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## ***SENSUS FIDEI* OF THE ENTIRE FAITHFUL AS THE BASIS FOR MAGISTERIUM**

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### **Abstract**

The Author examines the role of the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) of the entire believing Christian community and how it forms the basis for the official teaching of the Church. It all depends upon the notions of revelation and faith and the ecclesial models we have. In the pyramidal-hierarchical model of the Church, revelation is God's communication of certain dogmatic truths entrusted to the Church by Christ and his Apostles and it is faithfully handed down by the official teaching authority of the Church. The people of God or the community remains at the bottom of the pyramid just to receive everything from above. On the contrary, if we understand revelation as God's self-communication to his people and the Church as a community of "People of God," we have a "Communion" model ecclesiology, where revelation and faith will be seen as deposited in the entire people of God, and the entire community has a decisive role in determining the content of revelation and faith and in interpreting and communicating it. Christian revelation and faith is in continuous progress growing towards the fullness of the truth. The entire people of God and its *sensus fidei* led by the Holy Spirit, is the basis and controlling factor in this spiritual movement. Here the Church remains an open community with flexible and open boundaries, but rooted in faith and ultimate hope.

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## **Introduction**

The role of the community of believers (Church) and those who have the teaching office (*magisterium*) in the Church in the interpretation of revelation and in matters of faith is a crucial and complex issue. Much depends upon the very notion of revelation, faith and the ecclesial model we have. There are two basically different notions or models in understanding revelation and faith. In the first model, revelation is conceived as a clearly defined set of doctrines or truths entrusted to the Apostles and their successors to be handed down faithfully to the people. Here the people as a whole, including theologians, do not have any positive and creative role in the teaching and interpretation of revelation. Their role is just to receive passively and believe what has been handed down to them from above. On the contrary, in the second model revelation and faith are conceived as God's self-gift to his people which they experience and communicate, though never adequately, in various ways by means of symbols, rituals, doctrines, creeds, praxis, etc. Here the whole people or community has much to do with the teaching and interpretation and understanding of revelation and faith and its communication. Of course, this second view does not deny the decisive role played by the Apostles and the early Apostolic Community and the original apostolic faith experience in understanding, articulating and interpreting revelation and faith.

If the ecclesial model, we have, is monarchical and pyramidal, the deposit of revelation and the authority to interpret it will be invested in the one person or office at the top of the ecclesial pyramid, Peter and his successor today the Roman Pontiff, and he hands over this deposit down to the lower hierarchical rungs of the pyramid and interprets it with absolute authority. The people of God or the community remains at the bottom of the pyramid just to receive everything from above without any active and creative role in revelation and faith and in its communication. On the contrary, if we have a "People of God" ecclesiology or a "Communion" model ecclesiology, there revelation and faith will be seen as deposited in the entire people of God, and the entire community has a decisive role in determining the content of revelation and faith and in interpreting and communicating it. I do not mean to say that these two ecclesiological models are totally opposed to each other and these two models are the only ones available. In fact, these models of both

revelation and the Church may not exist in reality in their pure forms, and what exists in the many Churches are the different combinations of these two major models with the possibility of forming a number of other models.

We try to clarify the theological notions of revelation, faith, interpretation of revelation, *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium* (sense of faith or sense of the faithful) and *magisterium* (teaching authority) in order to understand their meanings, interrelationship and the ambiguities involved.

### **Revelation**

Revelation may be understood in a wider sense as God's self-communication to humanity and to the entire creation in its process of self-realization to which is essentially related the self-realization of each human person. God's revelation and man's response to it is thus an ongoing process in history. It cannot be simply narrowed down to certain historical events and experiences of the past, not even to the historical event of Jesus of Nazareth, although Jesus-event has a unique place in God's revelation. Understanding God's Word today by reading and interpreting the "signs of the times" is equally important as the Word of God in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, in Jesus of Nazareth and in other historical religious traditions. Man's experience of God's revelation and his response to it are expressed in the religious heritage of humanity in the various forms of symbols, doctrines, rituals and other life practices which are the products of certain 'peak moments' in the history of revelation, though these should not be identified with revelation itself. These religious symbols or revelatory symbols, however, can mediate to us God's Word or God's life or God's self-communication.

In the background of this broader notion of revelation, we have to understand *Christian revelation* as the revelatory experience of Jesus Christ and that of the early Christian community in which the Christians of all times and all places participate. Christianity began with the *Abba experience* of Jesus Christ and the experience of the disciples of Jesus who found in Jesus their God and Saviour. This faith-experience presupposes God's revelation in Jesus Christ directed towards humankind in view of human salvation. Thus Faith and Revelation, though they are distinct, cannot be separated. Revelation is God's self-communication, which can be realized or terminated only when it is received and responded by human persons in faith. Hence faith and revelation are two sides of the same process, and they are the foundations of theology. Any communication and self-

gift presupposes two persons and two simultaneous actions, giving and receiving. Revelation is to be received, perceived, grasped and responded.

