

## TOWARDS A CO-RESPONSIBLE ACCOUNTABLE BOND OF THE EPISCOPAL EXERCISE IN LIGHT OF THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM* OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD

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**SUMMARY** — The current reception of the Second Vatican Council recovers the hermeneutical primacy of Chapter II of *Lumen gentium*. In the model of the Church as People of God, all the *Christifideles* form an *organic totality* from which derive relationships of co-responsibility that link them together and reconfigure their identities through interactions of reciprocal necessity that mutually *complete* them, and not only complement them, according to what each one contributes *suo modo et pro sua parte*. The theology of the *sensus fidei fidelium* has a determining role. It cannot be reduced to the exercise of the intelligence of faith, for it is also a dynamic of permanent reconfiguration of the whole ecclesial life that links all ecclesial subjectivities with each other in a co-responsible way by means of communicative dynamics capable of manifesting the action of the Spirit. This article deals with this theme and its consequences for a responsible and accountable linking of the episcopal exercise within the People of God.

**RÉSUMÉ** — La réception actuelle du Concile Vatican II récupère la primauté herméneutique du chapitre II de *Lumen gentium*. Dans le modèle de l'Église comme peuple de Dieu, tous les *Christifideles* forment une *totalité organique* d'où découlent des relations de coresponsabilité qui les relient entre eux et reconfigurent leurs identités à travers des interactions de nécessité réciproque qui les *complètent* mutuellement, et n'en soient pas simplement le complément, selon ce que chacun apporte *suo modo et pro sua parte*. La théologie du *sensus fidei fidelium* a un rôle déterminant. Elle ne peut pas être réduite à l'exercice de l'intelligence de la foi, car elle est aussi une dynamique de reconfiguration permanente de toute la vie ecclésiale qui relie entre elles, de manière coresponsable, toutes les subjectivités ecclésiales au moyen de dynamiques de communication capables de manifester l'action de l'Esprit. Cet article traite de ce thème et de ses conséquences pour une articulation responsable et responsabilisante de l'exercice épiscopal au sein du Peuple de Dieu.

## *Introduction*

The great turning point in ecclesiology during the Second Vatican Council came with the incorporation of the category People of God, which “makes it possible to affirm both the equality of all the faithful in the dignity of Christian existence and the organic or functional inequality of the members.”<sup>1</sup> This image had been proposed by Cardinal Suenens, who added a chapter entitled *De Populo Dei* to the *Schema De Ecclesia*.<sup>2</sup> His contribution appears in a *Praenota* at the beginning of chapter III of the *textus prior*.<sup>3</sup> The change was to be incorporated in the *textus emendatus* by placing the chapter on the People of God (*De Populo Dei*) before the chapter on the hierarchy.<sup>4</sup>

With the new sequence, the Council Fathers chose to recognize the participation of all the members of the People of God in the *tria munera* (LG 10-13.31; AA 2) of Christ – priest, prophet, and king – thus establishing the equality of all by means of baptismal dignity as a structuring criterion for the configuration of the identity of all ecclesial subjects.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the pre-conciliar ecclesiology that considered the relationships between the different ecclesial subjectivities – pope, bishops, clergy, religious, laity – in the light of the model of an *unequal society* that understood the hierarchical condition from an ontological criterion from which the identity and place of the rest of the ecclesial subjects was defined by virtue of a deficit in essence. It was not for nothing that Mgr De Smedt, Bishop of Bruges, affirmed in the Council debates that “[i]t should be noted that hierarchical power is only transitory (...). What is permanent is the people of God; what is transitory is the hierarchical service,”<sup>6</sup> whose condition is historical-temporal because *pertinet ad statum viae*. What is permanent is what defines and qualifies it, not what is transitory.

The debate around the identity of the hierarchy was not easy. It depended on recognizing the binding character of the hierarchy in relation to the voice of the rest of the faithful, with clear implications not only for the evolution

<sup>1</sup> Yves CONGAR, “The Church. The People of God,” in *Concilium*, 1 (1965), 24.

<sup>2</sup> The initial outline proposed by Gérard Philips, assistant secretary of the doctrinal commission of the Council, consisted of four chapters: the mystery of the Church, the hierarchy, the laity, and the states of perfection.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, 32 volumes, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970-99 (= AS) 2/1, 256, 324-328; 2/3, 19; 3/1, 208.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. AS, 1/4, 12-13; 2/1, 216-217.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. AS, 2/1, 366; 2/3, 42, 70, 104-105, 223; 3/1, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. AS, 1/4, 143.

of doctrine, but also in relation to accountability. However, this was not a new problem for the Church. Already in the third century, the episcopal exercise of St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, testifies to the binding character of the whole ecclesial community in relation to the appointment of bishops to verify the suitability of the candidate's life. He explains this in his famous *Epistle 67*: "God commands that the priest be chosen in the presence of all the people, that is, he teaches and manifests that episcopal consecrations are not to be made except with the knowledge of the people and in their presence, so that in the presence of the people the misconducts of the bad or the merits of the good may be discovered, and thus, with the suffrage and examination of all, the ordination may be just and legitimate."<sup>7</sup>

