

St Joan's Alliance Centenary Briefing Paper

The Reception of Doctrine and the Sensus Fidei/Fidelium

In contrast with earlier ages, even a century ago, rapid communications have led to a tremendous burgeoning of the Church's teaching office. In the last 50 years there has been an unprecedented number of catechism, directories, encyclicals, episcopal letters and curial instructions. There has been a far more specific teaching than at any time in the past. We need to look not only at the degrees of authority these outpourings carry but also recover an understanding of the importance of the principle of reception of teaching (which includes laws) and the place of the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) and of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*). The difference has been described by Gaillardetz¹, a leading theologian expert in this matter, as that in *sensus fidei* each believer, through baptism, has a sense of the faith, and *sensus fidelium* is that which the whole people of God believe.

The Vatican Council II in *Lumen Gentium* #12 "The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf 1.Jn 2:20 & 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people when from the bishops to the last of the faithful they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals". This does not mean that individuals or groups cannot be led astray or be wrong. Its presence is more sure when there is general consensus of opinion- but even this not enough – for centuries Christians thought slavery to be moral.

Newman held that "while the multitude may falter in its judgement we have certainty when the whole church "in due course rests and acquiesces in a deliberate judgement". What is important here is the stress on the whole church. Vatican II underlined this. The first curial draft of *Lumen Gentium* put the Pope first and the laity at the bottom. The Council changed it so that the order is the mystery of the church, then the people of God and only then the hierarchy. This sees the church first as the work of God and a means of God's presence, then as a community of people, and only then a community with a structure and a hierarchy within it to carry out its task.

As so often in Vatican II documents, contradictory ideas were placed together, so that the faithful in coming to belief must follow the teaching authority of the Pope and bishops (*LG* ^{12 & 25}) were placed side by side" so that the whole message given by the Council was that the body of the faithful cannot err in matters of belief, but in coming to those beliefs it must follow the teaching authority of the pope and bishops.

Gaillardetz suggests that what is needed is a new synthesis, gained through dialogue. The Church should be sure when proclaiming a truth not just that it is not contrary to the bible, or the world around us, or tradition, but that it ensures the truth is not contrary to the faith of the Pope, the bishops of the faith of the whole church.

Where reception is concerned The New Dictionary of theology ² article by Rausch SJ sees Reception as a process whereby "an ecclesial community incorporates into its own life a

particular decision, teaching or practice". This practice emerged during the first millennium when the church was understood as a communion of churches and during this time ecclesiastical teaching decisions became normative for the larger church only when they were received by the faithful. The Pauline use of this concept was in the context of handing on tradition, and the same dynamic took place in the formation of the NT canon, those writings which were accepted by the early Christians as "expressions of the apostolic faith". Later liturgical practices, church laws and customs of one church were received by other communities. In the late medieval or the Tridentine church, however, the excessively hierarchical concept of church virtually rejected reception.

The use of conscience is closely related to the principle of Reception. Here again the Magisterium grudgingly accepts the importance of this but insists it has to be guided by them. The Curial draft of the Council "Declaration of Religious Freedom" (DH#14) read that the faithful were to inform their consciences "according to the teaching of the church". This was held by the Council fathers to be too restrictive and it was replaced by "**carefully attend** to the sacred and **certain** doctrine of the Church". This raises question – Can a doctrine be certain if it is not widely received? The Declaration of Religious Freedom states that in daily Christian living each believer "must engage their conscience in concrete decisions for which they alone will be responsible before God, but also must take responsibility to see their consciences are properly informed.

Conscience has to be informed, and not lightly invoked, but it would be negated if the only source of information was the Magisterium, much of whose recent dictats seem to be open to question to many of the faithful, and about which no enquiry into the *sensus fidei* had been made.

Gaillardetz in his significant study of authority points out that in the Church, since at last the 16th Century, there has been the tendency to divide the Church into two groups, *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* – the teaching and learning church. To Newman the whole community participates in the handing on of the faith: this does not mean that bishops abandon their role as authentic teachers but rather that before they teach, along with careful and prayerful study of scripture and tradition, they should take into account the insights of the faithful. According to St Cyprian "it is a bishop's duty not only to teach but also to learn". How far is this done today? How much does the Pope listen to the bishops? It is known that when the Synods of Bishops come up with findings that displease the Vatican, these are excised from the final report. Instead of the bishops together with the pontiff governing the church it seems as if the former have been reduced to an executive, while the curia takes on a policy making role.

The starting point in the early church was not doctrine but the testimony of the apostolic community of faith. Both the Marian infallible dogmas emerged from the devotional life of the church before being proposed as doctrine. In the section on "becoming a community of dialogue and discernment" another Jesuit authority on Reception, Richard Gaillardetz, speaks of the Pope and bishops as rightly claiming to teach with an authority that comes from the Spirit of God. But that Spirit speaks not through an infused knowledge but is to be heard "in the testimony of the Scriptures and the living tradition

of the Church manifested, in large part, in the testimony of the entire believing community”.

