

# **SENSUS FIDEI: CONSENSUS FIDELIUM IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE TODAY**

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In the preface to the compendium *Der Glaubenssinn des Gottesvolkes – Konkurrent oder Partner des Lehramts?* Dietreich Wiederkehr writes: "To the not a few new contributions which Vatican Council II has bequeathed to the Church, her faith, her theology and her pastoral and legal structure, there also belongs in the ecclesiastical structure, besides the basic category "people of God", the more symbolic rather than conceptual programme of the "sense of faith of the people of God". However Wiederkehr observes that the Council was not capable of placing in concrete terms the concept of the people of God in relation to the reality of everyday living in the Church and the existing system of Church discipline and teaching. In 1992, a Conference of the team of German-speaking theologians of Dogma and Fundamental Theology was dedicated to a discussion of the concept, which is so rich in tradition. The results of this wide discussion were included in the above-mentioned publication. We assume that the reader is familiar with them.

Already in 1985 the theological periodical *Concilium* had dedicated a whole issue to the theme: "The Teaching Authority of the Faithful". I shall later in this article refer to a few contributions in this periodical. The editors J.B. Metz and E. Schillebeeckx in the introduction to the subject stress explicitly its ecumenical relevance. "We are of the opinion that a positive and constructive treatment of the theme in itself gains an ecumenical relevance. After all, the perception and recognition of the teaching authority of the faithful which is discussed here is an important step forward to the living self-renewal of the Church, as envisaged by the Council, and this is an undeniable and decisive step forward in the growth of Christian unity."

The Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican Council II has made an important declaration in the second chapter on the People of God concerning the theme we are treating. Since it is an authoritative text, we shall here quote it in full:

"The holy People of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips praising his name (cf. Heb 13,15). The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf.

1Jn 2, 20. 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith of the whole people (*supernaturali sensu fidei totius populi*), when 'from the Bishops to the last of the faithful' (Augustinus, De Praed, Sanct. 14, 27: PL 44, 980) they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals (*universale suum consensum de rebus fidei*). By that sense of faith (*illo enim sensu fidei*), aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (*magisterium*) and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God (cf. 1 Th 2, 13), the faith once for all. The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life" (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). (This paragraph is quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 91 – 93 and also in n. 785)

From this basic statement, the dogmatic constitution on the Church draws certain conclusions. For example in n. 35: "Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word. Until the full manifestation of his glory, he fulfills this prophetic office, not only by the hierarchy who teaches in his name and by his power, but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the sense of the faith and the grace of the word (*testes constituit et sensu fidei et gratia verbi instruit*) (cf. Acts 2, 17–18; Rev 19, 10) so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life." (This paragraph is quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 904–905, where the subject is the participation of the faithful in the prophetic office of Christ). The formulation in *Lumen Gentium* n. 37 is also interesting: "By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have (*pro scientia, competentia et praestantia*) the laity are empowered – indeed sometimes obliged – to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church ... The pastors, indeed, should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They should willingly use their prudent advice and confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, leaving them freedom and scope for acting. Indeed they should give them the courage to undertake works on their own initiative."

The theme of the sense of faith is also referred to in other texts of Vatican Council II. For example in the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* n. 2 where it is stressed that the laity, through their participation in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ have their own role in the mission of the whole People of God. In the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* n. 8, it is stated that the whole

People of God in doctrine, life and worship perpetuates and transmits to all generations "all that she herself is, all that she believes". The insight into the realities and words which are transmitted grows "through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2,19.51), through an intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* n. 8)

*The Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et Spes"* in n. 62 emphasizes that: "Furthermore, it is to be hoped that more of the laity will receive adequate theological formation and that some among them will dedicate themselves professionally to these studies and contribute to their advancement. But for the proper exercise of this role, the faithful, both clerical and lay, should be accorded a lawful freedom of inquiry of thought, and of expression, tempered by humility and courage in whatever branch of study they have specialized."

In my reflections, I shall take the following definitions of the concepts as my starting-point. *Sensus Fidei* means a feeling for essential performance of the faith, that occurs to all believers, in so far as they exercise freely the grace of faith received sacramentally. The *sensus fidei* embraces an aspect of cognition, that arises out of consciousness enlightened by faith and an aspect of living which grows from the will moved by faith, hope and charity. *Sensus Fidelium* denotes the same feeling in so far as it is given to each individual in relation to the community of believers, the People of God and has its origin here. Under this aspect the *sensus fidelium* is a *sensus ecclesiae*, which precedes any distinction in the inner structure of the Church between Laity and leaders. *Consensus fidelium* denotes the explicit consent of the faithful growing from the *sensus fidei* in matters of teachings and Christian practice. The forms of the discernment and the determination of the consent must correspond to its spiritual character. This consent can be experienced in the witness of the Church and also in its profession of faith and its ways of living.

These concepts touch upon basic questions of the ecumenical movement, even if other expressions are used when these questions are dealt with. *The Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican Council II begins by pointing out a movement by the Spirit in the People of God, that transcends the borders of religions. The Council explains how the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium* form the starting-point for the formulation of the principles of Ecumenism.

