

# CATHOLIC SEXUAL ETHICS, VOICES OF DISSENT, THE ECCLESIAALLY LIMINAL AND THE SYNODAL CHURCH: A CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION

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## Abstract

Some prominent theologians argue that to discern the *sensus fidei* it is sufficient to listen only to committed believers. However, this position is antithetical to Pope Francis' conception of a synodal Church. The pope holds that it is important to listen to each member of the Church in order to discern the *sensus fidei*. This paper investigates Pope Francis' vision, which includes those people who are on the existential periphery since their views on sexual ethics diverge from the official teachings of the Church. The lived experience of Christ's disciples is pivotal to this discernment owing to the centrality of such experience to the *sensus fidelium*. This kind of discernment helps to integrate the believers who hold perspectives on sexual ethics that differ from the official teaching of the Church because of its attention to particular contexts of a problem, instead of providing a universal solution to ethical issues. Apart from the lived experience, due consideration of other sources of theology is inevitable for the accurate discernment of the movement of the Spirit in the faithful.

**Keywords:** Experience; Periphery; *Sensus Fidei*; Sexual Ethics; Synodality; Theological Sources

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## Introduction

Pope Francis conceives synodality principally as promoting listening to the *sensus fidei*, which significantly means a preferential option to attend to the laments and groans of the poor or those on the ecclesial peripheries, or listening to the voice of the Spirit communicating to the Church through the cries of the suffering. This call to listen is a constitutive element in the submission of faith, linked to the baptismal vocation and anointing of the Spirit to listen, accept and respond to God's word.<sup>1</sup> Francis' invitation is congruent with the spirit of Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* 12 refers to the "*sensus fidei totius populi*." If synodal processes wish to consult in the broadest possible manner, then the *sensus fidei* not merely of dedicated believers, but even of the marginalized, the ecclesially liminal, need to be heeded.<sup>2</sup> Like Yves Congar, the Pope knows that the peripheries are the source of several reforms.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Lakeland has demonstrated that for Pope Francis the notion of periphery or margins may refer to geographical, socioeconomic, psychological and existential margins.<sup>4</sup> This paper focuses on those faithful who are part of the Church but are on the existential margin since their perspective on matters such as same-sex marriage, contraception, divorce and remarriage etc., differ from the official teaching of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Voice of the Ecclesially Liminal and the *Sensus Fidelium*

Janet E. Smith's investigation of whether a large number of Catholics that approve of and practice contraception is a manifestation of the *sensus fidelium* has demonstrated that rather than the faithful in general, only a small fraction of the faithful that is authentically faithful to the faith determines accurately the Spirit's

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<sup>1</sup>Bradford Hinze, "Dreams of Synodality, Specters of Constraint," *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020) 303.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Healy, "New Theological Practices for the Contemporary Catholic Church," in *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*, eds. Staf Hellemans & Peter Jonkers, Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018, 201-227.

<sup>3</sup>Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*, Paris: Cerf, 1951, 277.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Lakeland, "Problems at the Periphery: A Productive Confusion in 'The Speech That Got Pope Francis Elected,'" *Changing the Church, Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic and Mark D. Chapman, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 352.

<sup>5</sup>Elise Ann Allen, "German Catholics Want Expanded Lay Roles, Greater Tolerance for Dissent," <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2022/08/german-catholics-want-expanded-lay-roles-greater-tolerance-for-dissent>. Accessed October 12, 2022.

movements in sexual morality.<sup>6</sup> Drawing upon John Henry Newman, she argues that the faithful who will be consulted ought to be free from arrogance, rashness, disputatiousness, and possess the knowledge of their religion, understanding, lack of understanding, and creed which will enable them to provide an explanation of it and have tremendous understanding of history which will help them to safeguard it. The basis of the *sensus fidei* is *phronema* or the twin knowledge of general precepts and lived truth. Drawing upon *Dominum Veritatis* she holds that the opinions of the Catholic community do not equal the *sensus fidelium*. It is only those persons who think like the Church does that possess the *sensus fidei*. In other words, according to her, solely those Catholics who comprehend the teaching of the Church are dependable interpreters of faith. Such people ought to be in love with Christ and Church, committed to the sacraments and other pieties and to being taught by the Church. The possession of *phronema* concerning sex may be hard in a context where having several sexual mates before marriage is the norm and where there is widespread practice of divorce. The *fideles* ought to possess certain knowledge or experience concerning true sexuality which is in conformity with natural law. According to her, there exist within the Church a tiny portion who possess the knowledge of and practice their faith, who know of the sexual reality that involves fornication and contraception and of the sexual fact that would limit the sexual act to marriage and takes the procreative potential of the sexual activity as a defining characteristic of the act. They emphasize the Church's wisdom concerning sexual morality.<sup>7</sup>

