



*The Witness of the Faithful
in Matters of Doctrine
according to
John Henry Newman*

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One of the most important studies from the pen of blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) is the essay, “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine.”¹ The publication of the article sparked fierce debate and is still considered controversial today. What follows here aims to describe the context surrounding the essay at its publication, to present its basic content, and to draw attention to the enduring importance of Newman’s thought.

I. The Context

Newman’s article on the witness of the faithful in doctrinal matters appeared in 1859 in the *Rambler*, one of the leading periodicals for educated Catholics in England. Founded in 1848, it enjoyed high esteem among many lay people, but was regarded critically by some bishops. Such criticism may have been motivated partly by personal reasons, but it was also caused by some polemical articles of the editor-in-chief, Richard Simpson, a convert clergyman, who did not refrain from referring explicitly to failings within the Catholic Church.

At the beginning of 1859, the situation came to a head. The British government had nominated a Royal Commission on Primary Education

¹ In the well-known biographies of Newman, the context and significance of this article are treated at length. Cf. especially Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman. A Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 463-489. The detailed introduction by John Coulson, *John Henry Newman, On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, London: Collins Publications, 1986, is valuable on the whole question.

and was prepared to support Catholic schools alongside others. However, the Catholic Church had missed the chance to assert its right to participate in this Commission, and the bishops had concluded that they could not collaborate with the Commission, because it also intended to examine the means of instruction. In the January edition of the *Rambler*, an article appeared in which the Catholic school inspector Scott Nasmyth Stokes respectfully but clearly rejected as inadequate the bishops’



Bishop Ullathorne

arguments against collaboration with the Royal Commission. This article was interpreted as an expression of inadequate backing of the bishops on the part of the *Rambler*. To avoid a public scandal, Cardinal Wiseman and Bishop Ullathorne decided to ask Simpson to resign as editor-in-chief and to ask Newman to take on the editorship. After long internal struggles, Newman agreed, because he wanted to save the periodical because of its importance for Catholic intellectuals, and to contribute to peace in the Church.

Newman was determined to alter the sometimes polemical tone of the journal, but not its basic direction. At first both the bishops and Sir John Acton, the celebrated owner of the periodical, seemed ready to accept this line. In the May 1859 edition of the *Rambler*, Newman wanted to stress the bishops’ critical attitude vis-à-vis the Royal Commission. For this purpose he printed lengthy pastoral letters in which Cardinal Wiseman and Bishop Ullathorne put forward their views. He added, however, that in regard to this question the laymen – fully recognising the rights of the episcopacy – should also express their view. “If even in the preparation of a dogmatic definition the faithful are consulted, as lately in the instance of the Immaculate Conception, it is at least as natural to anticipate such an act of kind feeling and sympathy in great practical questions.”²

This opinion led Dr John Gillow, a Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Ushaw, to suspect Newman of heresy. Newman decisively rejected this reproach and asked Bishop Ullathorne for a theological censor for the *Rambler*, in order to have the matter objectively disposed of by an expert. Ullathorne thought this inappropriate. Instead, he paid Newman a visit,

² See: Introduction of John Coulson, *John Henry Newman. On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, 8.

during which he pressed him to lay down the editorship of the *Rambler*. He could not understand why educating the faithful might be important for the Church. “There were remains of the old spirit. It was irritating. Our laity were a *peaceable* set; the Church was *peace*. They had a deep faith; they did not like to hear that anyone doubted,” the bishop told Newman. In a short note about the meeting Newman wrote, “I stated my own view strongly. ... he saw only one side, I another; that the Bishops etc., did not see the state of the laity... He said something like, ‘Who are the laity?’ I answered (not these words) that the Church would look foolish without them.”³ Although Newman could not understand the attitude of the bishop, he kept calm and agreed at once to give up the editorship. At this time, he wrote to a friend, “I then promised him I would give up the *Rambler* after the July Number. (There was no sort of unpleasantness of any kind in our conversation from beginning to end). It is impossible, with the principles and feelings on which I have acted all through life, that I could have acted otherwise. I never have resisted, nor can resist, the voice of a lawful Superior, speaking in his own province.”⁴

However, the affair was not closed with that. Newman still had to edit the July edition of the *Rambler*. In this issue, he set out to defend the status of the faithful, since he was convinced that they play an intrinsic role in the nature of the Church. He therefore published the article “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine”, in which he set up theological and historical arguments as the basis of his understanding.

