

THE PROCESS OF FORMULATING OFFICIAL CATHOLIC TEACHINGS: CONSULTING THE LAITY AND *SENSUS FIDELIUM*

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Abstract

Traditionally, Christian theology has upheld the fact that all the baptized are anointed by the Holy Spirit, and consequently, the Christian community as a whole will not be allowed to fall into error by the same Spirit, with regard to its faith and morals. Vatican II officially resurrected this traditional belief in and through the concept of *sensus fidelium* as expressed explicitly in LG, 12. However, during the post-Vatican II era what the concept implies with regard to the process of official Church teaching, namely, to consult all the baptized (majority of whom are the laity) has not happened, resulting in a glaring gap between the teachings of the clerical hierarchy and the rest of the Church. The article, while insisting that majority or public opinion cannot be equated to *sensus fidelium*, nevertheless, points out the indispensable need to consult and listen to the laity if the Church's teaching is to be credible in the eyes of the contemporary believers.

Keywords: Ecclesial Decision-Making, Laity, Lay Participation, Official Church Teaching, *Sensus Fidelium*, *Sensus Fidei*, Synod on the Family

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Introduction

At the time of composing this article (beginning of June 2015), Ireland that has traditionally been known as a Catholic country has just voted in a national referendum to recognize homosexual unions as 'marriages'. What was shocking was the overwhelming approval vote (62% approving such marriages) of the Irish, and that, in spite of the Catholic hierarchy actively campaigning hard to ask the voters to reject any civil move to recognize such unions as 'marriages'. As is well-known, traditionally, the Catholic Church upholds only heterosexual marriages, even though today she tolerates any civil union of homosexuals. Apparently, there is a vast gap between what the Church cherishes so dearly and teaches so resolutely and what the ordinary lay Catholics hold to be true, as is evident from the words of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin in the aftermath of the referendum:

It is very clear that, if this referendum is an affirmation of the views of young people, the Church has a huge task in front of it to find a language to be able to talk to, and get its message over to, young people not just on this issue but in general... The Church needs to do a reality check right across the board, to look at the things it is doing well, to look at the areas where we really have to say, 'Have we drifted away completely from young people?' We need to have robust discussions and challenge one another and we are not doing that — we are becoming a Church of the like-minded and a safe space for the like-minded, rather than the Church which Pope Francis is talking about. That does not mean we renounce our teaching on fundamental values on marriage and family, nor does it mean that we dig into the trenches. We need to find as in so many areas a new language which is fundamentally ours, that speaks to, is understood and is appreciated by, others.¹

This is not the first time in recent years that the hierarchy of the Church has openly admitted the existence of a gap between what the Church teaches officially and what the people believe and practice in reality. Even the *lineamenta* for the October 2014 Extraordinary Synod on Family (which itself was supposed to be the result of a wide ranging consultation all over the Roman Catholic Church) clearly acknowledged this ever growing gap. The purpose of this article is to draw the attention of the reader to the indispensable need to consult the laity with regard to important ecclesial issues, in general, and with regard to the process of formulating official Church teaching, in particular. Or else, the contention of this article is, the already existing

¹Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin as cited by the *Catholic News Update Asia*, Vol. VIII, Issue 244, 2nd June 2015.

gap between what the Church teaches and what her members really believe and live will further increase. In other words, gone are the days when the hierarchy could authoritatively wind up any discussion by simply saying: *Roma locuta est, causa finita est!*

The popular Catholic saying in the pre-Vatican-II era with regard to the main duties of the laity in the Catholic Church was: “to pray and pay”! In order to confirm the veracity of such a saying, it suffices for us to read what Pope Pius X wrote in an Encyclical in 1906:

It follows that the Church is essentially an *unequal* society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the ends of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.²

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), Pope John Paul II himself while recalling how the Council Fathers called for a definition of “the lay faithful’s vocation and mission in *positive terms*,” reaffirms such earlier *negative* sentiments within the Church with regard to the laity when he says: “In giving a response to the question ‘Who are the lay faithful,’ the Council went beyond previous interpretations which were predominantly negative.”³

In fact, the official Church since Vatican II has radically changed her understanding of the role of the laity from that which prevailed in the pre-Vatican II era. The acknowledgment of the fact that the Church consists of the People of God (all the baptized) (LG, 9, 11), the universal call to holiness of all the baptized (LG, 39-42), the competence of the laity especially in secular matters (GS, 43), the participation of the laity in the mission of the Church (LG, 31; AA, 2, 7), etc. are some of the salient features of this changed vision.