Long before the approval of *Lumen gentium*, the Dominican Yves Congar had written that "the total plan of God is not exhausted in the hierarchical principle, but presupposes the complement and reciprocity of a communitarian regime, the final fullness depending on both."<sup>8</sup> In this context of renewal, which the Council debates reflected, Mgr De Smedt described the new horizon to be followed. In one of his interventions during the Council, he stated that "what comes first is the People of God."<sup>9</sup> With this he expressed the ecclesiological turn that was being proposed. We can refer to the words of Cardinal Suenens to understand what was happening: "The Church, seen from baptism and no longer from the hierarchy, thus appeared from the beginning as a sacramental and mystical reality before being also a juridical society. It rests on its base, the people of God, rather than on its point, the hierarchy. The pyramid of our manuals had been inverted. The bishop (...) must once again place himself among the people of God who have been entrusted to him: to be even closer to his clergy and his faithful; on an equal footing with them."<sup>10</sup>

Being situated in the people of God entailed an ecclesial way of proceeding that gave primacy to the "whole" (People of God) over the "parts." In this sense, the ecclesial subjectivities – pastors, clergy, religious, laity – were defined on the basis of shared baptismal dignity and the participation of all in the common priesthood. Each of these subjectivities manifests and realizes in a particular and proper way the common condition they share. In *Lumen*

<sup>7</sup> Synodal Letter of the Council of Carthage (254). *In causa Basilidis et Martialis Cyprianus, Epistulae*, 67, IV, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Yves CONGAR, *Jalones para una teología del laicado*, Barcelona, Editorial Estela, 1963, 344. The original edition was published in 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *AS*, 1/4, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, "La unidad de la Iglesia en la lógica del Vaticano II. El cardenal Suenens contesta las preguntas de José Broucker," in *El Ciervo*, 184 (June 1969), 5.

*gentium*, it was decided to distinguish between the permanent, which is rooted in the one Christian vocation, and the transitory or temporary, which corresponds to the functions, roles or services to carry out the mission of the Church in the world.

## **1 — *Being a Church People of God***

The *People of God*, insofar as it expresses the *totality of the faithful* in their relationships and communicative dynamics, is the only active and fundamental subject of all the action and mission of the Church. Consequently, all the faithful form an *organic whole – universitas fidelium* – which is constituted by reciprocal interactions, from which each ecclesial subjectivity is defined in relation to the others, according to *suo modo et pro sua parte*. Thus, the category People of God implies a foundational *constitutive dynamic* of the whole conciliar ecclesiology. This way of being and doing Church based on co-responsible relationships links the hierarchy to the rest of the faithful, from the processes of listening, discernment, and elaboration of decisions, to those of evaluation and accountability of decisions taken. This bond is essential to the identity of ecclesial subjects and supposes that all ecclesial life has to be constructed and evaluated among and by all. Hence, all *christifideles* are subject to accountability and called to permanent conversion. This cannot be something optional in a Church of People of God. We will analyze, develop, and highlight the novelty of this ecclesiological approach in this first part of the article.

### **1.1 — An Organic Hermeneutic of the People of God**

The new conciliar vision implied overcoming fragmented readings that defined ecclesial identities as closed and isolated subjectivities, configured according to the place they had in the exercise of decision-taking power. The *mens* of the conciliar texts posed the challenge of putting into practice a new hermeneutic inspired by the logic of the Church as an organic totality of the faithful, in whose continuous and reciprocal interaction they are constituted as the People of God, including the college of bishops and the successor of Peter. All of them, however, are in a specific order: first the People of God (*all*), then the bishops (*some*), and finally the Bishop of Rome (*one*). These are not three ecclesial subjects. The People of God, insofar as it expresses the totality of the faithful in their relations with one another and in the permanent communicative dynamics, is the only active and fundamental

subject of all the Church's action and mission. Cardinal Suenens explained this conciliar novelty in the following words: "If we were to be asked what we considered the seed of life deriving from the Council which is most fruitful in pastoral consequences, we would answer without hesitation: it is the rediscovery of the People of God as a whole, as a totality, and then by way of consequence the co-responsibility thus implied for every member of the Church."<sup>11</sup>

The criterion of organic wholeness assumes that ecclesial life is defined by a reciprocity that goes beyond the pre-conciliar pyramid, from below and from within, through a style and an *ecclesial way of proceeding* that favors "common work (...), the participation of all according to the diversity and originality of gifts and services,"<sup>12</sup> in the functions of teaching, sanctification, and governance, thus starting from the theology of the *tria munera*.<sup>13</sup> The risk may lie in conceiving the notion of totality as an entity in itself or a mere grouping which, at times, could allow the magisterium and the primacy to be separated from the rest of the faithful and to act outside this totality. Therefore, the notion of the People of God conceived as an organic totality expresses the binding character that emerges from the very process of the constitution of the identities of the ecclesial subjects. The conciliar novelty cannot be reduced to a simple definition of what each ecclesial subject is in itself and what it can contribute to the others, because each one exists and is co-constituted in the reciprocal giving of itself. This will be captured in the newly coined term, *christifideles*.

