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Richard Shields

Bishops caught in an Institutional Straitjacket?

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Bishops caught in an Institutional Straitjacket?

Richard Shields

Mary McAleese, a Catholic theologian and former President of Ireland, bluntly put it this way: “In my view this understanding of magisterial control over Church members is no longer sustainable. For generations it has been based on unchallenged presumptions which have shaped and protected a dominant church culture of celibate male hierarchicalism and clericalism, which silenced and scorned the voices of the faithful especially the laity, especially women and especially those who dissent both lay and clerical.” In her talk to the *Root and Branch Conference* last year in Bristol England, McAleese opined that “the Church will continue to haemorrhage members and experience a lessening of both external and internal impact unless it shifts from a culture of imposed obligation to a culture of invitation, from a catechesis of imposed obligation to a catechesis of open invitation.”¹

I am intrigued by McAleese’s notion of “a culture of imposed obligation.” While she applies it to infant baptism, I would like, as a kind of thought experiment, to “turn a critical spotlight” on the issues of hierarchicalism and clericalism and ask: to what extent are the overseers of a “culture of imposed obligation” imbued with “an attitude that reduces [their own] faith to obedience, not so much to the grace of God, as to institutional norms and expectations.”² In this article I will employ the psychological construct of “*over-identification*” as a heuristic for understanding the often unbending stances of some bishops and priests regarding church practices and policies. The tendency to defend their decisions by conflating them with dogmas and divine revelation adds to their seeming inability to talk openly about the contradictions in the beliefs and

1 Mary McAleese, “No Synodality Without Freedom of Speech – Canon law must acknowledge the human rights of Church members.” Dr Mary McAleese – Root and Branch Synod Bristol. Association of Catholic Priests

2 Ibid.

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practices of ordinary Catholics.³ What is behind the inclination of many bishops and clergy to see their vocation and the power of their office primarily in terms of guardians of the Church's faith and protectors of the morals of its members? I suggest that the concept of "*over-identification*" can be helpful in explaining the seeming impasse between the ordained and non-ordained in the Church when it comes to issues of shared decision making. Finally, I explore pathways to change that move from the bottom up. Initiatives based on the prophetic role of the laity and their sense of the faith⁴ of the Church and the synodal path toward, as a way of encouraging, in McAleese's words, "the phenomenal resource that is the talent, insight and wisdom of the faithful."

WHO ARE YOU, YOUR EXCELLENCY, WHEN YOU ARE NOT BEING A BISHOP?

The question of who are you is obviously one of identity. What does it say of one's identity if the answer is "I am always a bishop"? It is not a question of whether the role defines the person or vice versa; but a query about the balance between the two. When this balance tilts in the direction of the role, there is a danger of identifying oneself so much with the institutional Church or its clerical offices that one's objectivity is skewed or individuality compromised.⁵

Examples of bishops and clergy as "company men" are not hard to find. When, for example, Pope Benedict (Josef Ratzinger) was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith he supported an institutional distance from the laity. In 1990 he wrote that "the bishops of the Church" by reason of their magisterial office "must protect God's People from the danger of deviations and confusion, guaranteeing them the objective possibility of professing the authentic faith free from error, at all times and in diverse situations."⁶ It is not surprising, then, that as Archbishop of Munich-Friesing he handled cases of clergy sexual abuse in a

3 See: Richard Shields, "On the Duty of Ecclesiastical Office Holders to Listen to the Laity," *The Furrow*, 72 (2021): 493-500.

4 The sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the laity is also referred to as the sense of the faith of the faithful (*sensus fidei fidelium*). I use these terms interchangeably in this article.

5 For a more robust discussion of identity and role of ordained ministers see: Eamonn Fitzgibbon, "Clericalization of the Laity – A prescient Warning of Pope Francis for the Catholic Church in Ireland," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 85 (2020): 16-34 and Brendan Hoban, "Elephants in the Living Room", *The Furrow* 47 (1996): 659–69.

