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"SENSUS FIDELIUM" AND THE MARIAN DOGMAS

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Within a decade of each other, a pope and arguably the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century stated that certain dogmatic teachings unique to the Roman Catholic Church made impossible any major ecumenical breakthrough. In 1957, Karl Barth stated that he was opposed to the recent Marian dogmas because for him they were an arbitrary innovation, went far beyond the biblical evidence, and contradicted the principle *sola gratia* by permitting a role to the creature in the work of redemption.¹ In 1967, Pope Paul VI stated that "undoubtedly the gravest obstacle in the path of ecumenism" remains that of papal infallibility.²

Despite such grim assessments of the potential for ecumenical progress, not even ten years passed before significant progress occurred. In 1973, Lutheran and Roman Catholic scholars in the United States published a study entitled *Peter and the New Testament* in which they concluded, "The ecumenical discussion must involve not only the historical figure [of Peter] but also the continuing trajectory of his image in the New Testament and beyond."³ In a study entitled *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, published in 1974, the national ecumenical dialogue team sponsored by the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches stated that although the Petrine images in the New Testament do "not constitute the papacy in its later technical sense . . . one can see the possibility of an orientation in that direction, when shaped by favoring factors in the subsequent church."⁴ They went further: "The line of development of such images is obviously reconcilable with, and indeed favorable to, the

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1957), I/2, pp. 138 ff.

² Paul VI, "La réception par S. S. Paul VI du Secrétariat pour l'Union des chrétiens," *La Documentation Catholique* 64 (1967):870.

³ *Peter in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. Reumann, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), p. 168.

⁴ *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, P. C. Empie and T. A. Murphy, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), p. 16.

claims of the Roman Catholic Church for the papacy. The same may be said of some images of Peter which appeared in early patristic times."⁵

After further serious dialogue with their Catholic partners, these Lutheran theologians thought the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the pope seemed to them little different "from the affirmation which we share, that God will not permit the Church to err definitively on any issue vital to the faith."⁶ Those who have followed closely the Lutheran/Catholic dialogue in the United States know that since 1978 it has achieved even further rapprochement, if not full agreement on many doctrinal matters.

Since the close of the Second Vatican Council, similar progress seems also to have been made by several groups, most notably by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded in England by the late H. Martin Gillett. Moreover, the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States and the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) have dealt with the Roman Catholic teachings on Mary, and have come to new and valuable understandings along lines which, once again, converge, if they do not join in full agreement. This article examines one facet of the discussion of the Marian dogmas which may prove to bear even more ecumenical fruit in the future. I propose to examine the notion of the *sensus fidelium* in the light of recent studies, particularly the important study of J. Robert Dionne, S.M. (Marist), *The Papacy and the Church: A Study of Praxis and Reception in Ecumenical Perspective*.⁷ Our study will first examine the thesis of Dionne's book, especially as it treats the Marian dogmas; then define the meaning of the term *sensus fidelium* and look at some of the difficulties that surround its interpretation; ask, thirdly, just who should be included among the faithful when the sense of the faithful is sought; and, finally, offer several reflections that might advance ecumenical efforts, especially with regard to our understanding of the Catholic Church's dogmatic teachings about Mary.

DIONNE'S THESIS: BOTH *DOCENS* AND *DISCENS* IN THE HIERARCHY

Dionne's careful and painstaking historical and theological research studies the way doctrine and dogma within the Catholic Church have developed from the begin-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶ *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*, P. C. Empie, T. A. Murphy, and J. A. Burgess, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), p. 12.

⁷ J. Robert Dionne, S.M., *The Papacy and the Church: A Study of Praxis and Reception in Ecumenical Perspective* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987); hereafter cited as *Papacy and Church*.

ning of the pontificate of Pius IX (1846) to the end of the Second Vatican Council (1965). Rather than study the various theories of development that have been advanced with renewed vigor since the publication of John Henry Newman’s seminal work *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859), Dionne devotes himself to a study of the *praxis* of the Church. In other words, he concentrates on how the Church, through its ordinary magisterium, has dealt with seven issues: (1) papal social teaching; (2) the teaching of Pius XII about collegiality; the teachings of Pius IX that (3) implied a lack of goodness and truth in non-Christian religions, (4) condemned the idea that the Church and the state should be separated, and (5) claimed religious freedom is not an objective right; (6) Pius XII’s identification of the Mystical Body of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church, and (7) the parallel question of the Church’s relationship to non-Catholic Christians.

Dionne devotes a chapter to each of these seven issues, and arrives at two major conclusions. First, he concludes “the way doctrine has developed within the Catholic Church beginning with the Petrine ministry of Pius IX (1846) up to the end of the Second Vatican Council (1965) requires a correction of the understanding of how the ordinary papal magisterium functions within Catholicism.”⁸ Dionne distinguishes between doctrine in the broad sense – which admits of change, even reversal – and doctrine in the narrow sense – more properly called “dogma” since the middle of the last century, which does not admit of change in meaning or reversal. In every instance he examines, doctrine in the first sense was affirmed, or modified, or even reversed on account of an extensive and intensive process of give-and-take between the bishop of Rome and various theologians. By describing in detail the reception of these seven teachings, Dionne shows that the reception of the first two, social teaching and collegiality, was basically positive (Dionne describes these as *alpha* movements). In contrast, the reception of the last five was partially critical or generally negative (*beta* movements), which led either to their modification or even to their rejection.

