



The infallible belief of the faithful: What is the *sensus fidei fidelium*?

Series of articles on the synod by Maria Caulfield
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One of the reasons that Pope Francis has been emphasizing synodality is that he wishes to better recognize and utilize all the gifts of all the people in the Church. We know that the Magisterium of the Church, under certain conditions, can teach infallibly. But the faithful members of Christ's Church also have a corresponding gift. They can believe infallibly. Ideally these two gifts should inform and reinforce each other.

This gift of the Holy Spirit is called the *sensus fidei fidelium*: The understanding of the Faith by the Faithful. Everyone who is baptized is anointed with the Holy Spirit, and this anointing is strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation. Pope Francis explained in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The People of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo* (in belief). This means that it does not err in faith, even when it cannot find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. 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." (EG 119) The Vatican II dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* defines the *sensus fidei* as the supernatural appreciation of the faith 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." (LG 12) The more faithful a Christian is – participating in the Sacraments, building their relationship with God, feeling with the heart of the Church – the better of an instinct they will have for the True Faith (*Synodality* 108). And when the entire People of God manifests a belief of faith or morals, that belief cannot be wrong, because the Holy Spirit would not allow the entire Church to go into error.

The *sensus fidei* cannot be determined by majority vote. History shows that individuals and groups in the Church, whether of the faithful or bishops, can very easily fall into error and sin. The more separated a person is from God and His Church, the less likely they will be to instinctively



recognize the truths of the Faith — and we have all sinned and fallen short (Romans 3:23). However, if the faithful stubbornly cling to some belief or obstinately refuse to accept another, for a long time and in many places, even in the face of opposition and persecution, that should be a sign to the Magisterium of the *sensus fidei* at work.

See:

International Theological Commission. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018). At the Holy See, www.vatican.va.

Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013). At the Holy See, www.vatican.va.

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

Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964). In *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P., 350-432. Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1987.