in every instance they must be able to give an infallible and hence irrevocable definition. In insisting too much on the question of infallibility, one runs the risk of demeaning in the eyes of the faithful the ordinary pastoral function of the magisterium.<sup>33</sup>

The neglect of Fr. Lerch's sage advice has led to an exaggerated zeal in teaching activity, especially by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its extension of the category of definitive doctrine (*doctrina definitiva tenenda*) as practically indistinguishable from infallible teaching. This new teaching has caused unnecessary confusion.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the multiplication of teachings and directives emanating from Rome, together with strenuous efforts to curtail healthy theological discussion and the normal processing of the meaning of the faith among the faithful, have vainly attempted to perpetuate a church and society that no longer exist—the world of modernity. In Christian hope, we need to come to terms with the ineradicable pluralism, cognitive dissonance, and ruptures of postmodernism, even as we struggle to pursue the truth and incorporate our limited insights into a way of living and thinking that proclaims the central claims of Christian revelation and imparts meaning to human lives.

## 7. Reception

The *sensus fidelium* perforce brings up the related theme of reception. The topic is vast and I can only discuss reception from one rather restricted point of view. Wolfgang Beinert has pointed out that reception is concerned with how an action or teaching fits into the whole of faith as lived and not just as something known or epistemologically justified. The primary question is not always, "Is this action or statement objectively true?" but, "Does it function within the faith as a whole?" Faith as *fides qua* not only makes truth-claims but constitutes a whole or totality that the

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<sup>33</sup> "Teaching Authority in the Church (Magisterium)," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967) 13: 959–65, at 964. Fr. Lerch taught fundamental theology at St. Mary's College, Kurseong, India. The passage has been retained verbatim in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, vol. 13:781 (Detroit: The Gale Group, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> See Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Ordinary Universal Magisterium: Unresolved Questions," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 447–71.

Medievals called *forma vitae* or a “unified pattern of Christian life.”<sup>35</sup> Reception answers the question of truth indirectly by primarily addressing the question of appropriation or internalization of the faith. This is how Beinert expresses it:

Given the necessarily historical condition of magisterial statements, it can happen that its directives are not practicable, are not supportive of life, or in certain socio-cultural situations are not able to be implemented. Precisely because faith is not law it has an inner dynamic that a given directive of the magisterium possibly does not capture. To observe such a directive would be to act contrary to the intention of the magisterium itself to proclaim the faith as something that can be lived...It follows that an act of reception or non-reception does not necessarily issue from a judgment. Rather, it consists of the adoption of the contents of the faith in the liturgical life, in one’s personal or local spirituality, in the specific praxis of the church, and so forth...Non-reception does not make clear that the content of a magisterial decision is necessarily false, but rather, at least *hic et nunc* (and so possibly in other places or situations), it does not possess the requisite value to advance ecclesial life. Consequently, the statement is without effect.<sup>36</sup>

Apropos, the German Catholic canonist Frank Ochmann, too, has written:

It is not first and foremost the truth or correctness that constitutes consent or reception. First of all it is a matter of the unanimity and the cohesion of a community of free subjects that arises out of the mutual respect for each one’s dignity, or in the case of the church, out of respect of the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

These are important observations. They get to the heart of the matter of what reception is and counterbalance our proclivity to concentrate exclusively on the certitude of our truth statements. Beinert and Ochmann remind us that there are many situations in the church today, especially when the church is considered as a world church, that defy our ability to spell out the implications of the non-reception of a teaching of the magisterium in terms of its truth or falsity. In some situations the real question is not “Is it objectively true?” but “Is it life-giving?”

### *Conclusion: The Sensus Fidei Fidelium and the Role of the Theologian*

Let me conclude with several brief observations about our role as theologians vis-à-vis the *sensus fidei fidelium*. The theologian best performs her or his function by remaining in the closest possible contact with the church at all levels—a practicing, worshiping, and learning community, the marginalized and estranged, the

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<sup>35</sup> On this notion, see the observations of Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, tr. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> “Die Rezeption und ihre Bedeutung für Leben und Lehre der Kirche,” in *Glaube und Zustimmung. Zur Interpretation kirchlicher Rezeptionsvorgänge*, QD 131, ed. Wolfgang Beinert (Freiburg: Herder, 1991) 15–49, at 42–44 (trans. mine). In this passage, Beinert draws on Bernard Häring explicitly for inspiration.