Jesus Christ commissioned his Apostles and disciples to proclaim and communicate this revelation or gift of God or 'good news' to the whole humankind. The Church has received this heritage and tradition and proclaims it today. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, bequeathed to the Church by Christ, leads her to the fuller understanding of this revelation.<sup>1</sup>

According to traditional Christian teaching, Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's revelation. However, the teaching on the definitive and full revelation in Christ is very often misunderstood as if we already know the whole truth and everything about God's plan of salvation. We do not know yet in any comprehensive way 'the mystery of Christ.' It has to be gradually unfolded by the work of the Spirit who alone will lead the Church into the fullness of truth. Revelation is "closed" with Christ does not mean that God is no more present and acting in history. It means, rather, that with the coming of Jesus, his ministry, death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit, salvation history has entered into a new and definitive period with the eruption of the Kingdom God into this world. God through the risen Christ and His Spirit is all the more dynamically present in the created world and in human history leading the whole creation into its final fulfilment.

In our age of pluralism and relativity of history, cultures and religions, naturally, any monopoly of revelation by Christianity will be challenged. Has not God revealed himself also to other peoples in other cultures, civilizations and religions? What about the claim made by other religions about God's revelation to them? Christian theology had never seriously grappled with this question. The Documents of Vatican II, however, has affirmed God's presence and action in other cultures and religions.<sup>2</sup> The task of theology today will be to explain the relationship of God's revelation in Christ and in other religions. God's revelation among other peoples and religions is made more explicit and definitive in His revelation in Christ. In Christ God fully revealed who and what a human person is, that He loves the whole humankind as His sons and daughters and that He is fully present and active in history to liberate humankind from injustice, oppression, sin and finally from death.

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<sup>1</sup>Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, Nos. 4 - 5.

<sup>2</sup>Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22; *Ad Gentes*, 7.

As social beings all of us belong to a society and community. We receive many things from the community. Revelation, more precisely, historical revelation, is not given to each person directly by God, but we receive it in and through the community. Every religious experience or faith and revelation, is mediated to us in and by the community through signs and symbols, objects, events and persons. Christian revelation is, above all, a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, not simply some knowledge, wisdom, or cognitive truths. It is an experience of its own kind with a holistic character, which is totally engaging one's whole person, not only one's intellect and will.

Revelation is thus a very complex reality and so is its concept. It has various components, which are often singled out and emphasized, and thus various models of revelation are presented. Revelation as *doctrine* is one model. Here the cognitive contents of revelation as propositions or deposit of truth are understood as revelation. They are either contained in the Sacred Scripture or passed on as tradition by the living *magisterium* of the Church. Another model conceives revelation as the *presence* within the believer as a personal encounter with God. It is not a mere communication of some knowledge, but the presence of the living and life-giving God. A third model conceives revelation as *experience*, the personal existential experience, which is universal and possible for all human persons. Revelation as *history* is a fourth model. It is not merely an event, which takes place in the inner subjectivity of the human person, rather it is an event of history, a universal and public historical event that can be historically established by its analysis and interpreted as an act of God in human history. These models do not exclude each other; rather they must be interrelated. All these aspects constitute the different dimensions of revelation.<sup>3</sup>

'Revelational experience' or 'faith-experience' is distinct from its expressions, interpretations and conceptualization. For example, what we have in the New Testament is not exactly revelation as such; it is the expressions and interpretations of the original revelational experience of the Apostles and the disciples of Christ.

## Faith

Faith is a universal human phenomenon. Every human person has some sort of faith, whether he/she is aware of it or not. Human person is a free, 'spiritual being' who realizes himself/herself by one's own decisions and actions in history. It is the human experience

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<sup>3</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology, An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 202-208.

that no finite object can really satisfy the human quest. In every decision and action the human person, in the quest for final self-realization or ultimate salvation, tends to the infinite and transcendent, whatever way he/she may conceive it. This 'transcendental' object or 'supreme value' or 'ultimate meaning' to which a person clings to and which guides and inspires one's whole life and action, and for which he/she has an absolute commitment, can be called "faith." Faith is very often defined as "ultimate concern," the state of being ultimately concerned.<sup>4</sup> We are concerned with so many things, physical health, food, occupation, family, friends, spiritual goods, etc. But what proceeds from the centre of our being and what absorbs the energy of our whole heart and mind may be called "ultimate concern." It is true that people can make passing values their "gods." A person may not be even explicitly aware of one's faith or ultimate concern. The object of faith may be varied according to persons and communities, and one can discuss what kind of faith is more relevant or meaningful or worthy of absolute commitment. All the same, it must be underlined that faith is very personal and subjective.

Abraham is called the father of faith, "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:3). "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (Heb 11:8; cf. Gen 12:1-4). By faith he lived as a stranger and pilgrim in the Promised Land, and by faith he offered his only son in sacrifice. Three major religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, share this faith of Abraham. Here faith means obedience to God's word and deep commitment to God's call. It is faith in God's activity in history. It is the deep conviction that God is present in history leading his people to freedom. This conviction can overcome all obstacles in our lives and provide us great courage and confidence. In the midst of failures, catastrophes and utter hopelessness this conviction can give us new hope and inspire us to make always 'new beginnings.' Amidst sin and death faith will give us strength, serenity and peace to set out towards the unknown future trusting absolutely in God.

