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New document gives big boost to 'sense of the faithful'

Robert McClory | Jul. 8, 2014 NCR Today

When the document from the International Theological Commission [1] was released in late June, it drew little buzz. Its authors -- from Canada, Britain, France, Poland, and other countries -- were unknown to me except for the one American on the panel, Sr. Sara Butler. She taught at Chicago's Mundelein Seminary for many years and is best known for her opposition to women's ordination. Ken Briggs wrote a blog post on the document [2] and characterized it as "patronizing palaver."

So when I read the full work of the commission (no small feat considering its length), I was surprised. Yes, there's some palaver here, but there's a mother lode of gold in them there hills, and I'm afraid Briggs missed it.

The subject alone should attract attention: " 'Sensus Fidei' in the Life of the Church." If there's anything the hierarchical church has ignored or misinterpreted in the 20th and 21st centuries, this is it. And here is a group of theologians looking at the "sense of the faithful" from the point of the individual believer and of the larger church. Their point is that this sense, instinct, awareness or conviction is inherent in the laity as well as the clergy; it must be listened to. And when disagreements occur, all sides must be consulted in working toward a solution.

I've been writing and talking about the sense of the faithful for more than 30 years, and I've never seen an official church document or statement as sensible and clear on the subject as this one.

Some examples:

The writers noted that in the early church, when a conflict between the Hellenists and Hebrews occurred concerning the work of the 12 apostles, the whole community was summoned, and it was this "whole community of disciples" that instituted the role of deacons. Similarly, when there was a dispute over the requirement of circumcision and the practice of the Torah, a meeting of the entire Christian community of Jerusalem was held, and the matter was settled "with the consent of the whole church," including apostles, disciples and all the laity.

The writers cited especially John Henry Newman's startling conclusion about the settlement of the Arian heresy in the fourth century. Although Arianism had been condemned at the Council of Nicaea, the great majority of the bishops clung to the heresy for some 60 years. The commission document quotes Newman's finding that during that period, "the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than be the Episcopate. ... There was a temporary suspense of the functions of the 'Ecclesia docens'. The body of Bishops failed in their confession of faith. They spoke variously, one against another; there was nothing after Nicaea, of firm, unwavering, consistent testimony, for nearly sixty years."

Newman is cited again in his claim that the tradition of the apostles, committed to the whole church, "manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors [of the church], sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history." Unfortunately, the

writers do not cite Newman's comments that follow almost immediately the above quote: "In order to know the tradition of the apostles we must have recourse to the faithful ... Their voice then is the voice of tradition."

The document provides examples of popes seeking at least some input from the faithful before defining doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the infallibility of the pope.

Much attention is paid to the Second Vatican Council's teaching regarding the laity. Liberally cited is the council's Document on Revelation: "All of the baptised participate in the prophetic office of Jesus Christ ... The Holy Spirit anoints them and equips them ... conferring on them a very personal and intimate knowledge of the faith of the Church. ... As a result, the faithful have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognise and endorse Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false."

"The importance of the *sensus fidei* in the life of the Church was strongly emphasised by the Second Vatican Council. Banishing the caricature of an active hierarchy and a passive laity ... the council taught that all the baptised participate in their own proper way in the three offices of Christ as prophet, priest and king."

Examples cited include the church's strict condemnation of taking interest on loans in the fourth century and the "clear development of teaching" over time, which reversed the condemnation. Also noted was the "openness of the church toward social problems," which came about in the 19th century through the actions of "social pioneers" and activists. Credit is given too to "the homogeneous development" from the condemnation of "liberal" theses by Pope Pius IX in his "Syllabus of Errors" to the declaration of human liberty at Vatican II. The shift would not have occurred, the writers said, without the commitment of Catholic laity and other Christians in "the struggle for human rights."

Perhaps most encouraging was the section on the *sensus fidei* in the life of believers. This sense, the writers state, "enables individual believers to perceive any disharmony, incoherence, or contradiction between a teaching or practice and the authentic Christian faith ... They react as a music lover does to false notes in the performance of a piece of music. In such cases, believers interiorly resist the teachings or practices concerned and do not accept them or participate in them. 'The [habit of faith] possesses a capacity whereby, thanks to it, the believer is prevented from giving assent to what is contrary to the faith' ... Alerted by their *sensus fidei*, individual believers may deny assent even to the teaching of legitimate pastors if they do not recognise in that teaching the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd."

This is about as close as anything I've seen in an official church document approving of legitimate dissent. The theologians have set the stage by carefully presenting the historical and theological foundations. But the theologians don't say it. The word "dissent" appears neither here nor anywhere else in this exhaustive text.

I do not think it would have hurt their efforts if they acknowledged that there are some teachings of the church today that are not accepted by great numbers of the faithful -- birth control and the ordination of women, for starters. But they choose not to be specific and not to refer in any way to current problems. They continue their praise of the laity. "Not only do they have the right to be heard, but their reaction to what is proposed as belonging to the faith of the Apostles must be taken very seriously, because it is by the Church as a whole that the apostolic faith is borne in the power of the Spirit."

This boost to the sense of the faithful can only go so far. When the document views the role of the magisterium, it seems in places to contradict what was said in earlier parts. And there is an unrealistic aura of good cheer that pervades much of the document as if all will be well if laity, clergy, bishops and pope simply sit down and agree to agree.

In a future blog, I'd like to take a deeper look at " 'Sensus Fidei' in the Life of the Church." I believe it could

have an important role in untying some of the knots that bedevil modern Catholicism.

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