6 *Donum Veritatis*, n. 14. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html

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manner more protective of the offenders than the victims.⁷ Professor Werner Huth, a psychoanalyst and long-time professor at the Jesuit Philosophical College in Munich, suggests that Ratzinger's actions should be attributed not so much to indifference to the victims, as a felt need to protect the Church's public image, to spare it shame and the scandal of having its moral failings exposed.⁸

Ratzinger's subsequent explanation was guarded and ambiguous – an apology without admission of guilt, qualified with several broad theological reservations.⁹ Huth suggests that the kind of reaction, witnessed in many other bishops who have historically covered up crimes of abuse, is indicative of “over-identification” with the ecclesiastical office and its role within the institution. “People like that have great difficulty letting themselves be open to others. They see themselves as representatives of their institution, making it almost impossible to carry on as ordinary citizens.”¹⁰

This phenomenon does *not* seem to be the case with Pope Francis. Much has been written since the beginning of his pontificate about Francis' approach to leadership and Church authority. When he refers to himself as a sinner and admits that he is not infallible, we hear Jorge Bergoglio talking about himself.¹¹ What also comes through is his vision of the Church as the people of God. “The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary.”¹²

- 7 “Ex-Pope Benedict knew about sexual abuse as archbishop of Munich,” *Euronews*, January 1, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/20/ex-pope-benedict-xvi-knew-about-sexual-abuse-as-archbishop-of-munich-report-says>; “Munchener Missbrauchsfall: Schwere Vorwürfe gegen Benedikt XVI,” *Katholisch.de*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/32613-muenchner-missbrauchsfall-schwere-vorwurfe-gegen-benedikt-xvi>
- 8 “Psychoanalytiker Dr. Werner Huth,” *Abend Zeitung*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.abendzeitung-muenchen.de/muenchen/psychoanalytiker-dr-werner-huth-es-ist-eine-ueberforderung-wenn-menschen-zum-zoelibat-gezwungen-werden-art-794345>
- 9 “Former Pope Benedict asks forgiveness over handling of abuse cases,” *Irish Times*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/former-pope-benedict-asks-for-forgiveness-over-handling-of-abuse-cases-1.4796939>.
- 10 Huth, “Psychoanalytiker.”
- 11 Antonio Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis”, September 21, 2013. “L'Osservatore Romano” of 21 September 2013 Francis (vatican.va)
- 12 Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 2013, n. 111. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

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Pope Francis can not only live with, but has a preference for “a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”¹³ In Vatican journalist John Allen’s view, “the pontiff seems utterly unabashed about admitting mistakes, confessing ignorance, and acknowledging that he may have left himself open to misinterpretation.”¹⁴ Two popes, two ways of understanding the ecclesiastical office; as well as two diverging visions for the Church. Francis conveys a sense of a synodal Church—people and pastors, walking together, listening to and discerning the will of God for the Church as a community. Benedict represents a traditional hierarchical view that places bishops above the laity, with the responsibility of protecting them from doctrinal error and, if you will, from themselves. Are we at an impasse or a turning point in the Church’s life?

OVER-IDENTIFICATION AND THE GAP BETWEEN THE ORDAINED AND NON-ORDAINED IN THE CHURCH

Clericalism, an overused and thus imprecise word, oversimplifies what is wrong. It offers a framework too narrow for doing what needs to be done to bring about effective change in prelates who are overly focused on structure and authority. More than a pedestal on which clergy place themselves or the laity place the clergy, clericalism represents an over-identification with and preference for a model of Church which ignores the role of the faithful in articulating the whole Church’s understanding of Christian beliefs and practices. “Over-identify,” an admittedly psychological term, refers to a disposition or attitude in which one’s identity is so conflated with the institutional Church that it becomes difficult to separate one’s self from one’s role. When the Church is defined as hierarchical and religious truth as “taught” rather than “discerned,” over-identification is manifested in a misplaced certitude in doctrinal wording, rigidity in authoritative structures, and hypocrisy in terms of denial, silencing, covering up uncomfortable realities, all of which build barriers to mutually respectful relations between the faithful and their pastors.

Clerical superiority is reinforced both in doctrine and liturgy. Traditional Church teachings on the sacrament of ordination speak

13 Ibid. n. 49.

14 John Allen, “Under Francis There is a New Dogma,” *Crux*, July 13, 2015, <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/07/13/under-francis-theres-a-new-dogma-papal-fallibility>

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of an ontological change in the person himself that “permits the exercise of a ‘sacred power’ that comes from Christ,” so that the ordained “possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself.”¹⁵ Neil Ormerod notes that the “notion of ontological change makes the sacramental character or seal a personal possession, [playing] powerfully into certain types of priestly spirituality, giving them as a personal possession a privileged place in the church ... [This, in turn] feeds into a sense of priestly identity and the clericalism it breeds, making of priests a special caste who hold a power which is unaccountable to anyone because it is isolated from any set of social and interpersonal relations.”¹⁶ Holy Orders situates the consecrated person in the tiered order of Church organization. Construing ordination as such does not deny, but obscures the notion of being set aside for service both of the Gospel and the faithful community.¹⁷ It also risks situating priestly and episcopal identity within a “culture of imposed obligation,” sealed as it were by an indelible mark or ontological change.