The Christian faith has its own specificity and uniqueness. It is "faith in Jesus Christ" that in him God has fully manifested and spoken definitively. In Jesus not only God revealed himself, but also in him God has revealed what a human person and humanity is. In Jesus God revealed his plan of human salvation and the way to

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, San Francisco: Harper, 1958.

establish the “Kingdom of God,” i.e. liberation here on earth and eternal salvation hereafter. According to the Christian faith Jesus Christ is “Word of God-incarnate” who by his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and Pentecost inaugurated the Kingdom of God, and thus effected human salvation. In Jesus Christ the promises made to Abraham and Israel were fulfilled, and salvation is now offered to all peoples and nations. Jesus still abides in the world, and in a special way in the Christian community or the Church and guides both the Church and the world through his Spirit. God’s decisive and definitive action in Jesus Christ in history and his abiding presence and action here and now gives confidence to the Christian believer to face all challenges both personal and societal.

Christian faith is the total response and commitment of the whole person to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is not merely the intellectual acceptance of some truths revealed by God or taught by Christ. All the same, faith has its rational, cognitive, ethical, mystical, emotional and other dimensions, which are expressed in various ways, in creeds, beliefs, dogmas, rites and rituals, moral behaviour, codes of conduct, etc. Hence faith and beliefs are not the same. Beliefs are doctrines and teachings, which are the rational and cognitive dimensions and conceptual expressions of the content of faith. Any conceptualization of faith will be in a sense one-sided, partial, limited, inadequate and imperfect. Hence in the conceptualization of faith in beliefs and doctrines, while there are aspects of truth, there can be changes, development and pluralism according to time, culture and categories of thought patterns. Hence, in the course of the history of Christianity its beliefs and doctrines have often changed and there has been clear ‘dogmatic development.’ There is one Christ and one faith in Christ, but there had been different ‘Christologies.’ There is one and the same faith in the salvation given by Christ, but there had been different ‘soteriologies.’ There has been one and the same faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but there have been different doctrines and theories to explain it. It means that one and the same faith can be expressed in different beliefs and doctrines; faith may be one, but beliefs and doctrines can be different and diversified. Although beliefs and doctrines are partial and inadequate, they are, however, necessary for understanding, communicating, stimulating and mediating faith. So one cannot dismiss beliefs and doctrines as unimportant.

Can there be changes in the understanding and elaboration of faith? First of all, if faith is a personal relationship and commitment to God, there can be differences and changes in its depth and intensity

on the part of any human person, especially in the course of one's physical, psychic and mental development. Secondly, with regard to the content of faith and its understanding and expression there will be differences according to time, history, culture and the thought patterns. Thirdly, faith itself is a perilous journey between faith and unfaith, belief and unbelief in one's own life. Often our faith is challenged and questioned by doubts in every new situation and experience. In fact, doubt is an integral part of any faith that is living and growing; it belongs to the very structure of faith; it clarifies and consolidates faith. Fourthly, if faith is a personal relationship and commitment, there is need of passing from conventional faith to real faith. Children receive faith from their parents and community, and it is only gradually they personally appropriate and make it personal.

As already mentioned, faith is not merely the assent of the intellect to a set of truths; it is a *personal encounter and experience*, which transforms the whole person. We see this from the lives of those who have really encountered an experience of God. Their total lives were radically changed with love of God and love of neighbour. Faith is to be manifested in life, action, *praxis*, and ethical life. New Testament has ample references to this. Love of God has to be manifested in the love of the neighbour. Faith is to be manifested in one's behaviour, not in what one says, but in what one does. Liberation theology has emphasized this point. Theology's task, according to them, is not merely understanding reality but changing or transforming it. 'To know the truth is to do the truth; to know Jesus is to follow Jesus.'

Above all, faith is a free gift of God. "When St. Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus declared to him that this revelation did not come 'from flesh and blood' but from 'my Father who is in heaven'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 153). But we receive it normally through the channel of our parents and community, the Church. The Church sustains, nourishes and hands over the faith entrusted to it. But faith is never imposed upon. It is to be received as a human and free act. It is a free response to God's self-gift.

### **Theology as Interpretation of Revelation and Faith**

Revelation in Christ and its response given by the disciples of Jesus and the early Christian community was in a particular historical and cultural form, in the context of the Old Testament, and the Hebrew culture encompassed by the Hellenistic and Roman civilizations, and the Judaism of their times. Revelation in Christ and the apostolic faith took concrete historical and cultural forms more or less two thousand



years ago in the Christian scriptures, liturgies, doctrines, beliefs, rituals and life-style. Time, culture, language, world-views and mental horizons have changed today that much of the older traditions, linguistic and cultural expressions may seem strange and foreign to the present generation. Much of it is foreign to us who belong to a different time, place and culture having a different world-view. Therefore, in order to understand the ancient scriptures, the early writings of the Fathers of the Church and the original faith expressions, one has to go back into history, reconstruct history and interpret the ancient faith expressions in terms of the present categories, mental horizons and contemporary experience. This is the task of the science and discipline of *hermeneutics* or interpretation. Only such interpretation will make revelation and faith meaningful to our times.