The critical reception of papal teaching is most evident in the four areas in which positions were advanced by Pius IX, teachings ultimately either modified or reversed by Vatican II: (1) Catholicism and non-Christian religions; (2) the relationship between Church and state; (3) the meaning of religious freedom; and (4) the definition of the Church and its membership. Even though Dionne states several times that in the vast majority of instances ordinary papal teaching has been received positively by theologians, he documents in each of these four instances how a minority of theologians produced scholarly works that appropriately criticized these official teachings prior to Vatican II (Dionne frequently employs the metaphor of “talking

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

back" to the papal magisterium), thereby preparing the way for modification and even reversal of the ordinary papal magisterium. He demonstrates in these four instances that doctrine (not dogma) does not always develop in a harmonious, organic or rectilinear way; rather, there are at times discontinuity, detours or even dead ends. Dionne emphasizes, as his first major conclusion, the need for the Church in its official statements to be more forthright about these historically documented modifications and even reversals of ordinary papal teaching: "What official Catholicism has never admitted is that the teaching of the ordinary papal magisterium has sometimes had to be modified and/or reversed because of the modalities of its reception."⁹

Dionne believes that the research that led to his first conclusion may help the Church address a major internal problem, namely the presence of "a certain malaise relative to the theological research and the ordinary papal magisterium."¹⁰ He believes that his research has implications for at least three groups: first, the "maximalists" (e.g., J. Salaverri and G. Grisez), who argue that under certain circumstances the ordinary papal magisterium is infallible; second, the "minimalists" (e.g., Hans Küng and Brian Tierney), who argue that changes in papal teaching constitute an argument against papal infallibility; and third, the popes themselves. If ordinary papal teaching has changed, then the maximalists' thesis is untenable. Similarly, if the ordinary magisterium is sometimes in tension with some responsible theologians, minimalists are forced to recognize that such tension can be a necessary process that contributes to the reception and modification of doctrines. Minimalists (or anti-infallibilists), who typically fail to distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary papal magisterium, should not be scandalized by changes in papal teaching, but rather encouraged that such honest and respectful dialogue by theologians has in fact contributed to such changes. Maximalists, for their part, ought not to overlook these instances of change.

Dionne believes that his historical research indicates that part of article 25 of *Lumen Gentium* needs to be changed by a future ecumenical council. Vatican II stated there that although bishops by themselves are not infallible, they can teach infallibly "even when dispersed around the world, provided that while maintaining the bond of unity among themselves and with Peter's successor, and while teaching authentically on a matter of faith or morals, they concur in a single viewpoint as the one which must be held conclusively [*tanquam definitive tenendam*]."¹¹ Since the

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

¹⁰ J. Robert Dionne, S.M., "An Interview with the Author of *The Papacy and the Church*," *America*, 14 January 1989, p. 12.

¹¹ Quoted in Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., "Talking Back to Rome? J. R. Dionne on Papal Magisterium and the Church," *One in Christ* 24, 2 (1988):188.

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bishops may agree with the pope more out of obedience than on account of a considered judgment that a matter actually pertains to the substance of the faith, the Vatican II text needs to be clarified in such a way as to make explicit that the teaching is to be held not only definitively, but also as pertaining to the substance of the faith. Dionne's historical research demonstrates that ordinary papal teaching, upheld by the bishops over several generations, was changed later by another pope with the concurrence of the bishops. If such a clarification of *Lumen Gentium* 25 is not made, it is possible to conclude, as did Hans Küng for example, that since *Humanae Vitae* has been taught by universal ordinary magisterium, it is, for that reason alone, infallible.

Finally, Roman bishops will need to admit, particularly in those instances when their teaching has been subsequently modified or even reversed, that they have not taught the rest of the Church so much as the rest of the Church has taught them. This conclusion, obviously, draws attention to the importance of the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*, which will be addressed in the next part of this article.

Dionne draws his second major conclusion directly from the next part of his study, Chapter 8, entitled "The Extraordinary Papal Magisterium: Church as Association and the Marian Dogmas." In this chapter, he focuses on how Pius IX and Pius XII went about their task of preparing for the definition of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption respectively. Dionne concludes that "associative elements present in the process that culminated in the definition of dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption may provide a partial solution to the ecumenical impasse brought about by the common understanding of so-called papal infallibility."¹² Dionne believes that in the case of the Marian dogmas, the Church in defining its faith functioned as a community of believers, as a "*koinonia* on the level of word." The Church, therefore, should be understood as functioning not only as an institution, in which authority proceeds from the top down, but also as a community, in which there may be found "associative elements," whereby authority proceeds from the bottom up, even in the matter of defining dogmas. Given the care with which Pius IX and Pius XII consulted the bishops and the faithful before each definition, Dionne stresses the importance of the *sensus fidelium* in the formulation of dogmas. In both these instances, the *ecclesia docens* found it appropriate first to become an *ecclesia discens*. A more adequate understanding of the Church will, Dionne hopes, distinguish much less sharply between the teaching and learning functions within the Church. Dionne writes of the "external problem" that the Church faces – the slowdown in ecumenical progress – and thereby draws out the important ecumenical implications of his study: "Non-Catholic Christians should perhaps

¹² Dionne, *Papacy and Church*, pp. 40-41.

take another look at the way authority functions within [the Roman Catholic Church]; the Roman Bishops and their advisors should perhaps ask themselves whether their theory about the function of the ordinary papal magisterium is fully in harmony with Catholicism's praxis."¹³

A more careful examination of the historical record reveals that official Catholic teaching grows out of a dynamic process of faithful give-and-take between the bishops and the rest of the Church. Catholicism's praxis in formulating official teaching holds more promise for ecumenism than its theory.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM*