"The Lord of History nevertheless wisely and patiently follows out the plan of

his grace on our behalf, sinners that we are. In recent times he has begun to bestow more generously upon divided Christians remorse over their divisions and longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day a movement fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians. Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour. They do this not merely as individuals but also as members of the corporate groups in which they have heard the Gospel, and which each regards as his church and indeed God's", (*Degree on Ecumenism* 1)

Today one increasingly reflects on the reception of documents of ecumenical consent, because it is manifest that an Ecumenism of theological specialists of official documents will remain fruitless if it does not have its roots and its resonance in the People of God. The *consensus theologorum* and the *consensus hierarchicus* need to correspond to the *consensus fidelium*. With this background one must reflect whether the constant already experienced between Christians of different religions can be taken seriously as an ecclesiastically relevant entity, and which forms of expression of a common faith and common witness can help prepare the way to such an agreement. In any case there is sufficient reason for the expectation that a theological interpretation of what is contained in *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidelium* will be an enlightening contribution to ecumenical dialogue.

**1. A Theologico-historical reminiscence: John Henry Newman's Essay:  
"On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine" (1859)**

**1. "The most dangerous man in England"**

An essay which was published in 1859 in the periodical *Rambler* had extraordinarily negative consequences for Newman who had become a Catholic (1845); from this point onwards he had to live under a cloud of suspicion and mistrust. For five years he did not publish anything. He was considered by English bishops and by the Roman Curia as "the most dangerous man in England". How did that happen?

Since his commitment for the foundation of a Catholic University in Ireland, it was one of the most important matters for Newman to promote the intellectual and religious education of catholic laity.

They were to be given training not only in scientific and historical research but

also to be educated in independent thought and correct judgement.

But where will it lead if the laity on account of their religious knowledge, obtained through training, discuss freely Church problems? Newman's own bishop, Ullathorne, is said to have told him: "Our laity were a peaceful set; the Church was peace". To the Bishop's question who then were the laity, Newman is said to have answered: "that the Church would look foolish without them." That the clerical position of the English Bishops could not allow any grown-up and responsible laity is evident from the dictum which is ascribed to Cardinal Wiseman: "The only function of the laity is "to pay" or from the words of Mgr. Talbot in Rome: "What is the province of the laity. To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all..."

Behind these statements there stands the will to separate the *ecclesia docens* from the *ecclesia disens*: to the first one belongs the monopoly to investigate all ecclesiastical matters and to pronounce herself; the second has only the right and the duty to listen, to make herself available and to behave accordingly. The last sentence of the article in *The Rambler* runs as follows: "I think certainly that the *Ecclesia docens* is more happy when she has such enthusiastic partisans about her as here represented, than when she cuts off the faithful from the study of her divine doctrines and the sympathy of her divine contemplations, and requires from them a *fides implicita* in her word, which in the educated classes will terminate in indifference, and in the poorer in superstition."

## 2. No Life without Contrasts

For Newman, the Church is a living totality: her unity necessarily implies polarity, tension and conflicts. There is no life without oppositions and contrasts. This applies to the life of religion too: here too there should be space for a friendly and comprehensive dialogue, for a conflict of opinions which is carried out in all fairness.

In his *Apologia pro vita sua*, the history of his religious convictions, Newman formulates it in the following manner: "Two great principles determine the course of the history of religion, authority and private judgement, and Protestant writers assume that they are the inheritors and sole possessors of private judgement and that we are the inheritors of the whole overpowering pressure of authority. But that is not the case. Precisely in the vast Catholic body and in it alone, both contestants find room in this fierce, never ending struggle. It is necessary for the very life of

religion, viewed in its large operations and its history, that the warfare should be incessantly carried on.

Just as in civil modes of behaviour, jealousy and struggles, the errors of judgement and the errors of the individual parts of the state become means of its existence and its continued existence, so is also Catholicity not simply an embodiment of religious absolutism, but shows an ever new picture of authority and personal judgement, both of which move backward and forward as the ebb and flow of the tide on the seashore."

Newman stresses the fact that the Church is not a hospital or a prison where one lies in bed or is buried alive, but rather a moral factory, in which the raw material of human nature by an incessant, noisy process is melted, refined and given a new form.

Newman was of the firm conviction that in the end Truth will triumph. This makes possible an open attitude on the part of the Church in relation to sciences. But this needs the incessant cooperation of Church leadership with the laity, which is firmly rooted in the faith, is familiar with the teaching of the faith and has gone through the necessary scientific training. In this way the unity of the Church expresses itself in the variety of its services. When it is a question of settling conflicts, in principle the Church leadership, theology and pastoral experience have the same right to indicate their wish to speak, and they should strive in the case of difference of opinions to come to an agreement with one another.

The concept of the organic totality, living on contrasts also builds the ecclesiastical background for the article in *The Rambler*. "Yet each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected" Certainly unity shows itself firstly in "*the pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*". However, the laity are in this process only "the reflection or echo of the clergy in matters of faith" but the *conspiratio* is not only present in the shepherds.