## 1.2 — The Constituent and Binding Character of the *christifideles*

Bishop De Smedt's interventions at the Council are illuminating in this regard, pointing out that "in the People of God, we are all united with one another, and we have the same fundamental laws and duties. We all participate in the royal priesthood of the people of God. The Pope is one of the faithful: bishops, priests, laity, religious, we are all [the] faithful."<sup>14</sup> The expression *christifideles* avoids both univocity and equivocity in defining

<sup>11</sup> Leo J. SUENENS, *Coresponsibility in the Church*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1968, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Gilles ROUTHIER, "Évangile et modèle de sociabilité," in *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 51/1 (1995), 69.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Peter DE MEY, "Sharing in the Threefold Office of Christ. A Different Matter for Laity and Priests? The *tria munera* in *Lumen gentium*, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, *Apostolicam actuositatem* and *Ad gentes*," in Anne M. MAYER (ed.), *The Letter and the Spirit: On the Forgotten Documents of Vatican II*, Leuven, Peeters, 2018, 55-179.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. AS, 1/4, 143.

what is proper to each subject in relation to the others. In speaking of the faithful, the intention is not only to emphasize the pluriform and co-responsible nature of the relationships between all<sup>15</sup> – bishops, priests, laity, religious – within the People of God, but also their mutual and *reciprocal necessity* in order to be.

Consequently, all the faithful form an organic totality – *universitas fidelium* – constituted by reciprocal interactions, from which each ecclesial subjectivity is defined in respectivity to the others according *suo modo et pro sua parte* (LG 31). As Cardinal Suenens explained, “in the People of God, functions, offices, ministries, states of life and charisms are organically bound together in a complex network of structural links and living relationships (LG 13)”<sup>16</sup> which are built up by relationships of reciprocity, respectivity, and completeness which are binding in the order of being and of doing because “each member is at the service of the other members ... [since] pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need” (LG 32).

*Coniunctio*, the expression chosen by the Council Fathers, supposes that equality in dignity is expressed in “the common action of all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ” (LG 32). Consequently, all the faithful, including the non-ordained, share in the *tria munera Christi*. Therefore, the laity are “the faithful [that] are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (LG 31).

Thus, the category People of God implies a foundational constitutive dynamic of the whole conciliar ecclesiology, so that “everything that has been said above concerning the People of God is intended for the laity, religious and clergy alike” (LG 30). The words of the Bishop of Bruges shed light on the *mens* behind the conciliar texts: “(...) the word *faithful* designates all those who have received the dignity of being members of the church by reason of baptism. Therefore, the faithful are not only the laity, but also religious, priests, bishops and the Pope. Faithful and laity are not interchangeable terms. When we find a mention of the People of God, it refers to the community made up of all the baptized, i.e., all the faithful.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, episcopal authority cannot be understood only by virtue of sacramental ordination or by means of the

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Serena NOCETI, “La costituzione gerarchica della Chiesa e in particolare l’episcopato,” in Serena NOCETI and Roberto REPOLE (eds.), *Commentario ai documenti del Vaticano II*, vol. 2, Bologna, EDB, 215-220.

<sup>16</sup> Leo J. SUENENS, *Coresponsibility in the Church*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Emile-Joseph DE SMEDT, *The Priesthood of the Faithful*, New York, Paulist Press, 1962, 115.

power to exercise the *potestas sacra*. It necessarily implicates involvement in the process of *making Church* in a place, witnessing to and guarding the apostolic life of the Church. And, by virtue of its identity and vocation, the hierarchy is accountable to the other faithful as one more faithful or element of the totality that is the People of God. In fact, the Doctrinal Commission of the Council had to clarify that, when it spoke of the *christifideles*, it also included the members of the hierarchy.<sup>18</sup>

This co-constitutive way of defining all ecclesial identities is relevant for understanding episcopal exercise, because “to include the bishop among the *fideles* in the notion *sensus fidelium* is an important way of highlighting the fact that no bishop exercises his official function in the magisterium without his own *sensus fidei fidelis* coming into play in some way.” Moreover, “it may happen in some cases that the unformed faith which Tillard attributed to many lay people applies to some bishops whose theological formation did not develop beyond their seminary years.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the Council succeeds in overcoming the theology of the *societas inequalis* of Pius X and proposes relationships of identity configuration which link and bond all ecclesial subjects among themselves in light of an essential – and not auxiliary – co-responsibility for all that concerns the life and mission of the Church.

### 1.3 — Some Connotations of a Co-Responsible Bond

This way of being and doing Church links the hierarchy to the rest of the faithful, from the processes of listening, discernment, and decision making, to those of evaluation and accountability of the decisions taken. This bond, which arises from co-responsibility, is essential to the identity of ecclesial subjects and presupposes that all ecclesial life must be constructed and evaluated by and among all. In *Christus Dominus* 16, it is affirmed that, “in exercising their office of father and pastor, bishops should stand in the midst of their people as those who serve (...). In exercising this pastoral care, they should preserve for their faithful the share proper to them in Church affairs; they should also respect their duty and right of actively collaborating in the building up of the Mystical Body of Christ” (*CD* 16).

In this sense, the 1983 Code of Canon Law recognizes a series of rights and duties for the maintenance of the bond. It states, for example, that the

<sup>18</sup> “Observatur quod vox fidelium intelligere posset de solis laicis, dum tamen hic etiam respiciuntur membra Hierarchiae. Inter ‘fideles’ cointelliguntur evidenter membra Hierarchiae (...) ab Episcopis usque ad extremos laicos-fideles,” in *AS*, 3/6, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Ormond RUSH, *The Eyes of Faith. The Sense of The Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation*, Washington, The Catholic University Press, 2009, 269.

laity have “the right, and sometimes even the duty, by reason of their own knowledge, competence and prestige, to express to the sacred Pastors their opinion on matters pertaining to the good of the Church” (c. 204 § 1). It is therefore proper to the laity to give advice by reason of their competence, even as experts (c. 228 §§ 1-2).

