

## **Sensus Fidelium: Listening for the Echo**

### **The conference of the Catholic Theological Association 2016**

The 2016 conference of the Association took place in Swanwick in Derbyshire in early September: as ever, it was a chance to catch up on what we were doing, to discuss a range of theological issues, and a chance to listen to a wide range of papers which were dedicated to the theme of what we mean when we speak of '*sensus fidelium*.' Following our usual practice, the proceedings will appear in *New Blackfriars* early in 2017 – and I would like to thank our editor, Dr Geoff Turner, for seeing the papers into print.

#### **So what did we discuss at Swanwick?**

Despite pockets of resistance, the magisterial authorities of the Catholic Church can no longer maintain that the faithful – and that largely means lay people – have yet to come of age and cannot be trusted to form their own minds (after due consultation and reflection) on the truth of the teaching of the church. This is especially true of matters of morality and worship, but it is also true of doctrine because the study of theology is no longer the preserve of the clergy and certainly not of the bishops. This situation was officially recognised when Pope Francis created a mechanism for consulting the faithful about the state of marriage and the family in the world, though it turned out to be a rather faulty 'consultation' because of Rome's inexperience in such things. So it was timely that the Catholic Theological Association should choose to reflect theologically on the idea of consultation and the *sensus fidelium*, particularly after the publication in 2014 of *Sensus Fidei in the Light of the Church* by the International Theological Commission.

That document is the fruit of a series of meetings of an ITC sub-committee – made up largely of clerical theologians – before being published by the CDF. It seems to have been written in a generous spirit, covering the evolution / development (the difference between these paradigms was not clarified in the document) of the idea of *sensus fidelium* from scripture through the centuries, giving particular prominence to the work of Newman, Congar and the Second Vatican Council. Its prime aim seems to have been to dismantle the hard division between the teaching church (*ecclesia docens*) and the taught church (*ecclesia discens*) that became embedded in the nineteenth-century: the magisterium speaks and the rest, priests and laity, hear and obey. Nonetheless, it is a committee document and the reader can sense tensions between different tendencies within the committee, so no reader is likely to be completely satisfied with all its detail. While, it has been written in a generous spirit that works hard to give a positive role to the laity, there remain occasional references to a magisterium (defined as the pope and bishops) that guides and that

should in the end be followed and obeyed. Defined like that, one can see why many clerics in Rome who are hardly more than bureaucrats or civil servants are made bishops: not for pastoral reasons but so that they can be incorporated into an apostolic tradition that speaks 'magisterially'. As for theologians, Rome still is not sure what to do with them, especially lay theologians and, above all, lay women theologians. Here, in a document written by theologians, their role is said to be 'to provide ... objective precision' to the *sensus fidelium* [para 81]. But in reality, instead of narrowing down what the faith might be about, theologians are better occupied by bringing out its complexities and ambiguities and multidimensionality.

At the conference there was a wide range of presentations. We had Orm Rush from Australia, Gabriel Flynn from Ireland, and Dorian Llywelyn from California [and Wales]. All the other speakers were on their home turf: Paul Murray from Durham, Roderick Strange and Tarcisius Mukuka from St Mary's Twickenham, and Sarah Boss from Roehampton. We had two contributions from the staff of Heythrop: Helen Costigane and Martin Poulson. In addition we had a splendid array for short papers including several from North American members of the Association – their presence brought an additional international dimension. In fact, we heard of theology not only in Europe and America, Australasia and Africa, and in wide variety of cultures in those continents. As in previous years, Anthony Towey presided over a lively reading session of salient passages from *Sensus Fidei*.

One new feature of the conference this year was the first award of an essay prize for postgraduate students. The CTA has initiated this prize to encourage research and publishing by younger scholars. The first winning essay is by Verena Suchhart, who reflected on the notion of the *sensus fidelium* in terms of her work on Baruch in the OT/Hebrew Bible. Verena was at Durham University but has now returned to Münster to continue her postgraduate studies; her essay will be published in the proceedings.

The majority of the papers presented in September have now been submitted for publication, and as such stand as a monument to our three days of discussion and reflection: *tolle lege*.

No note of a conference of the association would be complete without noting that the most honourable symposiastic traditions of the CTA were upheld; and, though we were all tired by the time we left Swanwick, there was a general feeling that we had had a good time, had many good conversations, and had engaged as a body in the *doing* of theology. However, we were all aware that as time passes we hear of the closure of now this, then that centre of theology – we were especially conscious this year of the impending closure of Heythrop in London – and we wondered what shape formal academic theology will take, among Catholics, in the years to come. This question, on the very existence of formal academic theology, was one that inspired many conversations over the days we were together – and it is a question to

which there are no easy answers and also one we must confront with ever greater attention in the immediate future.

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