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***SENSUS FIDEI* AND THE MAGISTERIUM OF POPE FRANCIS**

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Abstract

The Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium* teaches that, in virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the whole body of the faithful possesses a sure sense of the faith and it cannot err in matters of belief. This spiritual instinct, *sensus fidei*, is also a criterion for deciding whether a doctrine belongs to the living faith of the Church. This article, first, examines the notion of *sensus fidei* in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. It investigates how, according to the Council, the *sensus fidei* is the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers and what are its implications for the Church. The second part of the article is dedicated to the idea of *sensus fidei* in the teachings of Pope Francis. He strongly believes that “the wisdom which the Holy Spirit” has given to the faithful enables them to make their belief a Christian *praxis*. In the concluding part, the article examines the relevance of this notion for the mission of Church today.

Keywords: Magisterium, Missionary Church, People of God, Praxis, *Sensus Fidei*, Theology of the People

Introduction

Traditionally, the *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) holds that the whole body of the faithful cannot err in matters of belief. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council too confirms this when it says that the whole body of the faithful possesses a sure sense of the faith (*Lumen gentium* 12). With that, the Church believes that, in virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the baptized possess a certain spiritual

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instinct that helps them perceive the truth of the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition.¹ At the same time, the *sensus fidei* is a criterion for deciding whether a doctrine belongs to the living faith.² Pope Francis strongly believes that “the wisdom which the Holy Spirit” has given to the faithful enables them to make discernment with regard to matters of faith.³

The notion of *sensus fidei* has various significances and distinctions. Generally understood, the *sensus fidei* is the supernatural instinct or aptitude of the individual believer (*sensus fidei fidelis*) or the community of believers (*sensus fidei fidelium*) to make an accurate discernment in matters of faith.⁴ It is the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the believer to perceive the truth of the faith and, at the same time, to discern anything opposed to it. From that perspective, the *sensus fidei* is a subjective quality of the one who believes. However, while discussing the *sensus fidei*, one cannot overlook the other two expressions which are associated with it – *sensus fidelium* (mind of the faithful), and *consensus fidelium* (the agreement of the faithful). While *sensus fidelium* focuses on what is believed or the objective meaning of belief, *consensus fidelium* pays attention to how in a given situation the whole body of the faithful shares the same belief.⁵ It is within the framework of the *consensus fidelium* that the Vatican II affirms that the whole people of God cannot err on matters of faith. Though these three terms are interconnected and extremely relevant and necessary for a comprehensive study on *sensus Ecclesiae* (mind of the Church), constraints of space prevent us from surveying them all, and we limit ourselves to the notion of *sensus fidei*. In this article, first, we have a brief overview of the notion of *sensus fidei* in Church teachings, beginning with the Second Vatican Council. Thereafter, we investigate this important theological topic in the teachings of Pope Francis.

¹Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to International Theological Commission,” *Origins*, vol. 42, 31 (2013) 502.

²For example, the spiritual insight from the faithful helped the popes to formulate the doctrines of Blessed Mary’s Immaculate Conception (1854) and bodily Assumption (1950).

³Pope Francis quoted the words of a humble, elderly woman he once met: “If the Lord did not forgive everything, the world would not exist.” And the pope commented with admiration: “That is the wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives.” Pope Francis, “God Never Tires of Forgiving,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 20 March 2013, 11.

⁴International Theological Commission, “*Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church” (2014), 49.

⁵Cf. F.A. Sullivan, *Magisterium*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, 23.

The *Sensus fidei* in the Teachings of the Church

Though indirect references are made on the sense of faith in various documents of the Second Vatican Council (DV, 8; 15; PO, 9; AA, 30; GS, 7; 52; 62; 59; NA, 2; AG, 19) the principal text that directly deals with the theme can be found in *Lumen gentium* (LG). It is significant to note that the notion is explained within the framework of the theology of the People of God. In the second chapter of the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen gentium*, the Council makes it clear that *sensus fidei* is a form of participation by the faithful (*universitas fidelium*) in the ministry, especially the prophetic mission, of Christ:

The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name. The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life (LG, 12).