However, the problem of a co-responsible bond between ecclesial subjects cannot be seen as merely functional, procedural, or juridical. *Lumen gentium* 12 recognizes that the participation of the faithful is given in the prophetic *munus* of Christ and is expressed through the *sensus fidei fidelium*. *Lumen gentium* 35 relates the *sensus fidei* to the participation of the whole Church – laity and hierarchy together – in the prophetic mission of Christ. More recently, the document on the *Sensus fidei in the life of the Church* of the International Theological Commission recalls that the magisterium cannot decide without the faithful and, for this, it is based on baptism, since:

There is a genuine equality of dignity among all the faithful, because through their baptism they are all reborn in Christ. ‘Because of this equality they all contribute, each according to his or her own condition and office, to the building up of the Body of Christ.’ Therefore, all the faithful ‘have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the Church’ (...). Accordingly, the faithful, and specifically the lay people, should be treated by the Church’s pastors with respect and consideration, and consulted in an appropriate way for the good of the Church.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the exercise of a co-responsible bond is based on at least three theological connotations: (1) in relation to the identity configuration of the ecclesial subjects; (2) in relation to the active participation of all the faithful in the mission of the Church; and (3) in terms of the pneumatological character of listening and the link that is built between the processes of decision-making and decision-taking in the Church.

In relation to the first connotation, the ontological priority of the common priesthood qualifies the totality of the *christifideles* as a priestly people,<sup>21</sup> in and for whom the hierarchical ministry is exercised. Consequently, the hierarchical priesthood is placed at the service of the common priesthood, and both are ordered to the one priesthood of Christ (*LG* 10) so that “pastors must be at the service of the other faithful” (*LG* 32). Consequently, the

<sup>20</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 120 (= ITC, *Sensus fidei*). Cf. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Dario VITALI, “Il Popolo di Dio,” in NOCETI and REPOLE (eds.), *Commentario ai documenti del Vaticano II*, vol. 2, 167.



ministerial priesthood is only a way of life by which some *christifideles* fulfil their Christian vocation (LG 40-41).<sup>22</sup>

Although the Council speaks of a difference “in essence and not merely in degree” (LG 10)<sup>23</sup> between the two priesthoods, this phrase cannot be interpreted except within the common priesthood, from which the ordained minister exercises a specific ministry by reason of the sacrament of Holy Orders by which he is primarily destined to the service of the community and not to the performance of worship (PO 8; LG 28-29). As Santiago Madrigal explains, “Vatican II has made a choice: its point of departure is not the celebration of the Eucharist (worship, cult), but the mission of the people of God, which implies recognizing the ontological priority of the priestly people in which the priestly ministry is inscribed.”<sup>24</sup>

In the first drafts of *Apostolicam actuositatem*, it was held that through the common priesthood one receives “the right, the honor and the charge to exercise the apostolate of the Church in a proper way.”<sup>25</sup> It follows that the lay people properly exercise the common priesthood and participate in the priesthood of Christ in different ways and to different degrees.<sup>26</sup> It is a condition of life of its own, neither delegated nor deficient, and is “essentially” different from the hierarchical ministry. The essential difference seeks to highlight what is specific and proper that each ecclesial identity gives to the other,<sup>27</sup> under the criterion of “a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission” (AA 2).

The second meaning lies in the participation in the evangelizing function or proclamation of the Word, which is proper to all the faithful in exercising the *munus propheticum*. Here the Council finds what gives primacy to identities. In relation to the ministerial priesthood, it refers “principally” to the “Word” (“*primum habent officium Evangelium Dei omnibus evangelizandi,*” PO 4). This is also emphasized in LG 25 in relation to the episcopate and in LG 35 in relation to the laity. The hierarchical ministry cannot be defined outside of these common relationships of *reciprocal necessity* in order to be

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Salvador PIÉ-NINOT, *La sacramentalidad de la comunidad cristiana*, Salamanca, Cristiandad, 2007, 289-331.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rafael LUCIANI, “Hacia una eclesialidad sinodal ¿Una nueva comprensión de la Iglesia Pueblo de Dios?” in *Horizonte*, 59 (2021), 556-558.

<sup>24</sup> Santiago MADRIGAL, *Unas lecciones sobre el Vaticano II y su legado*, Madrid, San Pablo, 2012, 278.

<sup>25</sup> *Schemata Constitutionum et Decretorum de quibus disceptabitur in Concilii Sessionibus. Schema Decreti De Apostolatu Laicorum*, Typ. Polyg. Vat., 1963, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Schema Decreti De Apostolatu Laicorum*, Typ. Polyg. Vat., 1964, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Schema Decreti De Apostolatu Laicorum. Textus recognitus et modi a Patribus Conciliaribus propositi a Commissione de fidelium apostolatu examinati*, Typ. Polyg. Vat., 1965, 23.

(*LG* 32) and to realize the mission of the Church (*LG* 17). We can allude to the words of Congar when he explains how the Council achieved “a horizontal decentering on the community and the People of God (...). The People of God is structured by a hierarchy whose functional character is underlined, as well as its nature of service.”<sup>28</sup>

On the basis of these two meanings, the laity is recognized as a subject. In fact, during the debates on the drafting of *Lumen gentium* 12, Bishop De Smedt requested that the term *lay faithful* be related to the prophetic *munus* of Christ, because this emphasized the active subject character of the *sensus fidei*.<sup>29</sup> The laity is thus a way of realizing the Christian vocation and of participating actively, in a differentiated and co-responsible way, in the mission of the Church (*SC* 14) *suo modo et pro sua parte* (*AA* 29) to shape the Church as a community of subjects, and never of passive objects or recipients. *Lumen gentium* expresses it clearly when it says that by the name of laity are designated “these faithful [that] are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (*LG* 31). The laity is thus a proper way of being a subject in the Church, within the framework of the totality of the faithful in such a way that “the apostolate of the laity and the pastoral ministry are mutually complementary” (*AA* 6).

