

CURRENT SYNODAL PROCESS: AN EFFORT TO PROMOTE AN ECCLESIAL CULTURE OF SERIOUS LISTENING TO THE *SENSUS FIDEI*

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Abstract

According to the cherished Christian belief, when a person is baptized, the Holy Spirit not only anoints him/her, but begins to dwell in him/her. Because of this indwelling of the Spirit, the baptized as persons and as a whole are kept from falling into error with regard to matters to do with faith and morals, by the same Spirit. This supernatural instinct, known as *sensus fidei* is the characteristic of the fact that it is the Holy Spirit who guards and guides the Church as a community of believers. Although *sensus fidei* is affirmed and reaffirmed by Church authorities, especially after Vatican-II, in practice it has not been taken that seriously in ecclesial life, till the election of

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Pope Francis in 2013. His launching of the current synodal process in the worldwide Church has re-awakened this theological concept. Since the main aim of this process is to inculcate a culture of consulting and active listening in all spheres of Church life, it is hoped that eventually *sensus fidei* will be allotted its due place. This article is an effort not only to describe what this concept would imply (if taken seriously) in ecclesial life, but also to highlight a few obstacles one faces in putting it into practice in the contemporary ecclesial life.

Key Words: Baptism, *sensus fidei* (SF), synodal process, Holy Spirit, active listening, consultation, decision-making and decision-taking, clericalism.

Introduction

One of the main aims of the current synodal process, which was officially inaugurated by Pope Francis in October 2021 is to promote a synodality as a way of life in all spheres of ecclesial life. A necessary corollary of this is the promotion of a culture of listening in the Church, i.e., listening to each and every baptized person by each and every baptized person. In short, it is to harness what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today, through the forgotten or overlooked concept of *sensus fidei* (SF). Although this theological concept is not new to the Christian ethos, it has been somewhat dormant in the Church during the past, and the current synodal process has re-awakened interest and enthusiasm for the need to promote it. In this article, we intend to first discuss briefly what the concept of SF means, and then, to highlight how it ought to impact ecclesial decisions, in the form of decision-making and decision-taking. Thereafter, we discuss briefly the serious implications this concept has on every sphere of ecclesial life, and finally, we enumerate a few practical difficulties or challenges one faces in creating an ecclesial culture of listening based on SF.

What is *sensus fidei*?

It is the supernatural 'sense of the faith' or the 'instinct for the faith' of the believers, thanks mainly to their baptism through which the Holy Spirit anoints them and dwells in each of them, and also when they are in communion with each other. Thus, it refers to the faith of ordinary believers both subjectively (*sensus fidei fidelis*) **and** as a community of believers (*sensus fidei fidelium*). At times, this supernatural instinct for faith cannot be expressed in mere words but in and through various other human endeavours. For example, even today, when we visit the ancient magnificent Gothic Cathedrals that

are found in almost all the important western European cities (and at other similar historically renowned Christian places of worship), the popular art we find in them still screams out with this fundamental sense of the faith that had been present in the ordinary believers in those by-gone centuries. Thus, much before the cherished Catholic dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary were officially accepted and defined in words, these ancient artistic works have borne witness to such fundamental tenets of faith, thanks mainly to the supernatural instinct for the faith or SF present in all the baptized.

The current synodal process has resurrected this concept and brought to light again the extreme importance of listening to the SF in ecclesial life: “By means of the *sensus fidei*, the faithful are able not only to recognise what is in accordance with the Gospel and to reject what is contrary to it, but also to sense what Pope Francis has called ‘new ways for the journey’ in faith of the whole pilgrim people.”¹ It was precisely this that led the Catholic theologians in the 20th century (such as Yves Congar) to delve into the doctrine of SFF, and conclude that “‘the Church’ is not identical with her pastors: that the whole Church, by the action of the Holy Spirit, is the subject or ‘organ’ of Tradition; and that lay people have an active role in the transmission of the apostolic faith.”² It was these theologians who bridged the earlier gap between *Ecclesia docens* and *Ecclesia discerns*, and Congar could even write: “The Church loving and believing, that is, the body of the faithful, is infallible in the living possession of the faith, not in a particular act of judgment.”³ Inspired by these traditional theological currents, Vatican-II, while speaking about the People of God, namely, all the baptized, referred to this supernatural sense or intuition when it taught:

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.⁴

¹ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014, No:127. Also available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html (accessed on 10th August 2024). Henceforth, this document will be referred to as ITC.

² Cf., ITC, No:41.

³ Yves Congar, as cited by ITC, No:43.

⁴ Cf., *Lumen Gentium* (1964), No:12.