Theologizing is in fact this process of interpretation. Theologizing is the continuous dialogue and interaction between the Gospel or Christian message and the new realities of the time. It is the interpretation of the meaning of human life and of the totality of reality in the light of the Gospel, and at the same time it reinterprets the Gospel and faith itself. The Gospel or Christian faith puts questions to the actual situation and, on the other hand, the present realities put questions to faith so that the faith itself may be reinterpreted. The content of Christian faith needs continuous interpretation and re-interpretation, so that it may become understandable and relevant for every new age. Such interpretation or re-reading is needed both to distinguish between the core of the message and its historical and cultural expressions, and also to safeguard the authentic faith against its historical distortions. It is the task of theology to scrutinize, criticize and if necessary to reform the Church's teachings, its understanding and formulations of faith.

### **Magisterium**

*Magister* is teacher and by *magisterium* what is meant is the teaching office in the Church. In constituting the Christian faith, the Apostles played a key-role, and they were also mainly instrumental in communicating the faith. In Catholic ecclesiology, the 'Bishops are the successors of the Apostles,' and they have the authority in the Church for teaching, sanctifying and governing. This teaching authority is exercised in various ways and at different levels with varying degrees of authority. The individual bishops exercise the ordinary teaching authority in their own particular Churches. But the supreme teaching authority in the 'Universal Church' is vested in the

whole body of the bishops, in the 'College of the Bishops,' according to the doctrine of Episcopal Collegiality, as taught by the Vatican II in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.<sup>5</sup> However, the doctrine of collegiality of bishops does not take away the supreme teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff. It must be also noted that the authority of the Pope and the Bishops does not suppress the role of the whole body of the faithful in matters of faith. On the contrary, their authority is based on the *sensus fidei* of the entire community of the Church.

The Collegiality of the Bishops implies that all the bishops in the Catholic Church together constitute a single body or *collegium*, college, or collegial body, upon which is vested the supreme teaching authority of the Church. This supreme body has the final authority in teaching, sanctifying and governing the Universal Church.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament basis for the collegiality of the bishops is the choosing of the twelve apostles by Christ, who commissioned them to proclaim the Gospel and gather the disciples of Christ by teaching, sanctifying and ministering them. Vatican II teaches that in the Church there is an uninterrupted sacred order of bishops and that it is by "divine institution" that the bishops have succeeded the place of the Apostles.<sup>7</sup>

The body of the bishops is given a special authority and charism or gift by the power of the Risen Lord and the Holy Spirit to exercise their duty and special ministry in the Church. However, the teaching authority of the body of bishops is limited to the deposit of faith, entrusted to them, in order to protect, preserve, explain, and reformulate it for every new age, and hand over it thus meaningfully to every new generation. The body of the bishops cannot add anything new to the deposit of faith. The body of the bishops can teach with different levels of authority. The body of the bishops along with its head the Roman Pontiff exercises its *ordinary teaching authority* in matters of faith and morals in the day-today life of the Church in various ways. The teachings of the Ecumenical Councils, indeed, have a prime place. Normally, the members of the Church accept the teaching of the *magisterium* with a 'religious submission of will and mind,' not necessarily as absolutely revealed by God and necessary for salvation. The body of the bishops with its head can also teach with *extraordinary teaching authority or infallible teaching authority* in matters of faith and morals, either gathered in an

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<sup>5</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Nos. 18-23.

<sup>7</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 20.

ecumenical council or even when dispersed around the world, when they intend to do so in communion with each other and with the head, as a collegial act. The faithful are bound in conscience to accept such teachings as part of the deposit of faith. However, no teaching is imposed on the community, as it is derived from and based on the *sensus fidei* of the entire believing community.

### ***Sensus Fidei* and *Sensus Fidelium***

*Sensus Fidei* means “the collective faith-consciousness” of the believing community. The community of Christian believers has a “sense of faith” (*sensus fidei*), which means a special kind of knowledge, a supernatural sense of faith, springing from faith and embracing its fundamental features.<sup>8</sup> It is the community’s feeling or common sense or innate sense for the fundamentals of Christian faith and its authentic understanding. *Sensus Fidei* is the faith intuition or the faith feeling of the Christian Community by which it “sees” the correspondence or non-correspondence between Christian faith and its formulation or expression in a particular context. It also “sees” whether an element of faith corresponds to the genius or uniqueness of the totality of Christian faith or Christian World Vision.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, its basis is the individual consciousness illuminated by faith. But the individual faith consciousness and the collective faith consciousness are qualitatively different. The former may easily fall into error, whereas the latter is the criterion for the former. *Sensus Fidei* is the basis for the *Consensus fidelium* (the consensus of the faithful), which is the agreement among the faithful on matters of faith and its formulation. Our basic question is the role of the *sensus fidei* and *consensus fidelium* in the teachings and interpretations on matters of revelation and faith.

### **Historical Perspectives**

The New Testament models of the Church, such as, the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, etc., do not present the Church as a hierarchical institution with the distinctions and divisions of *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* (the teaching Church and the learning or obeying Church). On the contrary, it is a fellowship or community of brothers and sisters, a community of Jesus’ disciples where Jesus alone is the *magister*, the master. But the

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<sup>8</sup>Herbert Vorgrimler, “From *Sensus Fidei* to *Consensus Fidelium*,” *Concilium* 180 (4/1985) 3.