The novelty of this perspective lies in the fact that all ecclesial subjects are defined by relationships of *completeness* that are realized through the co-responsible exercise of one’s own identity and vocation. No ecclesial subject can be defined in isolation or above others, but only in relation to and together with others. Thus, ordained ministers exercise their authority outside the totality of all the faithful, since it is in this organic totality that each one’s own way of being is qualified and fulfilled, being completed with and for the others. The interaction between the faithful generates a dynamic of permanent identity reconfiguration of both the being and the function of each one in relation to the evangelizing mission of the Church. Hence, all *christifideles* are subject to accountability and called to permanent conversion.

<sup>28</sup> Yves CONGAR, *Historia de los dogmas. Tomo III: Ecclesiology*, Madrid, BAC, 1976, 297.

<sup>29</sup> “Laici initialiter audiunt doctrinam catholicam ab apostolis eorumque successoribus, sed in subsequenti intellectione doctrinae ipsi suo supernaturali sensu fidei habent partem activam, magisterio ecclesiastico subordinatam, tanquam organum Christi prophetae qui Ecclesiam suam adiuvat ne a veritate declinet eamque profundius intelligat et in vita fidelius applicet.” In *AS*, 2/3, 104.

## 2 — *Becoming a Church People of God*

The post-conciliar reception of the category of *christifideles* has not been easy, given the binding character it implies in relation to the processes of configuration of ecclesial identities by emphasizing the horizontality of baptismal dignity. The immediate post-conciliar period paid less attention to the inclusion of the episcopal exercise in the People of God and its consequent *accountability*. A turning point came during the discussions of *Lumen gentium* 12, when the Council Fathers came to the realization that it is the Spirit who manifests himself through the communicative dynamism that is set in motion in the interaction of all *christifideles*. This has made it possible to take a new hermeneutical leap and think of the *sensus fidei* in the light of *communicative dynamics* – listening, consultation, communitarian discernment and counseling – that generate a *co-responsible link* between all ecclesial subjects. It is a novelty of the current phase of reception of the Council that can be appreciated in defining the Church in the light of listening. Thus, we speak today of the binding character of the episcopal exercise within the totality of the People of God, both in matters of government and pastoral care. The faithful must not only be heard; they have the right to demand and evaluate the accountability of the hierarchy. This current step in the reception of a model of the Church as the People of God will be developed in this second part of the article.

### 2.1 — Some Perspectives of the Theology of the *sensus fidei*

The post-conciliar reception of the category *christifideles* has not been easy, given the binding character it implies in relation to the processes of configuration of ecclesial identities by emphasizing the horizontality of baptismal dignity. The initial post-conciliar reflections put the accent on what distinguishes ecclesial subjects, especially in terms of the exercise of the bishop's authority with regard to the *munus docendi* – witnessing, preaching, teaching – and its relevance for the evolution of doctrine. Consequently, there was a need to clarify the relationship between infallibility “in believing” (*infallibilitas in credendo*) and infallibility “in teaching” (*infallibilitas in docendo*). The way in which the reflection developed ended up creating a certain juxtaposition that responded to “the requests of the minority group of Council Fathers to describe more clearly the meaning of the office of teaching in relation to the meaning of faith.”<sup>30</sup> This was in the context of an

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Robert W. SCHMUCKER, *Sensus fidei: der Glaubenssinn in seiner vorkonziliaren Entwicklungsgeschichte und in den Dokumenten des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, Regensburg, Roderer, 1998, 218-219.

incipient deepening of the conciliar ecclesiology of the People of God and the co-responsibility that implied between the ecclesial subjects. The immediate post-conciliar period paid less attention to the inclusion of the episcopal exercise in the People of God and its consequent accountability.

In this context, the theology of the post-conciliar *sensus fidei* privileged the vision of *Dei verbum*. There, it is stressed the interrelation between the magisterium and the whole Church, and between the understanding of revelation and that of tradition. Both presented in the framework of an interaction. The relator of the Constitution, Bishop Hermenegildus Florit, argued that the magisterium is exercised within the whole Church, because the Church is the only organic subject, and the deposit of faith can progress through the common mind of all the faithful. Therefore, any “doctrine which is proposed is proper not only to the magisterium but to the whole Church. From this it follows that this deposit, just as it governs and sustains the life of the Church, is sustained by the life of the Church and participates exactly in it,”<sup>31</sup> for it must always seek the *singularis antistitum et fidelium conspiratio* (DV 10). This was the case in the proclamation of the two Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.<sup>32</sup>

*Dei verbum* 10 offered the appropriate hermeneutical framework for the questions addressed in this first reception of Vatican II. On the one hand, it clarified that “prelates and faithful collaborate closely in the preservation, exercise and profession of the faith received.” On the other hand, that “authentic interpretation is entrusted to the living magisterium of the Church,” not to the individual exercise of episcopal authority. With the expression *living* magisterium, emphasis was placed on the fact that the fruit of an interpretation of the magisterium comes from the interaction of the hierarchy with and together with all the faithful. Furthermore, it is held that “sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation” (DV 10). The text stresses the respectivity (*inter se connecti et consociari, ut unum sine aliis non consistat*), interconnectedness and reciprocity (*omniaque simul, singula suo modo*), but specifies that it is the action

<sup>31</sup> Cf. AS 3/3, 139.

