

Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence

*Hermeneutics, Critique,
and Catholic Theology*

Edited by

Anthony J. Godzieba
and Bradford E. Hinze



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CHAPTER 8

A Synodal Church

On Being a Hermeneutical Community

Ormond Rush

A third phase in the reception of Vatican II is beginning. After initial enthusiasm fifty years ago, and then—*de facto*, despite the rhetoric—official caution for thirty-five years, now it would seem greater freedom to implement the full vision of the council is enthusiastically promoted in the pontificate of Pope Francis. Like his predecessors, he also often quotes Vatican II; but there is something different. The shift could well be described as a move toward a more listening church. And, if there is one above all who is being officially invited into the conversation, then it is the third person of the Blessed Trinity—the Holy Spirit.

“Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” The cry rings out seven times in the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation.¹ The essential medium through which the Spirit speaks to the churches is the Spirit’s gift of *sensus fidei*. The ecclesial reality of the *sensus fidei*, given by the Holy Spirit to baptized Christians and to the church as a whole, is affirmed in *Lumen Gentium* 12.² This “sense

¹ Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 (all biblical references use the New Revised Standard Version translation).

² *Lumen Gentium* 12 states: “The holy people of God has a share, too, in the prophetic office of Christ, when it renders him a living witness, especially through a life of faith and charity, and when it offers to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips that honour his name. The universal body of the faithful who have received the anointing of the holy one, cannot be mistaken in belief. It displays this particular quality through a supernatural sense of the faith in the whole people [*supernaturali sensu fidei totius populi*]

of/for the faith,” the council teaches, enables the church to continue responding faithfully to God’s loving self-revelation, i.e., to be infallible in believing. In the reception of the Council over the past fifty years, the implications of this teaching have hardly begun to affect the official learning and teaching processes of the Catholic Church. However, it certainly appears that the Catholic Church is entering into a new phase in the reception of LG 12. The faithful have an increasing awareness of the importance of their own sense of the faith for revitalizing the church in an age of unbelief; theologians are giving more attention both to the *sensus fidei* as a topic for systematic reflection and, accordingly, to the *sensus fidei* of their own local communities; and, among the hierarchy, Vatican II’s doctrine of the *sensus fidei* seems to be receiving greater acknowledgment. Of significance here is the prominent role the *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God plays in the ecclesial vision of Pope Francis. His favorite passage would surely be LG 12 on the *sensus fidei*; and his favorite image of the church is that of “the people of God,” the title of the chapter in which LG 12 is situated.

Early in his pontificate, in an August 2013 interview with the editor of the Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Pope Francis revealed something of his personal ecclesiology being grounded in Vatican II:

The image of the Church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God. This is the definition I often use, which is the image of *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12. Belonging to a people has a strong theological value. . . . The people themselves are the subject. And the Church

when ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful laity,’ it expresses the consent of all in matters of faith and morals. *Through this sense of the faith* which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the people of God, under the guidance of the sacred magisterium to which it is faithfully obedient, receives no longer the words of human beings but truly the word of God; it adheres indefectibly to ‘the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints;’ it penetrates more deeply into that same faith through right judgment and applies it more fully to life.” Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) 12, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2: *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 858. Hereafter Vatican II documents are cited by abbreviation and paragraph in the text; e.g., (LG 12), and all subsequent translations are from the Tanner edition: LG = *Lumen Gentium*; DV = Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*); GS = Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*).

is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. *Sentire cum Ecclesia* [to think and to feel with the Church], therefore, is my way of being a part of this people. And all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of beliefs, and the people display this *infallibilitas in credendo*, this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together. This is what I understand today as the “thinking with the Church” of which St Ignatius speaks. When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the Pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. So this thinking with the Church does not concern theologians only. . . . And, of course, we must be very careful not to think that this *infallibilitas* of all the faithful I am talking about in the light of Vatican II is a form of populism. No, it is the experience of the “holy mother the hierarchical Church,” as St Ignatius called it, the Church as the people of God, pastors and people together. The Church is the totality of the people of God.³

A few months later, Pope Francis echoed these same thoughts in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.⁴

In this chapter, I propose that the ecclesial reality and authority of the *sensus fidelium* can be fruitfully explored by employing the “background theory” of hermeneutics.⁵ Of course, as Jürgen Habermas

³ Pope Francis, *My Door Is Always Open: A Conversation on Faith, Hope and the Church in a Time of Change*; Pope Francis with Antonio Spadaro (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 49–50. This interview took place over three meetings in August 2013.