### **3. *The Thesis: The Loyalty of the Body of the Laity during the Arian Crisis***

Newman takes at his starting-point the fact that the Apostolic tradition was transmitted to the whole Church but that in the course of history not always all parts and functions gave active expression to this tradition: one time it was the Episcopate, one time it was the doctors, one time it was the people, the liturgy, the rites, ceremonies and customs and then again the events, discussions, movements:

no one of these channels of tradition should be treated with disrespect. However, Newman emphasizes explicitly "that the gift of discerning, discriminating, defining, promulgating and enforcing any portion of that tradition resides solely in the *Ecclesia docens*".

Newman would like above all to underline the meaning of the *consensus* and *sensus fidelium* as well as the *conspiratio* of bishops and faithful as the witness for the tradition of revealed teaching and as the voice of the infallible church. Pope Pius IX had some time before referred to it in 1854 at the proclamation of the Dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Newman's main argument refers to the period of the Arian confusion between the Council of Nicea (325) and the first Council of Constantinople (381). On this matter he formulates his famous thesis: "It is not a little remarkable, that, though, historically speaking, the fourth century is the age of doctors ... nevertheless in that very day the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate ... I am not denying that the great body of the Bishops were in their internal belief orthodox; nor that there were numbers of clergy who stood by the laity ... nor that the laity actually received their faith, in the first instance, from the Bishop and the clergy ... but I mean still, that in that time of immense confusion, the divine dogma of our Lord's divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the "*Ecclesia docta*" than by the "*Ecclesia docens*"; that the body of the episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism."

Newman continues to explain in more detail how the body of the laity was in fact the support of the church of the great theologians of that time: the voice of the faithful was then the voice of tradition: The voice of tradition may in certain cases express itself, not by Councils, nor Fathers, nor Bishops, but the *communis fidelium sensus*. Newman explains further that the Dogma of Nicea during the greater part of the century was maintained unimpaired not through the firmness of the Holy See, the Councils and the Bishops but through the *consensus fidelium*.

In a later supplement to the third edition of his book: *The Arians in the fourth century* (1871), he repeats: "Taking a view of history, we are obliged to say that the governing body of the church came short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage and constancy." Half ironically, half diplomatically, Newman however adds: "I am not supposing that such times as the Arian will ever come again. As to the present, certainly, if there ever was an age which might dispense

with the testimony of the faithful, and leave the maintenance of the truth to the pastors of the Church, it is the age in which we live. Never was the Episcopate of Christendom so devoted to the Holy See, so religious, so earnest in the discharge of its special duties, so little disposed to innovate, so superior to the temptation of theological sophistry. And perhaps that is the reason why the *consensus fidelium* has, in the minds of many, fallen into the background."

#### 4. *The Witness of the Laity and the Meaning of Consensus*

It is Newman's firm conviction that in the preparation of a dogmatic definition, the faithful should be consulted. He explains in great detail how this word "consult" should be understood. "Doubtless their advice, their opinion, their judgement on the question of definition is not asked; but the matter of fact, viz. their belief is sought for, as a testimony to that apostolic tradition, on which alone any doctrine whatsoever can be defined. Hence it is the witness which the laity give in the question of faith that is consulted. In the process, one does not intend in the first place the notional, explicitly formulated knowledge of the content of the faith, but the real perception and grasping of this context in the praxis of the faith of the laity, the realization of the faith in the whole life of men.

Towards the end of this contribution, he says: "... if ever there be an instance when they ought to be consulted, it is in the case of doctrines which bear directly upon devotional sentiments. Such is the Immaculate Conception ... The faithful people have ever a special function in regard to those doctrinal truths which relate to the Objects of worship. As examples Newman adduces: the Teaching about the Divinity of Christ, the Real Presence, the Veneration of the Mother God. But what does *consensus fidelium* mean for Newman?

1. The *consensus fidelium* is in no way a new theological view but presents an Apostolic tradition which is transmitted in doctrine and life. Newman here bases his view of his teacher of theology, Giovanni Perrone S.J. (1794-1876).

2. The *consensus fidelium* is a kind of instinct or phronema (direct certainty which is present as a general feeling and which trusts itself forward into the conscious mind when it is challenged). Newman quotes in French a few sentences from J.A Möhler: "L'esprit de Dieu, qui gouverne et vivifie l'Eglise, enfante dans l'homme, en s'unissant à lui, un instinct, un tact éminemment chrétien, qui conduit à toute vraie doctrine... Ce sentiment commun, cette conscience de l'Eglise est la tradition dans le sens subjectif du mot. Qu'est-ce donc que la tradition considérée sous ce



point de vue? C'est le sens, toutefois, qu'on ne peut separer des vérités qu'il contient, puisqu'il est forme de ces vérités et par ces vérités".

3. The *consensus fidelium* may also be understood as a habit which moves forward towards a definite position under the leadership and through the help of the Holy Spirit.

4. As an answer to prayer, the consensus of the believers can reveal what up to this point was unknown to them. This aspect is interesting in so far as it is stressed that (Newman while quoting Petavius, refers to Augustine) prayer is the context in which God lets himself be recognized by men "in those usual ways".

