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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*Patrick Manning*

Why Consult  
the Laity? A  
Theological  
Justification

April 2018

# Why Consult the Laity? A Theological Justification

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Patrick Manning

On October 18th, 2013, the Secretary of the Vatican's Synod of Bishops sent notice to all the bishops of the world about a consultation of the whole Church that was to precede and prepare for the synod on the Family. This consultation was intended as an attempt to hear the cries of the people and their needs which were not being met by present Church structures and teaching – and it was in the context of Evangelization – which means it was also a call for a response, a call to action on the part of all the baptized faithful.

The questionnaire assumed the need for everyone in the Church – from the Pope on down – to listen and to learn from others. This conviction is based on the teaching, clearly explained by the Second Vatican Council, that “through baptism and confirmation all members of the church have been anointed by the Holy Spirit, and that the entire Christian community is infallible when its members discern together and speak with one voice on matters of faith and morals.” Pope Francis further explained: “... the *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) makes it impossible to rigidly separate the *ecclesia docens* (teaching Church), and the *ecclesia docta* (Church taught), because even the flock has a ‘nose’ for discerning new paths the Lord is opening up to the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

*Lumen gentium* also testifies to the graced baptismal ministry of all the faithful: “It is not only through the Sacraments and Church ministries that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God and enriches it with virtues. Allotting His gifts ‘to everyone according as He will’ (I Cor. 12:11), He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank.” (par. 12)

1 *National Catholic Reporter* News Service, 17/10/2015.

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In the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* we read the following:

“In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.”<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis has made it unequivocally clear, that the power of the Holy Spirit alive and well and working in the hearts and lives of the faithful is a gift and a fact that is, and has been, an essential part of the process of revealing God’s will for us in the Church. The *sensus fidelium* is not simply an opinion but a theological reality, and thus to consult the faithful (in some means or other), as Pope Francis has done, is essential to understanding the nature of the Church. Some consider this consultation of the laity of Pope Francis as a novelty or an innovation. A brief look at church history will show that this understanding is a false understanding.

One of the great truths of Catholicism is that we are a “Both – And” community, as opposed to “Either – Or”. This inclusivity is a hallmark of the Roman Tradition: we are saved yet we are sinners; the Kingdom is here and is yet to come; we are guided by Scripture, but also by Tradition; Jesus is human and divine; we worship in Word and Sacrament; we love and praise a God who is both revealed and hidden; we belong to a Church that is administrative and organized, as well as missionary and charismatic; and we are a people who embrace a God of the Book and a God of the Gathering.

What is the gift that Catholicism brings? I would suggest, it is inclusion in the pursuit of the truth. What this means is an insistence upon the necessity of community -- that God revealed in community takes precedence over the primacy of private revelation that is found in so many other sincere, yet divided, Christian traditions. On the down side, the Catholic emphasis on personal spirituality situated primarily in the context of a community affords the danger, of course, of inadequate emphasis on one’s personal relationship

2 *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, November 24, 2013, par. 119.

with a good and loving God. This, of course, begs the issue of theological truth and how it is pursued, manifested and protected from error in the Christian tradition. Certainly there is an inherent authority in the Scriptures as the Word of God. But there can be varying interpretations of passages of Scripture – which of those interpretations is correct or true? John Henry Cardinal Newman insisted, that God would have never provided us with a revelation, which He did in Jesus, if he would not also have provided for us an infallible authority to keep the Church from error, a living Tradition – a real testimony to the truth, to guard His Church from error. And thus, as Roman Catholics, we embrace Tradition, as a source of divine revelation, a Tradition that is grounded and rooted in an apostolical succession (*sic* -- as Blessed John Henry Newman referred to it), of authority that is one of the ways – and yet not the only one – in which Jesus keeps His promise to be with us, his Church, until the end of time. In *Dei verbum* of the Second Vatican Council, this teaching is unequivocally affirmed.<sup>3</sup> We note that not only is Sacred Tradition along with the Word of God, constituent of Divine Revelation, but that the recipients include the lay faithful (for reception and interpretation), and not just the formal hierarchy.

#### CONSULTATION IN CHURCH HISTORY

We turn first to Sacred Scripture, and the early Church. Jesus did not leave a blueprint for the Church or a list of dogmas or theological truths – nor did He leave a hierarchy of beliefs.<sup>4</sup> So how does a differentiation, clarification and fuller understanding of Church teaching and revealed truths take place? It develops through consultation, as Church history attests.

