

SENSUS FIDEI IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH 2.

The International Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Church has recently issued a study on the significance of the concept of the *sensus fidei* in the life of the Church. It should be significant for the ongoing dialogue of the Catholic Church with its ecumenical partners.

At Vatican II, the concept was given considerable ecclesiological significance within the context of the prophetic call of the entire people of God. *Lumen Gentium* 12 summarises the key points. It states.

‘The holy people of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office. It spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips that give honour to his name (cf. Heb 13:15). The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 John 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. God’s people...clings to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights and applies it more thoroughly to life’.

The document extends the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* in two ecumenically significant paragraphs¹. Following the teaching of the Decree on Ecumenism that many of the elements of sanctification and truth are to be outside the visible bounds of the Catholic Church and that ‘certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasised in other communities’, the report accepts that, in some manner, separated Christians can be understood as ‘participating in and contributing to the *sensus fidelium*’. Moreover, para 56 stresses that Catholics should be attentive to what can be learnt from the *sensus fidei* in other communions. However, para 86 also asserts that any proposal that only those doctrines common to all Christians should be accepted as expressing the *sensus fidelium* ‘goes counter to the Catholic Church’s faith and practice.’ It argues that though dialogue must continue on church dividing questions, Catholic participants cannot suspend their commitment to the Catholic Church’s own established doctrines’.

Hopefully, these two points will become the subject of careful and ultimately fruitful dialogue. I will return to them later in this essay with some tentative suggestions.

In this article, I give a brief synopsis of the document, followed by more detailed comment in the light of ecumenical sensitivities and the insights of other traditions, particularly my own Methodist tradition. In the other major Christian traditions the understanding of the *sensus fidei* is more implicit than developed. Nevertheless, there are theological resources available for responding to the proposals of the current document.

Methodism, for example, does not have a doctrine of the *sensus fidelium* anything like as clearly articulated as that of the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, it esteems highly the living experience of the people of God and it regards Reason, Tradition and Experience as all of co-ordinate importance in interpreting Scripture². In particular, the hymns of Charles Wesley frequently refer to

¹ Paras 56, 86 of the document, hereafter cited as SF, which speak positively about elements of the true *sensus fidei* being found in other communions

² A good exploration of the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral can be found in Langford, Thomas A (ed), *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (1991).

the way in which believers prove in their lives the truth of the biblical promises to and privileges of Christian believers. Hence such verses as

‘Being of beings, God of love

To thee our hearts we raise:

Thine all sustaining power we *prove*

And gladly sing thy praise³.

A moving testimony to the effect of the *sensus fidelium* on the practice of the earliest Church was detected by John Wesley in his comment on the practice, in that Church, of having ‘all things in common’. (Acts 2: 42, 4:32). He writes,

‘But here a question will naturally occur: “How came they to act thus, seeing we do not read of any command to do this? I answer, there needed no outward command: The command was written upon their hearts. It naturally and necessarily resulted from the degree of love that they enjoyed. Observe! “They were of one heart and one soul”⁴.

In Wesley’s understanding, the Church was already, in the very first days after Pentecost, endowed with a strong sense of what was christianly appropriate for their life together. Modern Methodists would still understand ‘the anointing of the Spirit whereby we know all things’ as relating primarily to growth in holiness and fruitful Christian action rather than to formal dogmatic development⁵. This point is, arguably, also the key emphasis also in *Dei Verbum*, which talks of ‘everything which contributes to the holiness of life and the increase in faith of the people of God⁶.’

The International Theological Commission does not claim to give an exhaustive account of the *sensus fidelium*⁷. Rather, it aims to give a succinct account of current Catholic teaching, setting the importance of the doctrine clearly in the context of the total ongoing life of the Church. It is divided into four chapters, the first dealing with the *sensus fidei* in Scripture and Tradition, the second with the *sensus fidei* in the personal life of the believer, the third with the role of the corporate *sensus fidei fidelium* (sense of faith of the faithful) of all the faithful in the life of the Church and, finally, a chapter on the particularly important question of how the *sensus fidelium* can be discerned authentically.

