

SENSUS FIDELIUM, SOCIOLOGY, AND GLOBAL
CATHOLIC THEOLOGY—INVITED SESSION

Topic: *Sensus Fidelium*
Convener: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University
Moderator: Mary Ann Hinsdale, Boston College
Presenters: Neil Ormerod, Australian Catholic University
Peter Phan, Georgetown University

Utilizing Lonergan’s distinction between classicist and empiricist understandings of culture, Ormerod proposed the topic, “*Sensus fidei* and Sociology: How Do We Find the Normative in the Empirical?” He engaged the issue as illustrated in the keynote address by Jerome Baggett, of the status of an authoritative faith tradition in a culture of individual authenticity. In the human sciences, unlike natural sciences, empirical data do not necessarily invalidate a hypothesis, since the data of human judgments may be infected with error or unintelligibility. This observation applies equally to the kinds of issues raised by Baggett with reference to the church.

Ormerod understands the *sensus fidei* to be built upon the normal processes of socialization into the faith that take place most commonly through childhood education. There is a supernatural element here, a work of the Holy Spirit, but this is no guarantee that socialization into the *sensus fidei* will always be successful. So ecclesial statements which understand the *sensus fidelium* to lie in the *universal* agreement of the *entire* body of the faithful must be considered idealizations. Historically speaking, unanimity is virtually unheard of.

Turning directly to Baggett’s description of the mix of agreement and disagreement evidenced in his study of Bay Area Catholic communities, Ormerod suggested it is an open question if these data are an illustration of healthy pluriformity or breakdown in socialization, and ended with three observations. First, following Rahner and historical studies of the early church, this kind of question is nothing new in the church. Second, in discussion with Lonergan, in a culture of security, where the relevance of religion is less urgent, a crisis of culture can lead to a crisis of faith. Third, following Komonchak, Ormerod suggested ecclesial authority depends on trust, and a breakdown of trust can occur when there is inauthenticity on either side.

Peter Phan’s presentation, “*Sensus fidelium, dissensus infidelium, consensus omnium*: An Interreligious Approach to Consensus in Doctrinal Theology,” was structured around the question whether and to what degree the three criteria for orthodoxy proposed by Vincent of Lerins—what is believed everywhere, always, and by all—and his organic understanding of doctrinal development continue to be of value in today’s church.

Vincent’s first rule—everywhere, always and by everyone—must be amplified by his understanding of legitimate development of doctrine contained in a second rule, an image of organic growth in understanding where progress will be “in the same doctrine, in the same sense, and in the same meaning.” So, things can be said in a new way but, against the heretics, there can be no novelty. Phan understands Vincent to be speaking in his own terms of what we now call the *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium*, but Vincent’s understanding is inadequate to today’s reality, argued Phan. The issues must now be framed in the contexts of religious pluralism and the

emergence of global Christianity. The polycentric structure of the latter and the explosion in some forms of evangelicalism of a theologically *different* type of Christianity with which historic mainline Christianity is not comfortable argues for a new non-elitist topography, a “*koiladology*” which shows the beliefs and practices of the ordinary Christians. Furthermore, it is necessary to see the faith of other traditions (the *dissensus infidelium*) as having a role in the formation of the *sensus fidelium*. Thus, the three criteria of Vincent of Lerins are both turned on their head and fulfilled. The everywhere is everywhere, the everyone is everyone, and the always is always. Thus we will be able to approach the *consensus omnium*.

During the discussion period questions were raised about the role of colonialism in the formation of global Christianity, about whether the difficulty of determining the *sensus fidelium* might not suggest that the notion of reception would be more helpful, and if, given the challenge of seeking overall consensus, we might not rather look to the creation of alliances on particular issues. Finally, Jerome Baggett responded to both speakers, thanking Ormerod for critiquing idealization and Phan for relativizing heresy. We need, he said, to be guardians of the apophatic.

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