Commenting on SF in this text, Sullivan wrote:

It describes it as ‘supernatural,’ and says that it is ‘aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth.’ In other words, it is a gift of grace, given by the Holy Spirit. It is related to the fundamental grace-gift of faith...it ‘characterizes the People of God as a whole.’ In other words, it is not one of the charisms which the Spirit distributes to whom He chooses, which some receive and others do not, it is a gift of the Spirit which all receive.⁵

Much later, in one of his discourses at his Wednesday Audience (7th July 2010) the theologian Pope Benedict XVI illuminated it further when he said:

In this regard I would like to highlight a fact that I consider relevant. Concerning the teaching on the Immaculate Conception, important theologians like Duns Scotus enriched what the People of God already spontaneously believed about the Blessed Virgin and expressed in acts of devotion, in the arts and in Christian life in general with the specific contribution of their thought. Thus faith both in the Immaculate Conception and in the bodily Assumption of the Virgin was already present in the People of God, while theology had not yet found the key to interpreting it in the totality of the doctrine of the faith. The People of God therefore precede theologians and this is all thanks to that supernatural SF, namely, that capacity infused by the Holy Spirit that qualifies us to embrace the reality of the faith with humility of heart and mind. In this sense, the People of God is the “teacher that goes first” and must then be more deeply examined and intellectually accepted by theology. May theologians always be ready to listen to this source of faith and retain the humility and simplicity of children! ⁶

In his turn, Pope Francis describes SF as follows:

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

⁵ Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, 21. See also 186-189.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, “Discourse on John Duns Scotus” at the Wednesday General Audience at the Paul VI Hall, on 7th July 2010, available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100707.html (accessed on 18th June 2024).

grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.⁷

Moreover, dispelling any strict isolation of the hierarchical magisterium and the rest of the People of God (which unfortunately still prevails in many an ecclesial ambient), Francis says: “The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and *Ecclesia discerns*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”⁸ The Pope went on to state:

A synodal Church which listens, which realises that listening ‘is more than simply hearing’. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn.14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev.2:7).⁹

According to the special study made by the International Theological Commission (ITC), “the faithful have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognise and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false. That supernatural instinct, intrinsically linked to the gift of faith received in the communion of the Church, is called the *sensus fidei*, and it enables Christians to fulfil their prophetic calling.”¹⁰ The ITC further stated that in their study, they used “the term *sensus fidei fidelis*, to refer to the personal aptitude of the believer to make an accurate discernment in matters of faith, and *sensus fidei fidelium* to refer to the Church’s own instinct for faith. According to the context, *sensus fidei* refers to either the former or the latter, and in the latter case, the term *sensus fidelium*, is also used.”¹¹

Moreover, the belief in *sensus fidei fidelium* is shared by almost all the mainline non-Catholic Christian denominations, too. For example,

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), No:119. Henceforth, this document will be referred to as EG.

⁸ The Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17th October 2015 available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (accessed on 31st July 2024).

⁹ The Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops.

¹⁰ ITC, No:2.

¹¹ ITC, No:3.

a joint declaration of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) says:

Anglicans and Catholics also recognize that the faithful People of God, thanks to their baptism, share an instinct for the faith (*sensus fidei fidelium*), the spiritual gift of discernment of the truth (see *Gift 29-30*; also *SFLC*). The sense of faith grows through a life of strong charity and regular religious practice, each of which promotes communion between the faithful and God, who is love. One who loves Love and welcomes Love has a symbolic relationship with God and, thereby, a sense of who God is, what God expects of us, and the kind of happiness Christ promises. Therefore, the sense of the faith means that the authentic transmission of the faith is not only the preserve of *the* magisterium and theologians, but also of saintly parents and holy men, women and children who know God ‘form within’ and have a sense of what conforms to God’s designs for human beatitude. The further implication is that the Church’s indefectibility, as well as the experience of disagreement in the Church, demands structures which will facilitate the fullest possible sharing of the experience of Christ and of the gifts of the Spirit among the baptized. Through prayer, debate, discussion, and study, the Church at every level seeks consensus with the assistance of the Spirit, even if variously formulated. This process of discernment of the mind of Christ can take time. It is this task of discovering which ‘calls for continuing discernment, constant repentance and renewing of the mind (Romans 12)’ (*LiC 29*).¹²

Last but not least, the recent first Assembly of the Synod on Synodality highlighted the link between the synodal process and SF when it said:

As a matter of fact, before any distinction of ecclesial charisms and ministries bestowed on the faithful, “we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Therefore, among all the baptized, there is a genuine equality of dignity and a common responsibility for mission, according to the vocation of each. By the anointing of the Spirit, who “teaches all things” (1 Jn.2:27), believers possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, the *sensus fidei*. This consists in a certain connaturality with divine realities and the aptitude to grasp what conforms to the truth of faith intuitively. Synodal processes enhance this gift. This process provides

¹² *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal*, An Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III), London: SPCK, 2018, No:54, 25-26. This document is available also at <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/344839/walking-together-on-the-way-spck-2018.pdf> (accessed on 20th June 2024).

a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the Apostolic faith.¹³

Decision-Making and Decision-Taking

In view of what we have said so far, the concept of SF should be at the base of any and every decision-making process in ecclesial life if we are serious about the role played by the Holy Spirit in ecclesial life. The underlying implication is that it is the Holy Spirit who ought to run the affairs of the Church as so clearly portrayed in the early Christian communities immediately after the ascension of Jesus – eg., Acts of the Apostles. The hierarchical leaders of the Church only give visibility to the Spirit's Words and actions, and this is fundamental Catholic theology. If so, as already mentioned above, it is indispensable that the decisions in the Church need to be participatory involving all the baptized through whom the Spirit is at work in various ways and in various degrees. Of course, in no way does this mean that all the baptized have the same role to play in arriving at the decisions of the Church.