It is interesting to note how at the very beginning and end of the document, there was some last minute tweaking in order to relate it to key concerns of the present Pontiff who was only elected as the working party concerned drew towards the end of their work. At the very beginning, Pope

³ Hymn no 690 in *Hymns and Psalms*, (1983), the official British Methodist hymnal between 1983 and 2012.

⁴ From John Wesley’s sermon, ‘The Mystery of Iniquity’, cited in Jennings, T. *Good News to the Poor. John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (1990), p. 112.

⁵ Cf the references in Wesley’s sermons mentioned below but note also particularly the teaching of Charles Wesley’s hymns.

⁶ *Dei Verbum*, ch 8. The Decree goes on to mention ‘the intimate understanding of the spiritual things they experience’, a phrase which resonates with John Wesley’s, ‘the true, the experimental religion’ and also, of course, with the verse of Charles Wesley’s cited above.

⁷ SF, para 6.

Francis' own experience of the *sensus fidei fidelis* at work in a humble elderly woman is recorded⁸. Later on attention is given to the relationship between popular religiosity and piety and the *sensus fidelium*, a key interest of Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.⁹ In the conclusion, there are three citations of the present Pope in the context of his concern for the new evangelisation¹⁰.

The first section of chapter 1 establishes both some important definitions and the biblical basis of the *sensus fidelium*. The sense, the instinct for the true faith is given both to individual disciples and to the whole Church, the important distinction being that the *sensus fidei fidelis*, the sense of faith in the individual believer refers 'to the personal aptitude of the believer to make an accurate discernment in matters of faith', whereas the *sensus fidei fidelium* refers to the Church's corporate instinct of faith, a point that would also bulk large in Methodist thinking. One might add that the latter is more basic as being given to the Church precisely as communion of the faithful in the things of God and particularly in the guidance of the Holy Spirit¹¹.

The biblical foundation lies in the promised constitution of the new People of God as a prophetic community in which all are severally and together taught by the Spirit¹². This is foreshadowed in the famous promise of the Spirit in the prophecy of Joel, fulfilled of course at Pentecost¹³. It is also foreshadowed in the promise of a new Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33-34.

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord'.

The emphasis in this passage on internal unmediated knowledge, received directly from the Lord, is complemented in the New Testament in the teaching of St John, who speaks of the anointing of the Spirit enjoyed by all the members of the Church, who 'all know', or, in an alternative reading, 'know all things'.¹⁴ In the Roman Catholic tradition, it is taken that this supernatural knowledge, when 'concordant' with 'the Church's ordinary teaching authority'¹⁵ can receive appropriate theological formulation by the magisterium, the case of the marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950) being taken as illustrative. In both cases, the Pope concerned consulted the bishops as to whether such beliefs were indeed those of their local churches and, only on receiving overwhelmingly affirmative replies did they proceed to define them authoritatively¹⁶.

The question naturally arises both for contemporary exegetes and for other Christian traditions as to whether the texts most frequently referred to will bear such a particular doctrinal burden. The

⁸ SF, para 2.

⁹ *Evangelium Gaudium*, paras 122-126.

¹⁰ SF, paras 127,128.

¹¹ For Methodists this is particularly expressed in their hymnody. Charles Wesley's hymns 'Thou God of truth and love' and 'All praise to our redeeming Lord', nos 620 and 608 respectively in the current British Methodist hymnal, *Singing the Faith* (2012), which both stress unity in pilgrimage and mutual care and support 'till all thy utmost goodness prove, and rise renewed in perfect love'.

¹² A point strongly stressed both in *Lumen Gentium* (as above) and in *Speaking the Truth in Love*, (2001), report of the seventh quinquennium of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International dialogue,

¹³ Joel 2:28-9, Acts 2:17-18.

¹⁴ And thus 'have no further need of teaching'. 1 John 2:20, 27.

¹⁵ SF, para 42. The words of Pius IX in 1854.

