

**RESPONSE TO JOHN J. BURKHARD, O.F.M., CONV., “THE SENSUS FIDELIUM: OLD QUESTIONS, NEW CHALLENGES”**

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It is a great pleasure to be taking part in this annual convention of the CTSA dedicated to the *sensus fidelium*, and I thank Brad Hinze very much for his kind invitation to give this brief response to John Burkhard’s excellent paper, which has opened up so many angles on the *sensus fidelium*, whetting our appetite for all the discussions to follow in the coming days. I would like to pay tribute at the start to the contribution that John has made in a number of important articles over the years to the study of the *sensus fidelium*. In the interest of full disclosure, I would also mention that I was president of the subcommission of the International Theological Commission (ITC) that completed work on the ITC document *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2011)<sup>1</sup> and then produced just last year the document, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*,<sup>2</sup> to which John refers several times, and which actually grew out of the earlier theology document.<sup>3</sup>

Strictly speaking, the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium* are often distinguished, *sensus fidei* meaning the instinct of faith that each of the baptized has, the *sensus fidei fidelis*, and *sensus fidelium*, an abbreviation of *sensus fidei fidelium*, meaning the instinct that the Church itself, the whole body of the faithful, has. *Sensus fidei* is quite often used to cover both meanings.<sup>4</sup> John uses only *sensus fidelium*, but I think also has both meanings in mind, the precise meaning being determined by the context.

John helpfully groups his reflections under two main headings: the *sensus fidei* (or *fidelium*) and ecclesiology, and the *sensus fidei* and epistemology, respectively, though the two, as he indicates, are most definitely linked. Under the first heading, I would strongly endorse his main point, that to handle the notion of the *sensus fidei*, which incidentally made its first appearance in the formal teaching of the Church only at Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 12,<sup>5</sup> we need to adopt the council’s two main ecclesiological ideas, namely of the Church as the people of God, very prominent in *Lumen Gentium*,<sup>6</sup> and of the Church as communion, less obvious in *Lumen Gentium* but implicit in the council’s profound linking of the Church with the mystery of the Trinity,<sup>7</sup> and brought into the spotlight at the 1985 extraordinary

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<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria* (published, 2012; hereafter *Theology Today*).

<sup>2</sup> International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014; hereafter, *Sensus Fidei*).

<sup>3</sup> See ITC, *Theology Today*, §§33–36, on the *sensus fidelium*.

<sup>4</sup> See ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, §3.

<sup>5</sup> In its dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964; hereafter, LG), the Second Vatican Council used only the term, *sensus fidei* (LG 12). The term, *sensus fidelium*, occurs, but less technically, only in the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965; hereafter, GS), 52. Reference will also be made below to the council’s dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965; hereafter, DV).

<sup>6</sup> See, LG esp. ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., LG 4; GS 24.

synod.<sup>8</sup> Under the second heading, he valuably points us to *Dei Verbum* (DV), where without mentioning the *sensus fidei* by name the council implicitly invokes it when it speaks of the ways in which the tradition that comes from the apostles "makes progress in the Church" across the centuries, and, before mentioning the preaching of the bishops, refers to the intimate understanding (*intelligentia*) of spiritual realities that all believers have (DV 8).

Multiple fascinating questions arise, and I like very much John's final outline of the role and service of theologians in all this. There is space here just for three brief reflections:

a) First of all, the Holy Spirit is mentioned a number of times in John's account, here and there, but I think that there is scope for a much stronger pneumatological framing of this whole topic. Vatican II itself points in that direction. LG 12 indicates that the *sensus fidei* results from the anointing of all the faithful by the Spirit in baptism, and says that it is "sustained by the Spirit of truth." It refers to the classic texts of 1 Jn: "the anointing that you received. . . teaches you about all things" (1Jn 2:27; cf. 2:20). DV 8 says that the historical progress of the Church's tradition, in which the *sensus fidei* plays a vital part, takes place "with the help of the Holy Spirit." As John says, one of the great benefits of the title, "people of God," for the Church is that it highlights the Church's historical existence, and that is what Jesus himself alluded to when he said to the twelve at the last supper: "the Spirit of truth. . . will guide you into all the truth" and "will declare to you the things that are to come" (Jn 16:13). The communion we enjoy as members of that people is itself "the communion of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:13) as St. Paul tells the Corinthians.

The Spirit is the key to an understanding of the Church in which all of its members are gifted, active, and valued, and that is a *sine qua non* for dealing with the *sensus fidelium*. A strong pneumatology enables us to appreciate what the Greek Orthodox theologian, Nikos Nissiotis, called "the pleroma of the Church."<sup>9</sup> "The Church is holy and one in the wholeness of the People of God," he said, from which the hierarchy "cannot be separated and examined apart."<sup>10</sup> The authority of the Church, he said, resides within that pleroma.<sup>11</sup> He was actually critiquing what he called the "very weak theology of the Holy Spirit" in *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>12</sup> I think that judgment is unfair, but Catholic theology can always do with more pneumatology! Yves Congar happened to regard LG 12, where the council refers to the many charisms distributed by the Spirit after its teaching on the *sensus fidei* as one of the prime examples of the council's "pneumatological ecclesiology," "quite different," as he said, "from. . . the earlier pyramidal and clerical ecclesiology"<sup>13</sup> that he tended to

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<sup>8</sup> See the Second Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (1985), *Final Relatio*, II, C, 1: "The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."