This article examines the challenge that the theological concept *sensus fidelium* (which was resurrected by Vatican II) poses with regard to consulting and listening to the lay faithful as an indispensable part of exercising the teaching office of the Church. We assume that more than any other concept this particular concept forms a firm theological basis as to why the laity need to be consulted *and* listened to within the Church, especially, in the process of the

²Pope Pius X, *Vehementer* (1906), 8.

³Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), 9.

formulation of official Church teachings.⁴ We will first briefly describe how *sensus fidelium* is understood in the Catholic tradition. Then, we will make a quick examination of how the conciliar and post-conciliar magisterial teachings treated the traditional Catholic concept of *sensus fidelium*. Finally, we will draw the attention of the reader to the ever-increasing and glaring gap between what the Church officially continues to teach and what the majority of laity really believe and practice in the contemporary ecclesial reality, making a suggestion to take the Christian sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) seriously so that such an unnecessary gap may be closed.

1. The Resurrection of the Concept *Sensus Fidelium* at Vatican II

1.1. What is *Sensus Fidelium*?

One of the most important theological teachings of Vatican II is its official recognition of what has traditionally been known as *sensus fidei*. As Sullivan points out, *sensus fidei* or 'the sense of faith' is "a supernatural gift, an aspect of the gift of faith itself, a kind of God-given instinct by which believers are able to recognize the word of God for what it is, to discern truth from error in matters of faith, and to have sound insights into what they believe."⁵ He further discusses the two corollaries of the same concept: *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidelium*:

The term *sensus fidelium* (sense or mind of the faithful) on the other hand generally has an objective meaning, referring not to the believer but to what is believed. Thus, if one asks: 'What is the sense of the faithful on this matter?', one wants to know what people believe; what is the 'mind of the faithful' on an issue. The term *sensus Ecclesiae* (mind of the Church) is often used with much the same meaning...

The term *consensus fidelium* (agreement of the faithful) adds the element of universal agreement to the notion of *sensus fidelium*. It refers to the situation in which, on a particular issue of faith, the whole body of the faithful, 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,' share the same belief. As we have seen, it is in such a *consensus* that the Second Vatican Council says that the whole People of God cannot be in error.⁶

Having situated the intrinsic link among the above-mentioned three concepts (*sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidelium*), we

⁴Cfr., Ormond Rush, "Ecclesial Conversion After Vatican II: Renewing 'The Face of the Church' to Reflect 'The Genuine Face of God,'" *Theological Studies* 74, 4 (December 2014) 799-802.

⁵Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: The Teaching Authority in the Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, 23.

⁶Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 23.

will now focus ourselves exclusively on *sensus fidelium* for the purposes of this essay. (The reader needs to note that at times this is also referred to as *sensus fidei fidelium* by some authors.⁷) Faith, as we know, is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and this faith is sustained and expressed through the *sensus fidelium*, by the same Spirit:

The result of this gift of faith, through the Spirit in the church today, is the *sensus fidelium*, which is that pneumatic gift that enables the whole church to receive and transmit the deposit of faith — divine revelation — effectively and faithfully to new cultures and contexts.

The *sensus fidelium* is given to all the faithful. That is why it is sometimes referred to as the ecclesial collective faith awareness, a “connatural, prethematic *sens*-itivity to what being Christian truly means.” This collective “faith awareness” or, as Herbert Vorgrimler calls it, “faith consciousness,” possessed by all the faithful enables them to understand the truth of faith under the influence of the Holy Spirit (LG, 12).⁸

The historical roots of the concept *sensus fidelium* in practice go back to the Apostolic Church.⁹ In the New Testament, we read how in the early Church communities all the believers together as a community played an active role in determining authentic Christian belief and practice. Chapters 1, 6 and 15 of the Acts of the Apostles render three classic examples of how the whole community of believers came together in agreeing as to what consisted of authentic Christian belief and practice. Thus, when Peter calls the community in Jerusalem to choose a replacement for the betrayer Judas, it is the whole community that suggested two names (1:15-26). Later, when there arose the question of the neglect of widows, “the Twelve summoned the body of disciples” (6:2), and “the whole multitude” chose the first seven deacons (6:5). When the crucial question of the continuation of the Jewish practice of circumcision even in the new gentile Christian communities arose, the Jerusalem community (together with Paul and Barnabas who had visited them to consult on this controversial issue) decides to choose men from among them to be sent to Antioch and other gentile areas to convey the decision of

⁷See for example, the recent document of The International Theological Commission, on “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church” (2014), 3. Henceforth, this document will be referred to as ITC. See also, Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2009, 215-219.