Although no-one could refute Newman’s arguments, serious accusations followed. Professor Gillow said Newman was denying the dogma of the infallibility of the Church. Bishop Brown of Newport translated parts of the essay – making errors in the process – into Latin, and brought an accusation in Rome before the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*), which at that time still supervised the Catholic Church in England. Newman heard of the criticisms and in January 1860 turned to Cardinal Wiseman, who was in Rome at this time, and asked for clarification as to which dogmatic propositions his arguments contradicted. Newman’s letter was forwarded to *Propaganda Fide*. In response *Propaganda Fide* issued notes on individual passages in the article asking Newman to clarify his position. However, these notes were never transmitted to Newman. He only received a letter reporting that Cardinal

³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁴ Charles Stephen Dessain (ed.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. XIX, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1969, 150.

Wiseman would clear up the matter for him, which in fact Wiseman never did. The Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, Cardinal Barnabò, thought Newman disobedient, because he failed to answer. Newman, of course, knew no details of the criticisms made of him and thus was not able to justify himself. This contributed to the Ultramontanist opinion that Newman was a “dangerous man”. The words of Monsignor Talbot, a convert from England, active in Rome as Papal Chamberlain, are well known: writing some years later in a letter to Archbishop Manning he states, “It is perfectly *true* that a cloud has been hanging over Dr Newman” ever since the *Rambler* article, and that “none of his writings since have removed that cloud”. Of the laity, Talbot goes on to say that “they are beginning to show the cloven hoof... They are only putting into practice the doctrine taught by Dr Newman in his article in the *Rambler*. ... What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but



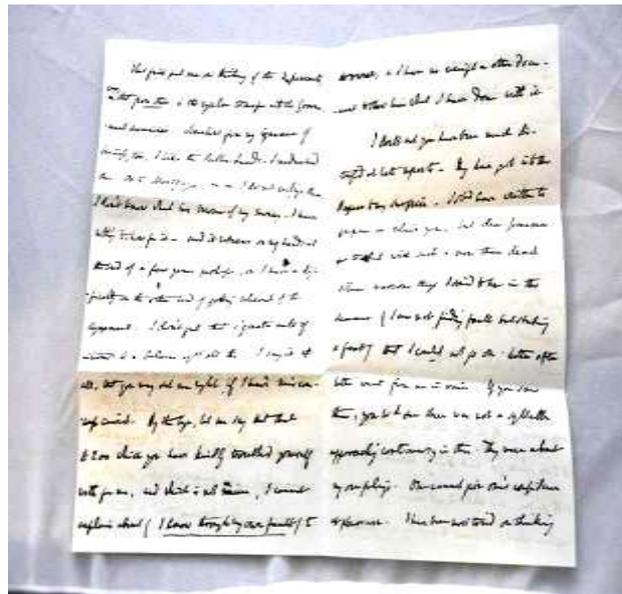
to meddle with ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all, and this affair of Newman is a matter purely ecclesiastical. ... Dr Newman is the most dangerous man in England.”⁵

Propaganda Fide in Rome

For several years a cloud of mistrust hung over Newman who published nothing more for some time. Only in 1864, when he wrote frankly of the development of his thought and of his path to the Catholic Church in the *Apologia pro vita sua*, were the suspicions shown to be without foundation. In 1867 the misunderstanding regarding *Propaganda Fide* was finally resolved when, on a visit to Rome, Ambrose St John and another Birmingham Oratorian heard that Newman had been accused of not having provided an explanation of the objectionable passages in the *Rambler* article. The two explained that Newman had never heard about these difficulties. Pope Pius IX was informed of this and subsequently asked Archbishop Cullen to report personally on Newman’s orthodoxy. After a very positive report from the Irish archbishop, it became clear to everyone in Rome, as elsewhere, that the accusations against Newman had been slanderous.

⁵ Coulson, *On Consulting the Faithful*, 41-42.