5. Newman finally quotes from his work: *Lecture on Anglican Difficulties*: "We know that it is the property of life to be impatient of any foreign substance in the body to which it belongs. It will be sovereign in its own domain, and it conflicts with what it cannot assimilate in itself, and is irritated and disordered till it has expelled it." The *consensus fidelium* is a kind of skill of discernment, through which the believers determine what is foreign and erroneous and expel it through non-acceptance. Through the *consensus fidelium*, various opinions, customs and institutions in the life of the People of God are tested. A piece of wood which one throws into the current immediately shows in which direction and how fast the water is flowing. "Hence", Newman writes: "Submit your heretical and Catholic principle to the action of the multitude, and you will be able to pronounce at once whether it is imbued with Catholic truth or worth heretical falsehood."

Newman here touches upon the process of reception, which does not take place only and in the first place on the notional-theological level, but in the first place through the practice of the faith itself, through a real preception of what truly belongs to the reality which is believed, what via the way of statements of faith, is really grasped, introduced into life and put into practice. This means that the practice of the faith itself to a certain extent is richer, more living than its notional way of being expressed – that it has its own liveliness, its own capability of discernment and a co-moulding power of effecting the whole body of the Church. The *consensus* of the faithful, as Newman understands it, has consequently a role in the origin of Church teaching and in the changing of the Church's understanding of herself.

### 5. *Consent and Dissent*

Is this also the case today? Newman's Bishop could say: "Our laity were a

peaceful flock (...) they had a deep faith". Here it is not the place to speak about the faith of today's Christians, but it can rightly be doubted whether they give the idea of a peaceful flock. The "World of believers" is today far away from being "homogenous": in it is reflected the heterogeneity and pluralism of modern society. Many Christians are distanced from the public life of their church; they do not absolutely share the teaching which is presented to them as binding; above all, there is a rift between what the magisterium proclaims as authoritative and the views lived in practice by many of the faithful. The knowledge of the transmitted contents of the faith is relatively scanty and the interest in Church affairs remains in many aspects very superficial. Consequently in the forming of their opinions they are quite dependent on the mass media and perhaps on those theological opinions which "can be easily sold" ... here I would however like to take into account that there is indeed something like a sort of "healthy judgement" as to what goes and does not go in church and religious interests, and as to what is acceptable and unacceptable. But it would be difficult to establish a *consensus* – in the case it was available.

The Congregation for the Teaching of the Faith speaks almost in the same details in its *"Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian"* about dissent – here this dissent is in the first place understood to be the public stand of opposition (of theologians) against the Magisterium of the Church. According to the Vatican document, this dissent has its origin in the ideology of philosophical Liberalism, which confronts the freedom of thought of authority and tradition. For it, the freedom of judgement has more value than truth. Without trying to re-state the argumentation of the whole document it will suffice for our context to quote the following paragraph:

"Dissent sometimes also appeals to a kind of sociological argumentation which holds that the opinion of a large number of Christians would be a direct and adequate expression of the "supernatural sense of the faith".

Actually, the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply identified with the "sensus fidei". The sense of the faith is a property of theological faith; and, as God's gift which enables one to adhere personally to the truth, it cannot err. This personal faith is also the faith of the Church since God has given guardianship of the Word to the Church. Consequently, what the believer believes is what the Church believes. The *sensus fidei* implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, "*sentire cum Ecclesia*".

Although theological faith as such, then, cannot err, the believer can still have erroneous opinions since all his thoughts do not spring from faith. Not all the ideas which circulate among the People of God are compatible with the faith. This is all the more so, given that people can be swayed by a public opinion, influenced by modern communications media. Not without reason did the Second Vatican Council emphasize the indissoluble bond between the "*Sensus fidei*" and the guidance of God's People by the magisterium of the Pastors. These two realities cannot be separated. Magisterial interventions serve to guarantee the Church's unity in the truth of the Lord (*Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 35)

## II THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

### 1. *The Consensus fidelium and the Infallibility of the Teaching of the Faith*

This last remark in the Vatican Document reminds us – that from the point of view of history – it was the problem of the arising erroneous doctrines and the threatening schisms that led to an emphasizing of the role of the church leaders in the preservation of the purity of the Apostolic Teaching and the Unity of the Church. For the Church Fathers the criterium for the genuineness and truth of a faith statement was the concordant view of the faithful *ab episcopis usque ad extremos laicos*.

In the course of history, under the pressure of the concept of full power, which strengthened the position of the Papacy, but also under the influence of internal controversies within the Church, the subject of the sense of the faith was ever more strongly discussed in connection with the infallibility of faith-teaching. The biblical Good News – sociologically speaking – finished in the hands of trained experts (bishops, theologians). They altered the formulation of this good news according to the situation of the dialogue and used it to put an end to inner conflicts within the Church. The practical aspect of Christian witnessing was suffocated by the contents of faith teaching.