⁸Anthony Ekpo, “The *Sensus Fidelium* and the Threefold Office of Christ: A Reinterpretation of *Lumen Gentium* No.12,” *Theological Studies* 76, 2 (June 2015) 338-339. For another more nuanced way of understanding what is conveyed through these crucially important theological concepts, see Rush, *The Eyes of Faith*, 215-219.

⁹For a detailed discussion of the Biblical base (both OT and NT), see ITC, 8-21.

the Twelve and the Elders in Jerusalem in this regard. What is important to note here is the phrase: “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them, and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (15:22). Thus, there obviously was an inclusiveness of all the baptized in the decision-making, with regard to their Christian life. The underlying theological presumption for such an inclusiveness was their firm belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit in all the believers as a whole, as promised by Jesus. It was basing on this solid theological presumption that Congar could write:

Tradition is what the ecclesiastical community believes, under its pastors, and is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, who resides and operates in it. “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32; cf. Jn 15:26-27). However, if this rule exists in written documents — Creed, canons of Councils, writings of the Fathers, the liturgy — it is alive in the Church, inseparable from the *ecclesia*, its living subject. From this point of view, the objective meaning of the expressions *sensus fidei*, *sensus catholicus*, *sensus Ecclesiae* already signifies for the Fathers an interior disposition experienced within the fellowship of the Church — a sort of instinct or inner feeling.¹⁰

The crucial role the laity played in the Early Church is evident from the historical fact that during the Arian heresy when almost all the bishops at the time were trapped within the Arian heresy and the controversies surrounding Arianism, it was the lay people who held on to the true orthodox Catholic faith, and eventually passed it on to future generations. This is rightly attributed to the *sensus fidelium*, and is well-documented by no lesser person than Blessed Cardinal Newman himself.¹¹ It is very important to note, however, that the simplistic equating of the profound theological concept of *sensus fidelium* to the exclusive sense of the faith of the laity is a serious mistake. By definition, as we have already seen, it refers to the sense of the faith of the community as a whole, laity included. We need also to mention here that lay participation in the official teaching process had been a cherished Catholic concept both in the East and the West from the time of the Early Church. That is why early Synods and Councils had not only bishops but also lay participants, often as voting members.

With regard to the presence of this concept in the Catholic tradition, the International Theological Commission in their recent study on *sensus fidei* has this to say:

¹⁰Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A.N. Woodrow, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004 (Re-print), 79.

¹¹Cfr. John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1961, 75-101.

The concept of the *sensus fidelium* began to be elaborated and used in a more systematic way at the time of the Reformation, though the decisive role of the *consensus fidelium* in the discernment and development of doctrine concerning faith and morals was already recognized in the patristic and medieval periods. What was still needed, however, was more attention to the specific role of the laity in this regard. That issue received attention particularly from the nineteenth century onwards (ITC, 22).

However, by the 19th century the term ‘magisterium’ or ‘the teaching office’ of the Church gradually tends to be reserved exclusively to the hierarchy in the Western/Latin Church, implying thus, an exclusively teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and an exclusively learning Church (*ecclesia discens*). Put simply, the hierarchy teaches actively and the laity learns passively! Dulles draws our attention to the historical roots of this unfortunate development when he writes:

Beginning with Thomas Stapleton (d. 1598), many theologians divide the Church into components — the “teaching Church” which is hierarchical and the “learning Church” which is predominantly lay. The hierarchy is credited with active infallibility; the infallibility of the “learning Church” is regarded as merely passive. The duty of the faithful, therefore, is simply to accept what the hierarchy tells them. The “sensus fidelium” in this theory ceases to function as a distinct theological source.¹²

1.2. Vatican II and *Sensus Fidelium*

By the time of Vatican II, the existing official position was the same, namely, the hierarchy teaches actively (*ecclesia docens*) while the vast majority of the laity simply follow such teachings passively (*ecclesia discens*). There was no question of the laity having any role whatsoever in the official teaching process of the Church. Vatican II corrected this erroneous development in the tradition, and recovered the practice of taking the lay voice seriously in the ecclesial decision-making, especially in its teaching process, when it resurrected the concept of *sensus fidelium*:

The holy People of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips praising his name (cf. Heb 13:15). The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*)¹³ of the whole people, when, “from the bishops to the

¹²Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom*, New York: Crossroad, 1982, 112.