In this time of suffering, Newman wrote in a letter to his friend Henry Wilberforce: “If you attempt at a wrong time, what in itself is right, you perhaps become a heretic or schismatic. What I may aim at may be real and good, but it may be God’s will it should be done a hundred years later. ... When I am gone, it will be seen perhaps that persons stopped me from doing a work which I might have done. God overrules all things. Of course it is discouraging to be out of joint



with the time, and to be snubbed and stopped as soon as I begin to act.”⁶ Newman was ahead of his time. A hundred years later, his thoughts – especially on the mission of the faithful – have been taken up by the Church and have had a positive and encouraging effect down to the present day; while Newman’s attitude and bearing during these years of trial offer an eloquent lesson in how to deal with difficulties and sufferings within the Church.

II. The Content

1. Drawing on his extensive study of the Fathers, Newman argued that the Apostolic Tradition was entrusted to the whole Church – and that every element of the Church is involved in its own way in the process of preserving that Tradition and handing it on. According to Newman, Tradition manifests itself variously at various times: “sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history.”⁷ Newman concludes from this “that none of these channels of tradition may be treated with disrespect;” but at once adds “that the gift of discerning, discriminating, defining, promulgating, and enforcing any portion of that tradition resides solely in the *Ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church).”⁸ One is at liberty to stress the

⁶ *Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XIX, 179-180.

⁷ Coulson, *On Consulting the Faithful*, 63.

⁸ *Ibid.*

one or the other side of this truth. Newman remarks that he himself is accustomed “to lay great stress on the *consensus fidelium*.”⁹

2. This insight helped Newman to resolve a number of difficulties connected with the question of the development of doctrine. The Tradition of the Church is after all not the mechanical handing on of the contents of belief, but a living process. This process becomes objectively tangible through historical testimony. However Tradition also has a subjective significance: all members of the Church are Spirit-filled bearers of Tradition. So why is the consent of all the faithful important? “Because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their *consensus* through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church.”¹⁰ The *consensus fidelium* can thus make up for the lack of Patristic testimony on various points of the Catholic dogma.

In this argument Newman depends on Fr Giovanni Perrone SJ, with whom he had discussed this question at length in 1847 in Rome during his preparation for ordination in the Catholic Church. Fr Perrone wrote in his work on the Immaculate Conception about the “sense of the Church” (*sensus Ecclesiae*) and describes it as a collaboration between the shepherds and the flock (*conspiratio pastorum ac fidelium*). He goes on to speak of the “sense of the faithful” (*sensus fidelium*) “as distinct (not separate) from the teaching of their pastors.” With Gregory of Valencia, he concludes, “in controversy about a matter of faith, the consent of all the faithful has such a force in the proof of this side or that, that the Supreme Pontiff *is able and ought to rest* upon it, as being the *judgment or sentiment* of the *infallible* Church.” This does not mean “that infallibility is in the *consensus fidelium*, but that the *consensus* is an *indicium* or *instrumentum* to us of the judgement of that Church which *is* infallible.” As an example of a definition of the living teaching office of the Church based on the *consensus fidelium*, Fr. Perrone offers the doctrine of the Beatific Vision of the souls after Purgatory and before the Last Judgment. Pope John XXII presented this in the 14th century, not on the basis of clear Biblical and Patristic texts, but because of the luminous testimony, the “strong feelings” and the “impatience” of the faithful.¹¹

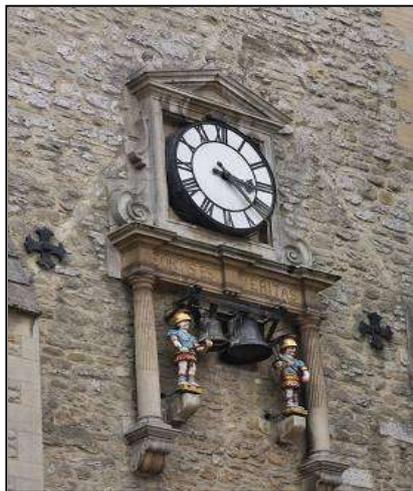
⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67-70.