Vatican 2 was moving beyond the demarcation of the teaching and the learning church to a “new community of dialogue and discernment. In *Gaudium et Spes* (#92) we have a call for the church to show itself as “a sign of that amity that renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it. Such a mission requires us first of all to create in the church itself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, and to acknowledge all legitimate diversity” the passage goes on to say that all the people of God, not just the pastors, will in this way be able to engage in fruitful dialogue and to this end “let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything”.

In the 1980s the US episcopate really put dialogue into action in the preparation of pastorals on economics and peace and war. This process came to an end when the one on the place of women in the Church, agreed by the people involved in the process and by the episcopate, was so eviscerated by the Vatican that it became useless and was never published.

One of the problems the people of God have with official church teaching is the rapid multiplication over recent years. As well as dogma based on revelation there are other gradations – “definitive” doctrine, authoritative doctrine, and concrete applications of church teaching, admonitions and church discipline. There is today particular unease over the concept of definitive doctrine, which gradation has recently emerged. These are teachings that do not themselves mediate divine revelation, but are held to be necessary to safeguard and expound revelation. Are these always without error? Yet the Magisterium holds them, not to be infallible, but irreformable! Where “authoritative” teaching is concerned the Magisterium itself grants the possibility of error in the proclamation of authoritative doctrine the difficulties raised by this may positively assist the church in recognizing its error and move forward in pursuit of the “plenitude of truth”. The sad thing is that in the explosion of measures to effect greater centralised control very little attention is paid to the principles of subsidiarity, collegiality or co-responsibility. Further the most rigid approach to moral problems is emphasized over that of the pastoral: the juridical interpretation of law and doctrine is preferred to the principle of *epikeia*, the pastoral approach of compassion and charity, which is exemplified in the Orthodox church practice, which Basil Hume pointed to as the best way ahead.

Where authoritative teaching is concerned many teachings of the Church, especially on morals, fall into this category. The faithful are expected to react with an *obsequium* of the will and intellect. What does this word mean? There has been much debate about it – obedience, submission, docility, due respect or assent? The Latin term can embrace all these meanings (LG#25) Due respect can mean weighing seriously the questions about a teaching. Interestingly Pope John Paul II in his letter to a 1998 Rome symposium on the Inquisition³ suggested that “one must appeal to the “sensus fidei” to find the criteria for a just judgement on the past life of the Church”.

The noted expert in Canon Law Ladislav Orsy SJ⁴ to the issue in his "Receiving the Council: theological and canonical insights and debates" · His survey shows how the succeeding years the official church turned away from the Council's avoidance of sanctions preferring rather the opening up to the work of the Spirit. The Magisterium has proliferated codes and regulations, often with severe sanctions attached to them. It seems from what Orsy says that there are two failures of reception here: the one is the very half-hearted acceptance of the insights of the Council by those in control of the Church, and the other is the unease of many in the Church as to the provenance and validity of the over juridical approach to the way we lead our lives.

Orsy's book has a lot to ponder on but the issues are too complicated to summarise in a short Briefing Paper. What is very evident from this book is that the Church is facing a considerable development of Papal power which is not justified by theology or history, and this needs to be challenged.

The failure to acknowledge the insights and experience of the whole people of God, and their baptismal priesthood, in favour of a small like-minded clerical group round the Pope, is leading to a lack of balance which alienates many believers and inhibits our witness to the world.

References

- 1 By What authority?: A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium and the Sense of the Faithful Richard R. Gaillardetz. Liturgical Press Minnesota 2003
- 2 New Dictionary of Theology ed J Komonchak et al. Article on "Reception" by T. Rausch S.J. Gill and Mcmillan, Dublin 1987
- 3 John Paul II letter to the 1998 Symposium on the Inquisition. Available on www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=1058
- 4 Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates Ladislav Orsy SJ Liturgical Press Minnesota 2009

Discussion Pointers

- 1 What difference would it make to the church if the Reception of Doctrine and the *sensus/fidei/fidelium* were taken seriously?
- 2 Do the church authorities listen enough to the Spirit?
- 3 How can we work towards a church where all are heard and valued?
- 4 Are there any advantages in the growing centralisation of power in the Church?

- 5 Would it be unrealistic to call on our bishops to reclaim the co-responsibility with the Pope for governing the church?



St Joan's Alliance started life in 1911 as the Catholic Suffrage Society, seeking votes for women. It has changed its name several times, but kept its remit to work for equality of women and men in both religion and secular society, and to pursue justice and human rights. One means the Alliance in Britain uses is in placing importance on theological education to help members to speak out, and we have produced a number of Briefing Papers on such issues as Conscience, the Listening Church, the Life/Work Balance, Relationship and Mutuality in the Renewed People of God etc. You can contact us at lumen@globalnet.co.uk