¹³With reference to this term, the English translation of Austin Flannery in a footnote says: “The *sensus fidei* refers to the instinctive sensitivity and discrimination which the

last of the faithful” they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (*magisterium*), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of human beings, but truly the word of God (cf. 1 Th 2:13), the faith once for all delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3). The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life (LG, 12).

Basing itself on firm traditional Catholic roots, Vatican II made a further decisive break with the popular pre-Vatican II view that the hierarchical magisterium is the exclusive bearer of the Tradition when it taught:

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19 and 51). It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth (DV, 8).

Gaillardetz and Clifford comment on this passage as follows:

The text does mention the necessary role of the bishops but not before it first cites the contributions of believers who, through contemplation, study, and intimate experience, allow church tradition to progress. What is striking is the vision of the bishops and the lay faithful cooperating in this “traditioning” process. This shared responsibility presupposes that all Christians have a spiritual gift for discerning God’s word that enables them to contribute to the “progress” of tradition.¹⁴

Interestingly, when the Council spoke about marriage and family (realities in which and on which the laity ought to have a major say), there was special reference made to this instinct or sense of the Christian faith of the laity:

Christians, making full use of the times in which we live and carefully distinguishing the everlasting from the changeable, should actively strive to promote the values of marriage and the family; it can be done by the witness of their own lives and by concerted action along with all men of good will; in this way they will overcome obstacles and make provision

members of the Church possess in matters of faith.” See Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vatican Collection Volume 1, Eighth Printing, New York: Costello Publishing House, 1987, 363. *Kindly note that in this article, all references to Vatican II documents are taken from this work of Flannery.*

¹⁴Richard R. Gaillardetz and Catherine E. Clifford, *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II*, Collegeville (Minnesota): Liturgical Press, 2012, 42.

for the requirements and the advantages of family life arising at the present day. To this end the Christian instinct of the faithful, the right moral conscience of man, and the wisdom and skill of persons versed in the sacred sciences will have much to contribute (GS, 52).

In fact, the second part of GS was entitled “Some More Urgent Problems,” and “The Dignity of Family and Marriage” was the first such ‘urgent problem’ treated in that section (already in mid-1960’s). How ‘the Christian sense of the faithful’ could contribute to solving such an ‘urgent problem’ is further highlighted by Mahoney when he comments on GS 52:

As the Council explained, the Spirit of truth arouses and sustains in all the faithful who have received his anointing a supernatural ‘sense of faith,’ which is not exercised only in matters of dogma and doctrine but also in morals, enabling the People of God as a whole to penetrate the faith more deeply by accurate judgment and apply it more thoroughly to life. That this is not simply conscience as traditionally understood seems clear from the Council’s later teaching, in concluding its treatment of marriage and the family in contemporary society, that a valuable contribution to the solving of modern difficulties in this area can be made by ‘the Christian sense of the faithful and the upright moral conscience of men.’ It appears, then, that at least the Christian has more within him in the way of moral resources than just the conscientious use of reason.¹⁵

As the International Theological Commission correctly points out, when Vatican II strongly emphasized the importance of the sense or the instinct of the faithful in the life of the Church, it banished “the caricature of an active hierarchy and a passive laity, and in particular the notion of a strict separation between the teaching Church (*Ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*Ecclesia discerns*)” (ITC, 4).

2. *Sensus Fidelium* in the Post Vatican II Period

In spite of such eloquent teachings on the concept of *sensus fidelium* by an Ecumenical Council (i.e., the Pope together with the bishops — the highest authority of teaching in the Catholic Church), the post-Vatican II era has not witnessed much progress with regard to this concept. Of course, as fresh as he was with the spirit of the Council, Paul VI makes a passing reference to this when he writes in his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975):

The Bishops’ Synod of 1974, which insisted strongly on the place of the Holy Spirit in evangelization, also expressed the desire that pastors and theologians — and we would also say the faithful marked by the seal of

¹⁵John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 207.

the Spirit by Baptism — should study more thoroughly the nature and manner of the Holy Spirit's action in evangelization today (no. 75).

Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation at the end of the special Synod on the Laity, *Christifidelis Laici* (1988) clearly highlights the importance of lay participation as taught by Vatican II, but it does not speak about the same participation through the concept of *sensus fidelium*, except for a passing vague reference to it in no. 14.

During the post-Vatican II era, though there surely was more lay participation in the consultative bodies of the Church in contrast to the pre-Vatican II times, very rarely does one see the opinions of the laity taken seriously. The need for wider consultation within the Church especially in the writing of the controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) of Paul VI is often cited as a classic example of this:

The painful experience of the reactions to *Humanae Vitae* in the Church as a whole points, rather, to the need for more thorough consideration and broadening of the sources of consultation and co-responsibility in the Church. In the body of episcopal teaching, comprising the encyclical and the resulting episcopal pronouncements which the Pope had invited in its support, it is possible to see a further expression of the Matthaean theology of authoritative teaching which we have already considered, with little reference to the positive functioning of what Vatican II also referred to as 'the Christian sense of the faithful' having a contribution to make to the solution of difficulties of family life. It is true, of course, the Pope referred to the influence of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of the faithful, but the role of the Spirit is seen by him as simply confirming what was being proposed by the papal *magisterium* rather than as making any more positive contribution to the contents of that proposal.¹⁶

Similarly, though there was lay participation in the Synods of Bishops of the post-Vatican II era, one wonders how much of their contributions ever entered into the official teachings pronounced in the form of post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations of the Pope. A careful glance at the propositions voted by each Synod and the contents of the respective final papal Apostolic Exhortations show a clear gap between the two.

Often, the argument put forward in defence of not taking the voice of the laity seriously in the post-Vatican II era is simply to say that the Church is not 'a democracy' or that the majority opinion of the laity is not what *sensus fidelium* really means. While both these assertions are certainly true, one also needs to take into account that the Church is

¹⁶John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 278.

not 'an autocracy' either! According to Vatican II and the post Vatican II magisterial teachings, participation of the laity in ecclesial life is a must, but such participation surely need not be in the fashion of a modern democracy. Similarly, while the majority opinions (even within the Church) need not always reflect what is true, active, sincere listening to such opinions may not be harmful at all whenever the Church is in the process of searching for the authentic contents that are in harmony with what the Spirit of Jesus wishes to teach the believers. The point at stake is neither democracy nor the majority opinion within the Church as such, but rather, providing adequate space for the active participation of the laity through the concrete forms of consulting the laity and the sincere listening to what the laity has got to say. These are morally obligatory if one takes the concept of *sensus fidelium* seriously, especially with regard to the process of official teaching in the Church. Put simply, while it is true that a simplistic equation of laity or public opinion to the rich theological concept of *sensus fidelium* is seriously erroneous, one has to acknowledge that both the laity and the public opinion may at least at times contain some elements of the *sensus fidelium*.

It is in this sense that one has begun to see a sudden glimmer of hope in the distant horizon during the past couple of years, with regard to the active participation of all the baptized, even with regard to the processes of formulating official Church teachings. Ever since his election, Pope Francis has clearly expressed his willingness to follow the conciliar teaching on taking *sensus fidelium* seriously. In his now well-known interview with Antonio Spadaro, the Pope said:

The image of the church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God. This is the definition I often use, and then there is that image from the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (no. 12). Belonging to a people has a strong theological value. In the history of salvation, God has saved a people. There is no full identity without belonging to a people. No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships.

The people itself constitutes a subject. And the church is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. Thinking with the church, therefore, is my way of being a part of this people. And all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this *infallibilitas in credendo*, this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together. This is what I understand today as the 'thinking with the church' of which St Ignatius speaks. When the dialogue among the

people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. So this thinking with the church does not concern theologians only.¹⁷

In his celebrated Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), the Pope while insisting that “the entire People of God proclaims the gospel,”¹⁸ reaffirms his thoughts on the instinct of the whole People of God for the authentic tenets of Christian faith when he writes:

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).

That the Pope does not limit these thoughts to mere words is evident from the fact of his launching of a “new”¹⁹ more participatory process for the two Synods on Family. What is unique in this current Synodal process is its ability to attract the participation of all the members of the Church in her reflections to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying with regard to family in the contemporary world. Following the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, in launching this unprecedented Synodal process, Pope Francis has made sure not only to promote the collegiality of the bishops, but also to get the pulse of the entire People of God, thus, to enhance the traditional theological concept of *sensus fidelium*. Given below are the main elements of what we are referring here to as ‘the Synodal process’:

- The Questionnaire about the Family in the Contemporary World that was sent to all the Episcopal Conferences in October/November 2013 for a feedback from their respective local churches.
- The feedback thus received was collated, and that became the Working Paper (*Instrumentum Laboris*) for the Extraordinary Synod of October 2014.