Nowhere in recent Church history is the dynamic and normative role of the faith of all the members of the Catholic Church more strikingly apparent than in the formulation of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950). In these two instances, the *sensus fidelium* "provided the only sufficient grounds for certitude that these particular doctrines were really contained in the deposit of faith."¹⁴ According to Michael O'Carroll, the *sensus fidelium* "is particularly valuable in questions concerning Our Lady" and "has played a remarkable part in the development of Marian doctrine."¹⁵

Besides professional mariologists, professional ecumenists – in particular the members of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic dialogue – have recognized the importance of the role of the *sensus fidelium*. Vatican II made clearer than had Vatican I that the infallibility of the pastors (pope and bishops) must be related to the *sensus fidelium* or the "sense of faith" possessed by the entire people of God. The popes and bishops are infallible insofar as they are assisted in giving official expression and formulation to what is already the faith of the Church as a whole. This theme of Vatican II underscores what is implicit in the assertion of Vatican I that the pope has no other infallibility than that which Christ conferred upon the Church.¹⁶

If mariologists underscore the importance of the *sensus fidelium* in the formulation of the Marian Dogmas, and if ecumenists affirm the importance of it for a proper understanding of the limits of papal teaching authority, and, finally, if the Church's actual practice, as Robert Dionne has amply demonstrated, returns again and again

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

¹⁴ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Magisterium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 105.

¹⁵ Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), p. 323.

¹⁶ *Teaching Authority... VI*, p. 44.

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to the *sensus fidelium* in a dynamic process of give-and-take among the faithful and the theologians and the bishops, then may it not be argued that, instead of being a point of division between Catholics and Protestants, the Marian dogmas, and in particular the way in which they were formulated, may actually constitute a point of convergence between Catholics and Protestants? Theological reflection on the *sensus fidelium* began, at least in some systematic form, only in the last century with Newman. As important as the concept is, it is not easy to define in precise terms and it generates considerable misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

To begin to grasp what the *sensus fidelium* is, it is necessary to distinguish between it and the *sensus fidei*. The latter is a gift of grace to the individual believer of the ability to perceive the truth of the faith and to oppose what is contrary to the faith; the *sensus fidelium* is that part of what believers affirm that can be grasped objectively and expressed in words. The *sensus fidei* constitutes the capacity to believe, and the *sensus fidelium* is the expression of what is believed.

Article 12 of *Lumen Gentium* provides the most explicit official description of the meaning of the *sensus fidei*: "By this sense of the faith which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the people of God, guided by the sacred magisterium and submitting to it, receives not the word of human beings but the very word of God (see 1 Thess. 2:13). It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints (see Jude 3), penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more thoroughly to life."¹⁷ This description's reference to several biblical passages indicates that the idea, in Newman's words, of "a sort of instinct, or *phronēma*, deep in the bosom of the mystical body of Christ," was not completely new even in Newman's day.¹⁸ Elements of this idea were found developed by Augustine, then by Aquinas followed by Bellarmine, and then most strikingly by Newman himself:

The religious life of a people is of a certain quality and in a certain direction, and this quality and this direction are tested by the mode in which it encounters the various opinions, customs and institutions which are submitted to it. Drive a stake into a river's bed, and you will at once ascertain which way it is running, and at what speed; throw up even a straw upon the air, and you will see in which way the wind blows; submit your heretical and Catholic principle to the action of the multitude, and you will be able to pronounce at once whether that multitude is imbued with Catholic truth or with heretical falsehood.¹⁹

Besides being enabled to accept God's word as the word of God and to cling to it faithfully, the people of God are also empowered by the *sensus fidei* to grasp more accurately the truths of the faith. Francis Sullivan writes that "no mere exegesis or

¹⁷ Quoted in Avery Dulles, S.J., "*Sensus Fidelium*," *America*, 1 November 1986, p. 241.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-241, citing *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (1850).

theological reasoning could have arrived at the certitude of faith" concerning Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption. Rather, "this certitude is the fruit of insight guided by the supernatural sense of faith," a sort of connaturality that St. Thomas described, "by which a person deeply committed to a virtue will almost instinctively tend to make right judgments in matters that pertain to that virtue."²⁰ Zoltan Alszeghy, drawing attention to the Latin text "*ex intima spiritualium rerum quam experiuntur intelligentia*," stresses that the *sensus fidei* refers to a sense that comes not primarily from intelligence, but from an experiential knowledge based on what has been lived²¹; or, again, that it is the "capacity to recognize the intimate experience of adherence to Christ and to judge everything on the basis of this knowledge."²² Several authors also cite article 8 of *Dei Verbum* as an insightful description of the *sensus fidei*, even though the article does not refer explicitly to it:

For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study of believers, who ponder these things in their hearts (Lk. 2:19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience and through the preaching of those who have received with their episcopal succession the sure charism of truth. (*Dei Verbum*, 8)²³

What is pondered in the heart eventually comes to expression on the lips. When the faithful express their lived-sense of the faith, that expression is called the *sensus fidelium*. I have already alluded to the important role played by the *sensus fidelium* in the development of the Marian dogmas. Among the five examples (the Arian crisis, Mary as *Theotokos*, the 9th-century real presence debate, the 14th-century beatific vision controversy, and the definition of the Immaculate Conception) listed by Newman in his *On Consulting the Faithful*, two are Marian dogmas. Had Newman written that same book a century later, he surely would have added a third Marian dogma, the Assumption. In each of these instances, the faith of ordinary Catholics played a key role in preserving and developing Catholic teaching.

Despite its importance, the use and discernment of the *sensus fidelium* poses difficulties. Many Protestants still find the absence of explicit biblical support for the Marian dogmas an obstacle to further ecumenical progress. Newman, who became adept at looking beneath the "surface of Scripture," described his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* as "an hypothesis to account for a difficulty,"

²⁰ Sullivan, *Magisterium*, p. 22.