¹⁶ SF, paras 38, 42.

promise of Christ in John 16:13, that the Spirit would lead the disciples into all truth is usually taken by Anglican and Protestant exegetes to refer to the fundamentals of faith in Christ arising out of the experience of the paschal mystery¹⁷. It relates to Christ's own word that the Spirit would bring to mind everything that he had taught. This much is certainly agreed by the International Theological Commission which also refers to what it calls the 'substantial content of the Gospel', defined in terms of 'the coming of God's kingdom, the resurrection and exaltation of the crucified Jesus Christ, the mystery of salvation and the glorification by God in the Holy Spirit.'¹⁸

John Wesley, in his few references to the texts in 1 John 2:20, 27, defends the teaching as being of permanent importance in the life of the Church and not just as a provision for the apostolic age as some apparently taught in his time. He argues,

'I grant that these words were more eminently fulfilled in the time of the apostles. But this is altogether consistent with their belonging, in a lower sense, to all Christians in all ages, seeing they have need of 'an unction from the Holy One', a supernatural assistance from the Holy Ghost that they may know, in the due use of all proper means, all things needful for their souls. Therefore, it is no enthusiasm to teach that the unction...belongs to Christians in all ages'.¹⁹

Wesley seems to be teaching that the unction applies specifically to the knowledge and guidance required for progress in holy living rather than to specific doctrines of the faith per se. Elsewhere he says, 'the inspiration of the Holy One shall give thee understanding and cause thee to understand wisdom secretly'²⁰. He is afraid of attributing too much to our knowledge, afraid that it could impair the vital virtue of humility but he has no doubt that 'the children of God do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation...for they are taught of God and the way he teaches them is so plain'²¹.

It is an important ecumenical question as to whether the anointing can be held to be of relevance to the further formal definition of doctrine as opposed to the guidance of the faithful in those ways of prayer and active witness and discipleship that lead to holiness²². It would be good for the present quinquennium of the international Catholic-Methodist dialogue, which is now studying patterns of holiness within the two traditions, to consider the matter.

Para 12 indicates that true faith leads Christians first to repentance, but then to active and confident witness, charity and service (diakonia), points which Orthodox and Protestant Christians can equally

¹⁷ See for example H.B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (1910), esp. Pp. 313-316. Swete stresses that the Spirit 'not only recalled our Lord's words, but revealed heights and depths in Him hitherto unsounded.' However, he also adds that 'the promise of Divine teaching is not a promise that the judgements of the Church shall be infallible or irreformable.' (pp. 315-6)

¹⁸ SF, Para 9.

¹⁹ Wesley, J. *Works*, vol 11(Cragg,G.R. ed), (1975) p. 154. Cited from *A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*.

²⁰ Ibid (Abingdon edn, 1985), vol 1,(Outler, A. Ed) pp. 613-4.

²¹ Ibid, vol 2 (Outler, A. Ed), p.40.

²² From what is said immediately above, it would seem that Wesley was more doubtful as to the application of the anointing in matters that did not relate to the immediate practicalities of Christian discipleship. His concept of 'things essential to salvation' would not include some doctrines nevertheless held by Roman Catholics as belong to the 'hierarchy of truths'.

fully affirm. The stress on responsibility particularly relates to the Methodist stress on accountable discipleship, accountable that is both to God and to one's companion disciples²³.

The second section of the first chapter moves to the development of the doctrine across the post apostolic ages, beginning with a consideration of those early fathers who used the universality of practice and custom as an argument for orthodoxy of particular doctrines or practices. It refers to later developments, particularly the thinking of Mohler and Newman. Mohler stressed the unity of the Church as held in and by the Spirit of love, enjoying a life of harmony in a way which, for Methodists, immediately reminds them of the lines of Charles Wesley, describing the life of the early societies and classes.

'the gift that he on one bestows

We all delight to prove'²⁴.

Newman's *On Consulting the faithful in Matters of Doctrine* has, of course, been particularly influential on modern Catholic teaching. All trinitarian churches have to take seriously his most famous example of the *sensus fidelium* at work, the determined loyalty of most of the faithful to the Nicene doctrine at a time when so many of the bishops floundered indecisively. Finally, there is mention of the role of popular piety in the development of marian doctrine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This last, however, raises serious questions for all non-Roman Catholic Christians in that it was made without reference to them.