<sup>32</sup> “*Singularis catholicorum Antistitum et fidelium conspiratio.*” Cf. Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*. This entailed another implication, namely to conceive of the exercise of the apostolicity presented in *Lumen gentium* 25 within the apostolicity of the whole ecclesial body in the light of *Lumen gentium* 12, but this is not the subject of this article.

of the Spirit (*sub actione unius Spiritus Sancti*) that makes possible the unity between Tradition, Scripture, and the Magisterium.

Another possible solution to the unresolved juxtaposition between the infallibility of the sense of the faithful and that of the magisterium can be found in the light of the theology of the *munus propheticum* of *all* (people of God as a whole) as a basis for the exercise of the *munus docendi* of *some* (episcopate). From this perspective, a link can also be established, because infallibility *in credendo* (LG 12) is not a mere passivity of the non-ordained faithful in the face of infallibility *in docendo* (LG 25). The *munus docendi* of the bishops can never be exercised without the *munus propheticum* of all the faithful through whom, as an organic totality, the Spirit speaks and manifests himself to the whole Church. Nor can we reduce the *munus regendi* to an exercise of hierarchical authority in isolation from the rest of the faithful, for “Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Father’s kingdom by the witness of his life and the power of his word, fulfils his prophetic mission to the full, realizes his prophetic mission until the full manifestation of glory, not only through the Hierarchy, which teaches in his name and with his power, but also through the laity, whom he consequently constitutes as witnesses and endows with the sense of faith and the grace of the word” (LG 35).

Moreover, if the People of God is an organic totality, all the *christifideles* participate in teaching, witnessing, and sanctifying. This reality is exercised in a differentiated way, each one from his own, which complements and completes the others. Without this vision, we would fall back into the model of an *ecclesia docens* (hierarchy) and *ecclesia discens* (rest of the faithful) that differentiates those who have an office or power (hierarchy) and those who do not (laity), resulting in a deficient and isolated understanding of identities. From an organic notion of the People of God, it has been possible to open a debate on the separation of the power of order and the power of jurisdiction, giving way to an exercise of the *munus regendi* by the laity, not exclusively by the hierarchy.

## 2.2 — The Recovery of the Pneumatological Dimension

A new turn comes during the discussions of *Lumen gentium* 12, when the Council Fathers come to the understanding that it is the Spirit who manifests through the communicative dynamics that are set in motion. This appears clearly in the *textus receptus* of *Lumen gentium* 12, which expresses that “the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies and guides the people of God through the sacraments and ministries, but also distributes gifts to each one as the he wills, making one fit and ready to undertake various works or services, for

the sake of the renewal and further edification of the Church.”<sup>33</sup> In the *modi* received, the doctrinal commission changed the expression *exercet* which appeared in the *textus prior* to *manifestat*, incorporated in the *textus emendatus*. This change, proposed by Mgr De Smedt,<sup>34</sup> offered the pneumatological foundation necessary to understand the infallibility of the magisterium within the infallibility of the whole People of God, since it is the voice of the Spirit that is manifested through the totality of the faithful. Finally, the recovery of this pneumatological dimension is linked to the maturing of the ecclesiology of the People of God. Cardinal Mario Grech explains:

... the rediscovery of the People of God as an active subject in the life and mission of the Church, proposed by Vatican II, is accompanied by the rediscovery, through the Council itself, of the pneumatological dimension of the Church. Listening to the People of God is truly listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Church. The choice to “consult the People of God” depends on this rediscovery: if we were not certain that the Spirit speaks to the Church, and does so by virtue of the anointing given in baptism, consultation would be reduced to a poll, with all the risks of manipulation of public opinion, typical of political systems based on representation. On the Spirit depends the “*conspiratio*”, i.e., the agreement in faith of the whole People of God.<sup>35</sup>

Hence *Lumen gentium* 12 is not without controversy, since it states how “the Holy Spirit makes infallible the whole Church as such, and within it each organic part according to what it represents.”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, within the framework of this organic totality (*LG* 32), the bishop is witness (*LG* 12), custodian, and guarantor (*DV* 8), and magisterial infallibility is qualified within the infallibility of the whole People of God by means of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. The final text of *Lumen gentium* 12 states:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27) 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. That discernment in matters of faith

<sup>33</sup> “Idem praeterea Spiritus Sanctus non tantum per sacramenta et ministeria populum Dei sanctificat et ducit eumque virtutibus ornat, sed dona sua ‘dividens singulis prout vult’ (1 Cor. 12, 11), inter omnis ordinis fideles distribuit gratias quoque speciales, quibus illos aptos et promptos reddit ad suscipienda varia opera vel officia, pro renovatione et ampliore aedificatione Ecclesiae proficua, secundum illud: Unicuique datur manifestatio Spiritus ad utilitem (1 Cor. 2,7).” Francisco GIL HELLÍN, *Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis. Constitutio Dogmatica De Ecclesia Lumen gentium*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995, 99-100.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. AS, 3/6, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Mario GRECH, “La consultazione del Popolo di Dio nelle Chiese particolari,” in *Sinodalità e riforma. Una sfida ecclesiale*, Brescia, Queriniana, 2022, 7.