It is in this regard that the sociological distinction that came to the fore in the 1980's would be of use for our purposes here. Accordingly, there is not only a subtle distinction but also an intrinsic connection between decision-making, and decision-taking in any sociologically healthy human group. Decision-making which precedes decision-taking, is a process that unfolds in time. But the eventual decision-taking is done in an instant. That is to say: “decision *making* is a process and happens over a period of time. It is when the decision is constructed and built (made), i.e., after serious deliberation and discernment, that a serious decision is taken. A decision is *taken* at a moment, in an instance. The decision is taken at the moment the choice is made: the decision is taken from the available options. So, decision-making precedes decisions being taken.”¹⁴

If we were to apply this sociological understanding of decision-making and decision-taking (which are linked to each other), to ecclesial communities, especially in the light of how decisions were arrived at in the early Christian communities and also promoted by the

¹³ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session, “A Synodal Church on Mission,” *Synthesis Report*, No:3 c.

¹⁴ P. Jones, “Decision Making and Decision Taking: they are different” available at <https://www.excitant.co.uk/decision-making-and-decision-taking-they-are-different> (accessed on 22nd August 2023). Italics in the original.

current synodal process, then the long-drawn phases of consultation and listening (and the eventual discernment) would belong to the phase of decision-making. Whenever decisions are to be finally taken (of course, after the due discernment), as for example, during and at the end of the current synodal process, by the legitimate authorities of the Church, i.e., the Pope together with the bishops, that would be the moment when decision-taking takes place.¹⁵ After all, it is they, the Pastors established by God who are to guard, interpret and bear witness to the Apostolic faith.¹⁶ As the ITC has made it very clear:

There is to be no distance or separation between the community and its Pastors - who are called to act in the name of the only Pastor - but a distinction between tasks in the reciprocity of communion. A synod, an assembly, a council cannot take decisions without its legitimate Pastors. The synodal process must take place at the heart of a hierarchically structured community. In a diocese, for example, it is necessary to distinguish between the process of *decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*, which is within the competence of the Bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity. Working things out is a synodal task; decision is a ministerial responsibility.¹⁷

For our purposes in this article, what is to be noted here is the process of consultation and listening (with the due prayerful discernment) that necessarily would lead to the eventual decisions. This is precisely the main purpose of the current synodal process, namely, to inculcate a culture of synodality with consulting and listening, in all rungs of ecclesial life.¹⁸

Of course, as we have been repeatedly hearing during the synodal process, already there are ecclesial structures ably supported by the Code of Canon Law to facilitate such a culture. But how many pastors - bishops and priests - are paying any heed to them? The Parish Pastoral Councils, the Parish Financial Committees, the Diocesan Pastoral Councils, the Diocesan Financial Committees, ...etc. are some of the concrete forms in Canon Law that guarantee at least some

¹⁵ Cf., Vimal Tirimanna, "Listening to the Voice of the Holy Spirit: The Current Synodal Process and a few Implications for Moral Theology," *Studia Moralia*, 61:2 (2023), 257-261.

¹⁶ Cf., *Dei Verbum* (1965), Nos.8-10.

¹⁷ ITC, No:69.

¹⁸ For a clear and down-to-earth application of this sociological understanding to ecclesial life, see Alphonse Borras, "Formal Synodality in Action: Beyond the Gulf Between Consultative and Deliberative," *Concilium* 2 (2021), 84-85.

consultation and listening (process of decision-making). But often, as was clear in the worldwide synodal consultation, quite a number of bishops and priests simply take decisions on their own, unilaterally. The responses to the consultation were unequivocal and direct in saying that in many parts of the Catholic world such consultation and listening had been badly lacking.¹⁹ That is to say that in many dioceses and parishes, not even the bare minimum stipulated by Canon Law in this regard is upheld or respected, and according to this writer's personal worldwide experience, it is precisely such 'pastors' who are quite vociferously opposed to the current synodal process.

A Few Crucially Important Implications of *sensus fidei* for Ecclesial Life

The concept of SF has serious implications for the whole ecclesial life in general, and for parish life, diocesan life, consecrated life, family life, and the life in basic Christian communities, ...etc., in particular. This is because all types of life that claim to be Christian, would possess the supernatural instinct for faith and morals, individually and collectively, thanks to them being anointed by the Holy Spirit at their Baptism. If the Church really believes that it is the Holy Spirit who guards and guides her, then, the Church hierarchical leaders who claim to give visibility to that Spirit, cannot ignore what the same Spirit prompts in and through all the baptized. Rather, it becomes imperative for them to listen and harness the promptings of the Spirit in and through indispensable consultation of those whose pastoral care is entrusted to them.

Consequently, there ought to be a radical shift (or conversion) **from** taking unilateral decisions by the Church leaders (as it happens regularly in many local Churches all over the world today)²⁰ **to** taking participatory/consultative decisions that would ensure that such decisions are not merely human or egoistic, but genuinely prompted by the Holy Spirit. This surely demands a sort of a conversion on the

¹⁹ Some of these responses even said that this was the first time that they were ever consulted about ecclesial matters!