First, the Council teaches that the *sensus fidei* is the gift of grace given to the believer by the Holy Spirit. However, to be a recipient of this gift, one needs to be a member of the People of God, i.e. the Church. Since the sense of faith is 'aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth,' every member of the Church – "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" – is equally entitled to have it. Let us note that the *sensus fidei* is not some special gifts of grace or charisms that the Spirit distributes to some select group of people in the Church (Cf. Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 7:7). It is a basic or fundamental grace given to all the people of God. In other words, to be a recipient of *sensus fidei*, one need not possess special talents or exceptional gifts because the sense of faith is the gift of the Spirit given to all believers.

Secondly, according to the teachings of the Council, the sense of faith enables the faithful to discern and to recognize the word of God, even though it comes to them through the words of men. Once it is recognized as the word of God, this supernatural gift of the Spirit helps the faithful adhere unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints. Here one may notice that the 'unerring quality' of the

faith belongs to “the whole People of God.” Again, it is the Spirit who becomes the guarantor of this indefectibility of the people of God in matters of belief. Furthermore, in the process, the Spirit empowers the believer with the gift of spiritual discernment. Thus, the *sensus fidei* strengthens the believer with a kind of instinct that helps him or her discern the presence of error that is contrary to the truth of faith and to reject it.⁶

Further, we also note that the paragraph on the *sensus fidei* ends with a significant affirmation: “Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life.” Simply put, the sense of faith helps the faithful integrate the word of God more thoroughly into their life. What does that imply? It simply highlights the fact that the *sensus fidei* helps the faithful realize that believing is not just a matter of believing in some propositions. As Aquinas reminds us, in the act of faith the believer does not just assent to the propositions for their own sake, but uses them as a means for assenting the realities they signify (*Credere in Deum*).⁷ That is to say, the sense of faith invites the faithful to go beyond an intellectual affirmation of truths to the *practice* of faith. While encouraging the faithful to grow in theological virtues, it also encourages them to resist all that is contrary to the Gospel, such as injustice, egoism, and all forms of social evil. “The *sensus fidei* in this sense is reflected in the convergence of the baptized in a lived adhesion to a doctrine of faith or to an element of Christian *praxis*.”⁸

After the Council, though the Magisterium prior to the papacy of Francis occasionally mentioned it in its teachings, often the notion of *sensus fidei* was addressed as a warning against its misuse, namely, presuming that public opinion inside (or outside) the Church is necessarily the same thing as the *sensus fidei*. For example, in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC), Pope John Paul II warned against confusing the *sensus fidei* with ‘consensus of the faithful’ determined by sociological and statistical research. According to him, it is the task of the Church’s pastors to promote, discern and authoritatively judge the genuineness of the sense of the faith in all the faithful (FC, 5). In the same way, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the need to distinguish authentic *sensus fidelium* from its

⁶Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 22.

⁷“Now the act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in a thing. For as in science we do not form propositions, except in order to have knowledge about things through their means, so is it in faith.” *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 1 a. 2. ad 2.

⁸International Theological Commission, “*Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church,” 3.

counterfeit.⁹ Therefore, though the Church taught that, in virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, all of the baptized participated in the prophetic office of Jesus Christ, caution prevailed over encouragement. The reason for this overemphasis on restraint, as already indicated, was to distinguish the *sensus fidei* from public opinion in the Church.¹⁰ Therefore, the competence to ascertain the authenticity of the *sensus fidelium* ultimately rested with the Magisterium, especially keeping in mind the distinction between the teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*ecclesia discens*). However, one cannot forget the fact that the Magisterium exercises this ministry of guidance within the fellowship of the Church.¹¹

Though Pope Francis agrees with his predecessors that the *sensus fidelium* must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion,¹² he is of the opinion that the Magisterium must pay attention to the sense of the faithful while exercising its teaching authority. The Magisterium cannot remain impervious to the insights that come from the faithful. In fact, Pope Francis looks at the Council's teaching on the *sensus fidei* as an opportunity to enter into dialogue with the concrete life situations of the Church.