<sup>9</sup>Zoltan Alszeghy, “The *Sensus Fidei* and the Development of Dogma,” in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty Five Years After*, Vol. I, ed. Rene Latourelle, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 148–152.

Master presented himself as the one who came “not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Leadership in the community is not mainly in teaching authority or office, but in the leadership of service. All the members of the community have equal status and dignity, as they all have received the same spirit (Acts 2:17-18; II Cor 5:17; Gal 5:26). But all of them have not the same function in the community; some have the gift of preaching, others the gift of prophecy, still others have the gift of healing, and some have the gift of teaching (I Cor 12:4-30). But none of these functions was given by a mandate or appointment. They were all visible gifts of the Spirit given to the individuals that were recognized and acknowledged by the community. The leaders of the Church in Antioch were “prophets and teachers” when they sent Paul and Barnabas for the mission. Till the third century the usual practice was that the “teachers of faith” could be either ordained or non-ordained.<sup>10</sup> The New Testament also witnesses that final and ultimate authority in all matters is the community in which the Risen Christ and his Spirit is abiding (Mt 18:15-18,20; I Cor 3:16-17). Acts of the Apostles narrates how the community of believers gathered together to decide on important matters, three typical cases, to choose one person in the place of the betrayer Judas Iscariot, to select seven deacons for the care of widows, to settle the dispute of circumcision for Gentile Christians (Acts Chapter 1, 6, and 15).

With the death of the Apostles, naturally the Church became gradually institutionalized and the ‘charismatic ministries’ gave way to ‘ordained ministries.’ But the patterns of ministry and the organizational set-up of the early Churches were not uniform. Different local Churches might have had different patterns of ministry. In the second century, we see almost a homogeneous development in most of the Churches with regard to the pattern of ministry and the organizational structures. Namely, a threefold ministry of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons clearly emerged as seen in Ignatius of Antioch.<sup>11</sup> It was adopted by all the Churches gradually as it suited to the timely need of the unity and continuity of the Church in the context of the increasing heresies and schisms in many communities. The Bishop presided over the council of Presbyters of

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<sup>10</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, “The Teaching Authority of All – A Reflection about the Structure of the NT,” *Concilium* 180 (4/1985) 18.

<sup>11</sup>Ignatius of Antioch’s Letters give the first evidence to the existence of a threefold ministry of *Episcopoi*, *Presbuteroi* and *Diakonoi*, at least in some Churches in Syria and Asia Minor. See, his Letters to the Ephesians, Magnasians and Trallians where he describes the duties of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons.

the local Church, and the deacons were his assistants in the administration of the temporal matters and later in the liturgical services too.

The third and fourth centuries saw two other developments – the emergence of a “monarchical episcopacy” and “sacerdotalism” that paved the way to a total clericalism in the Church reducing the status and mission of the laity practically to nil. According to many scholars, the *episcopoi* and *presbuteroi* seen in the New Testament writings were more or less synonymous. Presbyters or Elders did the “supervising” function (episcopal function). *Episcopoi* did not belong to a different category of ministers. But gradually the ‘episcopal function’ became a separate ministry and in each local Church the *Episcopos* (Bishop) became the most important minister who functioned as the head of the Church. Gradually, he began to claim and assume all authority and charisms in the Church including the teaching authority. Thus all ministries – that of Apostles, prophets, teachers, preachers, etc. – became concentrated in one man, the Bishop, in the church which negatively affected the diversity of ministries and their legitimate autonomy.

Monarchical episcopal system thus developed in the Church with the consequence that teaching authority in the Church became fully identified with the hierarchy. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage represents the clear emergence of such a monarchical episcopacy.<sup>12</sup> The major factor for this development was the ever-increasing heresies and schisms in the Church of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries which seriously threatened the unity of the Church. The role of the Bishop and the adherence of the people to him was found to be necessary for safeguarding the purity of the Apostolic faith and the unity of the Church, and in fact, the Church of this period survived the crisis due to the able guidance of the Bishops who were also well-known theologians. Through the regional councils and ecumenical councils, they fought tooth and nail against the heresies and schisms in the Church and formulated the right faith and ably defended it.

Along with the Monarchical Episcopacy, there was a parallel development of “Sacerdotalism,” which in turn led to “Clericalism” in the Church. The original New Testament ministry did not, in fact, include a specific category of Christian “priests.” The *episcopoi*,

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<sup>12</sup>Cyprian’s work, *De Unitate Catholicae Ecclesiae* and his numerous Letters witness to the emergence of a Monarchical Episcopacy. For Cyprian, there is ‘no Church outside the Bishop.’ He wrote: “The Bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the Bishop, and if anyone be not with the Bishop, then he is not in the Church” (*Letter*, 68).