The present pope’s call for a Church in which people and their pastors walk together is not grounds for unbounded optimism. There remain those at the highest levels of Church governance who are invested in a tiered model of Church. Recently, Cardinals George Pell and Gerhard Mueller launched scathing attacks on the German “Synodal Way.” According to Pell, questions raised by participants in the synod threaten “the unity on the major elements in the hierarchy of truths” which requires unquestioning adherence to traditional teachings of the Church. Conflating teaching authority with divine revelation, Mueller pronounced the so-called the liberal views of some German bishops to be heretical and he urged German Catholics to reject the authority of the bishops who endorse them.¹⁸

It is obvious, then, that a lop-sided understanding of the Church and its governing-teaching authority endures. Such views

15 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, paragraphs 1538 and 1548, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4T.HTM

16 Neil Ormerod, “Sex Abuse, a Royal Commission, and the Australian Church,” *Theological Studies*, 80 (2019) 4: 950-966, especially 958-960.

17 Maciej Raczynski-Rozek, “Viri Probati and Presiding Over the Eucharist according to Edward Schillebeeckx,” *Bogoslovní Vestník* 78 (2018) 1: 105-119.

18 “Cardinal Pell calls for Vatican reprimand over sexuality remarks by a cardinal and bishop,” *America Magazine*, March 2022, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/03/17/cardinal-pell-sexuality-doctrine-church-242620>). “Cardinal Calls on Pope Francis to Intervene,” *Catholic World Report*, May, 2021 available at <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2021/05/27/cardinal-muller-calls-on-pope-francis-to-intervene-with-the-church-in-germany/>; also reported in German in the *Tagespost*, available at <https://www.die-tagespost.de/kirche/weltkirche/kardinal-mueller-haeretischen-bischoefen-darf-man-nicht-gehorden-art-226709>

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reinforce the notion not only that the laity have an inferior position in the Church, but also are less trust-worthy than bishops and priests in matters of faith and Church – hardly an attitude capable of taking the questions of the laity seriously. As John Burkhard points out, the Catholic faithful have every right to question and “the hierarchy has no right to foreshorten the human process of learning and the normal process of growing in understanding of the Christian faith.”¹⁹

TRADITIONAL CATHOLICISM AND THE LOSS OF TRANSCENDENCE

Today the Catholic Church is experiencing, at least in Western nations, a steady exodus of members who find it difficult to reconcile common sense with claims of transcendent truth. But there are many Catholics who doubt, have reservations about, or outright disagree with many aspects of Church teachings or practices, yet refuse to waver in their commitment to their Church. Theirs is a dissent rooted not in defiance or lack of instruction. The situation of faith today is precarious. Western culture (and I write from this perspective) has changed over the past two centuries from a hierarchically structured and religiously interpreted world, to one in which authority is bestowed by the people and religion is left to personal choice. A shift to what Charles Taylor describes a “closed world structure,” a view of the world that excludes reliance on what is beyond empirical measuring and requires instead scientific technological models of understanding the world.

This loss of transcendence makes it harder to maintain traditional beliefs and practices, fostering instead norms and practices which make reference to what is beyond nature (supernatural) unnecessary or even detrimental.²⁰ Hans Joas, building on Taylor’s research, argues to what he calls “the secular option,” a cultural context in which belief and unbelief stand on equal footing and “believers have had to justify their particular faith, not just as a specific confession or with respect to other regions, but also as such, as faith *per se* – *vis a vis* a lack of faith ... [which] has become normalized.”²¹ On a mundane level this reality is played out in an attitude of tolerance, in which religion is set aside as a non-issue or “homogenized” in a way that relativizes absolute claims.

19 John J. Burkhard, OFM Conv., *The Sense of the Faith in History: Its sources, Reception, and Theology* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 2022), 341.

20 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 551-592.

21 Hans Joas, “The Church in a World of Options,” in *The Church in Pluralist Society: Social and Political Roles*, ed. Cornelius J. Casey and Fainche Ryan, (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 45-55, at 49.