At the Council of Jerusalem, the disciples were gathered in prayer and gathered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were confronted with a decision that would affect Christianity for all time – whether (in short), a pagan had to first become a Jew, and then become a Christian. The apostolic decision was uttered after a consultation in prayer, with these words: “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .”<sup>5</sup> Here we have a consultation—the first of many in Church history, that address policy and practice in the

3 *Dei Verbum*, #8, 10.

4 Clearly non-doctrinal beliefs and practices – like the avoidance of meat on Fridays in Lent, do not carry the same onus as convictions that have been discerned as dogmatic in nature, such as the nature of Jesus as being fully human and fully divine, or the equal divinity of the Three Persons in the Trinity.

5 In Act of the Apostles 15:22-28, we read: “It has seemed good to us in assembly to choose representatives and send them to Antioch with Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ‘For it has seemed good to the holy spirit and us not to place any burden upon you beyond these necessities . . .’; the letter continues regarding regulations concerning meat sacrificed to idols and unchastity.

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Church. This was conducted through the leaders (some of whom surely may have been laity), but through consultation as well, and in the context of apostolic authority. This first formal consultation takes place in a time of real crisis, which many afterward do as well. In history, the Church, especially the early Church, embraced the very same process with the very same convictions: That in the Church founded on the apostles, in prayer, the Holy Spirit will guide the leaders of the Church gathered in consultation and protect them from error as they try to clarify beliefs and address new insights and questions as they develop. This Tradition is a very significant part of the Church, one of the fountains of divine revelation.

Most of the early councils of the Church were initiated by crises, and followed much the same pattern.<sup>6</sup> Though there has been some contentiousness and disagreement about who attended these councils, and who was invited (or excluded), it has always been the Church's conviction that they were all convened by apostolic authority, conducted in the spirit of prayer, and guided by the Holy Spirit; all of them (to some extent), were representative and consultative. Only the Lord Himself knows how many lay faithful were involved in or consulted regarding these historical decisions.

### THE CONSULTATION OF POPE PIUS THE NINTH

Many are unaware that in the mid-nineteenth century a consultation of the laity through their bishops was called for by Pio Nono. This consultation was a quite a bit different, for this consultation was not a response to a theological problem or a crisis, but seems to have been, at least to the uninformed viewer, simply a result of the love for and devotion of the Church in general, and of Pius the Ninth in particular, to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Its aim was to provide a public testimony to the firm belief of the Church in the sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Not wanting to proclaim a dogma unilaterally, and following the ecclesiastical conciliar tradition of consultation, Pio Nono decided to consult the whole Church on this teaching -- and whether this teaching, the Immaculate Conception, ought to be proclaimed as a dogma.<sup>7</sup>

6 Some examples include but are not limited to: Carthage (256) presided over by St. Cyprian, dealt with the issue of baptism by heretics. Carthage (297) dealt with the issue of the Canon of Scripture. Nicea (325) took on the Arian crisis and the formation of the creed. Constantinople I (381) dealt with the issue of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Ephesus (431) Dealt with the resolution of the title *Theotokos* that Mary was (is) the Mother of God. Chalcedon (451) defined the two natures of Jesus Christ in one person.

7 On Feb. 2, 1849, having resolved to consult the Church worldwide, Pio Nono published from Gaeta his encyclical, *Ubi Primum*, which was sent to all of the bishops in the world. Note that here Pius IX is following a pattern found clearly in the history of the Church when the need for a theological decision emerges -- he decides to consult. This is undertaken, as was the consultation back at the Council of Jerusalem, in his apostolic authority, in prayer and grace, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## WHY CONSULT THE LAITY?

At length, in 1854, after having consulted all of the bishops in the world as to the convictions and beliefs of their flocks regarding the sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the definition took place, and the Pope's Bull articulating its teaching on Mary's Immaculate Conception made its appearance. In it the Holy Father speaks of a *conspiratio* (a "breathing together") of the hierarchy and the lay faithful. He already knew the sentiments of the Bishops, still he had wished to know the sentiments of the people as well. Thus, even before the first Vatican Council we have a worldwide consultation of the Church effected by Pio Nono.

Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful*, and the *Sensus Fidelium*: Just five years after the consultation of the faithful called for by Pius IX in anticipation of the proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the issue of consultation, and in particular that of the laity, emerges (with significant political overtones), in mid-Victorian England. The occasion was the publication of a very controversial article, in the July number, 1859, of the Roman Catholic periodical called the *Rambler*.<sup>8</sup> In this issue appeared an article by (the now Blessed and Cardinal) John Henry Newman entitled *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. In this unique and ground breaking work emerge the issues of both consulting the laity and the *sensus fidelium* (even in matter as grave as doctrinal pronouncements). A little background might be of some assistance.