<sup>9</sup> Nikos Nissiotis, "The Main Ecclesiological Problem of the Second Vatican Council," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 2 (1965): 31–62, at 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol.1, trans. David Smith (New York/London: Seabury Press/Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 170.

call “hierarchology.”<sup>14</sup> In short, the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium* is integral to the more ample vision of the Church that a strong pneumatology enables, and Orthodox theology is an important resource for such a vision. There is a notable mutual affirmation of the *sensus fidelium* in the joint Roman Catholic-Orthodox Ravenna document of 2007, which actually says: “By Baptism and Confirmation (Chrismation) each member of the Church exercises a form of authority in the Body of Christ”; “all the faithful,” it adds, “(and not just the bishops) are responsible for the faith professed at their Baptism.”<sup>15</sup>

Now, pneumatology must always be held together with Christology. John Zizioulas actually criticizes Nissiotis and other Orthodox theologians for shortcomings there,<sup>16</sup> and it is worth noting that the idea of the threefold office of Christ, which provides the framework for teaching on the *sensus fidei*, has patristic origins. It seems to derive from the mention in the Apostolic Tradition that prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed in the Old Testament,<sup>17</sup> and hence specially gifted by the Spirit.

b) Secondly, pneumatology can help, I think, in identifying *subjects* of the *sensus fidei*, which (as John says) is not an easy task. The *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium* is not necessarily at all the majority opinion in the Church. To think that would be to have just what we might call an empirical understanding of it. Theologically understood, the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium* is the instinct for the truth of the Gospel that believers have *as believers*, anointed by and attuned to the Spirit of truth. The best guides to it are therefore those who are living spiritual lives, holy lives of prayer and active charity, committed to the communion of the Church, and nourished by the Scriptures and the sacraments. The ITC document gives a list of six criteria along those lines.<sup>18</sup> By describing what it calls “dispositions needed for authentic participation in the *sensus fidei*,” it aims to identify reliable exponents, so to speak, of the *sensus fidei*, so as to help in discerning what truly is the *sensus fidei*. All of the baptized are *bearers* of the *sensus fidei*, but in whom is that sense alive and well, we might say, so that they are real *subjects* of the *sensus fidei*? That’s the rationale.

Having said that, however, it is surely important also to recognize that the Spirit blows everywhere (Jn 3:8). The Spirit leads the Church, yes, but “fills the whole world,” as Vatican II teaches in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 11), offering to every single person, in ways known to God, the opportunity to participate in the paschal mystery, and so to find salvation (GS 22). Wherever the Spirit finds a home, in some sense

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Yves Congar, “The Church: The People of God,” *Concilium*, 1.1 (1965): 7–19; at 18, note 13.

<sup>15</sup> Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority* (2007; the Ravenna Document), n.7.

<sup>16</sup> See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 123, with particular reference to comments reported by Congar in “The People of God,” 17–18, note 13.

<sup>17</sup> See Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), §5.2 (p.50).

<sup>18</sup> See, ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, §§87–105.

faith is engendered, and with it, presumably, the *sensus fidei*. Such people may never belong to the Church on earth, but they will most surely belong to the Church in heaven, and meanwhile they are the main reason why the Church in history looks for the signs of the times (GS 4, 11) and for the activity of the Spirit beyond its boundaries, acknowledging that as well as teaching the world it can also learn from it (GS 44).

c) Finally and briefly, Pope Francis has surely taken us into a new phase of understanding and applying, we might well say of *receiving*, Vatican II’s teaching on the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium*. The faithful at large are gifted with the *sensus fidei* and it is the particular charism and calling of the bishops to proclaim the Church’s faith authoritatively (DV 10). Those principles are clear from the council’s teaching, but how are they to be put into practice? Clearly, consulting the faithful ought to be a natural and regular part of the magisterium’s activity, and appropriate mechanisms are needed.<sup>19</sup> Now, John tells us that even Yves Congar had some reservations regarding the reliability of the *sensus fidelium*. Too much should not be attributed to it, he said, because of the errors, excesses and superstitions that the history of the Church shows us among the faithful at times.<sup>20</sup> That caution was evident in Church teaching, too, until the present pontificate.<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, however, has, I think, firmly tilted the balance in favor of trusting the instincts of the faithful and especially their piety, underlying which, he says, is “an active evangelizing power” due to “the work of the Holy Spirit,”<sup>22</sup> surely a reference to the *sensus fidei*. So the *sensus fidei* is not just reactive, a sense for the true faith in what we hear. It is also proactive, a sense for what faith demands that we should do, and interactive, prompting all the members of the Church to engage with one another and to work together.<sup>23</sup>

Synodality is something that Pope Francis expressly wants to promote in the Catholic Church, with a desire to learn from the Orthodox.<sup>24</sup> Most broadly, it refers to the mutual engagement of all the faithful that undergirds the stricter meaning of the conferring of bishops in councils.<sup>25</sup> Literally, however, it means ‘journeying together,’<sup>26</sup> and that points us back to the idea of the people of God on pilgrimage. That providential double meaning makes us realize that the same Holy Spirit who leads us in history toward the fullness of truth also gives us communion with one another, and calls us to take counsel together on the way. It seems that that is how we are meant to discern the truth and to grow in the truth as Christians: together.

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<sup>19</sup> See, ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, §§120–26.

<sup>20</sup> Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, trans. Donald Attwater (London/Westminster MD: Geoffrey Chapman/Christian Classics, 1985), 288–89.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., the comments of Pope Paul VI on “popular religiosity” in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), no.48; also, ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, §§111–12, and notes 128–29.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), n.126; see also ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, §§112, 127–128.

<sup>23</sup> See ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, §70.

<sup>24</sup> See, Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no.246.

<sup>25</sup> See the Ravenna Document (above, note 15), no.5.

<sup>26</sup> From *syn* + *hodos* (Greek).