¹⁷Pope Francis and Father Spadaro, SJ, “Pope Francis’ Interview with Jesuit Magazines,” *Origins*, 43, 19 (10 October 2013) 298-299.

¹⁸Cfr. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 111-134. Henceforth, this will be referred to as EG.

¹⁹In fact, this is a return to the earlier more participatory Synodal system of the Church in the by-gone centuries of the first millennium, and in that sense, it is not ‘new’!

- The celebration of the Extraordinary Synod in October 2014, under the theme “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization.” At the end, the Synod Fathers voted on each and every item of the Official Final Report (*Relatio*).

- The sending of the Official Final Report (*Relatio*) of the Extraordinary Synod back to the local churches for their further reflection and comments. These reflections, comments and recommendations are due to be gathered and collated, and eventually, they will become the Working Paper (*Instrumentum Laboris*) for the forthcoming Ordinary Synod of bishops which is due in October 2015.

- The celebration of the Ordinary Synod in October 2015, under the theme “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World.” Hopefully, at the end, the Synod will once again vote each and every one of its own comments and recommendations that would be handed over to the Pope, as usually is done at the end of a Synod.

- These Synodal comments and recommendations will obviously serve as a basis for the would-be-official teaching of the Church which the Pope hopefully will declare through an Apostolic Exhortation.

3. The Gap between What Is Officially Taught and What Is Practised in the Contemporary Church Reality

In launching the current Synodal process, more than changing doctrine with regard to marriage and family, Pope Francis seems to be preoccupied with getting the whole Church involved together in discerning what the Spirit says with regard to marriage and family in the contemporary world. What he seems to be mainly aiming at is a change of the magisterial teaching process (the method of arriving at official Church teachings), keeping in line with Vatican II’s resurrection of the concept of *sensus fidelium*. A quick glance at the current Synodal process and the Pope’s explicit encouragement to the participant bishops at the last Extraordinary Synod (October 2014) to speak out sincerely and openly even when they had opinions contrary to the Bishop of Rome, are clear signs of this. Unfortunately, quite a number of local Episcopal Conferences did not consult the laity in composing their responses to the original questionnaire that was circulated in October-November 2013. Then, there have also been complaints that even in countries where such consultation took place, the results were not published. Even during this current period between the two Synods which the Pope hoped would be a period of serious reflection of the whole Church on matters to do with family,

very few Episcopal Conferences are reported to have taken the initiative to consult the laity. If such reports are true, then, that is a bad omen for what Pope Francis is aiming at because it shows that quite a number of bishops all over the world are not in favour of such a serious and transparent consultation of the laity. Could this be also interpreted as the latter's ignorance of or lack of faith in *sensus fidelium*? No wonder that the well-known Italian theologian, Archbishop Bruno Forte who was also the Special Secretary of the recent Extraordinary Synod admitted during a press conference held in-between the Synod sessions that the bishops are still learning how to get the voices of all the baptized involved in discussions to do with Christian faith and practice.

At the beginning of this essay, we mentioned the shocking revelation in 'Catholic' Ireland with regard to homosexuality, as expressed in the recent referendum there. Should the Church's teaching authority take this seriously or should it simply dismiss it saying 'public opinion has nothing to do with the truths taught by the Church'? Fortunately, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin has called for a re-thinking of the ways in and through which the Church communicates her beliefs. This is surely a welcome sign in the sense that he seems to take public opinion seriously. But can the same be said of the world-wide episcopate? The common response of the majority of the hierarchy to such situations is expressed by one writer as follows: "So far church officials seemed to presume that the problem is situated almost exclusively at the level of the faithful themselves who are unwilling or unable to follow the moral law in their individual lives and relationships."²⁰ In the contemporary world that is dominated by Individualistic trends such as relativism and hedonism (especially with regard to sexual behaviour), such a presumption is surely justified. But the point is that 'the problem' cannot be limited to a framework of such trends:

What is more striking and alarming is that people no longer regard their deviance as aberration from and infringement of the moral law. The problem is thus no longer the gap between value and action but much more fundamentally the divergence between what Catholics discern as being morally good or bad and what the church teaches to be the moral norm. Although this is not true for every issue — with regard to adultery, rape and incest for instance most Catholics would concur with the moral judgment of the church — it is for central issues such as contraception and marriage that have dominated the debates among Catholics over the past

²⁰Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi, "Lay Perspectives on Marriage and the Family: Introduction to the Colloquium," *INTAMS Review*, 20, 2 (2014) 170.

decades and it undoubtedly will be in the future with regard to same-sex unions. To put it bluntly: while in the past the problem has been one of practice lagging behind the theory, it is for some time now theory itself that is put into question.²¹

The ever-widening gap between what the Church teaches and what her members really believe and put into practice is also evident from other recent surveys conducted in some parts of the world with regard to what the Church teaches officially and what the faithful really believe and practice. For example, Linda Woodhead, professor of sociology of religion at Lancaster University in England published the results of one of her surveys recently. This particular survey which was conducted in Britain between January and June in 2013 had 1,672 Catholics involved in it. Given below are just a couple of extracts from her report:

When it comes to sex, British Catholics take a very positive view. Almost three-quarters say it is important for a fulfilled life, compared to 68 percent of the general population. Only 7 percent of Catholics disagree. On the basis of this and wider observation, it seems that traditional teachings about the value of celibacy have largely been abandoned. Catholics also depart from church teaching when it comes to contraception: only 9 percent say they would feel guilty using it, and 12 percent of weekly churchgoers.

Although pre-marital sex has ceased to be something about which most Catholics would feel guilty (only one in five would), two-thirds say they would feel guilty about extra-marital sex — compared, for example, with 88 percent of Baptists, who are more guilt-prone than other Christians on most of these issues.

Catholics are positive about the institution of the family, yet their views of what constitutes a family are now very broad. Marriage has ceased to be an essential element of the family in most Catholic minds, with only a quarter disapproving of unmarried couples raising children. Almost 90 percent agree that an unmarried couple with children is a family, and that a single-parent household constitutes a family; over half think the same about childless unmarried couples. When it comes to gay and lesbian couples, two-thirds of Catholics believe that a same-sex couple with children constitute a family, and almost half say the same of a same-sex couple without children. Over a third of Catholics disapprove of same-sex couples raising children, a figure that is slightly higher than in the general public.²²

What are we to make out of such surveys? Is the Church to merely float along with such public opinion? Definitely not! The Church has

²¹Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi, "Lay Perspectives on Marriage and the Family...", 170.

²²Linda Woodhead, "What we Really Think," *The Tablet*, 9 November 2013, 12.

to continue to teach what she has received from her Lord and His Apostles. In doing so, if and when necessary, she may also have to swim against all popular contemporary currents, given her cherished prophetic role. There is no doubt about that. However, does the Church's teaching hierarchy not have a moral obligation to speak to her faithful in a language they could understand, within a reality in which they actually live? As Archbishop Martin says, it is precisely here that the Church has to find a new way, a new language, a new idiom, etc. to express and teach her cherished beliefs. This would undoubtedly demand a serious consulting of and a careful listening to the laity, and their lived life situations. Or else, the Church will be teaching in an empty room, so to say; she may be teaching to non-real persons who do not exist in our contemporary real world! Whenever there is a gap between the audience which the hierarchical magisterium presumes to teach and the real people of this world, an indifference to such teachings may inevitably follow. That is why a serious consultation of the lay faithful is necessary as Beattie so clearly states:

While some teachings are rejected because of a lack of faith or distorting cultural influences, sometimes it is because the Magisterium has failed to consult the faithful and to take into account their experiences before making decisions. Ultimately, doctrinal authority rests with the Magisterium, but those in authority must engage in consultation and dialogue with the people of God.²³

Of course, as we ourselves have already insisted above, the *sensus fidelium* cannot be reduced merely to opinion polls, but this fact could not be used as an excuse to ignore public opinion completely, or still worse, not to consult the laity, in the Church's process of discerning and formulating her revealed truth to teach the contemporary believers. Of course, in any teaching process, the hierarchical magisterium ought to have the last word, but the same magisterium cannot be dispensed from its moral obligation to consult the whole Church, including the laity. It is in this sense that the current Synodal process as stipulated by Rome under the leadership of Pope Francis has enormous merits though (as already mentioned above) quite a number of local hierarchies did not follow that process.