²¹ Zoltan Alszeghy, S.J., "The *Sensus Fidei* and the Development of Dogma," in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, Vol. I, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 139.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²³ Alszeghy, "The *Sensus Fidei*," p. 139; Dulles, "*Sensus Fidelium*," p. 241; and Patrick Granfield, *The Limits of the Papacy* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 140.

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namely, how the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which has no explicit basis in Scripture, is actually a part of the faith of the Church. John Macquarrie, the Anglican theologian, who accepts the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as "yet another precious insight into the one fundamental truth of God in Christ," admits nonetheless that the Catholic exegesis of the scriptural passages used to support the dogma is "somewhat strained." Much theological work remains to be done if it is to be shown that an appeal to the *sensus fidelium* in the case of the Marian dogmas does not devalue the central role that should be played by the Scriptures. If evangelical Protestants need to be encouraged to look beyond only what is explicitly stated in Scripture, Catholics need to be clearer about how the Marian dogmas flow from basic teachings about Christ, salvation, and the nature of the Church.²⁴

The discernment of the *sensus fidelium* poses difficulties since it is not always clear just who the faithful ones are. Instead of a faithful majority, Scripture, for example, speaks frequently of a faithful remnant, of the *anawim*, of those few individuals who despite mass apostasy cling to the truth of revelation. Especially sobering for Catholic Christians, who affirm the special role of the bishops in articulating the faith, is the example of the fourth-century bishops, who, as Newman has shown, failed, when confronted with Arianism, to articulate the faith adequately. If discerning the *sensus fidelium* were merely determining what most Catholics or most bishops believed at a certain time about a certain matter, the determination of the *sensus fidelium* would be less complicated.

We have at our disposal techniques previous generations could not have imagined, but they are obstacles as well as opportunities. Astute observers of the techniques of polling stress how the results of any poll can be manipulated by phrasing questions that will produce desired responses. Frequently those polled are forced by the phrasing of the question into extreme either/or positions, as has often been the case, for example, in polls conducted in the United States in recent years on the questions of abortion and of dissent from Church teachings. Patrick Granfield notes that "the *sensus fidelium* is above all a spiritual reality and not a sociological device, a counting of heads, or an opinion poll."²⁵

Yet, even if manipulative and leading questions were avoided, opinion polls would not be of much assistance in discerning the *sensus fidelium*. The reliability of polls, particularly about matters of faith, is radically affected by the quality of the faith and the level of religious practice of those polled. Whether the Catholics polled are involved in the life of their parish or only infrequently attend the parish Church affects how they answer questions about doctrine. A September 1986 Gallup survey

²⁴ John Macquarrie, "Immaculate Conception," *Communio* 7, 2 (1980):110-112.

²⁵ Granfield, *Limits of the Papacy*, p. 141.

found that while a majority of Catholics (57%) favored a change in the official teachings of the Church on sexual morals, only 46% of practicing Catholics favored a change as compared to 70% of non-practicing. Practicing Catholics favored the Vatican action against Charles Curran by a ratio of 5 to 3, while non-practicing Catholics opposed it 6 to 1.²⁶ It would therefore be naive to expect from polls anything more than what a number of people of unknown religious practice and commitment think in response to questions frequently phrased to manipulate their response.²⁷

Still another difficulty with discerning accurately the *sensus fidelium* is deciding in what matters the faithful are likely to enjoy competence. If the members of the Church are graced as individuals with a *sensus fidei*, with a capacity for sensing the truth of faith, does that capacity function equally well in every sort of situation? Alszeghy explains: "The *sensus fidei* rarely takes up positions on abstract and marginal theological questions; its voice is stronger with regard to questions that have a more direct connection with the basis of the Christian faith and on which personal behavior depends more directly."²⁸ He offers examples of the way in which the faithful were able to sense the truth of the great Christological teachings of the early centuries and of Vatican II's teaching on human activity in the world. Yet most of the faithful were uninterested in Trent's teachings on the use of the term *transubstantiation* or in Vatican II's teaching on the sacramentality of the episcopate. The faithful can be expected to sense more accurately the truth of who Christ is and how to act in the world, than to sense the most appropriate theological terms to express the real presence or the nature of the episcopate.

Thus, Avery Dulles is unwilling to entrust to "uninformed public opinion in the Church" judgment on scholarly exegesis or on the technical work of systematic theologians. He believes that "generally speaking, the sense of the faithful will be most reliable in matters that are close to the experience and behavior of the average Christian." Therefore, he thinks that ordinary Catholics will have more to contribute on matters such as liturgical worship and matters of personal and family morality.²⁹ In this view, Dulles may have been following the lead of Cardinal Hume, who, at the International Synod of Bishops that met in 1980 to discuss the family, pointed out that the prophetic mission of husbands and wives is based on their experience as married people "and on an understanding of the sacrament of marriage of which they

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁷ For a recent example of naive reliance on opinion polls for directions the Church should take, see Philip Kaufman, *Why You Can Disagree - and Remain a Faithful Catholic* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989), pp. 1, 115, and 160.

²⁸ Alszeghy, "The *Sensus Fidei*," p. 149.

²⁹ Dulles, "*Sensus Fidelium*," p. 242.

