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The Sensus Fidei

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Distinctly Catholic

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an important document last week that did not generate as much attention as it should have. The text deals with *the sensus fidei* and it represents the work of the International Theological Commission over several years. I would add that it is a very finely done document, accessible to anyone with even a rudimentary familiarity with theology.

The *sensus fidei* may be the single most misunderstood and abused concept in the post-Vatican II era. And, mere veracity requires those of us in the Catholic left and those of us who are not full-time theologians to admit that we have been the principal perpetrators of the misunderstandings. For all of my difficulties with certain trends in modern theology, most theologians have not misused the concept; it has been the commentariat. The sense of the faithful has been conflated with public opinion, repeatedly, and used to undermine Church teaching. It has been used to justify a stance of dissent. The misuse and misunderstanding of the phrase has been one of the more obvious examples of the maxim that a little learning can be a dangerous thing. This new document helps to ward off that danger. One wishes it had been published in, oh, I don't know, late 1967!!!!

I do not need to repeat all that the document says, but would like to highlight a few key points that jumped out at me.

Late in the text, at Paragraph 118, the document makes a point that is often overlooked in commentaries about the sense of the faithful. It states:

First of all, the sensus fidei is obviously related to faith, and faith is a gift not necessarily possessed by all people, so the sensus fidei can certainly not be likened to public opinion in society at large. Then also, while Christian faith is, of course, the primary factor uniting members of the Church, many different influences combine to shape the views of Christians living in the modern world.

You can pick any century, indeed any decade, and find people who are nominal Christians, those who are largely indifferent to the life of faith, those whom Pope Francis calls "lukewarm" Christians. The sense of the faithful must mean what it says "those who are full of faith, not those who have little faith or those whose faith has been overridden by a different agenda.

The document treats this last phenomenon of different agendas intruding into the *sensus fidei* at different points in the text. Paragraph 81 states:

Theology itself, therefore, has a two-fold relationship to the sensus fidelium. On the one hand, theologians depend on the sensus fidei because the faith that they study and articulate lives in the people of God. In this sense, theology must place itself in the school of the sensus fidelium so as to discover there the profound resonances of the word of God. On the other hand, theologians help the faithful to express the authentic sensus fidelium by reminding them of the essential lines of faith, and helping them to avoid deviations and confusion caused by the influence of imaginative elements from elsewhere.

I love the phrase "the influence of imaginative elements from elsewhere." Certainly, the consistent objections to laissez-faire economics voiced in these pages is based primarily on my conviction that the belief in the purely beneficent effects of the market is an "imaginative element from elsewhere."

None of which is to say that these issues are cut and dried and one of the strengths of the text is the degree to which it recognizes the importance of nuance and gradations. Paragraph # 60 reads:

Three principal manifestations of the sensus fidei fidelis in the personal life of the believer can be highlighted. The sensus fidei fidelis enables individual believers: 1) to discern whether or not a particular teaching or practice that they actually encounter in the Church is coherent with the true faith by which they live in the communion of the Church (see below, §§61-63); 2) to distinguish in what is preached between the essential and the secondary (§64); and 3) to determine and put into practice the witness to Jesus Christ that they should give in the particular historical and cultural context in which they live (§65).

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Indeed, further on (Paragraph # 73), the document notes three instances where doctrine explicitly developed in ways that challenged those who thought the doctrine was fine as it was, and in which the development came largely by the insistence of the lay faithful discerning a conflict between their lived reality and the official teaching of the Church: the teaching on usury, the openness to addressing social concerns that led to *Rerum Novarum*, and the issue of religious liberty. These developments were not quick. In the last example, John Courtney Murray, SJ was silenced before he was vindicated. I am not entirely certain the world would not be better off if we had not developed the teaching on usury. In any event, as the text states, "It can take a long time before this process of discernment comes to a conclusion."

A final citation will demonstrate why I find this text so compelling. Paragraph # 43 looks at the influence of Yves Congar, and concludes, "Where earlier authors had underlined the distinction between the *Ecclesia docens* and the *Ecclesia discens*, Congar was concerned to show their organic unity." The

Church loving and believing, that is, the body of the faithful, is infallible in the living possession of the faith, not in a particular act or judgment?, he wrote. The teaching of the hierarchy is at the service of communion. There is much food for thought there, yes? The words, ?loving and believing? are especially key, and the linkage of the two is, perhaps, one of the key pedagogical methods of Pope Francis. Paragraph # 56 states, ?The *sensus fidei fidelis* flows from the theological virtue of faith. That virtue is an interior disposition, prompted by love, to adhere without reserve to the whole truth revealed by God as soon as it is perceived as such. Faith does not therefore necessarily imply an explicit knowledge of the whole of revealed truth.? The phrase ?prompted by love? is an indication that when Pope Francis calls us to be ?a poor Church for the poor,? he is not only concerned about the ethics of distributive justice. He is concerned that we become ?full of faith? by encountering those who are privileged by the Master. The poor reveal the face of Christ to us. In the end, our faith must be rooted here, in the experience of Christ?s loving gaze upon us. This is not all pie-in-the-sky theological reflection.

A last thought. In the past few decades, there has undoubtedly been a crisis of faith within the Church. In most centuries, similar crises occurred, for a variety of different reasons. But, what worries me most is not just that some have come to doubt this teaching or that, but some have lost not only the faith of the Church, but lost their faith in the Church. The clergy sex abuse crisis, and especially the cover-up that it occasioned, has caused many faithful people to entertain grave doubts about the leadership of the Church. One of the most refreshing things about Pope Francis is his willingness to acknowledge the degree to which pastors sometimes give their people stones when they ask for bread. The *Instrumentum laboris* issued last week was almost shockingly frank about the natural law teachings of the Church becoming ?unintelligible.? Whatever the issue, be it the Church?s teachings on sexual matters or its teachings on socio-economic issues, it is vital, as this new document indicates, that we in the laity take seriously the obligation, and blessing, of cultivating our faith, of deepening it, of looking for ways to better understand instead of availing ourselves of the easy, but potentially disastrous, stance of dissent.

In our American culture, dissent is lionized and it is all too easy to make ourselves feel important by cloaking ourselves in the mantle of ?prophetic witness?by criticizing and challenging the authority of the Church. But, as Cardinal Francis George wrote long ago, in a few sentences that have stayed with me still, ?The Hebrew prophets, critical though they were, never told their people that they should renounce their past and cease to be Israelites. Rather, the prophets pointed to God and called their people back to their original covenant, to the best in themselves and their history. Modern alienation is not a biblical virtue.? Modern alienation is not an ecclesial virtue either. If we find ourselves alienated from the *sensus fidei* as it has been understood through the centuries, there is surely work to be done. But, not all the work rests with the hierarchy. This accessible document from the CDF helps us understand our work as lay faithful and the first task, surely, is to make sure that we are, literally, faithful, full of faith. We will still have to plod along. We will still be disappointed at times in our pastors. As our preacher at Mass pointed out yesterday, no team of head hunters would have picked either Peter or Paul to lead the early Church! But, this text, precisely in its intellectual rigor, its nuances and its willingness to face challenges, gives one hope that the Spirit of Christ is still with the Church and confidence that are plodding may yet help build up the Kingdom of God.

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