⁴ “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 (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). 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.” Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, §119, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁵ On the function of “background theories” in theological method, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Systematic Theology: Task and Methods,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 1–78, at 56–58.

noted in his critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical notion of tradition: “Hermeneutic consciousness remains incomplete as long as it does not include a reflection upon the limits of hermeneutic understanding.”⁶ Other background theories, such as critical theories, can well aid the church in developing its theology of the *sensus fidei*, by opening up further perspectives on the complexity of the world in which the faithful live the Gospel.

The background theory of hermeneutics I believe is especially relevant for interpreting four major teachings of the Second Vatican Council. First, divine revelation is not only, nor primarily, a series of doctrines and morals formulated throughout church history, although it includes these in a secondary and qualified sense. Rather, revelation is primarily a personal encounter with the Living God in all ages throughout history, and it is the Holy Spirit who enables the human reception of this personal revelation by bestowing the gift of faith (DV 2, 5). Second, along with the gift of faith (*fides*), the Holy Spirit gifts baptized individuals and the whole community of faith with a hermeneutical skill, a *sensus fidei*, i.e., “a sense for” understanding, interpreting, and applying the faith through time (LG 12). With the gift comes the ability both to receive the gift and to contextualize the gift. Third, this divine revelation and its accompanying gift of *sensus fidei* are communicated not only to the pope and bishops (as if we were some gnostic sect of select *Illuminati*) but to “the whole body of the faithful,” the *universitas fidelium* (LG 12). Fourth, in this way “the God who spoke of old still maintains an uninterrupted conversation with the bride of his beloved Son [i.e., the church]. The holy Spirit, too, is active, making the living voice of the gospel ring out in the church, and through it in the world, leading those who believe into the whole truth, and making the message of Christ dwell in them in all its richness” (DV 8). In other words, divine revelation is happening here and now, and the Spirit’s gift of *sensus fidei* enables its faithful interpretation.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 245–72, at 253. For Gadamer’s approach, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960); ET: *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989 [based on the 5th German ed., 1986]).

And in the here and now, God may just be teaching the church new perspectives on God's plan for humanity as history unfolds.

Reading these four teachings in a hermeneutical key opens up avenues for exploring the ecclesial implications of the dialogue that God continues to have with the church in our own time. And, it thus opens up ways of understanding the eschatological character of Christian truth; the story is never finished, until the eschaton. God continues to surprise us and to provoke us. And the *sensus fidei* is the antenna for sensing those surprises and provocations.

Around the time of his appointment as archbishop of Chicago in September 2014, Blase Cupich spoke of the uncomfortable challenge Pope Francis is currently presenting for the Catholic Church. He said: "One of the lines that [Pope Francis] uses [is] '*realities are greater than ideas.*' . . . I think the pope is giving us *a new epistemology, a new way of learning, of knowing—another way in which we're informed.* We can really get caught up in living in our own little bubble of an idea or an illusion of things the way they have been in the past. It's important not to have just a 30,000 feet perspective on life but to really be there in the reality of the situation and pay attention to the observables right now around you."⁷

Hermeneuts reading this may have sensed that in Cardinal Cupich's words there is an evocation of something of the so-called "hermeneutical circle" or "spiral": i.e., we get a sense of the whole (in theological terms, the doctrinal perspective) by getting down into the detail (the pastoral perspective); and from the perspective of the detail, we have to form a revised and more "real" sense of the whole; and so it continues in an ongoing hermeneutical circle. Observing a valley below from a plane 30,000 feet up gives *one* sense of context. Landing the plane, getting out, and walking through a village in the valley gives a very different sense of things. But, then again, this gives only one sense of context on the ground—there are other villages in the valley.