*presbuteroi* and *diakonoï* of the early Churches were modelled along the 'synagogue tradition' and not of the 'temple tradition.' But gradually when Christianity fully emerged as a separate religion, there happened an evolution within it towards "sacerdotalism" by which the "presbyters" became "priests," bishops became "high priests" and the deacons became mere liturgical assistants.<sup>13</sup> The Eucharistic 'table fellowship' became the 'Eucharistic Sacrifice,' the mystical renewal of the sacrifice of Christ, on the altar of a sanctuary.<sup>14</sup> Thus gradually a "priestly class" emerged in the Church as entirely separated from the laity. The political, economic and social status of the higher clergy, similar to the princely class or nobles of the Roman Empire, also widened the gulf between the hierarchy and the laity. Sacerdotalism and clericalism thus destroyed the equality among the people of God and reduced the laity to mere passivity.

The development of the magisterial structures in the Church reached its climax with the growth of the Papacy, its Primacy and Infallibility by which the Church began to function in a perfectly pyramidal or hierarchical-feudal model. Although the Bishops of Rome in general played a key role in the communion of the Churches during the first millennium, the development of Papal Primacy and Infallibility as such was a medieval phenomenon. Rome had assumed its prime place as the capital of the empire and as the ancient and venerable Church founded by Peter and Paul. The political power of the Bishop of Rome who was practically the King of Central Italy really enhanced the Papal primacy. But it was the medieval Scholastics who theologially elaborated a monarchical, pyramidal model of the Church. For them Pope was the "Vicar of Christ," "the visible Christ." Many of these scholastic theologians in fact worked with the framework of Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, which explained the relationship of creation and the Absolute by a series of 'intermediaries' or by a "hierarchy of beings." Similarly they explained the Church as a "pyramid," at the apex of which is the Pope in whom the whole authority and the whole deposit of revealed truths, is fully invested. He gives a share of his authority to those below him at the lower rungs of the ecclesial pyramid. The laity remained at the bottom of the pyramid just to receive everything from above without any positive role in the mission of the Church.

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<sup>13</sup>James A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, New York: Alba House, 1970, 49.

<sup>14</sup>Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 104.

Thus 99% of the people of God became mere spectators and observers in the Church with no active and creative role in the teaching and interpretation of the Word of God.

The outlines of this historical development, given above, may be too simplistic and naïve. But the overall perspective is generally accepted. What I want to say is that in this historical development of the structures and functioning of the Church the believing community's central role and its *sensus fidei* as the basis for the teaching authority in the Church did not get enough attention. Similarly, adequate ecclesial structures were developed for properly discerning the *sensus fidei* of the community and making it the centre of the teaching authority. I do not forget the historical facts that in modern times when the Popes defined Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Virgin Mary, they enquired all around the world in all the Churches, whether they believe in these teachings, or whether they are part of their *sensus fidei*. However, in my opinion, they are rather exceptions in the modern history of the Church.

### **Vatican II on *Sensus Fidei* and *Sensus Fidelium***

Although the Second Vatican Council reiterated the traditional teaching on the *Magisterium*,<sup>15</sup> the Council made certain remarkable changes in the nature and functioning of it. The first is the radical shift from the Papal Monarchical Pyramidal structure to collegial, or conciliar or synodal structure of the Church. The absolute authority in the Church is shifted to the College of the Bishops. This is in no way, a denial of the authority of the Pope. As the Apostles functioned and guided the Church as a team headed by Peter to which was entrusted the highest authority in the Church, so today the Bishops, as the successors of the Apostles, form a college or body, with the Pope as its head and this college has the highest authority in the church.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, to balance the Primacy and Infallibility of the Pope defined by the Vatican I, the Council underlined the authority and legitimate autonomy of the Bishops and of the Local Churches. The Bishops are directly the "successors of the Apostles" and the immediate heads of the Local Churches. They are not the executives or delegates of the Roman Pontiff. Their authority is not derived from the Pope, but from the Apostles by the act of episcopal ordination.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Bishop's Local Church is *not under any other Local Church*. Every Local Church is the concrete embodiment of the

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<sup>15</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 3; *Dei Verbum*, chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 22.

<sup>17</sup>Vatican II, Nos. 18 - 21.

Universal Church, which is made visible in the ‘Communion of the different Local Churches.’<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, with regard to our topic the most important contribution of the Council is the restoration of the position of the laity in the Church.<sup>19</sup> The concept and practice of the Church in the New Testament is rediscovered as a ‘community of brothers and sisters’ who enjoy perfect equality, fraternity and freedom with individual responsibility. The Council emphasizes that the entire people of God participates in the priestly, prophetic and pastoral mission and ministry of Christ. Every Christian is a priest in the real sense that he can stand before God and address Him as “Abba,” Father, without any mediator. The entire people of God are the celebrants and active participants in the celebration of the sacraments though some are called to be the ordained ministers for leading and guiding the worship.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, all Christians exercise the prophetic ministry of Christ in teaching and witnessing to the Word of God as they all have received the gift of the Holy Spirit to this purpose.<sup>21</sup> Here the Council corrects the exaggerated claims of the hierarchy to be the exclusive channels of the working of the Holy Spirit, and points out the positive and creative role of the laity in matters of faith and its interpretation.

We shall quote some of the most important texts of the Council on this matter: The Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* introduces the concept of *sensus fidei* of the entire people of God, its nature and its relation to the hierarchy’s teaching authority:

The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy one, cannot err in matters of belief: Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) which characterizes the people 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 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. I 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 a sacred teaching authority to which it loyally defers... Allotting His gifts “to everyone according to His will” (1 Cor 12:11), he distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By the gifts he makes them fit

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<sup>18</sup>Vatican II, No. 23.