Chapter 2 deals with the *sensus fidei* as an instinct of faith. It invokes the concept of connaturality, that is a close empathy between the person of faith and the God in whom he or she has faith, an empathy giving the disciple the capacity to 'judge spontaneously what suits the other because he or she shares the very inclinations of the other and so understands by connaturality what is good or bad for the other'. This seems consistent both with the teaching of Scripture and with the experience of the Methodist people.

Paul tells the Corinthians that 'we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor2:16). He tells the Philippians that they should have the mind that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5). He tells them that they should prove and approve what is excellent (Phil 1:10). The later Methodist experience was of 'gladly fulfilling all righteousness', of 'entering into thy wise design' and 'sweetly losing out wills in thine'²⁵. Charles Wesley sums up the process of Christian listening, praying and appropriating the excellent will and purpose of God in these beautiful lines.

²³ See e.g. Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace* (1994), Watson, David Lowes, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (1992)

²⁴ See the hymn 'All Praise to our redeeming Lord, no 608 in *Singing the Faith* (2012), the current official hymnal of British Methodism. For Mohler, see his *Unity in the Church or the Principle of Catholicism* (1838, ET 1995), esp p.209 'The Church is the external, visible structure of a holy, living power of love, the body of the spirit of believers forming itself from the interior externally'. This is close to Charles Wesley's 'touched by the lodestone of thy love/let all our hearts agree', no 504 in the *1780 Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. The question has been validly raised as to whether Wesley is speaking here of a charism rather than the anointing of the Spirit, as spoken of in 1 John. That *may* be the case, but a precise answer cannot be given.

²⁵ See *Singing the Faith*, op cit, hymns nos 546 and 620.

'Lord with open heart and ear,
We would thy law receive
All thy gracious sayings hear
And savingly believe;
All thy kind commands obey,
The pattern trace which thou hast given,
Walk in thee, the Truth, the Way,
The life and heaven of heaven'²⁶.

It is appropriately summarised in these final beautiful couplets of Wesley's.

'joyful from my own works to cease
Glad to fulfil all righteousness'²⁷, and
'His adorable will
We gladly fulfil'²⁸.

This is the adoring response of those who are the adopted children of God, who in Christ live out to the full the consequences of their sacramental and faithful participation in the paschal mystery, of those in whom the spirit of adoption murmurs endlessly, 'Abba, Father', in union with the exalted Christ²⁹.

That the Methodist experience and typos of the *sensus fidei* can contribute to the *oikoumene*, along of course with the experience and typos of other communions, is recognised in para 56.

'The *sensus fidei* flows from the theological virtue of faith. That virtue is an interior disposition, prompted by love, to adhere to the whole truth revealed by God as soon as it is perceived as such. Faith does not therefore necessarily imply an explicit knowledge of the whole revealed truth. It follows that a certain type of *sensus fidei* can exist 'in the baptised, who are honoured by the name of Christian but who do not however profess the catholic faith in its entirety'. The Catholic Church therefore needs to be attentive to what the Spirit may be saying to her by means of believers in the churches and ecclesial communities not fully in communion with her'.

²⁶ *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists with a new Supplement*, (1876), no 886.

²⁷ Charles Wesley's hymn 'Behold the Servant of the Lord'. See *Singing the Faith* (2012), the current official British Methodist hymnal, no. 546.

²⁸ Charles Wesley in 'Come, let us anew', *Singing the Faith*, no 546.

²⁹ Bobrinsky, B. *Le Mystere de la Trinite* (1996), pp. 95/7.

This valuable and irenic insight makes room for mutual enrichment. Other Christian traditions will have much to offer, stimulated by the present study. Traditions as diverse as those of the Orthodox and the Society of Friends have their own very deeply developed ways of understanding the *sensus fidei* and the leading of the people of God ever deeper into fuller understanding by the Holy Spirit. Reformed and Baptist churches in the independent tradition have a very strong sense of the ability of local church meeting, meeting under the invisible headship of Christ, to discern his providential guidance³⁰.