The original issue was one of education, but morphed, unintentionally, into a controversy about the role and function of the faithful in the institutional Church.<sup>9</sup> Newman wrote his work in support of a Catholic layperson who had encouraged, in earlier *Rambler* articles, the bishops to cooperate with the English government on an education issue. This incensed the bishops, that a lay person would offer advice to them on an issue which they deemed was their prerogative alone.

- 8 The *Rambler* was published out of London (1848-1862), and directed for the most part by converts from Anglicanism as a consequence of the Oxford Movement. Newman was variously involved with it, supporting its mission to educate the laity, but disdaining its sometimes liberal and disrespectful attitude (especially toward Catholic bishops and, at times, cradle Catholics). Newman was, for a short time in 1859, the editor of the *Rambler*.
- 9 In the January and February, 1859, issues, a Catholic expert on education, Scott Naysmyth Stokes, proffered opinions to the bishops on education, in particular, encouraging them (for good reasons) to cooperate with a newly initiated study entitled "The Duke of Newcastle's Royal Commission on Education." The bishops saw this an interference by the (Anglican, established Church "tinged") government in Catholic schools. They threatened to censure the *Rambler* unless Newman took over the editorship.

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The bishops threatened to censure the *Rambler* unless Newman took on the job as editor. He did so, reluctantly, in the spring of 1859.

In the next number, May, 1859 (written and edited by Newman), appeared a follow up article to the education articles' controversy entitled *Judgment of the English Bishops on the Royal Commission*, wherein Newman wrote these now famous words:

*'Acknowledging, then, most fully the prerogatives of the episcopate, we do unfeignedly believe, both from the reasonableness of the matter, and especially from the prudence, gentleness and considerateness which belong to them personally, that their Lordships really desire to know the opinion of the laity on those matters in which the laity are especially concerned. If even in the preparation of a dogmatic definition the faithful are consulted, as lately in the instance of the Immaculate Conception.'*<sup>10</sup>

With these words, it was all out war. Newman had no intention of offending the bishops, but was insistent on the importance of consulting the laity – and he could point to instances in past Church history, the most recent of which was that of Pio Nono in anticipation of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception. To counter the bishops' dismissal of consulting the laity, in the next, July, 1859, issue, Newman published his *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*.

One of the significant means throughout history that the Church has exercised its pursuit of the truth – in grace and prayer, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has been through a process of consultation. Our interest here in consultation (and our focus, as it was for Newman), is on the consultation of the laity. In particular, I would argue, with Newman, that truth is revealed in the laity by the presence among (and in) them (individually and in community), of the grace of the Holy Spirit received in the Sacrament of Baptism. For evidence, we need only remember the various consultations in Church history in the past, and up to the consultation process that Pope Francis has invoked in preparation for the Extraordinary Synod on the Family.

The process of consultation is not only not an innovation, but consultation is a continuation of and a development in the way the Holy Spirit is continuing to guide the Church in the way of truth. This is insightfully insisted upon by Newman by virtue of two significant principles in his thought – that of “disproportion”, and his use and analysis of the Greek word *phronema*.

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<sup>10</sup> Newman, John Henry. 'Judgment of the English Bishops on the Royal Commission'. (*Rambler*, May, 1859).

## DISPROPORTION

Underlying much of Newman's thought here is what Edward Miller refers to as the principle of disproportion.<sup>11</sup> This theological – epistemological principle undergirds Newman's insistence on the importance of a consultation of the laity, even in matters of doctrine. Regarding the principle of Disproportion, Newman suggests that the mind can conceive of an idea, but because of the limitations of human knowing, one can only “know” an idea in parts.

For example, if a number of people were to share the image that comes to their minds when the word “Jesus” is put forth, those images could well be different and varied, but all would claim some validity, some truth. What were those images?: Teacher, Shepherd, the Cross, the Crib, on the Sea, in the desert ... all have some bit of the truth, but no one “take” on the Lord encompasses the whole of who He is.

Therefore, the more “takes” if you will, we embrace of an idea, the closer we will approximate (though never reach) the whole or fullness of the idea or the truth. Conversely, to the extent we do not consult the various images, ideas, insights and experiences of others, to that extent we are farther from “the whole”, from a more truthful and accurate perception of the fullness of the idea or image. Therefore, if one listens to a Vivaldi concerto, but skips the *adagio* because it makes one sad, he or she has heard some wonderful music, but certainly has not heard a Vivaldi concerto. Therefore, in decisions concerning the Christian community, the Body of Christ and the People of God, a disservice is done not only to the laity, but to the Sacrament of Baptism and to the Holy Spirit, when the experience and insights of the laity are completely disregarded.

