
The *Sensus Fidei* and Mennonite Theology

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In Roman Catholic theology, the *sensus fidei* is a doctrine about the role of all believers in expressing the truth(s) of the Christian faith. The *sensus fidei*, literally the “sense of faith,” has an important place in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which marked a change in Roman Catholic ecclesiology towards a more active role for the entire church, including the laity, in the proclamation, authoritative teaching, and application of the gospel. It recognized more explicitly that the tradition, which mediates God’s self-revelation, includes the living witness of ordinary people of faith. It enabled conversation about the “teaching authority

of all believers” in virtue of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. My paper asks whether Mennonites may fruitfully appropriate the conceptual framework of the *sensus fidei* in order to talk about our own living tradition.

Before proceeding further, I propose this working definition: *Sensus fidei* is “the capacity to recognize the intimate experience of adherence to Christ and to judge everything on the basis of this knowledge.”¹ It is an experiential way of knowing and understood to be a gift of the Holy Spirit. While some writers use *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium* interchangeably, those who note a distinction describe the latter as the content or expression of what is actually believed and the former as the gift enabling such belief.²

***Sensus Fidei* in the Roman Catholic Church**

Under a “siege mentality,” the Counter-Reformational Roman Catholic Church approached ecclesiology and revelation as questions of jurisdiction. The Roman Church, specifically the bishops and pope, asserted the authority to define doctrine (over against the *sola scriptura* of the Reformers). As the Papal States themselves were under physical attack, the First Vatican Council (1870) concerned itself with the jurisdiction of the pope vis-à-vis the bishops, and concluded that when the pope speaks *ex cathedra*, his statements are “of themselves, and not by the consent of the church, irreformable.”³ In this scheme, the value of a theological statement, nearly always a proposition, derived more from its source than from its content.⁴ Such a view implied a sharp division of labor between the *ecclesia docens* (teaching church) and the *ecclesia discens* (believing church) with the clergy, especially the episcopacy, constituting the former and the laity the latter. For nineteenth-century theologian J.B. Franzelin, the teaching church plays the active role whereby bishops and pope propose, explain, and protect the faith. The *sensus fidei* of the believing church is strictly passive. It says “Amen” to authoritative teaching.⁵ However, already at Vatican I a view which was to prevail at Vatican II, one that rejected a “pyramid” in favor of an ecclesial model of “concentric circles” which begin with the faithful, was gaining ground.⁶ The dominant image of the church between the councils — “the mystical body of Christ” — was indicative of this more organic ecclesiology.

The ecclesiology of Vatican II was less concerned with polemics and jurisdictions than with mission in the world. It defined the church itself as a sacrament (rather than an institution which dispenses the sacraments), a

mystery, a communion, and as the “people of God.” This latter image, the title of chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium*, recognized that the church is not only a sacrament of grace but a recipient as well. Thus, the holiness and faithfulness of the church is not a static essence but the fruit of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the church as the “body of Christ” risks denying the sinful element of human community, as the “People of God” the church recognizes itself as a community elected by God for a covenantal relationship.

Accordingly, *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965), defined revelation as God’s *self-disclosure*, “in order to invite and take [human beings] into fellowship with himself” (article 2). Revelation is not the communication of propositional truth but a constitutive dynamic of God’s relationship with God’s people. Joseph Ratzinger’s commentary on *Dei Verbum* puts it this way: “The Council desired to express again the character of revelation as a totality, in which word and event make up one whole, a true dialogue which touches man in his totality, not only challenging his reason, but, as dialogue, addressing him as partner, indeed giving him his true nature for the first time.”⁷ The People of God is the addressee and transmitter of God’s self-communication. Revelation and church are thus mutually implied in the concept of People of God.

The above discussion on the church and revelation sets the context for discussing infallibility, the most proximate concept within which the *sensus fidei* is located. Infallibility is a major ecumenical hurdle, not to mention a contentious issue within the Roman Catholic Church, because it immediately evokes papal infallibility. Yet, even *Pastor Aeternus*, the Vatican I document which defined the infallibility of some papal statements, placed such exercise within a larger framework of infallibility which Vatican II articulated well: the church (the People of God) is the recipient of the Holy Spirit’s promise of preservation from fundamental error. Infallibility was a charism granted to the prophets, evangelists, and apostles who preached and recorded the Word of God in what we now know as Scripture. John 14:16-17 says that this Spirit of truth abides with the church. The church adheres to that foundational self-communication of God (Scripture) through interpretation and expression (Tradition) by the power of this same Spirit. This does not mean either that the church does not make mistakes, that its members are always faithful, that the Spirit’s work is limited to the church, or that its work is obvious. Modestly, it affirms that the church is not just a social reality but also a spiritual one.