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can speak with their own authority." Moreover, added the Cardinal, the experience and understanding of married people should constitute "an authentic *fons theologiae* from which we, the pastors, and indeed the whole Church can draw."³⁰

At the end of the first week of that same Synod, Cardinal Ratzinger drew attention to a difficulty that attends even this more limited scope for the *sensus fidelium*: when discussing the experience and understanding of married people as a source for theological reflection on the sacrament of marriage, theologians and bishops should draw upon the experience and understanding of those who are most converted to the ways of the Lord. Thus, experience helps theologians and bishops understand how doctrine ought to develop "only when faith penetrates the life of men and converts them."³¹ Dulles offers a similar caution when he states that "the danger of distortion is increased by the tendencies of our fallen nature." Therefore, in considering the experience of the members of the Church, "we must look not so much at the statistics, as at the quality of the witnesses and the motivation for their assent."³²

How do these reflections on the use and discernment of the *sensus fidelium* relate to the process that led to the formulation of the Marian dogmas? Pope Pius IX and Pius XII polled the bishops of the Church – and, through them, the members of their dioceses – about their belief in the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Pius XII's Allocution to the Consistory on October 30, 1950, explains: "We have addressed letters to all the bishops asking them to reveal to Us not only their own opinions but also the opinions and the wishes of their clergy and people. In splendid and almost unanimous chorus, the voices of pastors and faithful throughout the entire world reached Us, professing the same faith and requesting the same thing as sovereignly desired by all." And again, a little later in that same address, Pius XII referred to "this remarkable agreement of bishops and the Catholic faithful," an "agreement between the teaching of the ordinary magisterium of the Church and the responding faith of the Christian people upheld and guided by the same magisterium . . ."³³

To what extent were the validity of the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary within the competency of the laity to determine? Surely some would argue that a knowledge of Augustine's doctrine of original sin would be needed to understand properly the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and that a knowledge of eschatology is necessary to grasp the significance of the

³⁰ G. B. Hume, "Development of Marriage Teaching," *Origins* 10, 18 (16 October 1980):276.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

³² Dulles, "*Sensus Fidelium*," p. 242.

³³ Quoted in J. M. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, trans. John de Satgé (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), p. 230, n. 138.

Assumption. Yet, just as surely, there are those who have noted that the Marian dogmas are actually rich sources for Christian anthropology, that the Immaculate Conception is about God's saving grace given especially to prepare Mary for her unique calling, and that the Assumption is an affirmation of the destiny that all of us hope eventually will be ours – making it, in the words of John Macquarrie, “one of the most humanistic festivals in the Church's calendar,” for it is “not just a celebration of Mary (though it is certainly that) but also a celebration of redeemed humanity.”³⁴ In other words, even though the Marian dogmas invoke some technical theological concepts, the faithful are able to intuit in the Marian dogmas teachings that are central to their own Christian living. Thus Edward Yarnold observes of the theological insights embedded in the Marian dogmas “that it is of faith that God's grace requires human co-operation, provides the conditions which make the human response possible and fruitful, and results in sanctification, so that the holiness of the Church will be verifiable in the lives of its members, and will overflow from member to member; and finally that all that is truly of value in human existence continues after death, when it is transformed in heaven.”³⁵ Seen from this theological perspective, the Marian dogmas articulate fundamental aspects of Christian life and hope, and may well fall within the scope of competency, if you will, of the *sensus fidei* of the ordinary Catholic.

Theologians explain that the *sensus fidelium* does not create doctrine, but senses when teachings are true; it is not self-sufficient, but depends upon the discernment and judgment of the bishops who themselves are, of course, as Vatican II put it, not above but beneath the word of God (*Dei Verbum*, art. 10). Much remains to be clarified about the *sensus fidei* and its role in the life of the Church and the development of its teaching. The bishops of England and Wales at the 1985 Synod of Bishops stated that the exercise of their teaching office and “its relationship to the *sensus fidelium* and subsequent reception of teaching is not well understood.”³⁶ They also stated that theologians need to understand better how their work relates to the *sensus fidelium* and how common interest and mutual respect should be built up.

CONSENSUS FIDELIUM

Up to this point, I have limited my analysis to the nature, use and discernment of the *sensus fidelium* within the Catholic Church, particularly with reference to the

³⁴ John Macquarrie, “Glorious Assumption,” (The Assumption Day Lecture, preached at the Parish Church of S. Mary and All Saints, Walsingham, 1981), p. 4.

³⁵ Edward Yarnold, S.J., “Marian Dogmas and Reunion,” *The Month* (June 1971):179.

³⁶ “Vatican II and the 1985 Synod of Bishops,” *Origins* 15, 12 (5 September 1985):184.

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Marian dogmas. I have shown that the actual history of the formulation of the Marian dogmas drew upon the faith of all the members of the Catholic Church, a faith that constituted the essential warrant for their formal definition. Using the traditional distinction between the teaching (*docens*) and learning (*discens*) church, the teaching church, in the case of the Marian dogmas, wanted to be taught by the learning church. As Robert Dionne put it, the bishop of Rome wanted to learn from the rest of the Catholic Church just what its faith was on these matters.

It is now time to broaden this analysis to include non-Catholic Christians. From this broader perspective, it can be asked whether non-Catholic Christians should in any way be included among the faithful when we talk, for example, about the "sense of the faithful." Under what conditions and for what purposes would it be possible to seek a consensus among both Catholics and Protestants about the Marian dogmas? In many ways, such a question is even more complex than that of the *sensus fidelium* considered only within the Catholic Church. My purpose in raising this question here and now is modest. I have no intention of trying to solve this difficult question. I hope merely to underscore its importance for ecumenism.