## PHRONEMA

With this principle of disproportion, in pursuit of theological truth, Newman insists that, since the laity are, by virtue of their baptism, in possession of the Holy Spirit, they too must be consulted (as he insists in his work – “consult,” not in the democratic sense of one person-one vote, but to assess and discern the belief and faith

11 Miller explains: “Disproportion is Newman's word to convey the truth that the human Mind is not capable of grasping all aspects of a reality or a truth one time.” He also notes that all aspects of an idea or a truth need one another. He continues: “Theological reflection is limited by the parameters of the human mind, and one of those laws is that no matter how diligently one might pursue the truth, one can never grasp, at one time and in one single understanding, all the parts of that truth.” Miller, Edward Jeremy. *John Henry Newman on the Idea of Church*. Shepherdstown, W. VA.: Patmos Press, 1987, pg. 84.



of the People of God).<sup>12</sup> And to grasp the fullness of the truth, the more consultation that occurs, the closer can be achieved an approximation of the fullness of the truth; by the same token, if this consultation is neglected, to that extent, the fullness of the truth will be less available – and in some sense, it becomes a disregard for the Holy Spirit of God. To make this point in his *On Consulting*, Newman employs a very interesting term – *phronema*. This is what makes consultation in the Church an important *theological issue*, and raises it above the wise and often overlooked practice in secular business of consultation. There are theological (above practical) reasons for taking a consultation of the laity seriously. Consultation is good business, for sure, but it is holy business in the Church. Because of this *phronema*, residing in the People of God, this “instinct” or “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit which all members of the Church possess by virtue of their baptism, affords insight into the wholeness of the faith possessed by the Church.

In Newman’s opinion, the *sensus fidelium* has a valid place in the evidence of Apostolical (*sic*) tradition – even in the preliminaries of a dogmatic definition. He would argue further – it is a reliable way to meet deficiencies in the historical evidence on particular points of dogma. And this is so because of the *phronema*, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the baptized faithful.

In his *Rambler* article, Newman addresses the *sensus fidelium*, building upon the work of Rev. Giovanni Perrone, S.J. He notes that the *sensus fidelium* is constituent of five elements, the second of which he calls *phronema*, the “instinct” which is “deep in the bosom of the mystical Body of Christ”.<sup>13</sup> *Phronema* is within the Faithful by virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism and their membership in in the Church. The words *phronema* and *phronesis* (sing. φρον, plur. φρονες), in their most ancient sense, referred to the “diaphragm,” which of course, is the muscle that, for the ancients, determined the nature and strength of one’s breath. Thus, for them it was the source for and determined the strength of the human spirit and emotions.

12 In His work, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Newman makes a clear distinction. He does not suggest that the laity would be a body for making decisions; but because they possess this “instinct” (*Phronema*) of the Holy Spirit, he insists on such a consultation; but the analogy he uses is “as one would ‘consult’ a barometer.” *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, in Gaffney, James, *Conscience, Consensus and the Development of Doctrine*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 392-3.

13 Those five constituent elements are: 1. a testimony of the apostolical (*sic*) dogma; 2. a sort of instinct, or *phronema* deep in the bosom of the mystical body of Christ; 3. a direction of the Holy Ghost; 4. an answer to prayer; and, 5. an abhorrence of error, “which it at once feels as a scandal.” *On Consulting*, (Gaffney), pp. 406-407.

## INFALLIBILITY

To complicate matters, another issue arises that would later be addressed by the Church and Pio Nono, that is of infallibility. To think, as Newman did, that the laity could be part of an infallible teaching office was unheard of. One of his colleagues, a renowned theology professor, initially called Newman's ideas about the laity and infallibility *Haersi proxima*.<sup>14</sup>

Newman would argue, theologically, that the infallibility of the Church lies in the *communitate fidelium*: – the *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia docta*; and thus the *sensus fidelium* cannot be ignored or dismissed. He describes this union of the clergy and the laity, as did Pio Nono, as a *conspiratio* – “a breathing together.”<sup>15</sup> If this is so, then a consultation of the laity is of prime importance. In his *On Consulting*, he cuts to the quick as to why he insists the faithful need to be consulted: “Why?” for Newman “. . . the answer is plain, *viz.* because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their consensus through Christendom is the voice of the infallible Church.”