<sup>19</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Chapters II and IV.

<sup>20</sup>Vatican II, Nos. 10 – 11.

<sup>21</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 12.



and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the renewal and up building of the Church ... In any case, judgment as to their genuineness and proper use belongs to those who preside over the Church, and whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good (cf. I Th 5: 12, 19-21).<sup>22</sup>

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation has explained how the Word of God, divine revelation, faith and the Apostolic tradition gradually develop in *the living tradition of the entire community*, led by their shepherds and guided by the Holy Spirit:

This tradition, which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words, which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her... and thus God who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the Bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church and through her in the world, makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (cf. Col 3:16).<sup>23</sup>

Holding fast to this deposit, the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread, and in prayers so that in holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, there results on the part of the bishops and faithful a remarkable common effort... The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.<sup>24</sup>

I just point out the main points contained in these texts and similar other texts of the Council both explicitly and implicitly concerning the place and the role of *sensus fidelium* in the Church for understanding matters of faith and interpreting them under the

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<sup>22</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 12.

<sup>23</sup>Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, No. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, No. 10.

leadership of magisterium. Evidently, it is not the exclusive task and authority of the magisterium to speak on matters of faith:

1. Revelation, as explained in the earlier part of this article, does not mean 'a set of truths' revealed by God through Christ, prophets and apostles contained in the Scriptures and Traditions, and deposited in the Church in the form of apostolic faith, to be guarded or protected and handed down exclusively by the *magisterium*. Revelation is rather God's self communication, started in creation, continues in history with several peak moments, such as the coming of Christ, founding of the Church, realization of the Reign of God and God's plan of salvation, etc. Faith is the counter part of revelation by which humans respond to God's revelation, while the faith itself is a gift of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

2. The presence and gift of the Holy Spirit is seen in the 'supernatural sense of faith' (*sensus fidei*), which the entire people of God manifest. It may be concretely manifested in the universal agreement among the people of God in matters of faith and morals. The members of the entire Christian community are anointed by the Holy Spirit to discern the faith, to penetrate it, to understand its implications for the life of the Church. *Sensus fidei* may be concretely manifested in the universal agreement among the people of God in matters of faith and morals.

3. The deposit of faith is not a ready-made, static reality, but a dynamic reality, subjected to growth and development. It is often explained as a growth in understanding what has been handed down to us. It is a movement towards the fullness of the truth. New experiences and insights are part of human life which will lead us to new understanding in matters of faith as well and consequently to new interpretations of faith and doctrines.

4. The development of the deposit of faith by ever-new interpretations is a task of the whole Church which calls for a common effort by all the faithful led by their shepherds. It happens through study, prayer and contemplation and life-experience of the whole faithful. But the ultimate source of this growth and development is the Holy Spirit who arouses faith, sustains and nourishes it in the faithful.

5. By this supernatural sense of faith the people as a whole may be able to discern the true Word of God in the Church, in the Scriptures and traditions. They will distinguish true faith from error, adhere to the true faith, penetrate it, bring forth new insights and apply them to their life.

6. When the people as a whole clings to the faith by this supernatural sense of faith, it has an infallible character. It means that this *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium* is the basis for the infallibility of the Church although the latter may be exercised by the *magisterium*. The final judgment and discernment in matters of faith and morals is thus made by the *magisterium* for which they are commissioned by Christ and his Church and the *magisterium* is given a special charism for this so that the Church may always abide in the true faith.

7. But the *magisterium* is not above the Word of God; they are only at the service of the Word of God; so they have to listen to the Word of God devoutly and hand it over faithfully by their authentic teaching and interpretation under the guidance of the Spirit. They have to listen and consult the whole Church before making the judgment. The *sensus fidei* of the whole Church is their norm and basis for authentic teaching. Although bishops are the official teachers of faith, the entire people of God is the guardian of the faith.

8. *Sensus fidei* is the *fides qua* which is implicit in the life of the faithful and in every act of faith, and it is made explicit by the work of theologians and by the formulations and teachings of the *magisterium* which is called *fides quae*.

9. The authentic interpretation of revelation and proper development of faith and dogmas requires a harmonious blending and collaboration among three elements in the Church – the *sensus fidei* of the ordinary believers, the intuition and knowledge of the theologians and the charism of the *magisterium*.<sup>25</sup>

10. As Revelation and its counterpart, which is the deposit of faith, is ever dynamic and continuously growing, no faith formulation could be regarded as the final one. Every faith formulation is the product of a particular socio-historical and cultural context and hence contingent, flexible and changeable. Hence formally all defined formulations or dogmas cannot be said to be ‘absolute’ and unchangeable. What is in fact ‘infallible’ is not the verbal formulation or statement, but the faith which is underlying it. It means that all sacred dogmas may be re-formulated and in fact such reformulations are necessary in the progress and process of history so that the true meaning of the dogmas and doctrines may be maintained and rediscovered. This is the ongoing task of those who preside over the Church or community. To maintain and preserve a formulation is easy, but to discover and rediscover its real meaning for every new age is a rather difficult task, and it can be done only by the assistance

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<sup>25</sup>Zoltan Alszegehy, “The *Sensus Fidei* and the Development of Dogma,” 142 – 48.

and inspiration of the Holy Spirit with the co-operation of the three basic ecclesial elements, *sensus fidei* of the entire faithful, study and intuitive work of theologians and the charism of the Magisterium.