Even though the First Vatican Council was not concerned about ecumenism, it defined the infallibility of the pope in such a way that theologians in our own day see within that definition ecumenical ramifications. Vatican I taught that the pope, when he speaks infallibly, must speak as the "pastor and doctor of *all* Christians."³⁷ The Second Vatican Council which, unlike Vatican I, was explicitly concerned with ecumenism, taught in *Lumen Gentium* (art. 8) that the Church of Christ subsists in, but is not coextensive with, the Roman Catholic Church. Putting these two thoughts together – that the pope needs to speak as pastor and doctor of all Christians and that the Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church – one is led to ask whether in the formulation of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption (not to mention that of Papal Infallibility itself), the whole Church was consulted. In other words, did the pope speak in these instances as the pastor and doctor of all Christians?

Exactly this question was posed in 1967 by the Protestant ecumenist Arthur Piepkorn in an article significantly entitled: "Mary's Place Within the People of God." Piepkorn was not optimistic that Protestants would ever come to accept as revealed the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. He was more hopeful about another possibility: the eventuality that with an increasingly mature reception of key insights of *Lumen Gentium* and of *Unitatis Redintegratio* on the nature of the Church, it may "some day be realized and recognized that the whole

³⁷ Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 3074 (italics added).

Church was not consulted prior to 1854 and 1950, that the *whole* Church did not concur in and consent to the definitions"³⁸

Lumen Gentium did not simply identify the Church of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church. It stated that "the Church of Christ *subsists in* the Roman Catholic Church," a phrase which has been variously interpreted. Ecclesiologist Francis A. Sullivan explains that the Council meant that in the Catholic Church alone does the Church which Christ founded continue to exist with the fullness of the means of grace. Moreover, the Council recognized explicitly the separated eastern churches as particular churches. Finally, according to Sullivan, the Council "acknowledged the ecclesial character of the separated 'ecclesial communities' of the west"³⁹ In the case of both the separated Christians of the east and the west, Sullivan concludes that the Council recognized "the presence of more than just 'elements' of church in them."⁴⁰

If Sullivan is essentially correct in his interpretations of Vatican II's statement that the Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church, then in fact the members of particular churches and of ecclesial communities were in fact not consulted prior to the definitions of the Marian dogmas. Catholic ecumenists, influenced by Vatican II's restatement of membership in the Church of Christ, have recommended that Protestant and Orthodox Christians be consulted in the formulation of doctrines. One prominent Roman Catholic ecumenist, Jean-Marie Tillard, noted in 1982 the greater openness of Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches and ecclesial communities to some exercise of the primacy of the bishop of Rome. Writing mainly of the dogma of papal infallibility and primacy, but in a way that could be applied to the Marian dogmas, Tillard observes:

Should not the manner in which other churches 'receive' the definition of Vatican I, finalized by the Catholic Church alone, be taken into account, especially at a time when there is already an explicit will to find the way back to 'communion'? Does not the fact of this will towards unity create an entirely new condition of 'reception' of which ecclesiology must from now on take account?⁴¹

In raising a question about the dogmatic implications of the *votum unitatis* – the will to, the desire for and the intention of unity – Tillard is not suggesting that all dogmas promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church since the eleventh century must now be rescinded. Rather, he recommends that the Catholic Church take more seriously what other churches hold, especially those "who are admitted to be sister

³⁸ Arthur Piepkorn, "Mary's Place within the People of God According to Non-Roman-Catholics," *Marian Studies* 18 (1967):82.

³⁹ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *The Church We Believe In* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Tillard, *Bishop of Rome*, p. 4.

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churches, who care as much as [the Catholic Church] does about faithfulness to Christ and his Spirit."⁴² Such consultations, suggests Tillard, founded on the realization that the Spirit of unity is working through all Christians, should lead to a fuller grasp and more adequate expression of Christian teaching.

Sullivan, however, disagrees with those theologians who hold that ecumenicity of reception should be a prerequisite for infallibility of teaching. He does state, nevertheless, that a truly ecumenical consensus "would be the most satisfying basis" for concluding that all the faithful have been consulted, and that the conditions for infallibility have been fulfilled.⁴³

Arthur Piepkorn spoke of a more inclusive understanding of the Church that found "seminal and nascent expression" at Vatican II.⁴⁴ Since 1967, those seeds have taken root and some growth is becoming evident. Today, ecumenists and mariologists, concerned to understand more fully and interpret more accurately the consensus of all the faithful, will assist all Christians in rediscovering Mary not only as the Mother of the Church but also as a source of unity.

ECUMENICAL SUGGESTIONS

How might what Catholics believe about Mary become a positive force in bringing about a greater unity among all Christians? I have already noted that it was especially upon the *sensus fidelium* that the Marian dogmas were defined. As Francis Sullivan has noted, the universal consensus of the Catholic faithful was the "only sufficient grounds for certitude" that the Marian dogmas were part of divine revelation, and for this reason "it was indispensable that the pope first ascertain the fact of such a *consensus fidelium* before proceeding to define these doctrines . . ."⁴⁵ The fact of such extensive consultation constitutes an important element in finding in the Marian dogmas a basis for Christian unity.

Dionne emphasized the *praxis* of consultation by the ordinary papal magisterium. He stated that it was more dynamic than the Church's theory about the way it formulates its teaching. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising to read, towards the end of his book, concerning the pope's infallible teaching authority, that "the Roman Bishop does not have to agree with the rest of the Catholic Church but the rest of the Catholic Church must agree with the Roman Bishop as far as the definition goes."⁴⁶

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴³ Sullivan, *Magisterium*, p. 110.

⁴⁴ Piepkorn, "Mary's Place," p. 82.

⁴⁵ Sullivan, *Magisterium*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ Dionne, *Papacy and Church*, p. 359.