²⁰ As already mentioned, this was more than evident in the responses to the questionnaire that was floated among the baptized at the beginning of the current synodal process. The present writer was one of those twenty chosen experts who read and collated those responses in the process of preparing the Working Document for the Continental Ecclesial Assemblies which preceded the October 2023 Synodal Session.

part of the whole Church, but especially on the part of the hierarchy,²¹ if they really believe in the crucial and vital role which the Holy Spirit continues in ecclesial life as is so evident with regard to the Early Christian communities as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. In arriving at their important decisions, the Apostles made sure to listen to the voice of the Spirit together with the entire community of believers. For example, when choosing Mathias to replace Judas in the College of Apostles (Acts 1), when choosing the first deacons (Acts 7), when commissioning Paul and Barnabas on mission (Acts 13), when resolving the very controversial and divisive issue of circumcision at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the entire community of believers were involved in enabling the Apostles to take the final decisions.

In the contemporary Church which since the second millennium has progressively and radically moved away from this model given in the Acts of the Apostles (and thus, moved away also from the absolute trust in the guiding role of the Holy Spirit in and through the entire community), the challenge and the task for the ecclesial hierarchy today is enormous. They are now called not only to change their set ways of doing things (i.e., in making unilateral decisions when and as they wish) but also to be daring to take risks in treading on to unknown ways of doing things, placing their absolute trust in the Holy Spirit active in the believing communities. As Pope Francis teaches:

In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them.²²

In this regard, Pope Francis is exemplary in his leadership role as the Bishop of Rome. As is well known, ever since he was elected Pope, he has been reluctant to take unilateral decisions using his papal privileges of being Pope (ensured and guaranteed by the Catholic tradition and the Code of Canon Law), as it has been happening in the past. Often, if not always, he prefers to follow the synodal way of consulting and listening to others before taking such decisions. A fine example is his creating of a Council of Cardinals to advise him on important Church matters, especially with regard to various reforms

²¹ Cf., EG, No:32.

²² EG, No: 43.

of the Church. For example, the present writer is well aware that the papal document for reform of the Vatican Curia, *Predicate Evangelium* (2022) had a lot of inputs from this Council of Cardinals, as well as from other theological and Curial experts. His unprecedented use of the teachings of his brother-bishops (in and through the statements of various Episcopal Conferences) spread all over the world is yet another illustration of his practice of listening. Almost all of his official teachings (e.g. Encyclicals and Apostolic Exhortations) are studded with footnotes taken from the worldwide episcopate.

These and other similar words and actions of Francis point to a major shift in the functioning of the papacy, namely, from taking unilateral decisions (even when papal privileges permit it) to inculcating a culture of consulting. At the base of all these are his immense efforts to tap the *sensus fidei* present among all the People of God. By such an example, the Pope apparently intends to instil the same synodal culture into all rungs of ecclesial life. Thus, his primary intention seems to be to make this a way of life (or a culture) in the Church, i.e., of consulting others in order to listen and discern what the Holy Spirit really wishes for the Church. The main motive of the entire synodal process is precisely this. In fact, the two Assemblies of the Synod on Synodality have had no specific theme as such. As it has been consistently stated by Church authorities that, their only aim (or theme) is to initiate a way of consulting, listening and discerning by all the baptized in arriving at ecclesial decisions.²³

It is in this spirit that No:104 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2024 Assembly of the Synod could say:

Moreover, the drafting of canonical norms can also be a place to exercise a synodal style. The generation of rules does not imply merely the exercise of a power endowed by authority but should be considered true ecclesial discernment. Even if it alone enjoys all the prerogatives to legislate, in doing so, the authority could and should act with a synodal method to promulgate a norm that is the fruit of listening in the Spirit to a need for justice.²⁴

As a matter of fact, the Pope's intention to make such consultative listening to the entire community of believers was already manifested in concrete form in the unprecedented consultation of all the baptized

²³ See for example, the *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, Vatican City: Synod of Bishops, 2021, No:1.3.

²⁴ *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session (October 2024), No.104.

in the process that led to the two successive Synods of Bishops on Marriage and Family issues in 2014 and 2015. It was that worldwide ecclesial consultation that was instrumental in preparing the Working Documents for those two Synods. As is now well-known such consultation of all the believers was further widened in the long and tedious synodal processes that led to the two Synodal Assemblies in October 2023 and October 2024. The basic purpose of all these consultations was to listen and discern what exactly the Holy Spirit intends for the Church in the contemporary world, by tapping as much as possible into the SF present in ecclesial life. It is in this sense that for this writer, the synodal process is more important and pedagogical for the Church than what the two Synodal Assemblies would produce in the form of documents or synthesis reports. This was exactly what was experienced by the participants at the recently concluded first Session of the Synod in October 2023.²⁵

Most of the controversies in the contemporary Church could be attributed to a lack of consulting and listening to others in a synodal spirit. In fact, the scandals (not only to do with sexual abuse, but also to do with abuse of authority and finances) now rampant in the Church, especially in the West, can be often attributed to not having had sufficient consulting and sincere listening. Felix Wilfred gives a scintillating example from recent history:

In this connection, let me recall here at least two recent examples. The one is that of Marcial Maciel, the founder of the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ. He took the highest Church authorities for a ride by inducing them to believe, thanks to the triumphal display of wealth, power, and ability to attract “vocations” and build massive institutions, that he and his congregation are Christianizing the world and are in the forefront to defend the Church. The second case is that of the elevation of the prolific fundraiser Theodore McCarrick as archbishop of Washington and then the creation of his as cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. In both cases, there were voices from the bottom trying to unveil the underlying monstrous corruptions and criminality and calling for caution, which were, sadly, disregarded, set aside, and even covered up. Again, I am reminded of the memorable words of Karl Rahner. He observed that