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A Church in which cohesion and compliance were once taken for granted is now confronted with a new “normal.” Religion and/or belief have become options (personal or private matters) and judgments of fact and value are made to the exclusion of any transcendent reality or truth. In this reality to invoke authority to pressure, threaten, or force a semblance of unity would be counter-productive. Bernard Lonergan warns that where authority is substituted for dialogue and power is used to control, a reaction of “lasting resentment and a smoldering rebellion” inevitably set in. In place of the desired common “mode of understanding, there arise misunderstanding, distrust, suspicion, fear, hostility, factions.”²²

However, many bishops and bishops’ conferences still respond to serious questions and challenges from the laity in an authoritarian manner. For example, recently the United States Bishops Conference shut the door on a discussion which *they* initiated on denying communion to pro-choice politicians with a proscriptive instruction on the Eucharist. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee justified its discriminatory policy against LGBTQ Catholics by repeating the very teachings that were being challenged. Both responses appealed overwhelmingly to doctrines in, to employ McAleese’s language, a “catechesis of imposed obligation.” Both responses were formal and abstract. Missing in these bishops’ actions was the pastoral concern, the “who am I to judge?” modelled by the bishop of Rome. Captive, it would seem, to a “culture of imposed obligation” and defensive of Church dogmas, these ecclesiastical office holders failed to engage in any pastoral *listening*. The damage this causes is plain. Charles Taylor puts it well. “Searchers don’t feel welcomed, invited to express what they’re looking for. Instead, they hear embattled defenses of dogmas, of moral teachings which often don’t connect with their experience, of a magisterium which, in spite of all the difficult dilemmas where honest Christians will almost certainly disagree, claimed [until recently] to speak with one voice. This itself was enough to undermine the charisma of heartfelt conviction which is central for the teaching of Christian faith.”²³

DEFENDING THE DIVINE IN A HUMAN CHURCH

When it comes to authority and power in the Church, how many office holders so identify with the institution that they can no longer enter into the experiences of their parishioners – especially

22 Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Right and Historical Mindedness,” in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 51, 1977, 132-143, at 133.

23 Charles Taylor, “Shapes of Faith Today,” in *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision*, ed. by Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean, João J. Vila-Chã, 2016, 269-283, at 276, <http://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-VIII/21-TOC- McLean.pdf>.

those who have issues with the Church? The sanctity or holiness of the Church presents a particularly thorny challenge. Obviously, all members of the clergy including the Pope are sinners. While holiness remains an inspiration and a measure of faithfulness, the notion of “holy, Catholic Church” is often skewed by a rhetoric of what Joas describes as “self-sacralization” – a disposition which “prevents the institution from judging itself by the same high standards it uses with regard to others.”²⁴ Bishops are at the pinnacle of a clericalist culture. How they dress and are addressed, sets them off (and often isolates them) from the rest of the faithful. Even in the Eucharistic prayer, “all the faithful” appears almost as a footnote to “pope, bishop, the order of bishops, and all the clergy.” To the extent that a priest or bishop feels that every statement made or decision taken must represent the purity and inerrancy of Church teachings, as well as their own integrity and that of their office, the “culture of imposed obligation” perdures and authentic dialogue remains out of reach. This way of thinking lacks “historical consciousness,”²⁵ ignores the truth that Church doctrines were formulated in different historical periods. Many have meanings that do not make sense in new historical circumstances and become impediments to rather than anchors of faith. “Historical consciousness challenges the church to a cooperative model of teaching and learning...rather than a competitive one.”²⁶

Both the public at large and the media in particular tend to identify the Church with its office holders. Defending the institution does little to justify ecclesiastical decisions; but instead draws criticism and foments skepticism. When bishops or priests are convicted of crimes against children, embezzlement of church funds, or leading a double-life, the whole Church is the subject of ridicule. In the light of public scrutiny, an abstract theological distinction between the Holy Catholic Church and a Church of sinners doesn’t hold up. Defensive attitudes only serve to increase the pressure to become absorbed in a role.

24 Hans Joas, “The Church in a World of Options,” in *The Church in Pluralist Society: Social and Political Roles*, ed. Cornelius J Casey and Fainche Ryan, (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 45-55, at 48.