This is how Dionne understands Roman Catholic *theory*, even though he demonstrates in rich historical detail throughout his book that Roman Catholic *practice* is not only interactive and participatory, but also at times even conflictual. Dionne admits that ecumenically minded Protestants and Orthodox Christians will have trouble accepting Roman Catholic theory.

It must be added that some serious Roman Catholic ecclesialogists also would have difficulty accepting this reading of Roman Catholic theory. Many Catholic ecclesialogists realize that the final part of the dogmatic definition at Vatican I, that papal definitions are irreformable of themselves and not from the consent of the Church (*ex sese non autem consensu ecclesiae*), was the last-minute insertion of a phrase designed to oppose Gallicanism. Moreover, it is again clear in the texts of Vatican I, as Dionne himself notes elsewhere in his study, that the pope is obligated not to *create* but to *discern* the faith of the people *before* defining. The potentially misleading character of the *ex sese* phrase was clearly recognized by the theological commission at Vatican II who explained in the *relatio* attached to article 25 of *Lumen Gentium* the important clarification that these definitions “do not require the approbation of the people, . . . , but they carry with them and express the consensus of the whole community.”⁴⁷ Stated positively, the actual intention of the *ex sese* clause, clarified by the Vatican II *relatio*, should be understood, in the words of Gustave Thils, as follows: “The previous acquiescence of the Church, or her concomitant or subsequent acquiescence, can be considered as a habitually and relatively necessary condition to the infallible judgments of the popes.”⁴⁸ In view of these interpretations of the *ex sese* clause by Catholic ecclesialogists such as Sullivan, McSorley and Thils (Congar and others could be added), Dionne would have been more accurate had he stated that in both *practice* and in *theory* even the infallible magisterium of the pope is limited by the faith of the whole Church which it is obligated to express. Had Dionne made this clear, his contribution to advancing ecumenism would have been even greater.

Unless Roman Catholic theologians remain clear on the proper interpretation of that unfortunately worded *ex sese* clause, even non-Catholic theologians well-disposed toward ecumenism will typically misunderstand how papal teaching authority functions. Surely this was true of the Anglican members of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission who stated in their 1981 report that “in spite of our agreement over the need of a universal primacy in a united Church, Anglicans do not accept the guaranteed possession of such a gift of divine assistance in judgment

⁴⁷ *Schema Constitutionis de Ecclesia* (1964), cited in *The Infallibility Debate*, ed. John J. Kirvan (New York: Paulist Press, 1971), p. 87 (italics in source).

⁴⁸ *L'infaillibilité pontificale*, p. 175, cited in Kilian McDonnell, “Infallibility as Charism at Vatican I,” in *Teaching Authority . . . VI*, p. 274.

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necessarily attached to the office of the bishop of Rome by virtue of which his formal decisions can be known to be wholly assured before their reception by the faithful.”⁴⁹ Catholic ecclesialogists, supported by the important historical work of scholars such as Dionne, must continue to stress within the Church and with ecumenical partners that even though the process of reception is, as the bishops of Wales and England observed in 1985, not yet well understood, the *sensus fidelium* plays a substantive role in the formation of dogma.

My second observation arises in part from the first: the formulation of doctrines and of dogma must be done not only with the greatest care, but also with the full realization that no formulation will ever come near to stating with complete adequacy a truth of faith. In 1973, the Vatican document *Mysterium Ecclesiae* made clear that every dogma is historically conditioned by (1) the limited state of human knowledge at the time of definition, (2) changeable conceptions and thought patterns that belong to a certain period of time, (3) the specific concerns that motivated the definition, and (4) the limited expressive power of the language used.⁵⁰ What is irreformable about a dogma is not its wording, but its meaning, which is irreversible. Even though the form and content of a dogma cannot easily be separated, as the International Theological Commission recently has explained, “the relationship between formulation and content in dogma may of course benefit from further clarification.”⁵¹ Catholic theology teaches that dogmas validly express the truth revealed by God, and that these truths of revelation are universally valid and unchangeable in their substance. Catholic theology also teaches that all dogmas, like every human statement about God, must be understood analogically, that is, “however great the similarity, there is a greater dissimilarity.”⁵² These understandings of the nature and limits of dogmatic expressions should not only guide but also encourage theologians involved in reinterpreting dogmas so that Christians both inside and outside the Catholic Church might grasp and live more fully the mysteries of the faith.

Third and finally, greater attention must be paid to the ways in which all Christians live and think about their faith. The most recent document from the International Theological Commission explicitly refers to the 8th article of *Dei Verbum* in a section in which they develop guiding principles of contemporary interpretation:

... [C]ontemporary interpretation of dogma is neither a purely intellectual nor a purely existential or sociological process. It does not consist merely in the more

⁴⁹ ARCIC, “Authority in the Church II,” *The Final Report* (1982), par. 31.

⁵⁰ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Mysterium Ecclesiae*,” in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 65 (1973):402-404.

⁵¹ International Theological Commission, “On the Interpretation of Dogmas,” *Origins* 20, 1 (17 May 1990):11-12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

precise definition of individual concepts, in logical deductions or in reformulations and new formulations. It is encouraged, supported and guided by the working of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the hearts of individual Christians. It takes place in the light of faith; it is borne forward by the charism and the testimony of the saints, whom the Spirit of God gives to the church at a particular time. The prophetic witness of spiritual movements as well as the insight that comes from spiritual experience on the part of lay people, who are filled with God's Spirit (see *Dei Verbum*, 8), also form part of this context.⁵³

In the case of the Marian dogmas, the "spiritual experience on the part of lay people," played a central role in their definition. If the Protestant ecclesial communities are ever to affirm the Marian dogmas, and in that process affect in some ways those very dogmatic formulations, then it is crucial that Protestant spiritual experience gradually incorporate various forms of veneration of Mary. Veneration of the saints, as well as a devotion to the Mother of Jesus, was an integral part of the experience of Christians during the first millennium, and, with proper theological safeguards, should characterize the experience of all Christians during the third millennium.