Again Newman insists that the *Sensus fidelium* is a fact of history and not to be easily discarded. This ability of the laity to detect error is directed by the Holy Spirit and is an answer to prayer. It is somewhat analogous to Newman's long-standing conviction about the Church and apostolical (*sic*) authority, and the importance of an Apostolic tradition: That is, the Lord would never have afforded a revelation – which he has in Jesus Christ, as we previously stated, if He did not also provide an organ or a means to keep it from error (one of his arguments for tradition).

Newman explains: “And perhaps this is the reason why the *consensus fidelium* has, in the minds of many, fallen into the background. Yet each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected. Though the laity be but the reflection or echo of the clergy in matters of faith, yet there is something in the *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*, which is not in the pastors alone. The history of the definition of the Immaculate Conception shows us this; and it will be one among the blessings which the Holy Mother, who is the subject of it, will gain for us, in repayment of the definition, that by that very definition we are all reminded of the part which the laity have had in the preliminaries of its promulgation. Pope Pius has given us a pattern, in his manner of defining, of the duty of considering the sentiments of the laity upon a point of tradition, in spite of whatever fullness

14 Professor Gillow of Ushaw College; He among others, thought that the infallibility of the Church remained exclusively in the *Ecclesia docens* and not in the *Ecclesia docta*.

15 *On Consulting*, (Gaffney), pg. 405

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of evidence the Bishops had already thrown upon it.”<sup>16</sup> Newman concluded his now famous essay with a word of warning as well as with a word of hope:

“I think certainly that the Ecclesia *docens* is more happy when she has such enthusiastic partisans about her as are here represented, than when she cuts off the faithful from the study of her divine doctrines and the sympathy of her divine contemplations, and requires from them a *fides implicita* in her word, which in the educated classes will terminate in indifference, and in the poorer in superstition.”<sup>17</sup>

Msgr. George Talbot, an English convert and papal chamberlain for Pius IX in Rome, remarked to his bishop, regarding his suspicions about both Newman and the laity: “If a check be not placed on the laity of England they will be rulers of the Catholic Church in England instead of the Holy See and the Episcopate.” He then asked, “What is the province of the laity? ... to hunt to shoot, to entertain, these matters they understand; but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all, and this affair of Newman is purely ecclesiastical ... Dr. Newman is the most dangerous man in England, and you will see he will make use of the laity against your Grace.”<sup>18</sup>

William Ullathorne, Newman’s own bishop asked of him: “Who are the Laity?” Newman responded to him (as he writes): “...that the Church would look foolish without them.”<sup>19</sup>

### CONCLUSION:

Pope Francis, in his consultation of the laity, has offered a model for all pastors, indeed for all ministers in the church. The People of God have been imbued with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, by virtue of their baptism. The American colloquial version of this is: “Everyone has something to bring to the party.”

Therefore the leaders and pastors in the Church have a moral obligation to consult (as in “assess”) the faithful in the sense of truly discerning by consultation, how the Holy Spirit may be moving in the minds and the hearts of the faithful. It is for this reason that Newman’s theological-epistemological principle of disproportion, and the *phronema* of the Holy Spirit received at baptism, are so vital to a healthy and faithful Christian community.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* with an Introduction by John Coulson, London, 1961. Re-issued with a Foreword by Derek Warlock, Archbishop of Liverpool, London, 1986. Pg. 41.

19 Ibid. pp. 18-19.

## WHY CONSULT THE LAITY?

To consult is to acquire a more complete estimate of the reality with which one has to deal; to neglect to so do is to acquire a far less approximation of the fullness of the truth of the reality with which he or she has to deal. And this neglect in matters theological and ecclesiastical is tantamount to a neglect of the movements of the Holy Spirit – which makes religious consultation so much graver a moral imperative than consultation in the secular realm (as good as an idea as it may be).

### **A Prayer Before the Crucifix**

*by St Francis of Assisi*

Having taken the name Francis as pontiff it's little wonder that the pope has a particular devotion to his namesake, St Francis of Assisi. During the Exposition of the Holy Shroud on Holy Saturday 2013, Francis quoted the following prayer.

Most High, glorious God,  
enlighten the shadows of my heart,  
and grant me a right faith, a certain hope and perfect charity,  
sense and understanding, Lord,  
so that I may accomplish your holy and true command.  
Amen.

– Pope Francis: *Selected Prayers*, Dublin: Veritas, 2017.