Para 57 notes that the development of the *sensus fidei fidelis* is naturally related to the Christian's growth in holiness. With growth in holiness comes a more measured appreciation of what is authentic in teaching and even more in daily Christian witness and behaviour. That this can be and is independent of formal theological knowledge can be shown in the lives of countless faithful Christians³¹.

Paras 65 to 71 underline two important points. First, that the *sensus fidei fidelis*, the sense of faith of the individual believer is always related to the general *sensus fidei fidelium* of all the faithful. It is 'never purely private, but always ecclesial³².' Secondly, it relies not just on the past received wisdom and holiness of the people of God but is also related to the developing life of the Church and this orientated towards the future, a point which was also previously stressed in *Dei Verbum*, which emphasises the continued growth in understanding of Christian truth and holiness 'until all the promises of God find their complete fulfilment in her.' (i.e, the Church))

That the *sensus fidei* is always ecclesial is the teaching alike of this document and of Wesley and succeeding generations of Methodists. Wesley argued that the New Testament 'knew nothing of solitary religion' and that mutual support and accountability were an abiding part of growth in the Christ, who is 'never without His people seen.'³³ The people of God, each anointed by the Holy Spirit, constantly build each other up in ever developing catholicity and fullness of life, both at the 'micro' level of the traditional Methodist class meeting and at all wider levels of church life. There is a constant circulation of love and grace in the whole, an experience the understanding of which is encompassed in the statement in *Dei Verbum*,⁸ cited immediately above.

The report of the sixth quinquennium of the international Methodist-Catholic dialogue stresses the two dimensions of faith, the *fides qua creditur*, the act of trusting faith and the *fides quae creditur*, the content of faith, stressed by this document, but adds a third the fruitfulness of faith³⁴, a point clearly implicit in para 70 though not directly referred to as such. Para 70 clearly teaches that both in the process of reading the signs of the times and in adapting the presentation of the faith to new circumstances, 'the *sensus fidelium* has an essential role to play. It is not only reactive but also proactive and interactive, as the Church and all of its members make their pilgrim way in history'.

³⁰ This would also be true of the Reformed in respect of wider councils of the Church.

³¹ To the Pope's recent witness to the *sensus fidei fidelium* in an elderly woman, I can add my personal testimony to an elderly woman in my own village congregation who has an unerring instinct for the appropriately kind and Christian thing to say and do in all her relationships.

³² SF, para 65.

³³ Charles Wesley in Hymn no 622, *Hymns and Psalms* (1983), the official hymnal of British Methodism between 1983 and 2012.

³⁴ 'The Word of Life, A Statement on Revelation and Faith', paras 37-72. See Gros, J, Meyer H and Rusch, W. (eds), *Growth in Agreement II* (2000), pp. 618-646.

One may add that it is necessarily so ecumenically as both Catholics, Methodists and indeed all other Christian communions sense their incompleteness and the limitation of their own catholicity when apart from each other in their common call to work for the fulfilment of the Great Plan of reconciliation of the Father³⁵. Para 71 adds that in the process of discernment, there is a necessary *conspiratio* of pastors and faithful, one that would indeed be recognised in all communions even where the relationship between pastors and people may be very differently structured. William Shrewsbury, the Methodist ecumenical pioneer, taught that ‘the greatest evil that can befall a church is a want of confidence between ministers and people³⁶.’

As the report teaches, all the charisms of both laity and ministers are required. Pre Vatican II Catholic theology tended to attribute a very passive role to the laity, a rigid distinction being made between the *ecclesia docens*, the teaching church and the *ecclesia discens*, the learning Church. This distinction is to an extent still maintained by this document but it also now clearly accepts that regular consultation of the faithful by the magisterium is a priority and means to regularise and effect it must be sought³⁷. One has to note that no specific proposals are made as to exactly how this might be carried out. Vatican II clearly taught that the faithful are not merely passive recipients of what the hierarchy teaches and theologians explain; rather they are ‘living and active subjects within the Church’³⁸. Nevertheless, ‘the magisterium judges whether opinions that are present among the people of God, and which may seem to be the *sensus fidelium*, actually correspond to the truth of the Tradition received from the Apostles³⁹’.

