

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY (I)—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: *Sensus Fidelium* and Reception in the Christian Tradition
Convener: Shawn M. Colberg, St. John's University/College of Saint Benedict
Moderator: Scott Moringiello, DePaul University
Presenters: Daniel Finucane, St. Louis University
Trent Pomplun, Loyola University, Maryland
Aaron Pidel, S.J., University of Notre Dame

What is the relationship between the *sensus fidelium* and Christian doctrine, and perhaps more specifically, its relationship with Magisterial teaching? This session explored the meaning of the term *sensus fidelium*, its relationship *consensus fidelium*, and the dynamic between them which impacts the formulation of dogma. Such a topic fit ideally in a historical theology session which surveyed Patristic, medieval, and modern examples of dogmatic questions and their articulations among the faithful. The three presenters explored the way in which the process of *sensus fidelium*, while perhaps not itself indicative of dogmatic truth, nevertheless provides a dynamic in which theological reflection, undertaken widely within the church, advances the work of *fides quarens intellectum* for the Christian community. The papers affirmed that the *sensus fidelium* cannot be a mere barometer or passive recognition of dogmatic truth; rather, it offers a means by which doctrine is progressively assimilated into the church's consciousness and lived tradition.

Daniel Finucane initiated the conversation with his paper, "Reading the *Sensus Fidelium* as Process." Taking the 2014 International Theological Commission's document "*Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church" as a point of departure, Finucane raised the challenging question of the proper way in which to "read" the *sensus fidelium*. The beginning and ends of a movement from initial instances of *sensus fidei* to a settled notion of *consensus fidei* are difficult to determine, and so, recognizing a given teaching as settled or dogmatic seems next to impossible, particularly without the benefit of significant historical distance from the consensus itself. Finucane suggested that determining the *sensus fidelium* is therefore fraught with peril for historical theologians or even the magisterium. The value of *sensus fidelium* ought rather to be found in another dimension, specifically, in the process itself. Using Newman's claim that a *conspiratio* of pastors and faithful interacting together constitutes a proper expression of the *sensus fidelium*, Finucane outlined the criterion of "actual engagement of the whole church, magisterium, laity, clergy and theologians" as the litmus test for authentic *sensus fidelium*. He concluded that, while a hermeneutic of distance is needed to judge the final status of the faithful's consensus on dogmatic questions, Christians are nevertheless called to honor and practice the process of *conspiratio* among pastors and faithful as the condition of the possibility for eventual success in securing the *sensus fidelium*.

The session's second paper, "The Immaculate Conception, the *Sensus Fidelium*, and the Genesis of Modern Catholic Biblical Criticism (1854–1967)" by Trent Pomplun engages themes in Finucane's paper while setting them in the narrower and more concrete context of debates over the theologoumenon of the Immaculate Conception, particularly as resisted by late medieval and modern Thomists. Noting Thomas's opposition to Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pomplun traced increasingly strident rebuttals by later generations of Thomists, noting their use of biblical and

theological hermeneutics to reject an opinion increasingly held by many Christians. Interestingly, Dominicans rejected arguments *ex convenientia* for Mary's being conceived without sin. Pomplun argued that, because many Dominicans conceived of theology as a "science of conclusions," a theological opinion lacking a clear biblical warrant could not stand the test of probability required in Thomist systems. Following Pius IX's *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), Dominicans sought to articulate ways in which Genesis 3:15 could be used to affirm the dogma, leading to new hermeneutical approaches to the biblical text. Pomplun concluded that an effort to accommodate the settled *consensus fidelium* gave rise to notions of a biblical "*sensus plenior*" which informs later modern Catholic biblical criticism.

The final paper, "The Problem of Doctrinal Non-Reception: Ancient Precedents and Modern Analogies" by Aarion Pidel, S.J., integrated the investigative lines of the preceding papers. Pidel observed that contemporary theology has sought to develop a positive theology of doctrinal reception understood as the way in which the broader church's consent to a given doctrine "contributes to the 'effectiveness' of the magisterial decision." Noting that such theologies often look for theological precedent in the popular reception of councils as a sign of their legitimacy, Pidel distinguished two models for describing the primary function of doctrinal reception by the faithful. He identified one model as the "hermeneutical-assimilative" function of reception, connecting this to theologians such as Grillmeier, Sieben, and Legrand; Pidel also noted a second "constitutive model" for theologies of reception in which the roles of *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* are reversed so that those who receive teachings act effectively as teachers by determining the legitimacy of the statement, and he connected that model with the work of Beinert and Pottermeyer. Looking to studies on Athanasius and Vincent of Lerins, Pidel argued that the early church understood any authority assigned to reception to depend on the apostolic witness and its authority. It is difficult to assert that the faithful who depend on the apostolic witness for their derived authority can displace the role played by those claiming the apostolic witness more fully, e.g. bishops gathered in council. Pidel contended that reception in the "constitutive model" could not claim the authority needed for the "role-reversal" it asserts, at least as it looks to Patristic courses and the early ecumenical councils. He concluded that doctrinal reception, parsed as *sensus fidelium*, still plays a vital role in the hermeneutical-assimilative sense which is not merely passive but nevertheless retains the role of *ecclesia discens* for the faithful.

The three papers elicited lively questions from listeners. Questions explored the distinctions among "*sensus fidelium*," "*sensus fidei*," and "*consensus fidelium*" as sometimes blurred and difficult to disentangle. Also central were questions about whether a theology of reception differed from the process of *sensus fidelium*. Finally, questions about how to measure consensus, even with the benefit of historical distance were raised for conversation. Responses by the presenters demonstrated the on-going vitality of historical theology for constructive theological efforts, particularly the way in which the tradition can inform and advance contemporary approaches to dialogue between the Magisterium and the faithful.

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