²⁵ For a first-hand account of such synodal experience, see Vimal Tirimanna, “La Mia Esperienza Personale Dell’Assemblea Sinodale,” *Studia Moralia*, 62:1 (2024), 173-176.

experience and tradition tell us that even the highest authority in the Church is not free from error.²⁶

Many years ago, a similar sentiment was expressed by the much-esteemed American theologian *cum* Cardinal of yesteryears, Avery Dulles when he wrote:

The myth of an omniscient magisterium with a “direct wire” to heaven is an illusion based on dark psychological tendencies. Certain pastors and religious teachers foster this illusion by exaggerating the authority of ecclesiastical documents by acting as though conformity with the pope were the essence of religion. Vatican-II, in several of its finest documents, cautioned against such extreme authoritarianism, and sought to emphasize the responsibility of the faithful for forming the mind of the Church. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, for example, declares frankly that the pastors of the Church do not always have solutions to every problem which arises, and acknowledges that, in the complicated and rapidly changing world of our day, the Church needs special help from experts in various sciences in order to “hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word.”²⁷

Thus, consultation and sincere/active listening ought to be made obligatory whenever ecclesial decisions are made, but especially whenever important decisions such as the choice of candidates for Episcopacy are made:

Selection of bishops is another issue in which tradition and theology are open, but canon law does not correspond to them, nor to the contemporary sensitivities. The entire people of God, clergy and laity, were involved in the election of bishops in early Church, up until twelfth century. Within this frame, there was a plurality of modalities in choosing a bishop. Historical facts are well known, and do not need elaboration.²⁸

No wonder, then, that even in the first Session of the Synod in October 2023, there were quite a number of participants who highlighted the indispensable need for employing participatory listening with regard to the choosing of bishops.

²⁶ Felix Wilfred, “Crossing a Millennial Threshold: Church in India on the Synodal Path,” in A. Lawrence, S. C. Fernandes and S. Pinto (Eds.), *Church in India on the Synodal Path: National Conference 21-23 March 2022*, Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2022, 22.

²⁷ Avery R. Dulles, “Conscience and Church Authority,” in William C. Bier (Ed.), *Conscience: Its Freedom and Limitations*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1971, 253-254.

²⁸ Felix Wilfred, *Theology for an Inclusive World*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2019, 252.

Another vital area that would have serious implications of the concept for SF is Ecumenism. If Baptism in the name of the Trinity is one, and if the Baptism of the mainline non-Catholic Christian Churches is recognized and accepted, then, we need to acknowledge not only the anointing of the Holy Spirit in each of those baptized non-Catholic Christians but we also need to recognize the presence of SF in them, too. This could also be a key to theologically broadening the role of the Bishop of Rome, as so earnestly wished by Pope John Paul II:

Saint John Paul II not only reaffirmed this ecumenical path but also officially invited other Christians to reflect on the exercise of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome. In his milestone encyclical letter *Ut unum sint* (1995) he used the biblical notion of ‘*episkopein*’ (‘*keeping watch*’) to describe this ministry (UUs 94), whose primacy is defined as a *ministry of unity* (UUS 89) and a *service of love* (UUS 95). Assuming his particular ecumenical responsibility, and “heeding the request made of [him]”, Pope John Paul II recognized the need “to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” (UUS 95). Convinced that a mutually acceptable *ministry of unity* cannot be defined unilaterally, he extended an open invitation to all pastors and theologians from the different ecclesial traditions, repeating a request already made in 1987 in Saint Peter’s Basilica in the present of the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I.²⁹

Another vital area that would have serious implications of the concept of SF is Ecumenism. Here is a fine illustration of making efforts to enter into ecumenical dialogue and listening for an important ecclesial goal, namely, of the visible Christian Unity under a single visible leadership. It is not without risks and misunderstandings, but it is something worth probing into in response to the Lord’s prayer in John...: “That they may be One.” Pope Francis who says “We have made little progress in this regard” (EG 12), is even more explicit as to how the concept of SF could be used theologically to promote Ecumenism based on the concept of the People of God:

Making synodality a key theme of his pontificate, Pope Francis stresses the importance of a synodality grounded on the *sensus fidei* of the People of God “infallible in *credendo*” (EG 119), which is essential for a renewed understanding and exercise of the Petrine ministry, as he stated in his address for the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops.³⁰

²⁹ Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ur Unum Sint*, Collana Ut Unum Sint/7, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024, 4.

³⁰ *The Bishop of Rome*, 6.

In this regard, already in 1976 (in the aftermath of Vatican-II), the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) wrote: “The primacy accorded to a bishop implies that, after consulting his fellow bishops, he may speak in their name and express their mind” (ARCIC 1976, 20) and “a primate exercises his ministry not in isolation but in collegial association with his brother bishops (*id*, 21).” Thus, once again, we notice that what is at stake is participatory leadership based on SF of the People of God.

Some Practical Difficulties/Challenges with regard to the Role of *sensus fidei* in the Church

In spite of the current enthusiasm (especially on the part of the laity) to give the concept of SF its due place in the synodal process at work right now, and eventually, to make it an essential part of the Church’s very being, one cannot overlook the many challenges, especially the practical difficulties that ensue within the Catholic Church as things stand right now. In what follows, we highlight a few of them in succinct form.

