

**Ways of listening to the Holy Spirit: Synodality and the *Sensus Fidei***

As we spoke about at Senatus in December, the approaching Plenary Council highlights that the Holy Spirit speaks to the Church in many different ways. We are to ‘listen to what the Spirit is saying’ (*Rev 2:7*), as John in the Apocalypse exhorted the seven local churches of Asia Minor whom he addressed.

The Church is a ‘listening’ Church of her very nature, since faith itself involves openness to hear God’s word and trustful obedience and unreserved assent to that word once we’ve heard it. God’s word to humanity was complete and definitive in Jesus Christ. So on the one hand, our ongoing ‘listening’ to God includes an irrevocable commitment to the definitive fullness of truth already given by him to us in Jesus. Vatican II taught: ‘The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ (*Dei Verbum 4*) In that sense, we must never seek ‘new revelations’ of what God is saying. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church 65*)

‘Yet’, the *Catechism* tells us, ‘even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries.’ (66) On our pilgrim journey God does lead us on (as individuals and as the whole Church) to ever-new understandings – though never, obviously, so as to contradict what he’s said before, truths we already believe with certainty. Pope Francis expresses these two aspects of the old and the new: ‘God is always new; He never denies himself, He never says that something He had said was a mistake, never; but He always surprises...When one is on a journey one always finds new things, things one does not know.’ (*Meditation*, 13 October 2014)

The idea that listening *to one another*, and to the laity in particular, might help us discover God’s will for our present time, is not some ‘innovation’ of Pope Francis. St John Paul II wrote: ‘We need to make our own the ancient pastoral wisdom which, without prejudice to their authority, encouraged Pastors to listen more widely to the entire People of God. Significant is Saint Benedict’s reminder to the Abbot of a monastery, inviting him to consult even the youngest members of the community: “By the Lord’s inspiration, it is often a younger person who knows what is best”. And Saint Paulinus of Nola urges: “Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes”.’ (Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 45 (2001))

It’s good to recall, for example, that prior to their dogmatic definitions of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, Pius IX and Pius XII consulted all the bishops of the world to ascertain what the devotion of their people was in these matters.

This is all part of what is meant by ‘synodality’: discerning God’s will in communion, in the diversity of perspectives. ‘A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realises that listening “is more than simply hearing”. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (*Jn 14:17*), in order to know what he “says to the Churches” (*Rev 2:7*).’ (Francis *Address*, 17 October 2015)

In particular of course, a synod is a council of Bishops, from general (ecumenical) to local (provincial). It has always been part of the structure of the Church that she is governed not simply by the Pope in isolation, but by the Pope *and the Bishops in communion with him*. Christ set up leadership in his Church with Peter (and his successors, the Popes) embodying *unity*; and *all* the Apostles (and their successors, the Bishops) embodying *catholicity* – that is, variety and universality. Of course, this doesn't mean the College of Bishops can 'veto' the Pope: 'The college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is understood together with the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter as its head. The pope's power of primacy over all, both pastors and faithful, remains whole and intact. In virtue of his office, that is as Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme and universal power over the Church.' (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* 22)

Synodality also connects with the *sensus fidei*, the 'sense of the faith' of which Vatican II spoke: 'The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith (*sensus fidei*) when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God.' (*Lumen Gentium* 12)

Again, the meaning is not that the laity, or a group of them, can 'veto' the teaching of the magisterium – as though, if a lot of Catholics were disobeying the teaching of the Church, that would somehow invalidate or 'outvote' the teaching.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained under St John Paul II: 'Dissent sometimes also appeals to a kind of sociological argumentation which holds that the opinion of a large number of Christians would be a direct and adequate expression of the "supernatural sense of the faith". Actually, the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply identified with the "sensus fidei"...'

'Although theological faith as such...cannot err, the believer can still have erroneous opinions since all his thoughts do not spring from faith. Not all the ideas which circulate among the People of God are compatible with the faith. This is all the more so given that people can be swayed by a public opinion influenced by modern communications media. Not without reason did the Second Vatican Council emphasise the indissoluble bond between the "sensus fidei" and the guidance of God's People by the magisterium of the Pastors. These two realities cannot be separated.' (*Donum Veritatis* 35 (1990); cf. International Theological Commission *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* 113-119 (2014))

So hopefully those clarifications help us understand synodality and the *sensus fidei* as important aspects of the Church's life, while removing any confusions that might arise in their connection.