Without denying the failures of social groups and of individuals within those groups, infallibility speaks about the Spirit's abiding role in a covenantal reality: "[T]he Church's continued fidelity to the gospel is dependent on the prior fidelity of God to the Church."⁸

Infallibility in the first place attaches to the entire believing church — the church called into being in response to God's self-communication. Only secondarily, and only insofar as it defines and expresses the faith of the believing church, does infallibility attach to the teaching church, the bishops, and the pope (and, in various derivative ways, theologians). Patrick Hartin notes that even though Vatican I denied that papal statements are strictly dependent on popular or even episcopal assent, it affirmed that a pope cannot proclaim a new dogma but is limited to defining what already exists in the faith and life of the church; and thus, one interpretation goes, has an obligation to consult the faithful.⁹ The acceptance or "reception" by the church of such a definition does not establish the truth of the statement but confirms the charism of infallibility.

The combination of more organic ecclesiology, historical consciousness about the development of doctrine, attention to the church's mission in the world, an increasingly active laity, and emphasis on the entire church as the recipient of the Holy Spirit's promise was the framework for a renewal of the concept of the *sensus fidei* leading up to Vatican II and beyond.¹⁰ In the chapter, "People of God," and in an article (12) on the participation of the church in Christ's prophetic office, *Lumen Gentium* gave this theology of the *sensus fidei*:

The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn 2:20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith [*supernaturali sensu fidei*] which characterizes the People of God as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,' it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. For, by this sense of faith [*sensus fidei*] which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, God's People accepts not the word of men but the very word of God (cf. 1 Th. 2:13). It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life. All this it does under the lead of the sacred teaching authority to which it loyally defers.

Although it highlights an active role for the laity, it does not necessarily structure the laity *over against* the hierarchy. As John Burkhard points out, neither is it intended as a “pious exhortation to obedience on the part of the faithful” as might be suggested by the reference to loyal deference to teaching authority.¹¹ Rather, it enjoins specific actions such as prayer, study, discussion, commitment, and application to life that give doctrines specific content “from below.” A specific interdependent relationship of hierarchy and laity is thus envisioned. James Heft suggests that a review of how the Church came to define the Marian Dogmas of 1854 (Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary) and 1950 (Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) shows a “dynamic process of faithful give-and-take between the bishops and the rest of the church.”¹² In important (though not uncontroversial ways), the popes involved consulted the “faithful” and found these dogmas to be part of their faith in spite of ambiguous testimony in Scripture and the Tradition. The papal role was thus one of defining the *de facto* faith and piety of the church.

John Henry Newman claimed that in the preservation of orthodoxy against a majority of Arian bishops, “the divine dogma of our Lord’s divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved far more” the believing church than the teaching church.¹³ A more negative and controversial example is the authoritative but not “infallible” prohibition of artificial contraception in *Humanae Vitae* (1968). The question is whether the fact that a majority of Roman Catholics do not agree with and/or follow this prohibition in practice¹⁴ — that it has generally not been “received” — is indicative of a deficiency in the teaching. The professors at Catholic University subject to Vatican inquiry for their views on *Humanae Vitae* argue that the *sensus fidei*, including the sense expressed as dissent, is an important balance to “an *exclusive* teaching prerogative in the hierarchy,” and, as a potential correction of error, is “an intrinsic element in the total magisterial function the church.”¹⁵ Controversy itself does not necessarily disqualify a doctrine from the competence of the *sensus fidei*. Since truth, not majority opinion, remains the key criterion, it is possible that prophetic words come to the church through an instinct of faith expressed by a minority.