Indeed "in credendo", all believers, all members of the People of God are the subject of this infallibility. But it depends on whether this participation ultimately consists in the passive but infallible reception of the contents of the faith previously presented to them by the magisterium or as to whether their faith is indeed an active principle of the form of life which is followed from day to day and through which the contents of the faith are witnessed in a practical and authentic way.

According to the Catholic point of view, the laity seem to possess a passive

infallibility whereas the Church leaders on their part are not only infallible in *credendo*, but in virtue of their charisms with which they are endowed, also in *docendo*.

This last view then takes concretely the upper-hand together with one-sided fixation on theoretic truths and formulated contents of faith. Connected with this is the fact that divine revelation is considered to be primarily as the promulgation of truths and teachings. The faith subordinated to it was defined above all as a "Faith-of-teachings-and-statements" as a "holding-for-true" faith.

In this context the dogmatic definition about the teaching-authority of the Pope in Vatican I is very significant. It is emphasized that the Pope in the exertion of the highest teaching-authority does not need the consent of the totality of the Episcopate. "Whenever the Bishop of Rome speaks *ex cathedra*, i.e. when in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his apostolic authority, he decides that a teaching of faith or morals should be held by the whole Church, by means of the divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, he possesses that infallibility, with which the Divine Redeemer wanted to see his Church endowed in the definition of teaching regarding faith and morals and therefore such definitions of the Bishop of Rome are in themselves and not because of the consent of the Church, unalterable" (DS 3074).

The interpretation of this well-known text should take into account that through it the understanding of the Old Church of the consent of believers as a criterion for the authenticity and truth of statements of faith is not totally disarmed of its force. Consensus here seems to have a rather juridical meaning: a Papal definition for its juridical validity does not require the confirmation or consent of the Church. That a process in the building of a consensus should be undertaken in this proclamation empowered by right, results from the definition itself, in so far as it ascribes to the Bishop of Rome no other infallibility other than that which the Divine Redeemer wanted to see his Church endowed with in the definition of teaching regarding faith and morals.

Pope Pius IX before his official definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in 1854 (DH 2800-2804) had accordingly consulted the whole Catholic Episcopate in order to ascertain himself not only of the unity with his brothers in the Episcopate but also of the sense of faith of the People of God in all dioceses.

An interesting remark is made by Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835-1888), who speaks of an organic connection between the magisterium and the body of believers in the ecclesiastical community.

He stresses that the teaching of Christ comes to us in a double form in its presentation and conviction "on one side in the form of the official, authentic and authoritative teaching and proclamation of the faith, on the other side in the form of a private profession of the faith". Both of these forms together make up an authentic witnessing. The former witnessing is "formulated and equipped" by the Holy Spirit and serves for the instruction of others: it has a juridical-public character; the latter is a witnessing that results from the working of the Holy Spirit and leads to an expression of the faith which it presents.

Scheeben describes this witnessing also as a "post-and continued echoing of the word of God, as a continued speaking of God to men in his Church."

He also refers to the teaching of the magisterium. However he remarks: "The profession of faith of the body of believers owes its momentum not just to the influence of the magisterium of which it is the end-product but possesses as a result of the direct activity of the Holy Spirit on believers, an inner, relatively autonomous strength and indeed in the measure that the consenting profession of faith of the whole body of believers represents also infallibly a witness of the Holy Spirit as much as the consenting witness of the magisterium. This is even more so because without this infallibility, the objective of the infallibility of the magisterium could be completely obstructed and the connection between the teaching and the believing body completely severed.

Scheeben even goes so far as to stress that the strength of the total profession of faith is much more visible in the *consensus fidelium* than in the whole teaching of the magisterium, because (in my opinion) the profession of faith expressed only partially in words points to the effect of the Holy Spirit in the life and suffering of the believers and confirms the truth of the objective faith.

The interrelation between both the community of the faithful and that of the magisterium in the ecclesial community does not mean only that the believers are guided by the magisterium; the faith of communities lived in practice should redound on to the teachings and proclamations of the magisterium by supporting them and confirming them.

## 2. *Open Questions after Vatican Council II*

With theologians like Matthias Joseph Scheeben and John Adam Möhler, a release was embarked upon from the Anti-Protestantism of the Post-Tridentine Church. The long over-emphasized juridical and institutional aspect was again perceived in its interrelation with the sense of faith of the whole ecclesial community. The reformational teaching about the common priesthood of the faithful could without any prejudice be advantageously allowed to function in its whole truth.

There were also other ecumenical influences which had their effect on the renewal of the Catholic understanding of the Church. Groups of orthodox theologians who through migration or expulsion reached the West explained in a new way the pneumatological dimension of the Church for Catholic theology.

To take an example, the Orthodox Sobornost teaching points to the community founded by the Holy Spirit, which lies at the basis of the distinction between ministry and laity and therefore corresponds to the reality which is expressed clearly in the *sensus fidelium*. These theological impulses were enhanced by representative Catholic theologians like Yves Congar OP, and used with profit for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology.

