

HOW PRACTICAL IS THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM*?—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: How Practical is the *Sensus Fidelium*?
Methodological Inroads for Ecclesiologists
- Conveners: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University
Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College
- Moderator: Elizabeth Pyne, Fordham University
- Presenters: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University
Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College
John C. Seitz, Fordham University

The session explored the implication of the *sensus fidelium* for ecclesiological method, with particular attention to narrative and ethnographic modes of knowledge. Hahnenberg's paper, "Through the Eyes of Faith: Difficulties in Discerning the *Sensus Fidelium*," outlines some of the epistemological issues involved in appealing to the *sensus fidelium*. In her paper, "Latina Lives, Latina Literature: A Narrative Camino in Search of the *Sensus Fidelium*," Imperatori-Lee analyzes how the *sensus fidelium* of particular communities is embedded in literature, using Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré's work as an example. Finally Seitz's paper, "Ethnographic Knowledge and the Problem of 'the People of God,'" suggests the possibilities of methodological bridge-building between religious studies and theology, in particular through increased ties between ethnography and ecclesiology.

Hahnenberg's paper begins with the modern rational reductionism that dominates theological method in contemporary circles, noting that this sort of epistemology is culturally-bound, and therefore participates in relationships of power. Thus, that which is deemed "rational" by dominant groups enjoys a legitimacy denied to alternative forms of rationality found in knowledge stemming from aesthetics, participatory practices, and other sources closely related to the *sensus fidelium*. Because the *sensus fidelium* is a type of spiritual intuition or instinct, theologians should make room for these alternative ways of knowing, more inclined toward Aquinas's view of "connaturality" than "pure reason." Three Latino/a theologians exemplify these methods: Orlando Espín's claim that Latino/a theology is distinguished by its unique (subjugated) epistemological claims, Roberto Goizueta's theological aesthetics rooted in popular religious practice, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz's incorporation of ethnographic interview methods which are more adequate to the study of the *sensus fidelium*.

Imperatori-Lee's paper argues that aesthetics, particularly narratives, are fruitful places for encountering the *sensus fidelium* and employing the epistemology of connaturality suggested by Hahnenberg. Because the *sensus fidelium* is necessarily local and particular, religious practices and narratives about those practices reveal contours of the *sensus fidelium* that might otherwise go unnoticed. A close reading of Rosario Ferré's short story "The Battle of the Virgins" provides an alternate reading of Guadalupan devotion which highlights the variety of sacred and secular narratives that inform this devotional practice, as well as revealing the critical role of women in shaping and traditioning popular Catholicism. This story shows, for Imperatori-Lee, how the *sensus fidelium* does not merely confirm or reject doctrines but adds to them and reinterprets them in a variety of times and cultures. In this way, the *sensus*

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fidelium contributes to tradition and serves as a primary way in which God makes all things new.

Seitz's paper draws on his ethnographic work in order to build methodological bridges between the fields of theology and religious studies. After noting that Catholicism and ethnography have historic ties since Catholic missionaries in the West were producing detailed ethnographic accounts of native communities as early as the 16th century, Seitz builds a case for affinity between ethnographic knowledge and theological inquiry. Ethnography, as an art and a science, deploys relational humanistic methods (interviews, shared space) and arrives at knowledge that is at once empirical and intersubjective. Thus, ethnography provides a fitting path to different ways of knowing required to study the *sensus fidelium*, including bodily and sensory ways of knowing embedded in communities and practices.

Discussion centered on the topics of the discernment of spirits and spiritual direction as a centuries-old source for the kinds of epistemological shifts called for by the panelists, as well as the distinction between ethnographic enmeshment in communities and journalistic boundary-marking in an effort to maintain objectivity.

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