Ecumenical dialogues have already gone some distance in demonstrating ways in which historical and theological reflection can produce points of consensus on Mary that bear promise for greater unity in the future. Thus the members of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission could agree that Jesus Christ is the one mediator and that every interpretation of Mary's role must be consistent with that affirmation. They also agreed that the Marian doctrines are intimately linked with the doctrines of Christ and the Church. They recognized that Mary was especially graced for a unique vocation – the Motherhood of God incarnate – and affirmed the appropriateness of observing Marian festivals. Moreover, they affirmed that Mary was prepared by grace to be the Mother of Jesus, by whom "she herself was redeemed and received into glory." Finally, the members of the dialogue saw in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians, as well as a prophetic figure of the Church of God.⁵⁴

Most Protestants will not find it possible to affirm all that is included in the ARCIC statement. Catholics must find ways to extend to Protestants something of their own "lived experience" of fundamental Marian themes. Surely Pope John Paul II has made an important contribution by presenting Mary as a woman of faith, citing frequently in his development of this theme Paul's letter to the Romans (see *Redemptoris Mater*). The bishops of Wales and England point in the right direction when they call for practical initiatives that will allow members of different churches and

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ ARCIC, "Authority in the Church II," par. 30.

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ecclesial communities to live and work together: "Doctrinal discussions alone are not sufficient. We urge all concerned with the work for Christian unity to press forward in a continuing dialogue of prayer, social action and study."⁵⁵

Concerning Mary and ecumenism, William Henn recently noted two important facts, the second of which especially pertains to our theme. First, he recalls that differences over the understanding and exercise of papal authority but not over the recent Marian doctrines led to the divisions among Christians. It is encouraging that so much progress has been made in understanding papal teaching authority and how that authority might function in a more ecumenical context. Second, Henn points out that the Marian dogmas are the result of significant developments of dogma. If dogma develops, then deeper insight is possible and new formulations may well be necessary. In particular, I have asked whether and how Protestant ecclesial communities, particularly as they open themselves more and more to initiatives of Catholics who find practical ways to share with them their experience of Mary, will affect the ways in which we think about Mary's role in salvation and in the life of individual Christians committed to ecumenism. Henn explores a more flexible understanding of reunion:

Without excluding the hope for complete doctrinal agreement, we need to explore whether it might not be possible that reunion could include at least some diversity of explicit belief, based not upon the particular community's lack of faith or refusal to acknowledge authority, but rather on its different developmental history – something like the diversity of explicit belief which one observes between the various ages of Roman Catholic Church history.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

I began this study of the *sensus fidelium* and ecumenism with a summary of J. Robert Dionne's recent important study which underscores the diverse ways in which reformulations of papal teaching have occurred and the key role the faith of all the members of the Catholic Church has played in the development of the Marian dogmas. Next I examined the nature of the *sensus fidei*, its conceptual and pastoral ambiguities, and its importance in the Church. Third, I asked to what extent Vatican II's statement that the Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church affects the judgment of who should be included when seeking to consult the faithful. Finally, I offered several reflections on how ecumenism might move forward, not

⁵⁵ "The bishops respond to ARCIC I," *The Tablet*, 11 May 1985, p. 495, no. 46.

⁵⁶ William Henn, O.F.M.Cap., "Interpreting Marian Doctrine," *Gregorianum* 70, 3 (1989):435.

despite, but because of the Marian dogmas. The contemporary interpretation of dogma, and particularly the Marian dogmas, must take place in and through the Catholic Church, ever more willing to learn all it can about the Gospel from other faithful Christians. As the International Theological Commission explained recently, this interpretation "takes place in preaching and catechesis, in the celebration of liturgy, in the life of prayer, in the diaconal service, in the daily witness given by Christians as well as in the church's judicial-disciplinary order."⁵⁷ I have suggested that daily witness given by Christians must, in some way, include that given by more people than just Roman Catholics.

The work of ecumenism is difficult and requires great patience. One of the great surprises of the Spirit may be that Catholic teachings about Mary will become a rallying ground for ecumenism rather than an obstacle to it. On the other hand, perhaps we should not be surprised if the Spirit were to lead Christians to greater unity through a more adequate understanding of Mary. As John McHugh has written of the Marian dogmas,

... even the most dedicated anti-papalist would willingly confess that they concentrate the mind with startling clarity on some very central issues of the Christian faith ... the doctrines of grace and redemption, of the boundless generosity of God's giving, of his transformation of our sinful race, through the merits of his Son, into a people wholly and entirely redeemed, in body and soul.⁵⁸

Viewed in this light, the Marian dogmas need no longer be seen as the unwarranted innovation Karl Barth thought they were, any more than the papacy needs to be seen as a grave obstacle to ecumenism as Paul VI thought that it was. Since the Reformation, the Roman Catholic teachings about Mary and their devotion to her have been a stumbling block for Protestants. Many ecumenical difficulties will be obviated by a Catholic theology that gives greater emphasis to the importance of the *sensus* and *consensus fidelium*, and to the realization that the faithful to be consulted include more than Roman Catholics.

⁵⁷ International Theological Commission, "On the Interpretation," p. 12.

⁵⁸ John McHugh, "The Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception: Reflections on a Problem in Ecumenical Dialogue," *The Month* (August/September 1989):336.