- At the practical level, one of the biggest problems in harnessing SF is “the lack of forms, processes and structures”³¹ within the contemporary Church that would facilitate it. The current synodal process, if it succeeds in inculcating a culture of consulting and listening in all rungs of the Church, could be the remedy for this.
- Although (as mentioned above), Vatican-II and the Popes since then, have always upheld the concept of SF, there has also been an official trend to remind consistently that it is not equal to public opinion or the majority opinion,³² often, giving the impression that there is an invariable danger associated with this concept. Consequently, instead of promoting this crucially important concept, the trend has been to acknowledge it theoretically but at the same time wave a red flag as it were, to signal a danger when it

³¹ Cf., Serena Noceti, “Il *sensus fidelium*: Una riflessione ecclesiologicala” in Alessandro Rovello (a cura di), *La Morale Ecclesiale tra Sensus Fidelium e Magistero*, Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2016, 57.

³² See for example, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis* (1990), No:35, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html (accessed on 29th July 2024).

comes to practice.³³ Equally obstructive in promoting this concept has been the oft-repeated hackneyed statement that the Church is not a democracy!

- Of course, it is extremely important to point out that SF is not the majority or the public opinion, but this has to be done deftly without emptying or draining the richness of this theological concept. Dario Vitali convincingly points out the subtle but important distinction between public opinion and SF:

While the theory of public opinion refers to a shapeless mass of people, where individuals represent only a number in the sum of positions equal to or in any case similar to a certain opinion, in the case of *sensus fidei* it is an ecclesial function of knowledge of faith. In other words, the *sensus fidei* is more than the sum total of many baptized individuals who think the same thing on a given topic: the subject is the *universitas fidelium*, the totality of the faithful who cannot be wrong in believing.³⁴

- Equally important to keep in mind is that *sensus fidei fidelis* does not mean any and every opinion expressed by anyone and everyone simply because he/she is baptized or by any group consisting of the baptized persons. This is because baptism in itself cannot *ipso facto* guarantee the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a person if he/she is not properly disposed.
- Another difficulty is the erroneous equation of *sensus fidei fidelium* only to the laity, as if the clerics do not have it. In reality, all the baptized, including the ordained – the bishops and priests – form the totality of those baptized (the People of God), because before any office or special charism was conferred on the clergy, they were baptized and so they belong to the totality of the believers.
- Moreover, as is well-known, in this world tainted by sin and human weakness, among the baptized, there can be not only the voice of the Holy Spirit but also the voices other than that of His. It is precisely here that serious and prayerful discernment is needed, as we have been experiencing during the whole synodal process. Quite helpful in this regard has been the spiritual conversation method followed throughout this process to tap the authentic voice of the

³³ Cf., Paul Valadier, “Has the Concept of Sensus Fidelium fallen into Desuetude?” in Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (eds.), *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology, Readings in Moral Theolog.* No:18, New York: Paulist Press, 2017, 214-222.

³⁴ Dario Vitali, “*Sensus fidelium e opinione pubblica nella Chiesa*,” *Gregorianum* 82:4 (2001), 704. The translation from Italian to English is mine.

Spirit by enhancing the participation of all in discussions and also in actively listening to all in an atmosphere of prayer. As Keng points out: “It seemed that the Spiritual Conversation, when carried out well, was frequently a profound turning point for participants in groups, fostering a deep listening leading to a synodal conversation from ‘I’ to ‘we’”.³⁵ She goes on to state: “Spiritual Conversation works well when participants enter it with radical openness to the Holy Spirit, surrendering their attachments to certain preferred outcomes if any, and embracing a willingness to listen and learn from others. Such interior freedom is itself a fruit of divine grace. Attentive listening is based upon a theological worldview which acknowledges God’s Spirit present in all creation. In the Church, attentive listening has an added imperative from the principle of the *sensus fidei* of the baptised.”³⁶ As such, it is important to scrutinize as to what type of Christian life the so-called ‘believers’ live for the Holy Spirit to dwell within them. As Cardinal Sarah, speaking at the Catholic University of America in Washington recently is reported to have said: “Just because someone identifies as Catholic does not mean they are Catholic or have the ‘*sensus fidelium*.’”³⁷ As the first session of the Synod on Synodality itself said: “A mature exercise of the *sensus fidei* requires not only reception of Baptism, but a life lived in authentic discipleship that develops the grace of Baptism. This enables us to distinguish the action of the Spirit from merely dominant forms of thinking or cultural conditioning, or from matters inconsistent with the Gospel.”³⁸

- Just as we need to discern seriously and prayerfully whether every baptized person is disposed for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, there is also the reciprocal need to discern carefully and prayerfully whether those in authority in the Church (who are called to take the eventual decisions in a given community) are really disposed to the

³⁵ Christina Kheng, “The Method is the Message: Method of Spiritual Conversation,” in Myriam Wijlens and Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR (eds.), *The People of God have Spoken: Continental Ecclesial Assemblies within the Synod on Synodality*, Dublin: Columba Books, 2023, 24. This article is a must-read for gaining a comprehensive view of what Spiritual Conversation amounts to in theological and concrete terms.

