

CHURCH/ECUMENISM—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: *Sensus Fidelium*  
Convener: Cheryl Peterson, Trinity Lutheran Seminary  
Moderator: Richard Lennan, Boston College  
Presenters: Maria Angela Socorro S. Cruz, Boston College  
Johanna Rahner, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen  
Joél Schmidt, Salve Regina University

In her paper, “Reception on the Church’s Front Lines: Inculturation as a Process and Expression of the Laity’s Exercise of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” Maria Angela Socorro Cruz offers a framework through which a theology of reception of the laity might be developed, as laity are at the forefront of the reception process, exercising the *sensus fidelium* in terms of daily discernment and appropriation of the Christian faith. She proposes inculturation—defined as “the ongoing dialogue between the people and the Spirit”—as a starting point and further posits that the *sensus fidelium* and the inculturation of the gospel are two sides of the same coin. There are three forms of lay hermeneutics operative within this pattern of reception: the hermeneutic of daily life; the hermeneutic of desire; and the hermeneutic of trust in God. These hermeneutics help us appreciate the need to expand the community of interpreters, giving the church a “real face,” and invite us to embrace a broader meaning of authority in the church to include the authority of specific experiences of the laity.

In her presentation “Rahner and Ratzinger on Democracy in the Church,” Johanna Rahner describes Ratzinger’s view that democracy defined as majority rule is necessarily opposed to the principle of truth, contradicting the very essence of the church and waters down the demands of the faith. He is suspicious of democracy’s ideal of freedom as something humans should strive for, believing it can never be answered by the modern state without it becoming an idol. Ratzinger’s rejection of democracy can be seen as a theological disregard for the *sensus fidelium*, and irreconcilable with Vatican II. In contrast, Karl Rahner grounds the theological truth and dignity of democracy in the church in Vatican II’s concept of Revelation and his idea of the supernatural existential. Rahner believed the church had to draw on the “democratic lessons” of the modern period, the universal accessibility to participation in power as well as checks and balances. She sides with Rahner, arguing that there is a primary need for on-going democratic development in the church as a means for collective discovery of the truth.

In his paper, “‘The Gifts We Now Bring to the Church and the World’: How the LCWR’s Contemplative Dialogue Processes Offer Models for Gauging the *Sensus Fidelium* in the Church,” Joél Schmidt argues that the contemplative dialogue processes used by the Leadership Conference for Women Religious (LCWR) to develop their prophetic positions within and outside of the church offer a valuable resource for gauging the *sensus fidelium* beyond a simplistic affirmation or rejection of “democracy” in the church. After describing one such process, the “Member-Wide Conversation” currently underway in the LCWR as part of a program called “Leadership Pathways” and discussing a second resource, Schmidt noted several ways these processes help gauge the *sensus fidelium*. They are grounded in the idea that divine revelation has been given to the whole Christian community *qua* community. The collaborative nature of the process respects individual reflection but

brings it into a shared process. They address the concern that judgments offered on official church teachings be informed judgments. By incorporating an educative component, a significant degree of commitment and investment by participants is required.

In the conversation that followed, appreciation was stated for the focus on collective discernment as it relates to reception of magisterial teaching. In response to a question about whether ecumenical councils could be seen as a “democracy of bishops,” Rahner noted that, while the Holy Spirit works through the hierarchy, both the majority and minority need to be involved in the process of discernment. It was later noted that inculturation affects the hierarchy as well as the laity. In response to questions about the LWCR process, Schmidt explained that everyone is involved, and more specifically, on the same day, and this process could be adopted by any group committed to it. He explained it is not simple majority rule, or even consensus building, but a process of discerning God’s will that can lead to conversion. The panel wrestled with the haunting questions raised by Pope Paul VI’s rejection and contradiction of the conclusions reached by the study commission (that included laity) with his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

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