<sup>36</sup> CONGAR, *Jalones para una teología del laicado*, 351.

is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). Through it, the people of God adhere unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, (Jude 3) penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life (LG 12).

This conciliar passage recognizes that the Spirit has no distinction of any kind in manifesting himself. The expression *exercet* appears in the *textus prior* in the context of the following sentence: *mediante supernaturali sensus fidei totius populi exercet, cum ab Episcopis usque ad extremos laicos fideles*. The *textus receptus* makes an important semantic change by replacing *exercet* by *manifestat*: *mediante supernaturali sensus fidei totius populi manifestat*. This change makes it theologically clear that the *sensus fidei fidelium* is not a mere exercise, function, or implementation of an operation of the intelligence of faith. Instead, it is a communal and spiritual dynamic which binds all ecclesial subjects together and configures them as an organic and co-responsible whole on the basis of what the Spirit is manifesting through and to the whole People of God – *sensus totius populi* – and not to *some* of them. This spiritual dynamic is seen when the text states that:

... it is not only through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God and enriches it with virtues, but, “allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills, (1 Cor 12:11) He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit” (1 Cor 12:7) (LG 12).

In this way, the place of the hierarchy is situated among the faithful – *Inter fideles cointelliguntur evidenter membra Hierarchiae*<sup>37</sup> – on the basis of a rich exchange of gifts, charisms, and services, of which the co-responsible exercise is subject to ongoing discernment, evaluation, and conversion.

We can complement *Lumen gentium* 12 with *Dei verbum* 8, where the linking of all ecclesial subjects appears on the basis of a series of interesting communicative dynamics. On the one hand, it is said that the deposit of faith is entrusted to the whole People of God, who preserve, profess, and transmit it.<sup>38</sup> But, there is also an important consideration in the ways proposed by

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Relatio* of no. 12 appeared in GIL HELLÍN, *Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis*, 96-97.

<sup>38</sup> “Cum Depositum revelatum donum sit divinum toti Ecclesiae factum, toti Ecclesiae consequenter officium incumbit illud conservandi, eidem inhaerendi, idemque cunctis generationibus transmittendi.” Cf. AS, 3/3, 139.

the Council Fathers to the *Schema* of 3 July 1964. They asked for the addition of the expression *sensus fidei*. The doctrinal commission rejected it on the grounds that it was implicit in referring to the growth in the understanding of revealed truth. Instead, the phrase *spiritualem rerum quam experiuntur intelligentia*<sup>39</sup> was used. The Council Fathers did not want to refer only to experience and contemplation, but also to intelligence and study, including the contribution of theologians as well as other disciplines that collaborate in the understanding of revelation.

Among the amendments to the text, it was approved to replace *intelligentia* by *perceptio*,<sup>40</sup> which points to a connatural knowledge through the experience of *all* the faithful. It was considered that the explicit reference to the Holy Spirit was unnecessary because the expression *spiritualem rerum* already denoted it.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the text contributes something relevant to the understanding of the *sensus fidei* by maintaining that, in the Church, “there is a dynamic process from which the common sense of the faithful emerges and becomes the criterion for knowing the truth divinely revealed”<sup>42</sup> and achieves the *antistitium et fidelium conspiratio*. Further, *Dei verbum* 10 expresses this beautifully by affirming that the deposit of the Word of God has been entrusted to “the whole People of God, united with their pastors,” who are to “constitute a singular consensus.” This reflection, achieved in the third session of the Council, concludes that “the magisterium is not above the word of God, but serves it.” At the same time, “it is under the action of the Spirit” (*DV* 10). In all these cases, the awareness of an organic spiritual dynamic between the different ecclesial subjects can be seen.

### 2.3 — Open Pathways for Co-responsible Links

As the ecclesiology of the People of God deepened, the reception of *Lumen gentium* 12 matured. This has made it possible to think of the *sensus fidei* in the light of communicative dynamics that generate a co-responsible link between all ecclesial subjects. Among these we can mention listening, consultation, communal discernment, and counselling. It is a novelty of the current phase of reception of the Council that can be seen in defining the

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *AS*, 3/3, 145.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *AS*, 4/5, 704.

<sup>41</sup> “Additiones de donis Spiritus Sancti non videntur necessariae, quia influxus Spiritus Sancti memoratur in initio phraseos et ad totum se extendit. Ponitur ceterum ‘spiritualium rerum’, et non ‘divinarum’, praecise propter Spiritum Sanctum.” Cf. *AS*, 4/5, 697.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *AS*, 3/3, 139.