Pope Francis and the Sense of Faith

As mentioned earlier, Vatican II teaches that the *sensus fidei* is one of the ways in which the People of God participate in the threefold office (Priest, Prophet, and King) of Christ. From that perspective, it highlights the 'ontological' character of the baptized. It places the emphasis on who a Christian is. The 'functional' aspect of the baptized is not fully elaborated. Looking at it from that angle, one can notice a new vision of the *sensus fidei* in Pope Francis. He places the *sensus fidei* within the framework of the evangelizing Church. In other words, holding on to the teachings of the Council, Pope Francis explains the *sensus fidei* from an evangelical-missionary perspective. Thus, one can say that Pope Francis takes forward the process set in motion by Vatican II. The very fact that the *sensus fidei* finds an important place in his programmatic document— *Evangelii gaudium*¹³

⁹Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to International Theological Commission," 502

¹⁰Cf. A. Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of Faith*, Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007, 45.

¹¹Cf. Y. Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 79.

¹²Pope Francis, "Speech to International Theological Commission," *Origins*, vol. 43, 31 (9 January 2014) 519.

¹³As Pope Francis himself has mentioned, *Evangelii gaudium* is the key document of his papacy: "I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences" (EG, 25).

– itself shows how important the theme is for Pope Francis. In fact, one can say that *Evangelii gaudium* is the first post-conciliar Magisterial document that has taken the *sensus fidei* as an important theme for ecclesiology.¹⁴

For Pope Francis, the Church is more than a gathering of individuals for the sake of a cultural or religious identity. Therefore, he qualifies it with an important Christian notion: *mission*. For him, the Church is a *missionary community* of believers, i.e. a community with a mandate to preach the Gospel to all mankind. “If we attempt to put all things in a *missionary* key, this will also affect the way we communicate the message” (EG, 34). That is to say, for Pope Francis, the identity of the Church comes from its mission. And all the faithful are called upon to take part in this new missionary “going forth” (EG, 20). Therefore, quoting from the document of Aparecida, he asks all Christians to be “permanently in a state of mission” (EG, 25).

As missionary disciples, for Pope Francis, all the baptized are agents of the mission of the Church. Further, he maintains that it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. He reminds the faithful that the new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each baptized (EG, 120). And the *sensus fidei* which makes the faithful responsible people plays an important role in the mission of the Church.

Having taken this brief ecclesiological vision of the Pope into consideration, we shall now turn to *Evangelii gaudium* where Pope Francis elaborates the fundamental idea of the *sensus fidei*:

In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression (EG, 119).

¹⁴ D. Vitale, “Una chiesa di popolo: il *sensus fidei* come principio dell’evangelizzazione,” in H.M. Yáñez, ed., *Evangelii Gaudium: il testo ci interroga: Chiavi di lettura, testimonianze e prospettive*, Rome: GBP, 2014, 59-60.

First, a word on the context in which *sensus fidei* appears in the exhortation is in order. The paragraph that contains the notion is found in chapter III of *Evangelii gaudium*, which is dedicated to “the proclamation of the Gospel.” As mentioned earlier, for Pope Francis, evangelization is the task of every member of the Church. For him, the Church is not an elite of priests, consecrated people, and bishops. Everyone forms the holy faithful People of God. “Looking to the People of God is to remember that we all made our entrance into the Church as lay people. The first sacrament is baptism.”¹⁵ That is to say, every Christian is called upon to evangelize and share the joy of the Gospel with others. He makes it clear when he writes:

The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary (EG, 111).

In short, the key to understand the idea of *sensus fidei* in Pope Francis is evangelization.

It is also important to note that in the paragraphs prior to the discussion on the *sensus fidei* the Pope speaks of the multifaceted nature and culture of the Church. According to him, it is the bounden duty of the evangelizers to recognize the richness of the gifts of the Spirit already present among the peoples. It is the Spirit who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony. Therefore he says, “Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church” (EG, 117). The same Spirit gives rise to the *sensus fidei* in the Church and maintains it.