Let's put this another way. According to the notion of the hermeneutic circle, understanding is a circular movement from "the whole"

to "the part" and back to the whole again. For example, I may come to a topic with only a vague knowledge of the subject matter. The "whole" of my knowledge is limited; my current position is one of "not-knowing." I may go to a dictionary or an encyclopedia to get an overview, thus broadening my knowledge of "the whole." Perhaps one particular aspect of the topic grabs my attention, and a question may formulate in my mind about the matter. So I telescope in on the narrower question, seeking an answer. My knowledge of the whole already gained gives some kind of context to what I now learn about the partial detail. I understand the detail in terms of the general view I already have; I understand the part in terms of the whole. The consequence of this narrower enquiry is an expansion of my knowledge of the whole. This back and forth process of questioning, from whole to part and back again, from general to particular and back again to general knowledge, is the rhythm of the hermeneutical circle. Some authors prefer to speak of "the hermeneutical spiral," an expression that perhaps better captures the ongoing dynamic of understanding. We don't just return to the same point in a circle—we now see differently than before. This circle or spiral is similar to the way we come to know the past and the present. We only know the present out of the past, and we only know the past out of the present. This interrelationship of past and present is also a hermeneutical circle.

The church well knows this dynamic, with its ongoing challenge, however much it might sometimes try to avoid the challenge. But, *from-its very origins*, the church has always been a "hermeneutical" community—it is embedded in the church's DNA. As it moves through history, it is always necessary that the church interpret the Gospel for new times and contexts. Indeed, this hermeneutical task "must ever be the law of all evangelization" (GS 44). In the very process that gave rise to the New Testament, those early disciples, even pre-Easter, were interpreting Jesus, trying to "make sense" of his words and deeds, and of his identity in relationship with the God whose kingdom he was so focused on. But a decade or so later, someone like a Paul or an evangelist was asking, what does all that mean for my community? The New Testament canon (the finally-agreed-upon collection of twenty-seven writings), chosen by the early churches to stand thereafter as the ultimate benchmark regarding the faith for all time, is a testament to diverse "senses of the faith" in the church's earliest proclamations of

⁷Joshua J. McElwee, "Exclusive: Chicago's New Archbishop Talks About 'Stepping Into the Unknown,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, Sep. 21, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/people/exclusive-chicagos-new-archbishop-talks-about-stepping-unknown> (emphasis added).

the one faith in Jesus Christ. These writings are the classic examples of the *sensus fidei* at work in the life of the early churches. During the so-called Apostolic Period of the first and second centuries CE, we see local hermeneutical communities, *from within* and *for* their own contexts, interpreting and interrelating both their experience of divine revelation and the formulations of the faith and Christian practices that they have had passed on to them.

There is at work here what I have called elsewhere an “apostolic hermeneutic,” an interpretive dynamic within the first few generations of the church regarding Jesus Christ and the implications of his teaching and way of acting within the changing circumstances of economic, social, cultural, and political life.⁸ The results of this “apostolic hermeneutic” become normative for all times, including our own. We too must operate out of an apostolic hermeneutic and be equally creative for the sake of fidelity to the same God, who is still revealing and saving in Christ through the Spirit in our own time.

The two synods of bishops on marriage and the family in 2014 and 2015 were not only about moral and sacramental theology, nor simply about the church’s past doctrinal teaching. They were, at a more fundamental level, about *hermeneutics*—and the ramifications of one’s particular hermeneutic for key issues in fundamental theology (revelation and faith) and ecclesiology (the salvific mission of the church in a complex and constantly changing world). The 2014 synod had already exposed deep conflicts in interpretation, deep rifts regarding what the church should be all about, and in particular the interrelationship between doctrine and pastoral “realities” (as Pope Francis likes to call them). All this has ignited a *hermeneutical battle* that rages on even now, as we try to assess the implications of these two synods.

The German philosopher Odo Marquard, in his essay “The Question, To What Question Is Hermeneutics the Answer?” situates a significant point in the origins of the modern hermeneutical tradition in the religious wars of the seventeenth century following the Reformation.⁹ He depicts the devastating Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) as

⁸ See Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 116–29.