Vatican Council II accepted these theological developments and gave them a universal ecclesial acceptance. Above all, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, has again more strongly consolidated the role of the hierarchy in the totality of the People of God and so could in a new way bring out the significance of the *sensus fidei totius populi*.

Vorglimler sees in this context two open problematic areas:

1. With regard to theoretical truths, i.e. in the area of teaching itself, does the totality of believers out of their sense of faith, enjoy by right the competence of making statements or the competence of teaching?
2. How and where can this consent which results from the sense of faith with regard to definite contents of faith be determined?

One could very easily give a negative answer to the first question: the totality of the Episcopate with the Pope as its head reserves for itself the competence of teaching as its sole right. The fact that believers want to cooperate with theologians says nothing about the teaching competence of all believers.

For theological competence is in the first place a competence of knowledge (accruing through a historic-philosophical training) which is indeed connected with the *sensus fidei*, but which has the tendency to develop itself so as to become a show-off culture of experts.

The peculiar situation may arise where theological experts advance the claim that the faith of the People of God stands out best of all when it is in their hands and that they have the duty of expressing it in contrast to the magisterium. On its part, the magisterium is often of the opinion that it is its duty to protect the faith of the people from the negative influences of expert theologians.

Vorglimler reminds us of Rahner's view that in one and the same Church there may be big sociological groups and cultural circles "that nevertheless have their subjective hierarchy of the truths of the faith and that apply various principles and frameworks of selection. The complete fullness of the contents of historical mediations must not necessarily exist always and with all persons at the same time. The power which brings about unity, which binds together the believers in one community is not the official institution but God's Spirit. By obeying him, both the official faith of the leadership of the Church as well as the factual faith of the people in the Church relate themselves in a normal way to each other. Not only should they respect each other but are also to learn from each other".

In 1981 Rahner developed these views in an essay. Rahner starts from an increasing quantitative difference between the ecclesial and official contents of the faith and the factual faith-consciousness of most Christians. He speaks of a fragmentary and incomplete faith, which is based on simple lack of knowledge. Today, however, there is also a mingling contradiction to the explicit declarations of the faith as expressed in the teaching or to the teaching which is binding in the matter of morality.

Rahner strives to evaluate the difference theologically and positively and stresses that it is the faith of the Church factually present in the mind and heart which is in itself the faith and constitutes the Church and not the teaching of the Magisterium.

Hence one must not always regard the faith of the average Christians as "a poor outline of the official faith". It is actually the faith which God's grace wanted to produce and to enliven in the Church. Behind all this there is the important view that the faith should not be judged just on its verbal objective contents. As God's

deed in relation to man, it is constituted through God's self-revelation in the Holy Spirit. As a living faith it transcends the most sublime theological objectivising and official formulations.

Hence Rahner can also say that the real faith in the people of the Church has a normative significance for the official faith of the Church leadership. However he remarks that this factual faith cannot be collected through the usual demographic questionnaires. Rahner does not want to deny the authoritative magisterium as a basic norm for every individual, so that at the end he speaks (more cautiously?) of a reciprocal, conditional relationship between the two. He also admits: "It is not easy to determine the retro-effective influences of factual faith on the magisterium and its proclamation." Catholic theology definitely excludes a retrieval of an actually defined teaching on account of a factually wide-spread non-reception of this doctrine. In actual fact, however, one can arrive at a shifting of accent in the official proclamation. Rahner's ecumenical outlook is very interesting: "If the faith of Church-oriented Evangelical Christians can in fact today be hardly distinguished from that of practising Catholics (apart from their ecclesial and liturgical activities) one must estimate the value this simple fact merits in the context of ecumenical efforts".

One may carry these reflections further, when one considers that above all humanity as it exists in groupings of society, is the addressee and carrier of Revelation, of God's universal self-revelation.

This revelation will only be heard when it is experienced and accepted – not just a theory, but in the practical and existential course of human life, in the faith-experiences of the people. The magisterium, that is the servant to the Word of God, as this is handed down to it in history (*Dei Verbum* 10) and that guards it and expounds it, should also listen to the People of God, that in its faith experiences receives revelation and gives expression to it by interpreting it in practice.

The second question which is still pressing reads: How is the consent expressed? It does not suffice to say that believers are represented in their Bishop or that their consent is expressed in the common recitation of the Creed. Besides, every expression of consent demands a rather long enterprise for the discovery of the consent, which again demands patience and presupposes the training in competence.

The question about this consent could be answered more easily if one does not think in terms of articles of faith and in this sense about theories but about the



concrete living of the faith in human life. On this level there is not just *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that seems to suggest that all should have at hand at all times the totality of the truths of faith. On the practical level there is rather a legitimate “concrete Catechism”, which indeed presupposes the totality of the formulated divine Revelation, but which recognizes a hierarchy of truths of faith for concrete subjects and groups, which results from the concrete situation of these persons, from their concrete needs, shortcomings and aspirations. The formulated consent as a rule comes from above (or at least is perceived as such - when for example it comes in the form of a Church statement). Accordingly, it is again quickly forgotten, hardly accepted.