Church in the light of listening: “A synodal Church is a Church of listening (...). It is a *reciprocal listening* in which everyone has something to learn (...). It is listening to God, to the point of listening with him to the cry of the people; and it is listening to the people, to the point of breathing in them the will to which God calls us.”<sup>43</sup>

At the basis of this is the rediscovery of the pneumatological character which emphasizes the *constituent* ongoing dimension of the People of God on the basis of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. Just as the sequence of the chapters of *Lumen gentium* is the hermeneutical norm for the whole Constitution – chapter II (People of God) before chapter III (Hierarchy) – so the presence of the *sensus fidei* within chapter II (People of God) makes LG 12 the most appropriate framework for understanding the dynamics of identity reconfiguration in a Church of People of God, since the Spirit speaks through the organic totality (chapter II: People of God) and not through the hierarchy unilaterally (chapter III). Consequently, as Bishop De Smedt explained, “the teaching body [bishops] does not rest exclusively on the action of the Holy Spirit on the bishops; it [must] also listen to the action of the same Spirit on the people of God. Therefore, the teaching body not only speaks to the People of God, but also listens to this People in whom Christ continues His teaching.”<sup>44</sup>

Listening presupposes horizontal relationships rooted in baptismal dignity and participation in the common priesthood (LG 10). Being a *reciprocal listening*, each ecclesial subject contributes something that *completes* the identity and mission of the other (AA 6), and does so from what is most proper to him (LG 31). This qualifies the exercise of episcopal authority not only in relation to the evolution of doctrine and its teaching (*munus docendi*), but also in relation to the co-responsible exercise of the *munus pascendi* (PO 7). Consequently, everything that is part of the exercise of the *potestas spiritualis* and the pastoral office of pastors (LG 24-27) is subject to accountability, including the *munus regendi*. All this presupposes that the exercise of the episcopal ministry is not qualified by *determinatio fidei* but by *testificatio fidei*. The bishop is a witness and party to the mediation of the *sensus fidei fidelium* as a member of the *universitas fidelium*.<sup>45</sup> The Ravenna Document explains it thus: “The authority linked

<sup>43</sup> Pope FRANCIS, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015). Cf. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)

<sup>44</sup> Emile-Joseph DE SMEDT, *The Priesthood of the Faithful*, New York, Paulist, 1962, 89-90.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Dario VITALI, *Lumen gentium. Storia, Commento, Recezione*, Rome, Studium, 2012, 67.

to the grace received at ordination is neither a private possession of the one who receives it nor something delegated from the community, but is a gift of the Holy Spirit destined for the service (*diakonia*) of the community and never exercised outside it. Its exercise includes the participation of the whole community, the bishop being in the Church and the Church in the bishop (St Cyprian, *Ep.* 66, 8).<sup>46</sup>

The document on the *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church* inserts the binding character within the whole People of God and recognizes that the *sensus fidelium* is the living voice of the people of God to whom the magisterium has the duty to listen (ITC, *Sensus fidei*, 74), both in matters of government and pastoral care (ITC, *Sensus fidei*, 121), and either personally or through established bodies, such as pastoral councils (ITC, *Sensus fidei*, 125-126). Therefore, it is worth saying that

The people of God has its own normativity, understood in a sense analogous to that of the episcopate, since its understanding of the doctrine of the faith constitutes and delimits the sphere of magisterial action (...). The *sensus fidei* is considered a genuine mediation of divine revelation, and must therefore be verified in relation to it, and does not simply echo the magisterial position. The *sensus fidei* is a *locus theologicus* and possesses its formal authority, even if the authenticity of its exercise must be submitted to the supervision of the magisterium.<sup>47</sup>

The current *status quaestionis* invites us to deepen the reception of the *sensus fidei fidelium* in a synodal Church, in which listening is not just hearing or gathering information, but a binding dynamic that offers the hierarchy advice and council for a co-responsible decision-making and decision-taking process within the framework of the *communio fidelium*.

<sup>46</sup> THE JOINT THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION FOR THE THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH, "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority," Ravenna, 13 October 2007: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese.html>

<sup>47</sup> Massimo NARDELLO, "L'autorità dottrinale del ministero ordinato e il ruolo del popolo di Dio nella comprensione della fede," in Davide RIGHI (ed.), *Quelli della via. Indagini sulla sinodalità nella Chiesa*, Bologna, EDB, 2020, 47.

## *Conclusion*

The open challenge in the reception of this dynamic is described in the document on *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*.

In matters of faith the baptised cannot be passive. They have received the Spirit and are endowed as members of the body of the Lord with gifts and charisms ‘for the renewal and building up of the Church’, (LG 12) so the magisterium has to be attentive to the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the people of God. Not only do they have the right to be heard, but their reaction to what is proposed as belonging to the faith of the Apostles must be taken very seriously, because it is by the Church as a whole that the apostolic faith is borne in the power of the Spirit. The magisterium does not have sole responsibility for it.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, the theology of the *sensus fidei* cannot be reduced to a function or solely an exercise of the intelligence of faith, for it is primarily a dynamic of permanent reconfiguration of the whole ecclesial life which links all ecclesial subjectivities co-responsibly to one another by means of communicative dynamics capable of manifesting the action of the Spirit.

In the current reception of the Council, the challenge that remains is to institutionalize this theology and “to ensure the maturing of the mechanisms of participation proposed by the Code of Canon Law and other forms of pastoral dialogue, with the desire to listen to all and not just to some” (EG 31). Good practices and new structures should be inspired by the classic principle: “what concerns all must be dealt with and approved by all.”<sup>49</sup> In the framework of a fuller reception of the theology of the *sensus fidei*, we can build a synodal Church in which the practice of accountability is binding on *all* (*christifideles*), and not optional for *some* (*episcopate*) or *one* (*primate*).

<sup>48</sup> ITC, *Sensus fidei*, no. 74. Cf. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html)

<sup>49</sup> Rafael LUCIANI, “*Lo que afecta a todos debe ser tratado y aprobado por todos*. Hacia estructuras de participación y poder de decisión compartido,” in *Revista CLAR* [Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos], 58/1 (2020), 65.