⁹ Odo Marquard, “The Question, To What Question Is Hermeneutics the Answer?,” *Farewell to Matters of Principle: Philosophical Studies*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York:

“a civil war of the absolute text” between Catholics and Protestants.¹⁰ The Latin word for “hermeneutics” (*hermeneutica*), he notes, is first found in 1654, six years after the end of the Thirty Years’ War and the so-called Peace of Westphalia. Marquard’s thesis is that “hermeneutics gives an answer to this experience of the deadliness (*Tödllichkeitserfahrung*) of the hermeneutic civil war over the absolute text by inventing—thus turning itself into pluralizing, which is to say literary, hermeneutics—the nonabsolute text and the nonabsolute reader.”¹¹ He makes a distinction between “singularizing hermeneutics” and “pluralizing hermeneutics.” For singularizing hermeneutics, on the one hand, there is only “the one correct reading . . . the one absolute reading (for salvation) of the Bible.”¹² Pluralizing hermeneutics, on the other hand, “traces out many possible meanings and the most various kinds of spirit in one and the same literal form.”¹³ In the religious wars, both sides were working out of their own singularizing hermeneutics, with tragic consequences, as Marquard observes:

The dogmatic quality of the claim to truth that is made by the unambiguous interpretation of the absolute text can be deadly: that is the experience of the religious civil wars. When, in relation to the sacred text, two interpreters assert, in controversy, “I am right; my understanding of the text is the truth, and in fact—and this is necessary for salvation—in this way and not otherwise”: then there can be hacking and stabbing. Hermeneutics, when it turns into pluralizing hermeneutics, gives an answer to precisely this situation when it asks: Could this text not be understood, after all, in still another way, and—if that is not sufficient—still another way, and again and again in other ways?¹⁴

Oxford University Press, 1989), 111–37; *Abscheid vom Prinzipiellen* (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 1981).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122. On the religious wars and their aftermath, see particularly Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe’s Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Marquard, “The Question,” 122. Translation corrected.

¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123. Marquard’s approach has affinities with that of Paul Ricoeur’s notion of a text’s “surplus of meaning,” by which the reader makes of the text. See, for example,

A text thus invites a dialogue with future generations down through history. This ongoing process of pluralizing hermeneutics is evident within the Bible itself.¹⁵ Applying such a pluralizing hermeneutics, as a background theory, to the human interpretation of divine revelation is not a denial of the status for Christians of the Bible as the written Word of God and its function as the canon of the Christian faith.¹⁶ Nor is it some capitulation to a dictatorship of relativism in interpretation. Rather, it is a recognition that “realities are greater than ideas” in the transmission of revelation in new contexts.

Certainly the distinction between singularizing and pluralizing hermeneutics captures something of the tension within the Catholic Church in our own time. There have been some who have publicly voiced their concern over the present pope, his privileging of “mercy” in the interpretation of Scripture and tradition, and what they perceive as his promotion of “a weaker, pastoral permissiveness and a Christianity-lite, a way of being Christian at a reduced cost. So they see in mercy a kind of ‘fabric softener’ that undermines the dogmas and commandments and abrogates the central and fundamental meaning of truth.”¹⁷ Cardinal Walter Kasper speaks of the pope’s lens for interpreting and applying the Gospel in a new context as a “hermeneutical principle” in a way that appears to want to avoid any singularizing hermeneutics:

One can . . . characterize this highlighting of mercy—as a foundational hermeneutical principle—as a paradigm shift: from a deductive method to a method in the sense of see-judge-act, which begins inductively at first and, only in a second step, introduces theological criteria. Such a paradigm shift can elicit irritations and

Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Mogens Müller and Henrik Tronier, eds., *The New Testament as Reception* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

¹⁶ On the Bible as not being “revelation” as such for Christians, but rather a “revelatory text,” requiring interpretation from different worlds “in front of the text,” see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, trans. Willam Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 34. On the opposition to Pope Francis from certain cardinals and bishops, see, e.g., Massimo Faggioli, “The Italian Job: Can Pope Francis Manage His Local Opposition?,” *Commonweal* (August 15, 2014): 17–20.

misunderstandings . . . , as if what had been previously said was no longer valid. However, rightly understood, the paradigm shift does not change the previously valid content of what has been taught, but certainly changes the perspective and the horizon in which it is seen and understood.¹⁸