Certain elements of Smith's perspective are representative of the traditionalist stand on *sensus fidei*. As Jason Summersell has rightly exhibited, the traditionalists believe that only those persons who are deeply sunk in the instructions of the Church can be regarded as part of the community, that is, only the faithful or ethical can claim to have the experience of *sensus fidei*; and such intuitions may never contradict the magisterial position.<sup>8</sup>

This approach to *sensus fidelium* is antithetical to the idea of a synodal church championed by the current papacy. According to Pope Francis, the readiness to listen to the perspectives opposed to one's perspectives is important in order to understand the Spirit

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<sup>6</sup>Janet E. Smith, "The *Sensus Fidelium* and *Humanae Vitae*," *Angelicum* 83, 2 (2006) 273.

<sup>7</sup>Smith, "The *Sensus Fidelium* and *Humanae Vitae*," 280f, 284f, 288, 297.

<sup>8</sup>Jason Summersell, "Wade Rowland's Morality by Design Reflects the Religious Renaissance in Philosophy; and 'It's Pretty Toxic' for Women and LGBTQ," *Journal of Critical Realism* 19 (2020) 100.

speaking through the existential peripheries. The image of the polyhedron which the Pope employs in *Evangelii Gaudium* is helpful. He differentiates two possible paradigms to comprehend the relationship of the whole and part. The first is a sphere “which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them.”<sup>9</sup> He does not accept this paradigm. He prefers the polyhedron which shows the convergence of all elements while conserving their respective distinctiveness. About listening to the *sensus fidelium*, he derives two conclusions from this paradigm of the polyhedron: the significance of hearing each one in the church and the salience of distinctness for the wellbeing of the church.<sup>10</sup>

Pope Francis’ conceptualization of conflict is closely tied to the concept of the polyhedron. He considers conflict a necessary element in synodal life and that it is not to be overcome via denial, detestation or avoidance. Conflict needs to be accepted as an opportunity for the educational and sanctifying property of God’s grace, given to advance recognition of dignity and rights of humans and the gifts of all areas of the Church, and the universe, in life’s pilgrimage, which takes one to a better comprehension of self and collective life.<sup>11</sup> Hence he says that no one is futile in the church. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he underscores that even persons that can be regarded dodgy because of their faults possess something to offer which should not be neglected.<sup>12</sup> Here his focus is attention to the entirety. The Gospel possesses an inherent notion of wholeness. Regarding diversity, his focus is on attention to the parts. If “the whole is greater than the part, [which] is also greater than the sum of its parts,”<sup>13</sup> “there is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions. We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all.”<sup>14</sup> But this has to be done without evasion or eradication.<sup>15</sup> Francis here envisions a church that attempts to prophetically hear all divergent voices in a discernment of God’s will for the contemporary times.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*, Maryland: The Word Among Us Press, 2013, no. 236.

<sup>10</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 236, 324.

<sup>11</sup>Hinze, “Dreams of Synodality, Specters of Constraint,” 301f.

<sup>12</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 236f.

<sup>13</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 234.

<sup>14</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 235.

<sup>15</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 235.

<sup>16</sup>Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, 2 (2017) 324.

The need to focus on the existential peripheries is also discernible in the Pope's discussions on the *sensus fidei*. This is discernible most importantly in his explications of the pedagogical implications of the *sensus fidei*. Francis underscores that the intuition of God's people in today's contexts concerning faith and morals ought to be the principal focus in the process of the hierarchy's teaching, not merely while it is stating to do so with infallibility, but at every dimension of its practice of teaching authority.<sup>17</sup> In his address on the anniversary of the synod of bishops he says that although the consultation of the *sensus fidei* is inadequate to understand the *sensus fidei*, it would be impossible to speak about somebody without engaging them.<sup>18</sup> Simply at the pedagogical realm bishops ought to heed the *sensus fidelium* for the effective and credible transmission of the gospel message within the changing cultural and social contexts.<sup>19</sup> On the eve of the 2014 synod he stated that to know the Lord's demands today, one must listen to our contemporary debates and understand the 'fragrance' of today's people in order to be imbued with their joys, hopes, sorrows and worries.<sup>20</sup>

