

Hannaford, Robert (2024) Book review: The ‘sense of faith’ (sensus fidei) in historical and doctrinal perspective. *Ecclesiology*, 20 (1). pp. 99-104.

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/7640/>

Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria’s institutional repository ‘Insight’ must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria’s institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

provided that

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
 - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator’s reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing insight@cumbria.ac.uk.

The 'Sense of the Faith' in History: Its Sources, Reception and Theology, John J. Burkhard, OFM Conv., Liturgical Press Academic, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2022, pp., xiv + 442pp., pbk.

The author's extensive bibliography, numerous detailed footnotes, and many translated citations of significant contributions to scholarship, reveals his extensive knowledge in this area of theology. Although many, including readers of this journal, will be aware of the terms the 'sense of the faith' [*sensus fidei*] or the 'sense of the faithful' [*sensus fidelium*], by the author's own admission, they have had little or no impact on the church and are noticeably absent from wider theological writing, including discussion about the doctrine of the church. This suggests that doctrinal thinking in this area is still insufficiently developed to warrant wider reference or application. The book should go some way towards rectifying this, exploring as it does the origins of the term and the sources from which it sprang.

The idea of the 'Sense of the Faith' treated as a formal or technical term is largely, if not entirely, restricted to Catholic theological thinking. Despite that it has considerable ecumenical significance. First, it helps to clarify further the Catholic rationale for some of the doctrines contested by Protestant and Orthodox Christians, such as the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It shows how they link to the ongoing process of receiving the revelation of God as expressed in the developing tradition of the Catholic Church's faith and worship. Secondly, it throws light on the relationship between the role and authority of the whole Church, individual believers, and those who hold public, formal, office. This is an especially challenging area given the many different positions adopted within the diverse Protestant traditions. The issue has also come into sharper focus within the Catholic Church because of the present Pope's encouragement of greater synodality. It would be a mistake to see this as a move to create a new form of governance within the Catholic Church. Rather it picks up the call of the Second Vatican Council for all baptised Christians to own their responsibility to participate actively in the life of the Church, especially its mission to evangelise the world.

The early chapters in Burkhard's book trace the origins and foundations of 'Sense of the Faith' in medieval Catholic theology, before and after the Council of Trent. We should not be surprised that the author picks up the story as late as the medieval period. It is at this time that Catholic theologians began to address more directly the nature of the Church and its authority, under the impetus provided by the rise of Protestant reform. In theologians such as Thomas Netter (1375-1430) and Antoninus of Florence (1389-1449) Burkhard identifies a recognition of the role of the ordinary faithful in supporting the witness of the whole Church. Unexpectedly, given the conservative nature of much post-Tridentine thinking, the Council itself also drew attention to the role of the universal Church, alongside that of the hierarchy in the determination and defence of Catholic teaching. This is made even clearer by Melchior Cano (1509-60), writing after the Council, when he refers to 'what is proven by the common consent of the faithful in the Church' in determining matters of faith. No less an authority than Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), in his refutation of Reformation thinking, argued that the infallibility of Catholic teaching resided not just in the papacy or the episcopate but also in the entirety of the faithful. Although Johann Adam Möhler, a nineteenth century German theologian, did not use the expression the 'Sense of the Faith' his major contribution to ecclesiology, with its emphasis upon the role of the Holy Spirit, helped to reinforce the importance of a sense of the whole Church in the emergence of tradition. For Möhler tradition is not a 'deposit' sitting alongside the Church, but a dynamic expression of the life of the whole Church as it engages with, and bears witness to divine revelation. Tradition is the living word continually proclaimed and expounded in the Church, and in this sense the believers of all times are present to the Church in what he terms the 'Christian

consciousness'. Burkhard mentions the contribution of two nineteenth-century German Canon lawyers, Ferdinand Walter and George Phillips, who have been largely ignored in most English-language discussion of the 'Sense of the Faithful'. Against the prevailing tendency to emphasise the distinction between the teaching and learning Church, and the priority of the former, they sought to build a new ecclesial model around the threefold ministry of the whole Church as prophet, priest and king, a position which was to be picked up again at the Second Vatican Council.