The appeal of Pope Francis’s opponents to the absolute character of Scripture, as well as the absolute character of the church’s doctrinal tradition on those texts, does sound a bit like a “singularizing hermeneutics,” and indeed, a declaration of war—without perhaps the actual “hacking and stabbing” of 1614–48.¹⁹ And it does seem to be an ecclesial conflict as significant as that hermeneutical battle in the early church between Paul and Peter over circumcision and the implications of the Gospel in a new non-Jewish context.²⁰ In tension here were appeals to “the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5) and appeals to “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14). In the midst of such hermeneutical battles, the New Testament does provide us with a model for coming to a *consensus fidelium*. At the so-called Council of Jerusalem, “after there had been much debate” (Acts 15:7) and sharing of the diverse *sensus fidei* of the community gathered in “council,” together they were able at the end of it all to say: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials” (Acts 15:28). Openness to a pluralizing hermeneutics can lead to dialogue and, through dialogue, to a *consensus fidelium*. Dialogue is the means through which the Spirit communicates.

Cardinal Luis Tagle has recently made a distinction between “problems” and “dilemmas.” “Problems,” he said, can be solved, but “dilemmas” don’t have clear and universal solution. Learning how the faithful have faced dilemmas, he went on, can only be accessed by listening

¹⁸ Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution*, 35.

¹⁹ Marquard, “The Question,” 123.

²⁰ Gal 2:11–14: “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” On these issues, see Ian J. Elmer, *Paul, Jerusalem and the Judaizers: The Galatian Crisis in Its Broadest Historical Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 81–116.

to their stories. “Tell stories of people who have navigated through those murky waters of dilemmas. . . . You don’t need a solution. You need meaning. You need hope.”²¹ Listening to the stories of the people of God and the dilemmas they have faced in their journey through the murky waters of their lives is simply listening to their *sensus fidei*, their “senses of the faith.”²² Those *sensus fidei* may very well have been formed in prayerful conversation with the Holy Spirit who graced them with that gift in their baptism. Their *sensus fidei* reveal how they have sensed the Gospel and have decided to act in their circumstances. Hearing those stories is hearing stories of *the Holy Spirit at work*, the one who is the Enlightener, the Interpreter, the Hermeneut. Through the exercise of their sense of the faith, in the reality of their constrained lives in the changing contexts of human history, God is in dialogue with humanity throughout that history (DV 8). This is not to be cheaply dismissed as some “situation ethics” or just one more example of the “dictatorship of relativism” but rather a *deeply theological affirmation*, grounded in the New Testament and the tradition of the church, concerning the activity of the Holy Spirit whose enlightenment brings about understanding, interpretation, and application of the Christian Gospel in the realities of life in sinful, yet grace-filled and often selflessly loving, human lives—down in the valley, in their particular situations.

And here we get to the rub—*history*. The hermeneutical tradition is above all concerned with having an historical consciousness at all turns, and even—in more recent times, with the “urging” of critical theories—turning historical consciousness critically upon ourselves as interpreters of the past in the present. On this score, I think the present pope is once again prophetically messing with the minds of Catholics, bringing us back to basics. Like the historian pope he seems to be modeling himself on, St. John XXIII, Pope Francis wants to bring into play the Holy Spirit, who urges us to descend the plane from 30,000 feet and land down in the valley, and then, from the valley—where Jesus walked—to go back up to a renewed perspective on reality from 30,000 feet. From Pope Francis’s perspective, there are lots of smelly sheep wandering across this valley; and the hermeneutical church must

²¹ Joshua J. McElwee, “Cardinal Tagle: Church Should Not Look to ‘Idealized Past’ with Nostalgia,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 22, 2015, <http://ncronline.org/news/global/cardinal-tagle-church-should-not-look-idealized-past-nostalgia>.

²² The nominative plural form of the singular *sensus* is also *sensus*.

take on “the smell of the sheep.”²³ That hermeneut Martin Heidegger continues to challenge us as an ecclesial hermeneutical community: “What is decisive is not to get out of the [hermeneutical] circle but to come into it in the right way.”²⁴ And the privileged way for us as a church to get into the hermeneutical circle of interpreting God’s revelation is the *sensus fidelium*. And becoming a synodal church is the privileged way of listening to the *sensus fidelium*.