Paras 78-80 deal with the ecumenically fruitful concept of Reception in this context. It is stressed that the teaching of Vatican I that infallible declarations of the Pope are irreformable of themselves does not mean that they are made in isolation from the rest of the Church or independently of any consultation with the faithful⁴⁰. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the other Christian traditions, a supposedly definitive decision is still subject to a different form of verification. In the Orthodox churches even solemn conciliar definitions rely on *subsequent* reception in virtue of the understanding, stated by the Orthodox fathers in response to Pius IX, that it is the whole body of the faithful that is the judge of the truth, of which the bishops are but guardians⁴¹. In the Anglican and Protestant traditions, conformity with the clear teaching of Holy Scripture is required before a teaching can be accepted as defining the mind of the Universal Church⁴². Whilst Orthodox, like Roman Catholics, claim to be the one fully authentic Church of Christ, the Anglican and Protestant

³⁵ Ephesians 1:10. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para 4, teaches that even the catholicity of churches in communion with Rome is wounded by their separation from other churches and communities. It also stresses ‘whatever is truly Christian...can always result in a more ample realisation of the very mystery of Christ and the Church’.

³⁶ Shrewsbury, W. *An Essay on the Scriptural Character of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy* (1840), p. 54.

³⁷ SF, para 74. Some clear institutional suggestions would be a helpful ecumenical sign, especially to the Anglican and Protestant churches where constitutional provision is made for lay participation in church government.

³⁸ SF, para 67.

³⁹ SF, para 77. The authority of Newman is also adduced for this.

⁴⁰ SF, para 79.

⁴¹ Ware, K. *The Orthodox Church*, (1963), p 255, citing the Reply of the Orthodox Patriarchs to Pope Pius IX, 1848.

⁴² See e.g. Article VI of the articles of Religion of the Church of England. ‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation’.

churches claim no more than that they are parts of the true Catholic Church⁴³. They ascribe *provisional* authority to their statements of belief but believe that only a full council of all the trinitarian churches would have the right to propose teaching as universally binding and then only subject to its clear conformity to Scripture, through which the *sensus fidei* is constantly renewed and refreshed.

Paragraphs 81-84 deal with the two-fold relationship between the *sensus fidei* and Theology. For theologians, the *sensus fidei* can, as part of the richness of the apostolic tradition, be a source to be integrated into their reflection and formulation of truth. Theologians also help the faithful to know with greater precision and clarity the meaning of Scripture, the true significance of conciliar definitions and the proper contents of the Tradition.⁴⁴

The statement in para 86 that the Catholic Church cannot renounce any part of its dogmatic heritage seems to create an ecumenical impasse. Nevertheless, there are perhaps resources available that may help us to establish a basis for dialogue. First, there is the acceptance in the *Decree on Ecumenism* that 'if the influence of events or of the times... has led to deficiencies even in the definition of doctrine...these should be appropriately rectified at the proper moment'⁴⁵. Next, for Orthodox and Protestants, there is the question of whether they can contribute insights that might change the theological balance of the way in which a question can be reconsidered by the entire *oikoumene*.

I take as difficult issues on which these considerations might apply the marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950 and the teaching of the magisterium since 1976 on the ordination of women.

Might it now be possible, in the light of the four major dialogues devoted to Mary to consider whether commonly agreed ecumenical teaching might be developed which does two things, first, which affirms her unique calling and unique engraving for that calling, secondly which reconfigures teaching on her so as to avoid both Protestant neglect of her and popular Catholic exaggeration, stressing, in particular, the modern accent on her as first and model disciple of the Lord?