As is well known, John Henry Newman, made his own contribution to the discussion in his article 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine.' Drawing on his extensive knowledge of patristic sources, he argued that the lay faithful should be consulted on matters of Church teaching, including the determination of dogma. He makes it clear that he is not using the term 'consultation' in its common sense of asking for opinions but in a theological sense, that is in establishing what as a matter of fact the faithful believe about a matter of faith. This is to be regarded as a witness of the faith and hence a resource in defining the Church's teaching. Newman believed that there were several legitimate sources for determining Church dogma in areas where the Scriptures are unclear. These include the bishops, the fathers and theologians *and* the lay faithful. When these resources are shown to 'breathe in unison' (*conspiratio*), on a contested matter this provides grounds for determining that a matter is divinely ordained or inspired.

We are greatly in the author's debt for his exposition of Matthias Scheeben's treatment of our topic. This important nineteenth-century German theologian, much neglected, and overshadowed in his own time by the neo-scholastic tradition, is fortunately receiving increasing attention. His thinking on the matter in hand denotes something of a step change. Although a firm defender of the hierarchical nature of the Church and papal authority, his ecclesiology stressed the organic and unitary nature of the body of believers. According to Scheeben, although the body of believers receives teaching from the teaching office of the Church, embodied in the clergy, its role is far from a passive. Indeed, the faith of the body of believers is itself an embodiment of the Church's faith since it is also under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. It is clear here that together both the lay faithful and the bishops, as teachers and leaders, have an active role in bearing witness to the faith: the one taking a public but official and juridical form; the other a role which is truly public. In both cases the Holy Spirit is active.

In the twentieth Century Catholic ecclesiology increasingly stressed the idea of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ and the People of God. This and wider historical forces, particularly the political and economic disruption wrought by two world wars led the Catholic hierarchy to recognise the importance of drawing the laity into more active participation in the Church's mission to the world. Amongst the theologians who promoted these developments, including the idea of the 'Sense of the Faith,' was Yves Congar, a French Dominican who published his influential book *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity* in the 1950's. Congar begins his treatment from the perspective of the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, which he regarded as foundational for the theology of the Church. He identifies the teaching role of the Church with Christ's prophetic role. This includes not only the exercise of the magisterium but all the ways in which God makes known his purposes through the life of the Church. Congar is clear that the baptismal anointing equips the laity for a prophetic function, and that they too along with their shepherds are endowed with understanding and discernment. The Church is endowed with divine power, which is exercised by the bishops and clergy, but this can only be effective if there is genuine collaboration with the laity for it is they who are more properly directed to the life of the world and thus are able to bear witness to the faith. By the time of the second Vatican Council the ground had

been laid for the *sensus fidelium* to become part of the bishops' deliberations. The support for this was far from overwhelming, and several bishops objected to its inclusion in the final documents. Nevertheless, the term is mentioned twice in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and is implied in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. *Lumen Gentium* relates the term principally to the faithful as a whole and not just to the laity. It is used to stress the unity of the whole people of God, clergy and laity, in the understanding and proclamation of the faith. It also re-affirms the infallibility of the whole people of God: '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* when from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.' (para. 12, *nb.*, my italics). Although overall the stress is on the interdependence of clergy and lay faithful, in its second reference *Lumen Gentium* (para.,35) links *sensu fidei* specifically with the witness of the lay faithful, to whom Christ has given a share in his prophetic ministry and called to be his witnesses 'so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life.' Para., 35).