Toward the end of the 2015 synod, at a ceremony to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the creation by Paul VI of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis outlined his vision of “a synodal church.”²⁵ Yet again he cited LG 12 on the *sensus fidei* of the whole people and quoted his own commentary of the passage from *Evangelii Gaudium* 119. The pope linked the importance of the Council’s teaching with his desire to access the worldwide *sensus fidei* before the synod, albeit in some basic way:

Such was the conviction [regarding the *sensus fidei*] underlying my desire that the people of God should be consulted in the preparation of the two phases of the Synod on the family, as is ordinarily done with each *Lineamenta*. Certainly, a consultation of this sort would never be sufficient to perceive the *sensus fidei*. But how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish? Through the answers given to the two questionnaires sent to the particular Churches, we had the opportunity at least to hear some of those families speak to issues which closely affect them and about which they have much to say.

The pope went on to present the implications of his vision of a synodal church: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes 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

²³ *Evangelii Gaudium* 24.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 195.

²⁵ Pope Francis, Address to the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod Of Bishops, October 15, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."²⁶ "Synodality," he stated, is "a constitutive element of the Church." Indeed, "in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base." From the local level to the universal, whether it be parish councils, diocesan councils, episcopal conferences, synods of bishops, each of these are "an opportunity for listening and sharing," and so contribute to a more synodal church.

Determination of the *sensus fidelium* at all of these levels is not easy, because it is a diffuse sense.²⁷ Beginning at the local level, it involves different "agents" and "instruments," including "the listening bishop" and "the listening theologian."²⁸ But we must not forget that already, within faith and the functioning of the *sensus fidei*, there is "theologizing" being done, before the scholarly theologians get to work.²⁹ The *sensus fidei* is already itself a capacity for intuitive judgment of what rings true to the Gospel, and what doesn't. Theologians must tap into the trajectory of this intuitive theologizing. At the local level they have a particular role to play in bringing to systematic expression the oftentimes-diffuse expressions of insight into the Gospel by the faithful. In this way, theologians help to coalesce these insights into "local theologies," which are genuine expressions of the lived faith inspired by the Holy Spirit through the exercise of the *sensus fidei*. Theologians,

²⁶ The quotation is taken from *Evangelii Gaudium* 171.

²⁷ On the determination of the *sensus fidelium* through ongoing dialogue between the *sensus fidelium*, theology, and the magisterium, see Rush, *The Eyes of Faith*, 241–91.

²⁸ On "the listening bishop" and "the listening theologian," see *ibid.*, 274–75.

²⁹ Karl Rahner writes: "Since the analysis by the hearer of what he is told is an inevitable moment in the process of hearing itself, and since utter non-understanding destroys even the hearing itself, a certain degree of theology belongs as an inner moment to hearing itself, and the mere hearing in faith is already a human activity in which man's own subjectivity, together with its logic, its experience, native concepts and perspectives, already enters into play. What we call theology and hence dogmatic statement in the strict sense is therefore merely a further development, an unfolding, of that basic subjective reflection which already takes place in the obedient listening to the Word of God, i.e. in faith as such. From this it follows, however, that dogmatic reflection and its statement can and must never separate themselves completely from the source from which they spring, i.e. from faith itself. This refers always, as has been said, not merely to the object of faith but also to its exercise. The latter remains the basis and support of the dogmatic statement as such itself." Karl Rahner, "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5: *Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Krüger (New York: Seabury, 1975), 42–66, at 49 (emphasis added).

then, are mediators of the Holy Spirit in helping to bring international awareness across the universal church of the particularities of the one faith in different contexts. And bishops, assisted by the same Holy Spirit, are called to listen to the lived faith of the church local and universal and are aided by theologians to be open to the possible challenges coming from the Spirit-inspired *sensus fidelium*.