Newman then mentions the Encyclical Letter in which Pope Pius IX, in preparation for the Dogma of 1854, asked the bishops for information about the views of clergy and lay people on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the suitability of its definition. He takes note of the definition itself, in which Pius IX mentions, among the witnesses for the apostolicity of the dogma, the *singularis catholicorum Antistitum ac fidelium conspiratio*. That is to say: “*Conspiratio*; the two, the Church teaching and the Church taught, are put together, as one twofold testimony, illustrating each other, and never to be divided.”¹²

Finally Newman also mentions Bishop Ullathorne, who, in a treatise published shortly after the promulgation of the Dogma, calls the convictions of the faithful a “mirror” of what is taught by the shepherds. Regarding the passage in the May edition of the *Rambler*, which had been so vehemently attacked, Newman writes with dry irony, “Well, I suppose a person may *consult* his glass, and in that way may know things about himself which he can learn in no other way.”¹³



Impressions of Oxford

3. In a further section, Newman deals with how the *consensus fidelium* is related to the spreading of the Tradition of the Church. He agrees with Fr Perrone that this *consensus* is evidence in favour of the Apostolic teaching. When Newman speaks of “consulting the faithful”, he does not – as Professor Gillow wrongly thought – mean that the bishops ought to ask the faithful laity for their advice or be dependent on their judgment before they could intervene in a doctrinal matter. To “consult” can, especially in colloquial English, also refer

to ascertaining facts: “Thus we talk of ‘consulting our barometer’ about the weather: the barometer only attests the *fact* of the state of the atmosphere. In like manner, we may consult a watch or a sun-dial about the time of day. A physician consults the pulse of his patient; ... It is but an index of the state of his health.”¹⁴ Only in this sense does Newman wish to speak of consulting the faithful: “Doubtless their advice, their opinion, their judgment on the question of definition is not asked; but the matter

¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

of fact, viz. their belief, is sought for, as a testimony to that apostolical tradition, on which alone any doctrine whatsoever can be defined.”¹⁵

However, the consent of all the faithful is still more than a witness of the truth. With Johann Adam Möhler, the great Tübingen theologian, Newman speaks of “a sort of instinct” in the mystical body of Christ, which is a fruit of the union of believers with God and thus constitutes something like an ecclesial conscience which leads believers on to grasp the truth.¹⁶ With Cardinal John Fisher, he refers to the Holy Spirit leading the people of God.¹⁷ With Augustine, he claims that the *consensus fidelium* may be regarded as an answer to their prayers.¹⁸ Especially important to him is the function of the “sense of believing” as a spiritual immune system: “The religious life of a people is of a certain quality and direction, and these are tested by the mode in which it encounters the various opinions, customs, and institutions which are submitted to it. Drive a stake into a river’s bed, and you will at once ascertain which way it is running, and at what speed; throw up even a straw upon the air, and you will see which way the wind blows; submit your heretical and Catholic principle to the action of the multitude, and you will be able to pronounce at once whether it is imbued with Catholic truth or with heretical falsehood.”¹⁹

4. To make the teaching of the *consensus fidelium* transparent, Newman then deals at length with the era of the Arians, to which while still an Anglican he had devoted his first major work. This period in the fourth century is, says Newman, “the age of doctors, illustrated, as it was, by the saints Athanasius, Hilary.... Augustine, nevertheless in that very day the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate.”²⁰ Newman does not deny “that the great body of the Bishops were in their internal belief orthodox; nor that there were numbers of clergy who stood by the laity, and acted as their centres and guides; nor that the laity actually received their faith, in the first instance, from the Bishops and clergy; nor that some portions of the laity were ignorant, and other portions at length corrupted by the Arian teachers, who got possession of sees and ordained

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

an heretical clergy.”²¹ Nevertheless, he does claim “that in that time of immense confusion the divine dogma of Our Lord’s divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the *Ecclesia docta* than by the *Ecclesia docens*.”²²