With regard to the ordination of women, might it now be possible for Catholics to compass the possibility that, in this matter, the *sensus fidelium* in the Anglican and Protestant churches has been alive to a truth not as well developed as in the Catholic Church, viz that the Holy Spirit has given extraordinary vocations and graces to many women, who are now being truly called to ordained presbyteral and episcopal ministry, in which they demonstrate real gifts that enrich the churches concerned⁴⁶. While it may be true to state, as some Roman Catholic theologians have done, that men and women normally have different, yet complementary spiritual gifts, the ability of the Holy Spirit to act beyond normal dispensations and provisions can never be discounted⁴⁷. It is to be noted

⁴³ See, for example, canon A1 of the Church of England and the (British) Methodist Deed of Union, where Methodism 'claims and cherishes its place within the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ'.

⁴⁴ SF, para 84.

⁴⁵ Decree on Ecumenism, para 6.

⁴⁶ On an anecdotal level, I mention that fact that, at the time, when the British Methodist Church first began to ordain women presbyters in 1974, a very senior and holy minister expressed the view to me that not many women would be ordained, but that, nevertheless, there would be those with special gifts which should be recognised by the Church through their reception as ministers

⁴⁷ Indeed, according to Jean-Marie Tillard, *L'Eglise Locale* (1995), p. 553, it is one of the functions of the 'Pauline' aspect of the heritage of the Church of Rome to 'attest the unforeseeable action of God.'

that this was the reason given for the reception of women into full connexion in the Bible Christian and Primitive Methodist churches⁴⁸. They were held, *exceptionally*, to have received the gifts and graces appropriate to the work of the ministry⁴⁹.

Paras 88 to 104 give a valuable definition of characteristics essential to the formation of a true *sensus fidei* in both individuals and communities. First mentioned are participation in the life of the Church and listening to the word of God. Protestants might want to stress the latter as strongly as the former but even so they have a co-ordinate importance for them and the Word contemplated in private devotion is also the Word to be read and preached in the Great Congregation. Next come openness to reason and adherence to the magisterium. Protestants, for reasons already given, cannot give quite as high a status to the teaching offices of their respective churches; nevertheless, they would agree that their authority should always be respected and their teaching carefully weighed. Finally, Holiness, humility, freedom and joy are stressed. 'authentic participation in the *sensus fidei* requires holiness'⁵⁰. One may also argue that it requires catholicity of spirit, a desire to be nourished by authentic Christian truth and spiritual wisdom of whatever provenance⁵¹. In true humility, the Christian mind always receives gratefully and joyfully from all other fellow Christians whom it 'prefers in honour'⁵².

The final sections of the document deal with popular religiosity which, as Pope Francis teaches must never be despised but rather affirmed as a way of expressing true praise and devotion⁵³. Popular opinion, as such, which may be over influenced by current fashions in thinking must, however, be carefully distinguished from the authentic *sensus fidei*, resulting from true contemplation of the Gospel.

There is much in this document that can enrich the life and thinking of all the churches, even if and where they can also plead that the insights need complementing with some of the riches of their own participation in the *sensus fidei*. In a recent article, Catherine Clifford notes that that the importance of the *sensus fidei* has already been raised in the context of ARCIC. One would expect this report to stimulate attention to it within other bilateral dialogues⁵⁴.

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⁴⁸ It is important to note that this pneumatological justification long predates the modern movement for the emancipation of women. It is found in the Bible Christian Minutes from the beginning in the 1820's.

⁴⁹ Testifying to the standard nineteenth century expectation that ordinarily only men were called to such a vocation.

⁵⁰ SF, para 99. An emphasis that would certainly be in accord with the Methodist *sensus fidei*.

⁵¹ A point the late Pope John-Paul II emphasised when he talked of the need to be ever aware of new patterns of Christian service and discipleship. He made no distinction between those emerging within the Roman Catholic Church and those originating elsewhere.

⁵² Romans, 12:10.

⁵³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, paras 122-126.

⁵⁴ Clifford, C. 'Journeying Together: Ecumenism in the twenty first Century', *One in Christ*, vol 48, (2014), pp 2-25. Exact citation, p.22.