Commentators seem to agree that concerns to which the *sensus fidei* might especially apply are those of immediate pastoral and practical concern. The “popular faith” of Marian devotion, for example, is discerned to contain an important theological insight about human response and cooperation with

God's grace.¹⁶ Yves Congar speaks of the value of what "Christians declare by their behaviour." This refers both to everyday practical judgments as well as the witness of the Spirit of truth through martyrdom.¹⁷ Burkhard argues that *Lumen Gentium's* specification that the *sensus fidei* is concerned with application to the circumstances of life means that activity in the workplace, politics, economics, education, medicine, counseling services, etc. are as authentic channels as sacraments or preaching through which the Spirit proclaims the gospel.¹⁸

Who are the faithful are who are said to have this "sense"? While Congar speaks of *sensus fidei* "tend[ing] towards a consensus," unanimity is not necessarily its defining mark, since human grasp of truth is always partial.¹⁹ The idea that polling members may be a way of gauging the *sensus fidei* is suspect, especially since it is difficult for such a method to determine whether the opinions expressed are rooted in secular culture or in a sense of faith. While it makes assessing the *sensus fidei* qualitatively more difficult, Avery Dulles maintains that "we must look not so much at the statistics, as at the quality of the witnesses and the motivation for their assent."²⁰ One quality of great importance is nurture and life in Christian community. On one hand, this criterion of "quality of witnesses" and emphasis on community life can lead to Thomas Dubay's assertion that only those accepting the teaching of the magisterium are the faithful.²¹ On the other, Leonard Swidler uses the concept of *sensus fidei* to argue for the democratization of the Roman Catholic Church based on the sanctity of the individual conscience.²²

Catholic discourse about the *sensus fidei* includes ecumenical considerations of the reformative power for the Church itself and for the enhancement of ecumenical fellowship. Incorporation of the Protestant emphasis on lay reading of the Bible may be an example of the former. Possibilities for the latter may be exercised on the basis of Vatican II statements which recognize the ecclesial quality of non-Roman churches, and which, according to Heft, enjoin the Roman Catholic church to take more seriously what other churches hold and to consult them in good faith before promulgating doctrine.²³ On the issue of contraception, he speculates, the official teaching is too "culturally bound" to medieval ideas of sexuality and ought to be modified by "the thinking and teaching of most of the rest of Christianity."²⁴ More positively, "the faithful" ought to be understood as all Christians, the entire People of God. The Spirit's preservation of this body from fundamental error

is not limited by denominational boundaries. Such an understanding would move the concept of infallibility further from a juridical definition (limited to Roman Catholic hierarchy) and towards the expression of the lived faith of the entire believing community.

***Sensus Fidei* in the Mennonite Church?**

The language of the *sensus fidei* might stimulate Mennonite theology and practices in creative ways. As should be apparent, the *sensus fidei* is not a precisely defined instrument but rather yields a witness only in time and after thoughtful reflection. Thus, the immediate benefit may not be the expression of specific content, *sensus fidelium*, but rather new self-understandings realized in attempting the search. I will briefly mention four benefits from using this language, while also addressing potential concerns.

The *sensus fidei* turns our attention to the witness of the Holy Spirit, an important theological corrective for a Christocentric tradition. If we really mean that the Holy Spirit is at work, then we would benefit from this rich language in which to talk about it. We hold, for example, that baptism is public testimony about the Holy Spirit's work in an individual which at the same time incorporates the individual into a new humanity. While not denying the personal element, Mennonite theology would do well to reflect further on how it takes the promise of the Holy Spirit, especially the Spirit of truth, to abide with the church. Does it imply some notion of infallibility? Is the meaning of the promise "spiritualized"? Are the results inscrutable? Is there visible manifestation?

The difference in the practice of authority between Roman Catholics and Mennonites would greatly affect Mennonite appropriation of *sensus fidei* language. For Roman Catholics, the *sensus fidei* operates within a potentially dialogical polarity of laity and hierarchy, authority and conscience, or, more precisely, the faith of the entire People of God and those whose teaching office calls them to express, clarify, and define that faith. In the absence of clearly authorized *persons* over doctrinal matters, it may still be meaningful for Mennonites to talk about expressing the lived faith of the church in a decisive way. Here, I suggest that if we are neither Catholic nor Protestant, then a congregational style of authority which resides in face-to-face discernment among disciples who are also priests is amenable to *sensus fidei* concepts, while transforming them. Nevertheless, we can also ask whether Mennonites have an implicit "magisterium." What is the relation between doctrinal authority

and the ability of the church to hold particular beliefs and practices *qua* church? What would an analysis of the way in which H.S. Bender's expression of the "Anabaptist Vision" caught fire and was owned broadly within the church say about "authority" and "reception" in expressing the lived faith of the community? What is the relation of scholarship and authority in Mennonite practice? *Sensus fidei* vocabulary may stimulate new reflections on these issues.