Sandra Arenas has provided a theological explanation for the centrality of listening to the cries of the poor in a synodal Church. She has shown that the inclusion of the faithful is attained via the recognition and normalization of the subjectivity of every person within the framework of the entirety of individuals that comprise God's people. Hence nobody can be excluded from the invitation to participate; this leads to the understanding of synodality to proceed to an ecclesio genesis that impacts the entire mode of being and functioning in the Church. The acceptance of the normative character of subjectivities and their inclusion into the decision-making processes is needed. The interaction between various subjectivities from the bottom up makes possible an ecclesio genesis between the centre and the margins which achieves the norm: what impacts all must be treated and approved by everyone.<sup>21</sup> It is not difficult to find

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<sup>17</sup>Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid," 311.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis: Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Vatican City, October 17, 2015," [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papafrancesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papafrancesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html). Accessed October 15, 2022.

<sup>19</sup>Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid," 320.

<sup>20</sup>Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Meeting on the Family," [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141004\\_incontro-per-la-famiglia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_incontro-per-la-famiglia.html). Accessed October 15, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Sandra Arenas, "Ecclesial Extroversion: On the Reform in the Current Pontificate," in *Changing the Church, Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious*

here the correlation of the inclusion of existential peripheries with doctrinal pluralism and flexibility and recognition of the subjectivity of each faithful in the Church.

It is for the inclusion of the existential peripheries that he emphasizes the necessity for doctrinal pluralism and flexibility. Divergent streams of reflection in philosophy, theology and pastoral practice, if receptive to reconciliation by the Spirit in reverence and affection, can empower the Church to progress, as they all aid to manifest more explicitly the great riches of God's message. For those who yearn for a monolithic body of doctrine safeguarded by everyone and with no scope for nuance, this may seem to be undesirable and producing confusion.<sup>22</sup> Therefore he prefers "a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."<sup>23</sup> He prefers such an inclusive Church over a self-referential Church. Through his stern denouncements of the self-referential Church, he manifestly emphasizes the need to be inclusive of the existential peripheries in the Church.

Therefore in *Evangelii Gaudium* he cautions the faithful that the Church will become merely an ecclesial structure inclined towards self-preservation<sup>24</sup> if it becomes a tollhouse and fails to be a house with room for everyone; when there is preoccupation with the disconnected transference a profusion of doctrines; when there is no updating of language in the transference of the doctrines of the faith and a rigid doctrine is upheld without nuances; the diminishing of Catholicism to a list of sins and faults; the confinement of the Church and its retreat into its own security and choice of rigidity and defensiveness; the failure to opt for the poor and positioning itself at the centre and not at the peripheries; lack of collective discernment to reconsider ecclesial norms which are insignificant today.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, although Pope Francis' general theoretical stance on synodality implies the need for inclusiveness of even the existential peripheries, in practice he accepts or at least allows the accepted positions of the Church to be championed. While he has drifted from

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*Dialogue*, eds. Vladimir Latinovic and Mark D. Chapman, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 321.

<sup>22</sup>Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015, 40.

<sup>23</sup>Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 49.

<sup>24</sup>Arenas, "Ecclesial Extroversion," 317.

<sup>25</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 35, 39, 40, 45, 47, 197.

the policy of condemning the dissenter and has admitted how hierarchy has erred, the official position of the Church on sexual ethics still hinges on a theology of denouncement. His frontal contestation of gender theory shows both grave ignorance of its nuances and the desertion of the posture of dialogue focused on the encounter with the other, at whatever existential margin. Pope Francis holds that the gender theory is antagonistic to the order of creation. Hence, though he has shown great pastoral sensitivity to the LGBTQ community, his sensitivity appears to not reach the movements that contest gender identity. One could find here either the restraints of Francis' exposure<sup>26</sup> to those who advance this specific intellectual current or perhaps simply the absolute failure of the Church throughout its history to have dialogue with those people who are unable to accept the outcomes of the Church's "natural law" bioethics.