25 Lonergan, “Natural Right.” see also: Bernard Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World- View to Historical-Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William Ryan and Bernard Tyrrell, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974), 1-9.

26 Burkhard, *Sense of the Faith*, p. 339. In *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis gives a compelling example of how historical consciousness and pastoral responsibility can be mutually reinforcing. https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf Many negative responses to the Pope’s exhortation, however, indicate how difficult the transition to historical consciousness remains for many members of the hierarchy.

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When clergy over-identify with an ideal image of the Church, they too easily get caught up in the rules, in a “culture of imposed obligation.” When bishops see themselves as the primary or sole defenders of orthodoxy, their statements wrongly assume a tone of righteousness, if not infallibility. The role absorbs the man, whose personal fears, feelings and thoughts are kept private; while public statements and decisions repeat and reinforce formulaic doctrines. Caught up in the performative aspects of the office, the ecclesiastical office holder “doesn’t have time to listen to those who are suffering, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned: the evil of clericalism is a really awful thing.”²⁷

Is there a way out of an understanding of ecclesiastical office that places more value on teaching than on listening, that views the voice of the faithful as less value than that of the *magisterium*? What pathways are opening that will allow us to see bishops and priests (and them to see themselves) as co-responsible with the laity for accomplishing the Church’s mission? Ordination does not place one in control of the truths of the faith. Ordained ministry is in the service of the Gospel (2 Timothy 2:2). Persevering in the teachings of the apostles is a responsibility and a gift to all the baptized (Acts 2:42).

SENSE OF FAITH AND SYNODALITY OR HOW TO STOP AN OCEAN LINER

The Catholic Church can be likened to a big ocean liner – slow moving, difficult to stop or reverse course. We ignore at our own peril Hans Joas’ comment on the challenge to change “that institutional structures and their inertia resist lofty declarations and tend to restabilize themselves after phases of turmoil...”²⁸ From a structural-organizational perspective there is reason for pessimism. Confidence, however, in the reality of the Holy Spirit and conviction of the sense of the faith of believers are grounds for hope.

a. The “sense of the faith” and what it means to be Church

At the start we need to recognize the unquestionable need in the Church for “formation at a deep and profound level” about the meaning and practice of the sense of the faith.²⁹ While there have been significant developments in understanding the “sense of the faith” since Cardinal Newman’s famous essay “On Consulting the

27 Pope Francis, “Morning Meditation”, December 13, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20161213_people-discarded.html

28 Hans Joas, “The Church in a World of Options,” 46.

29 Fainche Ryan, “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine: The Twenty-First Century,” in *The Church in Pluralist Society*, 101-122, esp.113-117.

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Faithful in Matters of Doctrine,”³⁰ even today his work remains relevant, especially in situations where the faithful are not consulted. In concluding his discussion of Newman’s contribution to the “sense of faithful” in the Church, John Burkhard notes several characteristics that I have outlined and adapted in the following four points.³¹

- The sense of the faithful does not require any expertise in theological language or the ability to explain any specific doctrine. Newman referred to the “*sensus*” as an instinct, not in the sense of a hunch or a vague feeling, but “a more global grasp of reality,”³² specifically the reality of God. “Sense” describes knowledge, in faith, of the reality of God (see: 2 Timothy 1: 12) and serves as the basis for the following three characteristics.
- The sense of the faithful is an activity. While the laity “know the content of their faith convictions,”³³ the dynamism of the sense of faith unfolds in the movement of discernment, a prayerful openness to the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The sense of the faithful functions, if I may use the term, as a “smell test.” The faithful are able to detect when something is not right with what is being taught by the hierarchy or in the structures of teaching and authority in the Church. Where “various opinions, customs, and institutions” are out of sync with the Gospel, the faithful exhibit “a jealousy of error.”³⁴
- The sense of the faith is integral to a movement of faith toward a *conspiratio* (a shared faith-conscious or community of belief) of bishops and laity. Rather than a moment in time, the sense of the faith is an unfolding, open to disagreement, where “the strength of one makes up for the deficiency of another.”³⁵

These characteristics are of particular significance to the ecclesial practice of the sense of the faith, especially where there is no shared starting point. The concerns and aspirations of Catholics vary from place to place, from continent to continent, and from one historical period to another. When we speak of the sense of the faith in a practical vein, we must view it as a partial, provisional phenomenon

30 John Henry Newman, “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine,” *Rambler*, July, 1859, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html>

31 See: Burkhard, *Sense of the Faith*, 96-99. I am indebted to Burkhard for his insightful summary of the characteristics of the sense of the faithful according to Newman. However, the contents of these four bullets express my own sense of where Newman’s ideas can still lead the Church. Any deficiency in interpreting Newman should be attributed to me, not to Burkhard.