Consent is more easy to establish from a Christian practice which is nourished by faith than from a theory of faith. A particular behaviour in a concrete situation — in response to a specific need and motivated by the recollection of Jesus’ practical proclamation of God’s reign, of his life, death and rising from the dead — can be the sign of a consent inasmuch as Christians profess that they are here and now obeying the will of God in a particular moment through a specific form of behaviour. Their witnessing in this case allows conclusions regarding the sense of faith; it can develop prophetic dynamics and in the course of time become the witnessing of the faith of the totality of believers.

In actual fact there exist many of these forms of Christian witnessing, which are a response to the present signs of the time, as given by Christians of various beliefs, e.g. work for peace, a commitment for justice, for the protection of the environment, the feministic movement, charitable and political development programmes.

Vatican Council II merits our praise for working out the inclusive participation of the laity in the mission of the Church. However there is still a problem area.

While the hierarchical consent in the Church is also promoted and represented by concrete forms of organization such as the Council, Bishops’ Conferences, Bishops’ Synod, College of Cardinals etc., the process of the building up of the consent which is based on the *sensus fidei* of the faithful remains by and large without any structural form.

Through post-conciliar decrees, various parish-councils, presbyterial councils and similar consulting bodies were established, but the working-out in practice of spiritual forms of discernment does not always keep pace with this

institutionalisation. In many sectors of ecclesial processes of decision-making, organisational possibilities of dialogue with the laity are still lacking. What applies to matters within the Catholic Church, is even more valid when there is a lack of inter-religious methods in the building-up of the consent.

### ***3. Witnessing to the faith and arriving at the truth - About the patient search for a consent.***

In the reflection about the ways leading to the *consensus fidelium*, the relationship of a lived, reflected or expressed witnessing of the faith has to be determined anew. Indeed the lived witnessing of the faith is in no way dumb. There is a discovery content "that cannot be expressed in dogmatic formulae but helps itself with other forms of verbal or non-verbal communication."

The lived witnessing of the faith speaks "while it keeps going the learning-processes and courses of action. Nonverbal witnessing is itself a teaching - or it uses this teaching when it expresses itself in words, a language which is distinct from that of Dogma".

But there is more to it. It is the *sense of faith* which bears the witnessing of the whole people, which Vatican Council II says, is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of Truth (*Lumen Gentium* 12). This sense of faith can arrive at discoveries, judgements or views, that on the way of articulated logic cannot be caught up with but which should not simply be dismissed protestingly as being subjective and emotional.

The sense of faith of the faithful has the function of discovering the truth and convincing about the truth; it is in no way based on a derivative from another source. FRIES speaks of a "co-creating subjectivity" (*von einer mitschaffenden Subjektivitaet*) of the faithful; in it unfolds itself the history of the Christian faith and ecclesial teaching. This also implies that this is a discovery of the truth from below: this is not simply the normativity of the factual, but the normativity of Revelation which develops itself in the listening to the truth with others and in putting it into practice.

In principle there is room in the Church for a discovery of the truth in dialogue and collectivity, in which all are involved in their own way, each time with their own witnessing. The magisterium on its part has a service in the action of

communication of the community, not as a ruler over the faith but as the guardian and promoter of the charisms, of the diversity of talents.

The formal, theological-contents of the competence of teaching is constitutively related to the competence of the living witnessing of the faith in the whole People of God. The recent encyclical of Pope John Paul II on ecumenical commitment reminds us of it: "In a theocentric vision, we Christians already have a common Martyrology" (*Ut unum sint*, 84). The peak of Christian truth is not the profession of faith expressed in words or even its theological form of reflection but the Martyria, the witnessing of the faith with the laying of one's own life. "The fact that one is able to die for the faith shows that other demands of the faith can also be met with. On the level of witnessing of life, which reaches its peak in martyrdom, but which also manifests itself in the still invisible form of sanctity, we may remark with deep joy how an imperfect but real communion is preserved and is growing at many levels of ecclesial life" (*Ut unum sint*, 84).

The way of the *sensus fidei*, inasmuch as it is a way of sanctity, prepares the way to a full and visible community of the Church.

"Where there is a sincere desire to follow Christ, the Spirit is often able to pour out his grace in extraordinary ways. The experience of ecumenism has enabled us to understand this better. If, in the interior spiritual space described above, communities are able truly to "be converted" to the quest for full and visible communion, God will do for them what he did for their saints. He will overcome the obstacles inherited from the past and will lead communities along his paths to where he wills: to the visible *koinonia* which is both praise of his glory and service of his plan of salvation" (*Ut unum sint*, 84). John Paul II refers explicitly to the teaching of the *sensus fidei*: "It is the same Spirit who assists the Magisterium and awakens the *sensus fidei*" (*Ut omnes unum sint*, 80).

In an essay, "Das Volk Gottes als aktives Glaubenssubjekt in der Kirche", Christian Duquoc puts the question, how practical protest and opposition against ecclesiastical statements and guide-lines (he speaks above all about *Humanae Vitae*!) are to be valued. Are they simply dissent and disobedience or does in practice the presence of another view show itself, that can claim for itself authority? Or more as a matter of principle: Is it possible to remain loyal in the Church and to preserve freedom from her authority? And what role does the so-called public opinion (on the model of modern democracies) play in the process?

