

## (A key issue for the Australian Catholic Plenary Council 2020/21)

### What is the ‘sense of faith of Christ’s faithful’ (sensus fidelium)\* ?

The Holy Spirit dwells within us ‘leading us to all truth’ (Jn. 16:13). For St John Henry Newman “*the Church teaching, and the Church taught, are . . . never to be divided*”<sup>1</sup>. And Vatican II taught that “*the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief.*”<sup>2</sup> Being attuned to the ‘sense of faith of Christ’s faithful’ will be central to the success of the 2020/21 Plenary Council

During the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when heresies about Christ’s nature arose, it was the laity’s sense of what was the true belief of the Church that saved the whole Church from error. That ‘sense’ became known as the ‘sense of the faith of Christ’s faithful’ or the ‘faithful’s sense of the faith’ (*sensus fidei fidelium*).

God has a ‘people’ – Christ’s faithful – and God speaks to them in every time and circumstance, including our own. Our sense of faith empowers us to hear God’s voice as it is expressed in the events of our times. Christ’s faithful are not simply a collection of isolated individuals, each having independent perceptions of what is true, but a ‘People’ gathered in communion with each other by the Holy Spirit, sharing their experiences of the Spirit’s call.

Bishops must listen to the voices of Christ’s faithful, discern what they consider to be the true call, and present it back to Christ’s faithful for their reception. This listening by bishops is not a concession, a special favour, a gracious indulgence, or a mere courtesy. For Newman, it is an absolute necessity, and any decision by bishops on Church teaching made without consulting the sense of Christ’s faithful is a terrible mistake.

Christ’s faithful’s sense of the faith does not place them above the bishops in determining what is true in matters of faith and morals. Nor is the sense to be taken as authentic only when it agrees with the teaching of the Pope and bishops. Only when there is universal agreement among Christ’s faithful ‘as a whole’ on a matter of faith or morals does the Spirit guarantee infallibility.

Before and during the Plenary Council the Australian bishops must listen to the voices of Christ’s faithful in this nation if the Council is to renew the Church in Australia according to the movement of the Spirit, and point the way for renewal in the Universal Church.

\* *sensus fidelium* is a common abbreviation for *sensus fidei fidelium*

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Further reading:

- Catholics for Renewal, *Getting Back On Mission: Reforming Our Church Together*, Garrett Publishing, 2019: <https://garrattpublishing.com.au/product/9781925009651/>
- International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, Vatican, 2014 – link accessed 13 Dec. 2019: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html)

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<sup>1</sup> *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, London 1986, p.71

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 12

- Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009.
- Robert McClory, *As it was in the Beginning. The Coming Democratization of the Catholic Church*, New York: Crossroad Books, 2007, 55.