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The 'sense of the faithful' is loose

Robert McClory | Apr. 1, 2014 NCR Today
Synod on the Family

The cat is out of the bag. Thanks to reports from the worldwide questionnaire authorized by the Vatican and the Univision world poll [1], the "sense of the faithful" is alive and highly visible following a long exile imposed by the magisterium. Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., was one among many who acknowledged its liberation when discussing how Catholics in his diocese rated the absolute prohibition of contraception [2]: "That train left the station long ago. Catholics have made up their minds and the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) suggests the rejection of church teaching on the subject."

It's refreshing to see a bishop in good standing state in public what everyone already knows. It's not that the official church never referred to the sense of the faithful. But in recent pontificates, it always had a cramped, self-contradictory definition. Here's how Pope Benedict explained it to the International Theological Commission in 2012: "It is certainly not a kind of public ecclesial opinion and invoking it in order to contest the teaching of the Magisterium would be unthinkable, since the sense of the faith cannot be authentically developed in believers, except to the extent in which they fully participate in the life of the Church, and this demands responsible adherence to the Magisterium."

Read the previous sentence again slowly. It says an authentic sense of the faith is found only in aligning oneself with the magisterium, and to contest a teaching or (God forbid) to dissent from one is "unthinkable." In Benedict's understanding, the sense of the faithful has little value other than to echo official church teaching.

Thanks to the outpouring of poll results, discussion about the sensitive issues is heard everywhere. We have a deeply divided global church. The head of the Swiss bishops' conference said the Vatican questionnaire results showed church teaching on sexual morality in general but particularly on "cohabitation, contraception and forbidding divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the Sacraments was seen with great skepticism, if not rejected altogether or more or less ignored."

Expressions of dissent were not unanimous on any subject, though certainly overwhelming in some areas. For example, the vote against the church's stand on contraception was 78 percent worldwide, according to Univision, and 66 percent in favor of gay marriage.

What Francis and the bishops will make of all this remains to be seen, hopefully at the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family. When addressing the International Theological Commission in December, Francis sounded a little like Benedict when he said the sense of the faithful "must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion." And he told the theologians, "It is your task to elaborate the criteria that permit discernment of authentic expressions of the 'sense of the faithful.' " But he added that the magisterium has the "duty to pay attention to what the Spirit tells the church through authentic manifestations of the sense of the faithful."

I believe we are now hearing as never before indisputable manifestations of the sense of the faithful. There's no longer any excuse to ignore them, dismiss them as mere public opinion or attack them outright as pernicious

signs of secularism. The church of the 21st century is what it is; it will not be dragged back into an earlier time. In this age, it is silence and status quo that are "unthinkable."

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[1] http://www.univision.com/interactivos/openpage/2014-02-06/la-voz-del-pueblo-portada-en
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/70986