Duquoc gives the following explanation of the concepts: "The authority which is ascribed to this public opinion holds itself in the parameters of an agreement: This is the will to live in affirmation with others, a will that demands that no group should impose its own law on others". This implies tolerance and the readiness to apply public opinion and its influence only in the frame of an agreement with it. (For public opinion can also be totally misused, for example, for the racist mobilization of actions against ethnic groups). What in the Church is this agreement? It is the will "on the basis of a radical confidence in God of Jesus Christ and the charisma of the Holy Spirit to establish among men relationships which correspond to the Gospel."

However the problem is: Which role is played by the opinion of believers expressed publicly in practice? I have already mentioned that there is a choice among the traditional contents of the faith and the forms of the practice. Does not however the lack of interest about certain dogmatic questions, liturgical forms, and ethical presentations play the role of a regulator against former possible exaggerations? Besides there is also opposition conducted by definite groups of communities. How is this to be estimated? Is it disobedience? Or is it a prophetic protest which may bear fruit so long as it does not refuse to have dialogue with the insitutional authorities, for example in synodal meetings, and does not neglect theological clarification? If there are conflicts we should bear them patiently, to use Newman's words, not "*more digladiatorio* but *colloqualiter*".

Again we have to face the problem of the arrival of the truth and the actualisation of the faith. In the framework of the community of believers, the truth of faith relies on witnessing and prophecy. However, it needs also - in the case of dissent - synodal communication, counselling inside a brotherly community, which is consistently subordinate to the working of God's Spirit and in which in principle all participants are entitled to a free expression of opinions, which may undergo testing with regard to their claim of validity. In the process one should take care that the search for the truth is ready to insert itself into the flow of tradition. Novelities in words and actions must be judged according to their striving for a consent with Scripture, ecclesial tradition (official documents, theological views from the time of the early Church), and the juridical order and life-patterns of the Church.

Ecclesially speaking, one should also observe that the subject of the truth is "neither the individual (including Church leaders) nor the Church at any period, but only the '*ecclesia universalis*' as the community of believers from Adam" up-

to the last day of history. This also means that the proclamation of the truth that brings us together on the basis of our belief in Jesus Christ, extends itself permanently in an open future — which we are unable to exhaust completely in our concepts or in our forms of practice, but which we are already able to grasp in our hope, provided we are modest and at the same time tolerant enough to place ourselves under its critical demands.

This demand of the truth leads us into a dialogue, that is neither a sporadic addition to our faith nor the witnessing of the faith itself in a related form or suspended in expectancy of the discovery of the truth. It is the patient dialogue of a reciprocal witnessing of the faith, the dialogue of prayer, the petition for the Spirit of Truth, the dialogue between the laity and the magisterium, the dialogue with Scripture, the dialogue with the spiritual, theological and tradition of official teaching of the magisterium, with the society and signs of the times, with all who demand accountability for our faith, with other Christian churches, with the great world religions and with all men of goodwill. This dialogue is the expression of the *sensus fidei* and is called “the heart of ecumenical cooperation” by the *Ecumenical Directory* (25 March 1993).

“Dialogue demands that one should listen and answer, that one should try to understand and make oneself understood. It also means however to reveal something of oneself and to trust in what others say of oneself. Every partner of the dialogue should be ready ever more to contribute to a clarification and to change his personal views, his way of life and his activities, while letting himself be lead by a genuine love for truth. Reciprocity and commitment for one another are essential elements of the dialogue together with the consciousness that the partners find themselves on the same level, having the same rights” (*Ecumenical Directory*, 172).

In this perspective, ecumenical dialogue changes itself into a “dialogue of conversion”, and, according to Pope Paul VI’s formulation to a genuine “dialogue of salvation”. The dialogue cannot unfold itself when it takes an exclusively horizontal course and limits itself to the meeting and exchange of points of view or the specific talents of every community. It strives also and above all towards a vertical dimension, that leads it to the Redeemer of the World and the Lord of History, which is our reconciliation. The vertical dimension of dialogue lies in our common and reciprocal recognition of our situation as human beings that have sinned. This dialogue opens its doors precisely to brothers and sisters who live inside societies that have no full fellowship with one another, that inner space, in

which Christ, the source of unity of the Church can be effectively active with the whole power of his office of Consoler, the space in which the *sensus fidei* is prepared for the consensus fidei which embraces various religions.

The *sensus fidei* is not only the place of reception, through which the mature ecumenical consent is made alive in the whole People of God; it is not just a subsequent appropriation of "Expert-Ecumenism", but the essential source of the ecumenical happening. "Through this sense of faith, the People of God hold fast to the faith which was one transmitted to the saints and which cannot be lost, penetrates more and more deeply with right judgment into the faith and lives it in its fullness" (*Ecumenical Directory*, 179). Expert ecumenical and theological reflection stands at the service of this fullness of faith. We would like the reflections we have formulated to be of service for the same cause.