For the synodal processes to have a reformatory effect on ecclesial teaching and practice, hearing divergent voices and endeavouring to understand them, instead of condemning them, will be of vital importance. Engagement with a plethora of viewpoints and voices will be an admission that "the *sensus fidelium* is significant to the development of doctrine."<sup>27</sup>

## 2. The Salience of Human Experience to the Ethical Evaluation of Sexual Acts

As the foregoing discussion has shown, synodal participation of the faithful whose perspective on sexual morality diverges from the official teaching of the Church still remains a contentious issue. Examples from the past of cases of usury,<sup>28</sup> slavery,<sup>29</sup> etc., show that

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<sup>26</sup>Lakeland, "Problems at the Periphery," 355.

<sup>27</sup>Brian N. Massingale, "Beyond 'Who Am I to Judge?' The *Sensus Fidelium*, LGBT Experience, and Truth-Telling in the Church," in *Learning from All the Faithful. A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, eds. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan, Pickwick/Wipf and Stock: Oregon, 2016, Ch. 12.

<sup>28</sup>For nearly four centuries from 1150 lending with a profiteering motive was regarded as the mortal sin of usury because it was believed to be contrary to the natural law and law of the gospel. The condemnation of usury was firmly established via three ecumenical councils and defended unanimously by theologians. This conception was replaced by the understanding that the lender rather than the loan and the opportunities for investment the lender lost by loaning needs to be the locus of evaluation. This renewed understanding resulted from a re-evaluation and re-examination of the lived experience and testimony of committed Christians who were lenders and believed that lending money for profit was congruent with Christian theology. Cf. John T. Noonan, "Development in Moral Doctrine," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 666.

<sup>29</sup>Until 1860 the Church taught that it was not unethical to have ownership over another human being or to exercise property rights over another person. Practice of

in none of these instances the hierarchy or the moral theologians were taking the lead.<sup>30</sup> While secular philosophers like Baron de Montesquieu and non-Catholic theologians spearheaded the fight against slavery in the English-speaking regions, the French Revolution brought about its eradication in the French empire. It was only after the legal system of all civilized nations abolished the practice that the Catholic Church condemned slavery as a sin. Until 1860 it was held that slavery was not incompatible with Christian theology. Later it was abolished following the teaching of the Scripture that in Jesus there exists “neither free nor slave” (Gal 3:28).<sup>31</sup>

The magisterial teaching and Catholic theology were catching up with what had already been established in the social context wherein believers lived and practiced their following of Jesus or with the *sensus fidelium* and practice of the faithful in a modernizing era.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the lived experience or the conscious understanding of internal or external experience via senses and mind is the centre of the *sensus fidelium*. The *sensus fidelium*, therefore, signifies a structure of beliefs, viewpoints, affective attractions and behavioural inclinations regarded as valid since it is attested to by God’s Spirit as a need and mode of following Christ.<sup>33</sup>

If as the Second Vatican Council explicitly indicates, the body of the faithful in entirety cannot be erroneous about issues of belief, then they must possess infallibility in beliefs that they in fact believe.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas explicated this idea in scholastic terms by showing that the faithful exhibit natural inclination in faith to cling to what they believe is in congruence with the authentic meaning of the divine word.<sup>35</sup> Robert Bellarmine gave his more explicit view that that which all the faithful maintain as a matter of faith is undoubtedly true and belongs to faith.<sup>36</sup> Hence, a common, genuine and universal

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slavery was endorsed by the apostles, Popes and theologians; there were Popes who owned slaves and theologians who defended the practice of slavery. In Catholic jurisprudence slavery was taught to be an institution of the *jus gentius* (law of the nations). Cf. Noonan, “Development in Moral Doctrine,” 665.

<sup>30</sup>Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, “Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage: A Practical Theological Examination,” *Theological Studies* 78, 2 (2017) 330.

<sup>31</sup>Noonan, “Development,” 666, 669, 675f.

<sup>32</sup>Lawler and Salzman, “Catholic Doctrine,” 330.

<sup>33</sup>Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, “Experience and Moral Theology: Reflections on *Humanae Vitae* Forty Years Later,” *Intams Review* 14 (2008) 164.

<sup>34</sup>Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward A Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008, 232.

<sup>35</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, New York: Aquinas Institute, 2012, 2a-2ae 2, 3, ad 2.