Moreover, some of the recent unilateral decisions made by the Roman hierarchical magisterium have also come under serious questioning with regard to dialogue even between Rome and the local Episcopal Conferences, leave alone dialogue between the

²³Tina Beattie, "Let the Laity be Heard," *The Tablet*, 16 August 2014, 9.

teaching authority and the laity. One of the glaring recent examples in this regard is the way the new English translation of the Roman Missal was imposed on the local churches in 2011, after having rejected the English translation that was approved by the English-speaking Episcopal Conferences worldwide.²⁴ Since the Eucharist is “the source and summit of Christian living” (LG, 11), and since laity too are expected to participate in it actively and consciously (SC, 48), the inevitable question that needs to be asked is: did the laity have any say in this translation which is hardly intelligible to a contemporary decent English speaker? The uninterrupted series of articles and letters from the laity, published in various Catholic newspapers and journals are very negative about the unilateral process followed in bringing out this English translation.

Moreover, though the composition of lay participation at the recent Extraordinary Synod in Rome (October 2014) was relatively higher than the previous occasions, one wonders whether it ought not be even higher simply because the Synodal theme was to do with family, something on which the laity ought to have a major say as they live it daily and have direct experience of it. As Rush points out, “*sensus fidelium* [the sense of the faith]... exercises a truth-finding and truth-attesting function that has as its special character that it takes into account the faithful’s experience of the world.”²⁵ Selling, too, draws our attention to the indispensable role that experience plays in our moral behaviour:

Human experience also plays a role in directing moral behaviour because it is necessary to take into account the precise life-situation of the acting person before most decisions could be made. For instance, carrying out certain tasks, such as teaching, offering psychological advice, or practicing medicine presumes, nay demands, that the person has developed competence in these specific fields. If one attempted to do these things without being competent they would be acting in a way that was wrong and unethical.²⁶

Last but not least, in our contemporary world, there is another important reason why the ‘lay perspectives’ need to be taken seriously in the teaching process of the Church. Today, there are lay

²⁴For a succinct account of this, Cfr., Gerald O’Collins, “Open Letter to the English-speaking Bishops” in the section on Letters to the Editor in *The Tablet*, 5th March 2015. See also Michael G. Ryan, “Mission Intelligible,” *The Tablet*, 29th November 2014, 11-12.

²⁵Ormond Rush, *Eyes of Faith*, 2.

²⁶Joseph Selling, “Is Lived Experience a Source of Morality?” *INTAMS Review*, 20, 2 (2014) 219.

people who may have more professional competence (than the clerical hierarchy) on certain matters, and as such, they need to be consulted and their opinions be seriously considered in formulating official Church teachings. In fact, Vatican II had already warned the laity not to depend on the clerical hierarchy for every solution to their day to day problems which inversely is also a hint to the clerical hierarchy not to presume to have all the answers to all the problems:

For guidance and spiritual strength, let them turn to the clergy; but let them realize that their pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer to every problem (even every grave problem) that arises; this is not the role of the clergy: it is rather up to the laymen to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with eager attention to the teaching authority of the Church (GS, 43).

Conclusion

The Church predominantly comprises of the laity. Should they not be listened to, even in exercising the teaching role of the Church which is exclusively reserved in the Catholic tradition to the clerical hierarchy? Of course, *vox populi* is not *vox dei*,²⁷ but as baptized persons, the lay believers, too, ought to be heard because they too are not only the 'temples of the Holy Spirit' but the same Spirit speaks through them, too. Vatican II resurrected concepts like *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium*, precisely to indicate that all the baptized are sealed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit who continues to be active in and through them. Nowhere in the New Testament did Jesus promise his Holy Spirit only to the clerical hierarchy of the Church. If the Church is really serious about hearing and discerning the voice of the Spirit, then, the clerical hierarchy and the laity invariably have to be in constant, sincere, healthy dialogue. When such a dialogue is missing, we end up in extreme positions wherein the Holy Spirit is surely absent. Such extremes emerge when on the one hand, the laity completely ignore the voice of the magisterium, and on the other hand, when the magisterium completely ignore the voice of the laity. Since by definition the Church comprises both of hierarchy and laity, and since the Holy Spirit acts in and through the whole Church (the whole People of God), listening to each other and taking each other seriously are indispensable moral obligations both of the hierarchy and of the laity, if they are sincere about discerning the voice of the Spirit.

²⁷The celebrated saying *vox populi, vox dei* literally amounts to saying "the voice of the people is the voice of God"!