For Pope Francis, faith does not exist as an abstract idea. Faith is alive in the community of believers. Faith is alive only when it is shared and nurtured. Therefore, faith cannot be separated from the “faithful people” of God. That is to say, faith becomes a reality only in the life of the people. Even though they transcend all institutional expressions of faith, the faithful people are the ones who announce the Gospel in its entirety (EG, 101). This idea was present in Bergoglio back in the 1980s. He wrote: “Whenever you want to know what the Church believes, go to the Magisterium, but when you want to know

¹⁵Pope Francis, “The Hour of the Laity Has Come,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 29 April, 2016, 4.

how the Church believes, go to the faithful people.”¹⁶ For him, the faithful people are infallible ‘in credendo’ – in believing (EG, 124). That is the meaning of the teaching of the Council and the Church traditions with regard to the *sensus fidei*. Again, for Pope Francis, if the Church wants to encourage every member to be a responsible person, it needs to pay attention to the exercise of the *sensus fidelium* in the Church.

Concluding Remarks

One cannot but notice that the thoughts of Pope Francis on *sensus fidei* are clearly influenced by “the theology of the people” espoused by the Argentinian theologians and the reflections of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM). For the theology of the people, the poor are a privileged category because they are the ones who retain the culture of a nation by holding on to the historical memory of the people.¹⁷ Endorsing the basic principles of “the theology of the people,” Cardinal Bergoglio wrote: “When we approach our people with the gaze of the good shepherd, when we do not come to judge but to love, we can find out that this cultural way to express the Christian faith is still present among us, especially in our poor.”¹⁸ He is of the opinion that when we walk with the poor, we understand that they live life in a transcendental sense, beyond the huge daily difficulties. According to him, these experiences should be the framework of our theological reflections. For him, faith and culture have a symbiotic relationship. Faith always expresses itself culturally.¹⁹ In fact, he would even say that “our formulations of the faith are expressions of a life lived and pondered as a Church.”²⁰

One of the great challenges facing the Church today is to foster in all the faithful a sense of personal responsibility for the Church’s mission and to enable them to fulfil that responsibility as missionary

¹⁶J.M. Bergoglio, *Meditaciones para religiosos*, Buenos Aires: San Miguel, 1982, 46.

¹⁷In his video message to the faculty of theology at the Catholic University of Argentina (UCA), Pope Francis makes this observation: “Memory enables us to remember where we come from and, in so doing, to unite ourselves with the many who have contributed to this history, this ecclesial life in its many vicissitudes, and those certainly have been many. Memory moves us to discover that, in the midst of the journey, the faithful People of God have not been left alone. This pilgrim people have always counted on the Spirit to guide them, to sustain them and prompt them from both within and without.” Pope Francis, “A Living River,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 11 September 2015, 8.

¹⁸J.M. Bergoglio – Papa Francesco, “Prefazione” in E.C. Bianchi, *Introduzione alla teologia del popolo*, Bologna: EMI, 2015, 14-15.

¹⁹Bergoglio – Pope Francis, “Prefazione,” 18-19.

²⁰Pope Francis, “A Living River,” 9.

disciples. This will require creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life.²¹

Pope Francis' invitation to reflect on the dynamic nature of faith also highlights the "responsible" way of practicing the faith. That is to say, the sense of "responsibility" resists every attempt to reduce faith to passivity. The act of faith is not accepting fate or placing all responsibilities in the hands of God or the hierarchical structure of the Church and passively waiting upon God's miraculous intervention in history at some future time.²² "Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes: it is a participation in his way of seeing" (*Lumen fidei*, 18).

Pope Francis has made serious efforts to make the *sensus fidei* a practical reality for the Church. That can be seen in the process and the conduct of various synods. His initiative to circulate an extensive questionnaire, requesting feedback from the faithful prior to the synods, can be interpreted as his earnestness in making *sensus fidei* a practical reality. He is convinced of the fact that "as part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith" (EG, 119). He wants the Church to use this supernatural gift of the Spirit as a vital resource for evangelization. That is why Pope Francis in his first *Angelus* address invited everyone to reflect on "the wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives" to the faithful.²³

²¹Pope Francis, "More Responsibilities for the Laity," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 2 October 2015, 16.

²²Cf. A. Dulles, "Faith in Relation to Justice," in J.C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, New York: Paulist Press, 1977, 32-44.

²³Pope Francis, "God Never Tires of Forgiving," 11.