Newman supports his statement with many witnesses from the age of the Fathers. After the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), there was a period in which “there was a temporary suspense of the functions of the *Ecclesia docens*;²³ in which “the body of the episcopate was unfaithful to its commission;”²⁴ in which “at one time the Pope, at other times the patriarchal, metropolitan, and other great sees, at other times general councils, said what they should not have said.”²⁵ Vast sections of the Church fell into Arianism, largely because the bishops neglected their duty, often influenced by the violent repressive measures of the Emperors with Arian sympathies: “They spoke variously, one against another; there was nothing, after Nicaea, of firm, unvarying, consistent testimony, for nearly sixty years. There were untrustworthy Councils, unfaithful Bishops; there was weakness, fear of consequences, misguidance, delusion, hallucination, endless, hopeless, extending itself into nearly every corner of the Catholic Church. The comparatively few who remained faithful were discredited

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²² *Ibid.*, 75-76. The argument that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ was retained and handed down in the fourth century far more by the faithful than by the bishops is disputed among historians. Nor can it be used to create a gap between pastors (*Ecclesia docens*) and laymen (*Ecclesia docta*); this would be theologically untenable and in no way compatible with Newman’s wide-ranging view of the Church. Newman’s main desire is simply to say that pure belief during the Arian confusion was maintained by the faithful under the leadership of some influential confessing bishops, whilst many pastors, influenced by the Arian establishment at the imperial court, did not fulfil their responsibilities as teachers of the faith. All members of the Church count among the faithful, including also the pastors.

²³ *Ibid.*, 77. This sentence was criticised by Bishop Brown as contradicting the infallibility of the Church. In 1871, Newman published the third edition of his book on *The Arians of the Fourth Century* with a shortened, revised version of the article, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. In it he admitted frankly that he could have expressed himself more exactly, made various parts of the essay more specific and added some clarifications to the original text. However, he defended himself with the argument that he had not denied the Church’s gift of infallibility, but only claimed that the Church’s teaching authority in the fourth century was, at times, non-functional. Cf. Coulson, *On Consulting the Faithful*, 115-116.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76. The expression that the bishops had failed as a “body” was also an object of harsh criticism. Newman clarified it later with the reference to his having thought here not theologically but historically and not having had the whole *corpus* of bishops before his eyes, but the great majority. Cf. Coulson, *On Consulting the Faithful*, 116-117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76. Regarding this passage, which was also objected to, Newman mentioned many witnesses – for instance the weakness of Pope Liberius – who indeed had remained orthodox, but in exile had agreed with a sentence against Athanasius – the failure of numerous bishops and the holding of a series of councils which agreed heretical or ambiguous creeds. At the same time he explained that by “general councils” he was thinking not of ecumenical councils, but of synods largely dominated by Arians. Cf. Coulson, *On Consulting the Faithful*, 117-118.

and driven into exile.”²⁶ The last of Newman’s 22 examples of the failure of many shepherds at that time is from the pen of St Gregory of Nazianzen: “If I must speak the truth, I feel disposed to shun every conference of Bishops; for never saw I a synod brought to a happy issue, and remedying, and not rather aggravating, existing evils. For rivalry and ambition are stronger than reason – do not think me extravagant for saying so – and a mediator is more likely to incur some imputation himself than to clear up the imputations which others lie under.”²⁷

Newman then cites numerous witnesses to show how “the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism”; it was “the Christian people who, under Providence, were the ecclesiastical strength of Athanasius, Hilary, Eusebius of Vercellae, and other great solitary confessors, who would have failed without them.”²⁸ Basil the Great, for instance, writes: “Matters have come to this pass; *the people have left their houses of prayer, and assemble in deserts: a pitiable sight; women and children, old men, and [others] infirm, wretchedly faring in the open air amid the most profuse rains and snow-storms, and winds, and frosts of winter; and again in summer under a scorching sun. To this they submit, because they will have no part in the wicked Arian leaven.*”²⁹ Hilary of Poitiers turns to Emperor Constantius: “Not only in words, but in tears, we beseech you to save the Catholic Churches from any longer continuance of these most grievous injuries, and of their present intolerable persecutions and insults, which moreover they are enduring, which is monstrous, from our brethren. Surely your clemency should listen to the *voice of those who cry out so loudly, ‘I am a Catholic, I have no wish to be a heretic.’*”³⁰ Newman introduces 21 similar Patristic texts to witness to the *consensus fidelium* in the main cities of the then Christian world. In an age when councils and bishops could not guarantee the pure faith, the *consensus fidelium* had to intervene with support.