<sup>37</sup> “Kirchliches Recht in und aus dem Leben der Communio—Zur ‘Rezeption’ aus kononistischer Sicht,” in *Glaube als Zustimmung*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert, 123–63, at 157 (trans. mine).

local church's bishop and pastors, the academy, and other Christians. First and foremost, we are members of the *sensus fidelium* and we never relinquish this connection. We are in communion with all other believers and we offer our personal knowledge, professional competence, and love of the church in its service.

When necessary we offer our unique service to the full, living tradition of the church, and we marshal all our resources to help the bishops and the faithful better understand the terms of an issue and its manifold dimensions. We do not have to give a final answer to questions that are often beyond our ability to master, but we must have the courage to pose questions and make observations about issues that continue to motivate or disturb us. When we see something with clarity, we will courageously challenge received positions. When we continue to have doubts, we will express them with candor and modesty. When an issue defies our limited abilities, we will use our collective resources and our specialized competencies to form the requisite task forces and study groups. Perhaps the best example we can keep before our eyes is the mutual service of Christian life and truth during the Second Vatican Council.<sup>38</sup> A strong sense of co-responsibility and a healthy spirit of collaboration between ourselves, the bishops, and all the faithful is still the best model for our indispensable and demanding role in service of the church and society. Apropos, Richard R. Gaillardetz has remarked: "Consultative activities, dialogue, and deliberation are constitutive of *communio*. These are the means by which the Spirit brings the Church to truth."<sup>39</sup>

An area that is emerging where theologians can be of service to the wider church concerns the process of discernment in the Spirit. Recently, Amanda Osheim has pointed out this task to us.<sup>40</sup> The issues we face today are so complex and multifaceted that it is not easy to find the right way to identify, define, and resolve them. Theological acumen alone often cannot measure up to the demands of the task. In such situations, the rich practice of the church in spiritually discerning the most appropriate practice for a given situation is part of the theological tradition. This broad area of searching for answers offers the possibility of closer collaboration among biblical scholars and pastoral, spiritual, historical, and systematic theologians. We need to give greater attention to this conversation.

Finally, the genre I have found to be most effective in our postmodern societies is the theological reflection often employed in our schools of theology and ministry. Theological reflection begins with a concrete pastoral issue, draws on Scripture and tradition as the primary *loci theologici* of the faith, then involves ever wider circles of study: religious traditions and spiritualities, social analysis, cultural and ethnographic studies, and theological schools and movements. Theological reflection calls on us to honestly share our human experience with one another.<sup>41</sup> The fact that the process

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<sup>38</sup> See Jared Wicks, "Vatican II on Revelation—From behind the Scenes," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 637–50 and the list of Wicks' studies on Vatican II given there.

<sup>39</sup> See "Reflections on Key Ecclesiological Issues Raised in the Elizabeth Johnson Case," in *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church*, ed. R. Gaillardetz (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 276–94, at 293.

<sup>40</sup> See Amanda C. Osheim, "The Bishop's Discernment of the *Sensus Fidelium*: Insights from the Jesuit Tradition," Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Still helpful on theological reflection are Robert L. Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996); and idem, *Making Faith-Sense: Theological Reflection in Everyday Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).



involves a cross-section of participants assures that all will have the opportunity to contribute and be heard. It would be desirable that some such form of theological reflection become a regular part of decision making in our parishes and diocesan institutions. Some such process is already the normal case in communities of consecrated life. Coupled with the growing influence of *lectio divina* as a way for biblically based group prayer, little-by-little we can retrieve some of the rich experience of *communio* of the early church, and with it, a lively *sensus fidelium omnium* of the People of God.