The author has done a considerable service to theology and the Church by drawing together a wide range of sources and presenting a clear, accessible and coherent account of the development of the doctrine of the 'Sense of the Faith'. Alongside this he also provides us with some examples of how the doctrine has been applied in the case of specific dogmatic pronouncements, notably the contested Marian doctrines promulgated in modern times: the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1854), and her Assumption (1950). He concludes the book by offering some thoughts on how a more comprehensive theology of the senses might be fleshed out. It is here where we might pose some questions to the author but a helpful jumping off point is his treatment of the Immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Burkhard offers the reader a comprehensive account of the development of belief in this doctrine, drawing on material relating to both faith and worship. Although this dogma was only formally defined in modern times, it has been believed and liturgically celebrated in one form or another since relatively early in Christian history. All protagonists in the long history of the development of this doctrine in the Catholic tradition are united in their veneration of Mary's holiness. This developed into a recognition of the significance of her conception, treating it as a key moment in the history of salvation. The earliest reference to the conception of the Virgin is in the second century *Protoevangelium of St. James*. Belief in God's direct intervention from the first moments of Mary's existence is also evidenced in the seventh century *Life of Mary*, attributed to Maximus the Confessor. Her purity and sinlessness were widely believed, although, theologians in the ancient Church differed as to whether she was free from the taint of original sin.

Liturgically, in the seventh century, the introduction of a feast of the birth of the Virgin and of the Conception of St Anne, known in the East as the Conception of the Virgin, bear witness to the emergence of a cult focussed on the sinlessness of the Virgin. The feast was celebrated in monasteries in the south of Italy by the tenth and eleventh centuries and was being observed in England around the same time. In the fifteenth century the feast was authorised for the diocese of Rome by Pope Sixtus IV, and in 1708 Pope Clement extended it to the rest of the Catholic Church. The feast was finally re-designated as the Immaculate Conception when the dogma was promulgated in 1854.

Burkhard provides us with clear evidence of a debate amongst clergy and theologians about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the gradual emergence of formal liturgical celebration of the festival in various local churches. By implication this suggests a significant undercurrent of popular, lay, belief and practice connected with the doctrine, but this does not amount to concrete evidence to support his case. I believe a case can be made to support a growing lay sense of the faith regarding this doctrine, but this would go beyond the scope of the book and draw upon historical evidence of popular Marian piety in the form of art, music, cultic practice, Guild celebrations, etc. It would also involve closer examination of historical documents detailing local, deanery and diocesan tribunals and courts, which no doubt would have become involved in the, often, heated debates about Mary's sinlessness.

Burkhard sets his brief sketch of a possible theological synthesis of the doctrine of the 'Sense of the Faith' in an epistemological context. This reviewer suggests that it would be better set within a wider ecclesiological and anthropological context. Modern epistemology has its origins in rationalism and is associated with both anti-metaphysical ontologies and a focus on the autonomy of the rational thinking subject. Christian accounts of reason and knowledge in contrast are based on a relational understanding of human identity. We exist and are constituted in relation to God and others. A Christian account of the man or woman of faith will always be ecclesial in character. Whatever else it is the *Sensus Fidei* cannot be merely a matter of individual or collective perception or opinion. Pope Francis in speaking of the importance of synodality is careful to stress this point. In affirming that the *sensus fidei* gives all baptised Catholics a share in the dignity of the prophetic office of Christ he compares it to the 'sense of smell'. When addressing the faithful of the diocese of Rome on the 18 September 2021, the Pope described this 'sense of smell' as two dimensional: 'one is individual and the other communitarian: we are sheep, yet we are also members of the flock, which in this case means the Church.' A similar point was made in a 2014 report on the *sensus fidei* by the Catholic Church's International Theological Commission. The report links the 'Sense of the Faith' to the development of the Christian virtue of faith, and describes it as an 'instinct,' a kind of "flair" by which the believer clings spontaneously to what conforms to the truth of faith and shuns what is contrary to it.' (para., 54). Instinct or virtue is developed within community .and the relevant community here is the Church. It is only insofar as the many of the Church participate in the unity or one of the Body of Christ that they grow and develop together in the mind of Christ.

The author is to be congratulated for producing a timely and highly readable book about an area of theology which deserves wider attention. It will be welcomed by scholars, teachers and students alike. Hopefully, it will encourage others to pick up the challenge to develop a more comprehensive theological account of *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church. I commend this book whole heartedly.

Robert Hannaford
December 2023