Thus, the church's interpretation of divine revelation can be imagined as a circle—a hermeneutical circle—of understanding. And around the circle are the five constitutive points of reference: Scripture, tradition, the *sensus fidelium*, theology, and the magisterium. Getting into the hermeneutical circle marked by these five points can only be via those who live in the valley; it must be through the lived faith of the church in history enabled by the Holy Spirit, i.e., via the *sensus fidelium*. This, of course, does not make the *sensus fidelium* the final arbiter in the formulation of matters of faith and morals. But even though the magisterium is that final arbiter, its role is to safeguard the church's *faith*. And faith has its sensing organ that the Spirit has guaranteed. The guarantee to the magisterium of a "charism of truth" (DV 8) and of an "infallibility in teaching" (LG 25) is not a guarantee over and above the guarantee of "infallibility in believing" assured of the church as a whole, through the *sensus fidei* given to all the baptised (LG 12). There is a condition to the charism of truth that must be realized: "in maintaining, practicing and professing the faith that has been handed on there is a unique interplay [*conspiratio*] between bishops and the faithful" (DV 10). Truth, as the "council" of Jerusalem found, is arrived at through dialogue. And theologians too, in their "faith seeking understanding," are beholden not only to their own perceptions but more so to the faith of the communities of faith they serve. Through their attention to the *sensus fidelium*, their local theologies can contribute to a so-called "development" of doctrine.

Development of doctrine can come through new encounters with God's otherness within human history, and new perceptions of the meaning of Scripture and tradition.³⁰ It is incumbent on all the baptized

³⁰ For a hermeneutical approach to the organic notion of "development," see Ormond Rush, "Reception Hermeneutics and the 'Development' of Doctrine," *Pacifica* 6 (1993): 125–40.

to be attentive to these “signs of the times,”³¹ especially the signs of God’s presence which the Spirit reveals.³² As the council highlights, the activity of the Holy Spirit is vital. Yves Congar writes of the promise of *new knowledge* that the Holy Spirit reveals to the church:

In his discourse on the coming of the Spirit, Jesus combines the affirmation of a non-autonomy of the Spirit with the promise of new knowledge: “He will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. . . . He will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Such a pendulum-swing between *the already acquired* and *the new*, between what has preceded and what has yet to come, should not perplex anyone with a sense of Tradition, *for it is the very law of Tradition*. To be the genuine transmission of something, Tradition must be at once criticism, creativity and reference. It is the active presence of a principle at every moment of its history, the permanence of identity in what renews itself and changes.³³

This element of criticism is fundamental for the vitality of the living tradition. The *sensus fidelium*, actively at work receiving the Gospel and passing it on to others in a meaningful and truthful way, constitutes the living tradition of the church. This *sensus fidelium* therefore should function in a critical way in the processes of the church learning and teaching, in its hermeneutical circle of understanding. In his commen-

³¹ “In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live” (GS 4).

³² “The People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole world. Impelled by that belief, they try to discern the true signs of God’s presence and purpose in the events, the needs and the desires which it shares with the rest of humanity today. For faith casts a new light on everything and makes known the full ideal which God has set for humanity, thus guiding the mind towards solutions which are fully human” (GS 11; translation corrected).

³³ Yves Congar, “Renewed Actuality of the Holy Spirit,” *Lumen Vitae: International Review of Religious Education* 28, no. 1 (1973): 13–30, at 24 (emphasis added). Congar quotes from John 16:13–14 and cites John 14:26.

tary on *Dei Verbum*, Joseph Ratzinger noted that unfortunately it did not allow for a critique of tradition by Scripture.³⁴ A similar statement can be made regarding the role of the *sensus fidelium* as a necessary critique of tradition. DV 12 intimates the role of the Holy Spirit for a proper ecclesial reading of Scripture: that Scripture must be interpreted with the same Spirit with which it was written. The same Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures—which, as Ratzinger highlights, must act as a critical norm of the tradition—evokes in believers, through the gift of *sensus fidei*, interpretations and applications of Scripture which must be allowed to function as a critique of the tradition.

The cry still challenges the Catholic Church: “Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Becoming a synodal church and finding better ways to listen to, discern, and determine the sense of the faithful throughout the world church is fundamental for responding to that scriptural injunction—and for implementing the vision of the Second Vatican Council fifty years on.

³⁴ “Not every tradition [in the narrow sense of a particular formulation, discipline, or practice] that arises in the Church is a true celebration and keeping present of the mystery of Christ. There is a distorting, as well as a legitimate, tradition. . . . Consequently, tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically; we have Scripture as a criterion for this indispensable criticism of tradition, and tradition must therefore always be related back to it and measured by it. . . . On this point Vatican II has unfortunately not made any progress, but has more or less ignored the whole question of the criticism of tradition.” Joseph Ratzinger, “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder, 1969), 181–98, at 185–86.