<sup>36</sup>Avery Dulles, “*Sensus Fidelium*,” in *America* (November 1, 1986), 240.



*sensus fidelium* is constructed through open dialogue, unforced evaluations of conscience and free consensus.

### 3. Dialogue Between Theological Sources: The Authentic Source of Truth on Sexual Ethics

Experience, which is only participation in a particular phenomenon, is not the key to discernment; but experience understood with the aid of the other sources, viz. scripture, tradition, and reason.<sup>37</sup> Discernment is vital for this specific task of communicating from the concrete faith situation of the Church what such experience shows in order to transmit traditional doctrine coming from the past and also to assess it for theological meaningfulness in contemporary experience and to transmit it, changed or unchanged, as necessitated by critical theological evaluation, to shape future theological and ecclesial experience.<sup>38</sup>

The contemporary revisionist views on same-sex relations that contest the traditional understanding of the Catholic Church on same-sex relations substantiate this argument. The Catholic Church's conceptualizations of homosexuality are based on the anthropology structured by the gender complementarity expounded by Pope John Paul II and concludes with the condemnation of homosexual acts as gravely sinful because it contradicts this complementarity. Central to this teaching is the Pope's contention that his version of gender complementarity is emphasized via Bible and tradition.<sup>39</sup>

Contemporary theologians, however, generally agree that the six clobber passages on same-sex relations in the Bible all point to sexual manipulation, abuse and idolatry rather than to consenting, loving homosexual behaviour. These passages are reflective of the sort of condemnation of immorality integral to a Jewish evaluation of contemporary culture. Forced and manipulative sexual acts were characteristic of Paul's world.<sup>40</sup> The most famous New Testament reference in Romans 1 to same-sex relation points to its association

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<sup>37</sup>Salzman and Lawler, "Experience and Moral Theology," 158.

<sup>38</sup>Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, "Human Experience and Catholic Moral Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76 (2011): 21.

<sup>39</sup>Craig Ford, "Engaging Homosexuality and Transgender Identity Through an African-American Catholic Lens," <https://catholicethics.com/forum/engaging-homosexuality-and-transgender-identity/>. Accessed December 13, 2022.

<sup>40</sup>Harold W. Attridge, "New Testament Passages on Same-Sex Relations Must Be Read in Context," <https://outreach.faith/2022/10/harold-w-attridge-new-testament-passages-on-same-sex-relations-must-be-read-in-context/>. Accessed December 13, 2022.

with the idolatrous practice in the Roman culture.<sup>41</sup> Paul's use of "contrary to nature" in this passage is exactly the same explanation he employs in 11:24 of the same epistle. Here an act that contradicts nature creates being in a proper relationship with the Lord. The condemnation in the Pastoral Letter attributed to Paul, 1 Timothy 1:10 likewise points to forced, commercial transactions for sexual pleasure rather than to consensual same-sex relations.<sup>42</sup>

The foregoing discussion exhibits how salient it is to investigate narrative context of specific texts. It is good to look at the Greek and Hebrew Bible to view the texts as historical documents and determine what they meant when they were written.<sup>43</sup> The observation of the American Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann in distinguishing the Gospel from the Bible is significant here. He holds that the identification of the Gospel with the Bible is to be avoided. The former is the good news of God's love, mercy and justice while the latter has all kinds of voices antithetical to the Gospel. The passages that contravene the good news are to be viewed as beyond the influence of gospel attentiveness.<sup>44</sup>

The above discussion makes it amply clear that the confinement of the *sensus fidelium* to a stringent conservative perspective is, from a theological standpoint, arguing that God or His Spirit has no role to play. It is also worthwhile examining how to determine the sense of the faith of the faithful against a background of divergent understandings on sexual ethics. *Sensus fidelium* cannot be equated with public opinion; the truth rather than the majority opinion ought to prevail.<sup>45</sup>

Conor M Kelly, in his exposition of the role of moral theologians in forming an authentic culture of discernment in the Church, considers a discernment process that is in dialogue with the four sources of moral truth as the most generous response one gives to God from the

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<sup>41</sup>Brandon J. Robertson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: A Christian Case for LGBT+ Inclusion in the Church*, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019, 19-25.

<sup>42</sup>Amy-Jill Levine, "How to Read the Bible's 'Clobber Passages' on Homosexuality," <https://outreach.faith/2022/09/amy-jill-levine-how-to-read-the-bibles-clobber-passages-on-homosexuality/>. Accessed December 13, 2022.