A third benefit has more direct implications for Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship: closer attention to the "lived faith" of actual church practices and beliefs. Neither contemporary "authoritative" statements nor the writings of the sixteenth century necessarily express what is held at the concrete congregational level. While not ignoring those sources, discernment of the *sensus fidei* would push scholars to give more attention to accessing and expressing lived faith in a disciplined way (neither simply sociology nor pure subjective experience). Attending to worship formats, church outreach programs, justice initiatives, and baptismal candidates' confessions of faith are examples. Such expressions are not only the *result* of Bible reading and instruction but embodied judgments about the relationship of God-humanity-world which cannot be deduced from concepts and texts alone. Thus, they are a crucial source for theological reflection.²⁵

Fourthly, ecumenical benefits to which I have already alluded would be relevant too in our appropriation. The insights of other Christian traditions and our own particular witness may be mutually commended on the basis of the *sensus fidei* rather than through denominationally negotiated statements. This would suggest that a Mennonite approach to ecumenicity properly moves from the grassroots to (possible) high level discussions rather than vice-versa. Mennonite theology must ask how the spiritual resources of another Christian tradition, translated into our own distinctive key, may enhance the conception and practice of our own living tradition.

Notes

¹ Zoltán Alszegehy, "The *Sensus Fidei* and the Development of Dogma," in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, vol.1, ed. Rene Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 147.

² For example, James L. Heft, "'Sensus Fidelium' and the Marian Dogmas," *One in Christ* 28/2 (1992): 112; Patrick J. Hartin, "*Sensus Fidelium*: A Roman Catholic Reflection on its

Significance for Ecumenical Thought,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (1991): 76.

³ *Pastor Aeternus*, chapter 4.

⁴ Daniel J. Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996), 243.

⁵ John Burkhard, “*Sensus fidei*: Meaning, Role and Future of a Teaching of Vatican II,” *Louvain Studies* 17 (1992): 22.

⁶ Charles E. Curran, Robert E. Hunt, et al., *Dissent In and For the Church: Theologians and Humanae Vitae* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969), 96.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 172.

⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 142.

⁹ Hartin, “*Sensus Fidelium*: Ecumenical Thought,” 79

¹⁰ Cited in Avery Dulles, “*Sensus Fidelium*,” *America* 155 (1986): 241. John Henry Newman, whose ideas posthumously influenced Vatican II, had discussed historical instances of the *sensus fidei* including the defense of Christ’s divinity against the Arians, the confession of Mary as *theotokos*, and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

¹¹ Burkhard, “*Sensus fidei*: Meaning, Role, Future,” 26.

¹² Heft, “‘*Sensus Fidelium*’ and the Marian Dogmas,” 110.

¹³ Cited in Heinrich Fries, “Is there a *Magisterium* of the Faithful?” in J.B. Metz and E. Schillebeeckx, eds., *The Teaching Authority of Believers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 87.

¹⁴ “A recent survey claims that nearly 77% of Catholic wives were practicing birth control, 94% of whom were using methods condemned by the Church. It is reported elsewhere that only 29% of the lower clergy believe that artificial contraception is morally wrong. . . .” Joseph A. Komonchak, “*Humanae Vitae* and the Its Reception: Ecclesiological Reflections,” *Theological Studies* 39 (1978): 221. Statistics like this are contested by those who draw distinctions in such surveys in the degree of “commitment” to the church (i.e., “practicing Catholics”).

¹⁵ Curran, et al. *Dissent In and For the Church*, 86-87.

¹⁶ Heft, “‘*Sensus Fidelium*’ and the Marian Dogmas,” 117.

¹⁷ Yves Congar, “Towards a Catholic Synthesis,” in *Who Has a Say in the Church?* eds. Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Küng (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 74.

¹⁸ Burkhard, “*Sensus fidei*: Meaning, Role, Future,” 30.

¹⁹ Congar, “Towards a Catholic Synthesis,” 74.

²⁰ Dulles, “*Sensus Fidelium*,” 242.

²¹ Cited in Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept*, 393.

²² Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept*, 324-30.

²³ Heft, “‘*Sensus Fidelium*’ and the Marian Dogmas,” 119.

²⁴ Hartin, “*Sensus Fidelium*: Ecumenical Thought,” 85-86.

²⁵ There has been a surge in interest on “church practices.” See *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, eds. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).