³⁶ Kheng, “The Method is the Message,” 28.

³⁷ Cardinal Robert Sarah as reported in *Our Sunday Visitor*, 14th June 2024, available at <https://www.oursundayvisitor.com/cardinal-sarah-warns-against-practical-atheism-even-within-the-church/>.

³⁸ *Synthesis Report*, No:3 h.

special indwelling of the Holy Spirit in them as leaders, and consequently, whether they are really inspired by Him. The crucial question that arises here is: does the mere fact of being ordained to be a leader in the Church (namely, to be a bishop or a priest), guarantee a special exclusive line of communication with the Holy Spirit? If not, don't they need to listen to the voice of the same Spirit speaking in and through their respective flocks?

- Another oft-repeated objection to the concept of SF has been the argument that ordinary lay persons have no theological training or understanding, say for example, as the clergy have in order to have an intuition for matters of faith and morals (SF). Hence the common tendency to perceive the lay faithful as mere recipients or 'objects' of the teachings by the hierarchy (who alone are rightly perceived as 'subjects' of teaching the revealed truth). In this regard what Tillard has written is useful:

In fact, only a theology centred upon the relation of the Spirit to the body of the Church as a whole makes it possible to pass beyond the dead-end into which one is led by a downward view which pictures the whole ecclesial reality as hanging upon a participation by the "simple faithful" in a knowledge of the Christian mystery which is first communicated to the hierarchy and given in its fullness only to the latter. The Holy Spirit Himself, who gives each believer new life, leads him to a knowledge of the mystery of Christ in a fashion that is meant to benefit the whole body of believers. The whole of the ecclesial body, by a sort of interaction and complementarity of charisms and functions, must "enter into the truth." Indeed, even at the level of the understanding of the content of revelation and of the rendering explicit of certain of its elements, those faithful who have no hierarchical responsibility cannot be seen as simply receiving what is determined by the heads of the Church enlightened by the researches of theologians or other specialists in "educated faith"; the faithful have a specific part to play in this understanding by the whole Church of the truth given in Jesus Christ.³⁹

Moreover, as Cardinal Newman has pointed out, during the Arian heresy when almost all the bishops at the time were adherents of that heresy, it was the ordinary simple lay faithful who held on to the true orthodox Catholic faith, and thus, passed it on to later generations. Newman

³⁹ J.M.R. Tillard, "*Sensus Fidelium*," in Curran and Fullam, *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology*, 33.

attributed this intuition of the laity for the authentic Catholic faith, to the *sensus fidelium*.⁴⁰

- As was evident from the worldwide responses to the questionnaire sent to all the People of God at the start of the current synodal process, clericalism is one of the major challenges to consulting and listening to the voices of the laity who form the vast majority of the baptized. Clericalism can be defined as the strict compartmentalization of the clergy and the laity as two water-tight compartments, and then, considering the former as superior to the latter in any sphere of ecclesial life. One may also describe clericalism as nothing but usurping more authority by the clergy than they legitimately are entitled to among the People of God. Moreover, clericalism not only craves to sustain and perpetuate the artificial divide between the clergy and the laity within the Church, but also to hide any and every wrong doing of the clerics, with “an obsessive concern for secrecy”, by resorting to the slogan “there should be no scandalizing of the lay faithful.”⁴¹ Accordingly, the clergy are often considered as not responsible or answerable to anyone than their clerical superiors. This clericalist throttling of lay voices surely is a hindrance to a culture that promotes SF.
- Closely linked to the above point is the unhealthy clericalist fear of losing control over the running of the Church as they had been now used to for centuries. For example, at the Amazon Synod in 2018, thanks to the consulting and listening processes prompted by the concept of SF, “the periphery arrived at the centre creating instability, fear, reaction and opposition, mainly coming from certain parts of the Roman Curia.”⁴² Similarly, as things have unfolded during the current synodal process itself, clericalism (not only of the Roman Curia) had been one of the main retarding causes of the entire process in some parts of the world. For example, some clerics – priests and bishops – have not even bothered to distribute the original questionnaire of synodality among their respective flocks. According to the observations of the present writer, most of these clerics are the ones who are badly lacking in accountability

⁴⁰ Cf., John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Edited by John Coulson, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1961, 75-101.

⁴¹ Cf., Kevin Seasoltz, “Clericalism: A Sickness in the Church,” in *The Furrow*, 61:3 (March 2010), 136-137.

⁴² Cf., Agenor Brighenti, “The Amazon Synod: Synodality as a Meeting Place for Diversity,” *Concilium* 2 (2021), 52-55.

because they tend to think that since they are clerics, they are not accountable to anyone. Keenan believes that there is a more serious issue behind clericalism, namely, what he calls “hierarchicalism.” It amounts to a gruesome lack of accountability on the part of the bishops.⁴³ For Keenan, this “hierarchicalism and its lack of accountability and ability to act with impunity will be harder to dismantle than clericalism and in fact, will guarantee the survival of clericalism, for the former is the father and promoter of the second”.⁴⁴