<sup>43</sup>Levine, "How to Read the Bible's 'Clobber Passages' on Homosexuality."

<sup>44</sup>Walter Brueggemann, "How to Read the Bible on Homosexuality," <https://outreach.faith/2022/09/walter-brueggemann-how-to-read-the-bible-on-homosexuality/>. Accessed December 13, 2022.

<sup>45</sup>Pope John Paul II, "Address of to the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Region of Pennsylvania and New Jersey (U.S.A.) on their 'Ad Limina' Visit," [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/september/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20040911\\_ad-limina-usa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040911_ad-limina-usa.html). Accessed October 15, 2022.

perspective of one's current context. The focus here is on enabling the faithful to traverse the possibility of doubt, presuming the incertitude in the ethical life so as to enable them to make ethical choices confidently.<sup>46</sup> The aspect of discernment becomes all the more significant because, as acknowledged by the International Theological Commission itself, the majority of the faithful can show indifference or reject specific doctrinal or moral precepts, but they need not always be to blame. In certain instances, it may show that some decisions of the hierarchy were made without adequate regard for the experience and the sense of the faith of the faithful or insufficient consultation of the faithful by the hierarchy.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the painful matter is how to discern the *sensus fidei/fidelium*.

In *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis underscores that while the general rules that set forth a good which can never be ignored or overlooked, in their articulation they cannot offer solutions for all specific contexts. Hence the Pope advocates a process of discernment in the instance of the integration of the divorced and remarried into the ecclesial life indicating that the Catholic life is not determined by absolutist rules, but is incarnated greatly in shades of grey.<sup>48</sup> The same principle also would be applicable in the case of all those committed believers whose perspectives on sexual morality diverge from the official position of the Church.

## Conclusion

This paper examined whether voices of those persons whose perspective on sexual ethics diverge from the official Catholic teaching are significant to the discernment of the *sensus fidei* in a synodal Church. Some prominent theologians hold that the Spirit communicates only with the committed believers. However, this view is incongruent with Pope Francis' theology of the synodal church. According to him, a synodal Church essentially means listening to the *sensus fidei* which principally means listening to the cries of the poor including those on the existential margins, like those faithful whose perspective on sexual behaviour differs from the official teaching of the Church. The Pope advocates this view because it is important to listen to each member of the Church. The Pope thus

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<sup>46</sup>Conor M. Kelly, "The Role of the Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016) 931.

<sup>47</sup> International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html). Accessed October 15, 2022.

<sup>48</sup>Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love*, Rakeuggm NC: Lulu Press, 2016, no. 304f.

recognizes the association of the inclusion of people who have divergent views with doctrinal pluralism and the subjectivity of all the faithful in the Church. A Church that fails to be inclusive in this manner ends up being a self-referential Church.

In the discernment of the *sensus fidelium* moral theologians recommend an open dialogue between the lived experience of the faithful and the other sources of theology, viz. scripture, tradition and reason. The lived experience of the believers plays a crucial role in this discernment since such experience through senses and mind is the crux of the *sensus fidelium*. The followers of Christ exhibit an inherent proclivity to adhere to what they consider to be in agreement with the real meaning of God's word. The discernment that involves the lived experience of the committed believers facilitates the integration of the faithful Christians whose perspectives on sexual ethics differ from the doctrinal teaching of the Church because of its focus on specific contexts of a problem rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution to the moral issues. Dialogue with the other sources in discernment enables one to accurately determine the movement of the Spirit in the faithful.

Discernment is crucial to the doctrinal formulation in the Catholic Church because of the dynamic nature of Catholic doctrine; the Christian awareness of the salvific plan becomes more full and closer to life in human hearts via the action of the Spirit in the Church's history.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the success or failure of a common discernment process depends on the receptivity towards complexity and different viewpoints. This involves a capacity to compare each other's perspectives and be receptive to dissenting viewpoints and to grasping a perspective beyond one's own understanding of a subject.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Noonan, "Development," 672.

<sup>50</sup>Anne Vandenhoeck, "Homosexuality, Crisis and Communal Discernment: A Reflection on the Catholic Church's Crisis-Inducing Attitude on Homosexuality," *Louvain Studies* 45 (2022) 93f.