32 Burkhard, *Sense of the Faith*, 97.

33 Ibid. 97.

34 John Henry Newman, “On Consulting the Faithful, cited by Burkhard, *Sense of the Faith*, 99.

35 Newman, “On Consulting the Faithful,” cited by Burkhard, *Sense of the Faith*, 95.

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– expecting neither too much nor too little of it. As *conspiratio* is not an “all at once” experience, not every conversation must include the pastors. In this context it makes sense to drop the broad theological categories “universal consensus” and “infallibility in believing,” which obscure the conflictual and disruptive quality of discourse among parishioners on even practical matters. “The history of the *sensus fidelium* is, then, a checkered one. Just as there are instances when the pope and bishops faltered, failed, or overreached, so, too, instances can be adduced when theologians and the laity at large got it wrong.”³⁶ We don’t have to get it right the first time. What we do have to have are a few people who are prepared to ask “what does it mean to be Church?” and who are willing to help the Church find its place in the world today.

b. The “sense of the faith” is not just about doctrine

The historical development of the theology of the “sense of the faith” has been focused more on doctrine than practice. Because of this, the discussion has been deficient in clarifying the connection between what we believe and its implications for what Pope Francis describes as the Church’s “customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures.”³⁷ Newman, we should recall, did not reduce matters of faith to only magisterial teachings, but included “subjects on which the laity are especially concerned.”³⁸ These are not just issues of style. How effective the Church is in communicating the message it was entrusted with (2 Corinthians 5:16–6:2) depends on how it acts. Practice either makes doctrine accessible or obscures the message. Church practices – from how it is governed to popular devotions – are not to be considered of lesser importance than church teachings. They are, in fact, the Church teaching by example – be that good or bad.³⁹ Shaping the life of the Church as a visible community is not the sole prerogative of the hierarchy, but a responsibility shared all the baptized. Hierarchialism and clericalism warrant serious discussion and decisive action. As Munich’s Cardinal Marx recently pointed out, how we regard offices in the Church

36 John J. Burkhard, “The Sensus Fidelium: Old Questions, New Challenges”, *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 70/2015, 27-43, at 28. View of The Sensus Fidelium: Old Questions, New Challenges (bc.edu).

37 Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, n. 27.

38 “Judgment of the English Bishops on the Royal Commission,” *Rambler*, May 1859, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/contemporary.html>

39 Karl Rahner, “Practical Theology Within the Totality of Theological Disciplines,” in *Theological Investigations*, Volume 9, tr. Graham Harrison (London: Darton, Longmans, and Todd, 1972), 104-105.

too often embodies “a way of thinking and an attitude”⁴⁰ that gets in the way of the laity hearing and acknowledging their own voices and makes it difficult for many in the Church to recognize “the phenomenal resource that is the talent, insight and wisdom of the faithful.”⁴¹

To summarize, the sense of faith is a dimension of Church life. *It does not require total unanimity in order to be real.* It is not an outcome of discussion, but the basis for the legitimacy and necessity for dialogue in the Church. The laity do not have to wait for a process that has the official sanction of the institutional church or one that fits within diocesan structures.

c. The Synod and synodality

As Catholics around the world take part in a Vatican initiated consultation, others are already in a process of diocesan and national synods. Many Catholics have placed their hopes for change on the Synodal Path inaugurated by Pope Francis in October 2021 and moving toward a full assembly of bishops in 2023. It is not surprising that for many Catholics “synodality” refers to a Church structure—a meeting of delegates, clerical and lay, to discuss and decide on some topic or theme. This has given rise to expectations about the ordination of women, access of divorced Catholics to the Eucharist, acceptance of same sex marriage and a number of other hot button issues. It also raises questions of representation – how are delegates selected, who do they speak for or answer to?