- Another challenge is to do with the type of persons the decision-takers would be consulting and listening to. Are they only those whom the hierarchy can trust, or those who follow their way of thinking? What about those who hold views contrary to them? Should they not be consulted and listened to in order to clearly discern the SF of a given local community/Church? Thus, in No:92 of the Working Document for October 2024 Synodal Assembly while speaking of various ecclesial Councils (such as Parish, Diocesan, Deanery, Diocesan or Eparchial), is direct in saying that it is “necessary that the majority of members are not chosen by the authority (parish priest or bishop) but designated in another way, effectively expressing the reality of the community or local Church.”⁴⁵ Here one sees how sufficient space is left for the Holy Spirit to express Himself through SF of the believing community.
- Last but not least, the present writer has been hearing from quite a number of bishops and parish priests (including in his own native country, Sri Lanka and in Western Europe) some cynical, pessimistic or even naïve comments such as: “This entire synodal process is bound to collapse once Pope Francis is out of office,” “Synodality is yet another passing fad,” “Our lay people are not theologically sound to understand concepts like ‘synodality’; what is important right now is to administer sacraments properly and regularly, and ensure their eternal salvation,”...etc. Most of them ought to know what Baigent has written recently:

⁴³ Cf., James F. Keenan, “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism,” in *Asian Horizons*, 14:2 (June 2020), 319-332.

⁴⁴ James F. Keenan, “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism”, 325.

⁴⁵ Cf., *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session (October 2024), No:92, available at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/07/09/240709d.html> (accessed on 31st July 2024).

The Second Vatican Council offered a compelling vision of the Church: the pilgrim people of God bringing the good news of the Gospel to a hurting world. Sixty years later, Catholics are still only beginning to unpack this rich legacy. There is still an urgency for our core mission, yet increasingly this is weighed down with weariness and cynicism.⁴⁶

The current synodal process – with its highlighting of SF, as one of its essential components – is one concrete and realistic way to recover and put into practice the conciliar vision of the Church.

Conclusion

As one of those privileged to participate at every stage of the current synodal process since October 2021, the present writer has been overwhelmed by the voices of those who never had the opportunity to express themselves within the Church, earlier. Those voices though not equal to the rich theological concept of SF, nevertheless, did indicate what the Holy Spirit was telling the Church through the baptized as a whole. Moreover, his personal experience at Frascati, the Asian Continental Meeting and the first session of the Synod (in October 2023) have made this writer experience the powerful working of the Spirit. In fact, the entire synodal process was an attempt to tap the voice of the Spirit, and thus, harness SF ever present among the People of God.⁴⁷ Even during the eleven months between the first session of the Synod on Synodality held in October 2023 and its second session to be held in October 2024, the Synodal Secretariat, true to the spirit of synodality, wished to listen to the Catholic faithful all over the world once again with a few pointed questions. Thus, the responses supplied by various national Episcopal Conferences were discussed extensively and discerned seriously and prayerfully by a group of some twenty experts – bishops, priests, religious and lay persons – in June 2024 in the Vatican. These responses paved the way for the Working Document (*Instrumentum laboris*) for the second session of the Synod on Synodality to be held in October 2024. Commenting on this, the well-known Catholic journalist Austen Ivereigh, writing in the London weekly, the *Tablet*, had this to say:

⁴⁶ Avril Baigent, “A Church for the Third Millennium,” *The Tablet*, 15 June 2024, 4.

⁴⁷ For a detailed account of the entire worldwide process of consulting the People of God at the level of Continental Assemblies, see Wijlens and Tirimanna, *The People of God have Spoken*. For an account of the Asian Continental Ecclesial Assembly, see Vimal Tirimanna, “The Asian Continental Ecclesial Assembly: An Effective Platform to Listen to the Voice of the People of God in Asia,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 87:8 (August 2023), 584-606.

These concrete questions were set out in the synod secretariat's "Towards October 2024" document, which noted how since October 2021 the Church has been on a journey of opening up to the Spirit in mutual encounters that have generated a "desire to share this gift, involving ever more people in this dynamism." This three-year historic synod on synodality, in all its different phases, diocesan, national, regional, universal – has been about learning to exercise an atrophied muscle. It is a culture, a praxis, a way of operating, that belonged to the early Church and is being given new life by Pope Francis in ways appropriate for our times. Rome has asked what we are doing and what we have learned, so that the final assembly can draw lessons in how to deepen the synodal journey. The bishops' conference reports from across the world will be fed into the working document.⁴⁸

The current synodal process is nothing but an effort to revive the ecclesiology proposed by the Second Vatican Council, based on the concept of the Church as the People of God who are anointed and sustained by the Holy Spirit, and guarded by Him from falling into error, thanks to the theological concept of SF. As we saw above, it is in order to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit as to what He intends to tell the Church, and also, to give sufficient space for Him to be Himself in ecclesial life that the synodal process based on consultative and active listening is promoted as a way of life in the Church. Since it is a radical shift from the present Church life (still based exclusively on hierarchical domination) to a Church life based on the dignity of all the baptized, it is imperative that the Church leaders are courageous and daring in embracing this conciliar vision, which was officially adopted more than six decades ago. No wonder the first Synodal Assembly on Synodality in October 2023 adopted with near unanimity that "synodality represents the future of the Church."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Austen Ivereigh, "Does the bishops' report indicate that synodality is simply not happening here? That would be a reasonable reading, but it's not true," *The Tablet*, 1st June 2024, 9.

⁴⁹ *The Synthesis Report*, No:1 i.