### **Conclusion**

Christian revelation and faith as carried through in the written Scriptures, unwritten traditions and by the life and praxis of the Christian community today needs new and fresh interpretations, and it is in continuous progress growing towards the fullness of the truth. The entire people of God and its *sensus fidei* led by the Holy Spirit, is the basis and controlling factor in this progressive spiritual movement. The theologians are the spokespersons as well as the avant-garde of this movement. The magisterium guides the whole movement or process and makes discernment and judgment whenever it is needed. The whole movement is sustained and guided by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This vision is, indeed, comprehensive and beautiful. But there are many problems and issues connected with it. Some of them are theological, others practical. As a conclusion to this article, I just indicate some of these problems, issues and questions:

1. The Vatican II in its documents has indeed rejected the monarchical and pyramidal ecclesiology of the pre-Vatican II period by introducing or restoring the doctrine of episcopal collegiality and the creative role and status of the laity. The first question is how far the new vision, thinking, and the new ecclesiology theologically spelt out and practically implemented even 50 years after the Council? What is the real status and authority of the Roman Synod of Bishops? How does the Synod function? Even today there is no official document of the Synod. It is published only as Papal Apostolic Exhortations. And what is the real authority of the National and Regional Episcopal Conferences? Have the canons of the Catholic Church with regard to them thoroughly revised in the spirit of Episcopal Collegiality?

2. If the faith of the entire people of God and the *Sensus Fidei* is the basis of the Church's infallible teaching, what is the role of the people or laity in the decision-making process of the Church with regard to matters of Faith and morals? What are the doctrinal and theological problems, if any, that deny membership to the laity in the ecumenical councils and synods? Many of the early ecumenical councils were convened and presided by the emperors and non-Episcopal members took part in the decision making process. According to the canonical legislation today there are already non-episcopal members, such as religious superiors and abbots with voting rights as members of the

Council. It may be noted here that many of the Protestant Churches, including the Anglican Communion today have synods as the highest authority where the majority are laymen and laywomen. With the Vatican II's emphasis on *Sensus Fidei* of the entire Christian community, may be, time has come to revise the canons of membership of the Councils and Synods.

3. How can we discover and identify the *sensus fidei* of the Christian community? If the enduring faith of the community is the norm for the Church's life and for the proclamation and teaching of the magisterium, indeed, the magisterium cannot simply dictate or impose people's faith and praxis. How could *sensus fidei* be identified and expressed in the culture of a democratic society? In moral issues like Christian teaching on marriage and birth control, how can we identify the *sensus fidei* of the Christian community? Faith and Christian morals cannot be strictly separated. What are the criteria for evaluating the *sensus fidei*? Who are the proper subjects of *sensus fidei*? All genuine Christians, all Catholics or only practicing Catholics?<sup>26</sup>

4. Which Christian community or group today can claim to have the *sensus fidei*? The community which externally and verbally professes the Christian faith or the community which actually lives it out? Right faith and right Christian living cannot be separated. How can individuals or communities, which do not respond to the movements and gifts of the Spirit claim to have the authentic *sensus fidei*?

5. How can we verify the claims and counter-claims of the different Christian communities? In a situation of ecclesial divisions, where do we find the authentic *sensus fidei*? Can anyone single Church among the various historical Churches claim the monopoly of *sensus fidei*? Certainly, an ecumenical consensus among the different Churches is the most appropriate and solid basis for the *sensus fidei*.

6. Is *sensus fidei* the common consensus or agreement among the people of God at a particular historical moment, or an enduring consensus through the centuries by which we identify its continuity

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<sup>26</sup>In 2014 the International Theological Commission of Vatican published a document on "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church." It restricted *sensus fidei* only to the *committed members of the Catholic Church* and spelt out the conditions in detail. According to the present author, it is a very strict interpretation in this ecumenical age in the light of Council's Decree on Ecumenism. The International Theological Commission's document may be contrasted with the BEM (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry) document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches where it is said that on Baptism and Eucharist there exists almost unanimous consensus among the different Churches in the area of *faith* and differences are only in their theologies.

with the apostolic faith? It naturally raises the question of the infallibility of the decisions of the Church at particular moments of the Church's life and teaching. The theologians of the Orthodox Churches seem to suggest the process of "reception" by the entire Church. This "reception" is not a juridical act of approval by the Church once for all, but a living process of interiorization, assimilation and explication, which is a slow and organic, process in the Church.

7. Finally, to the question whether the laity has a teaching authority in the Church, the answer seems to be "yes" in the light of the prophetic function of the entire people of God and their *sensus fidei*. Today, with the emergence of the people's Churches and people's theologies where the faith experience of the ordinary people plays an important and determining role, the teaching function of the laity in matters of faith and morals and their role in the decision making bodies of the Churches remains a very serious and important question.