Pope Francis, however, reminds us that synodality is more than an official assembly, it is a way of being Church. Synodality is about building a community of shared faith and moral consciousness – what God expects of the Church in the 21st century.⁴² Over fifty years ago Karl Rahner explored the notion of dialogue in the Church. Although he did not use the term “synodality,” what Rahner said sheds light on the notion of synodality as an essential dimension of Catholic life.⁴³ Dialogue among believers has to be rooted in the truth of God. It must be a discussion grounded in faith and aimed at discerning what we believe God is calling us to. It must, according to Rahner, have a missionary impulse. More than an inner Church debate, dialogue must be a transformative

40 „Es geht um Haltungsveränderungen,“ *Vatican News*, March 13, 2022.

<https://www.vaticannews.va/de/kirche/news/2022-03/muenchen-kardinal-reinhard-marx-kirche-deutschland-reform-glaube.html>

41 McAleese, “No Synodality Without Freedom of Speech.”

42 Pope Francis, “Speech on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

43 Karl Rahner, “Dialogue in the Church” in *Theological Investigations*, volume 10, tr. David Bourke, New York: Herder and Herder, 1973, 103-121.

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conversation in which all parties are learning how to enter more deeply into the reality of God in the world and at the same time avoiding a reductionist approach to either Church teaching or the situation of the faith today.

d. Synodality and the life of the believer

Obviously, Catholics talk to each other about any variety of things going on in their Church. Few, however, would see this as consequential for the life and mission of the Church; nor would they see themselves as “the Church” taking responsibility for itself. A dialogue about clericalism, for example, is no trivial matter. Yet, regardless of expressions of support for or criticism of dialogue from Church leadership, the reality remains that governance is reserved exclusively to ordained men, who may or may not include lay men and women in their structures. This prompts the question: *Cui bono?* What difference will it make? The Pope himself, recognizes the inertia at the heart of this feeling, but makes it clear that complacency is not an acceptable response. “I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities ... I encourage everyone to [do so] generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear.”⁴⁴

Dialogue in the Church, according to Rahner, should not, therefore be considered primarily as a consultation leading up to any decision-making assemblies of the institutional Church.⁴⁵ The faithful are not junior partners in ecclesiastical reform. They have a right to meet and question, challenge and learn, and in mutual conversation to experience the mood and motivation to insist that they are co-responsible with the clergy for the good of the Church. The “grass roots” of the People of God can and should take up the challenge of ending clericalism. They understand – perhaps more than they realize – what being a bishop is about. Their participation in the universal priesthood of Christ provides a horizon for understanding and judging the ministerial priesthood. What is lacking, however, is the practice necessary to make this appreciative understanding operative. Confidence in the reality of the Holy Spirit and conviction of the sense of the faith of believers are grounds for hope. A dialogue about clericalism can be legitimately initiated by a group of even three or four of the faithful. A small beginning will help all who participate not only to understand the situation that causes them concern, but to come to know themselves as vital to the life of the Church. Theological

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, n. 33.

⁴⁵ Rahner, “Dialog in the Church.”

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correctness is not a requirement for being part of the conversation. Discernment means entering a process in which issues are sorted out, a new consciousness emerges, and a contemporary vision of ministry is developed.⁴⁶ What is needed are people who are ready to ask what it means to be a Christian in a Church struggling to be faithful in world that seems no longer to need faith; people who will speak with a confidence, not because they represent a movement or a power group in the Church, but because they have strong voices and they are saying something that needs to be heard. Theology refers such action to the Holy Spirit. It is the fruit of discernment, a genuine self-realization of the Church, even if only partial and provisional. In a word, these conversations are acts of the Church, of the People of God.⁴⁷

There is no crystal ball to predict how this will happen. What a lay response might do or even look like will only emerge when parishioners begin to talk in a serious conversations based on concern for the Church. According to German canon lawyer Christoph Ohly, “because of being bound to one another in the Church, the laity have the possibility, even the responsibility, of offering their advice, their viewpoint, and thus their influence on the life of the Church in matters of teaching.”⁴⁸ But most important, as McAleese points out, they “can showcase to the Church in general and the magisterium in particular what it is to be an equal citizen of the Church, how to respectfully embrace freedom of speech, how to listen to, how to hear and how to trust the voices of lay men and women who care about the Church and who are open to guidance from the Holy Spirit. Their fresh wisdom may yet provide answers to problems a decomposing hierarchical infrastructure cannot face.”⁴⁹

46 Raczynski-Rozek, “Viri Probati,” p. 115.

47 Rahner, “Dialog in the Church”.

48 Quoted in Burkhard, *Sense of the Faith*, 37.

49 McAleese, “No synodality.”