5. Finally, Newman comes to deal with his own time, and in this context leaves no doubt about the value he attaches to the ecclesiastical teaching office (*Magisterium*) and the *consensus fidelium*. He notes that the testimony of the faithful found in the fourth century is not necessarily found elsewhere in the history of the Church, even in his own time. He

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

praises the stand of the bishops of the day in favour of faith. “Never was the episcopate of Christendom so devoted to the Holy See, so religious, so earnest in the discharge of its special duties, so little disposed to innovate, so superior to the temptation of theological sophistry.”³¹ Newman thinks this is probably the reason why the *consensus fidelium* has, in the minds of many, fallen into the background.

However, he is convinced that “each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected. Though the laity be but the reflection or echo of the clergy in matters of faith, yet there is something in the *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*, which is not the pastors alone.”³² Newman ends his article mentioning the cry of joy of the faithful after the definition of Mary as Mother of God at the Council of Ephesus (431) and pointing out “that the *Ecclesia docens* is more happy when she has such enthusiastic partisans about her as are here represented, than when she cuts off the faithful from the study of her divine doctrines and the sympathy of her divine contemplations, and requires from them a *fides implicita* in her word, which in the educated classes will terminate in indifference, and in the poorer in superstition.”³³

III. The Lasting Significance

In the *Essay* Newman was concerned with an overall understanding of the way in which Tradition is present and promulgated in the Church. As such his work, even if it contains some imprecise phraseology, represents an important milestone in Christian thinking – one which has had a lasting significance and which continues to be relevant in the modern debate.

1. For Newman it is important that the Church is not merely a legal institution managed by officials. She is the Body of Christ, in which each limb and organ is irreplaceable. She is a community with diverse members with a common mind of faith which is shared by all her members and which cannot stray into error. The Second Vatican Council promulgated this doctrine of the *consensus fidelium* as Catholic teaching: “the whole body of the faithful who have anointing that comes from the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20, 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith of the whole people

³¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³² *Ibid.*, 103-104.

³³ *Ibid.*, 106.

(*supernaturali sensu fidei totius populi*), when, ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’ (Augustinus, *De Praed. Sanct.* 14, 27) they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals (*universalem suum consensum de rebus fidei et morum*). By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (*Magisterium*), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God (cf. 1 Thes. 2:13), the faith once for all delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3). The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.”³⁴



It follows from that every member of the Church has responsibility for the faith and for its faithful transmission. The hierarchy and the lay faithful have different duties, but are called to take forward the mission of Christ together. Among the members of the Church there rules “a true equality between all with regard to the dignity and to the activity which is common to all the faithful in the building up of the Body of Christ. The distinction which the Lord has made between the sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God involves union, for the pastors and the other faithful are joined together by a close relationship: the pastors of the Church – following the example of the Lord – should minister to each other and to the rest of the faithful; the latter should eagerly collaborate with the pastors and teachers. And so amid variety all will bear witness to the wonderful unity in the Body of Christ: this very diversity of graces, of ministries and of works gathers the sons of God into one, for ‘all these things are the work of the one and the same Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:11).”³⁵

Newman’s ecclesiology is characteristically balanced, clearly manifesting the particular mission of each member of the Church. Starting from the mystery of faith, which the Church represents, he stresses the necessary unity and collaboration of all, and is therefore a convinced opposition

³⁴ II. Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

between hierarchy and laity. As he, in the 19th century, attacked the reduction of the Church to its institutional structure, so he would today presumably deal with the tendency to eradicate the differences between lay persons and hierarchy. As in his own day, he complained that no importance was attached to the *consensus fidelium*, he would in our day perhaps criticise how many people in the Church have forgotten that decisions in matters of faith and morals are entrusted exclusively to the hierarchy. Newman is definitely in favour of the unity of all members of the Church, with full recognition of the worth of the particular mission that comes to each individual from Christ.

2. Newman demands due respect for the consent of believers. Here, he is thinking not of a sort of teaching authority, but of the importance of belief lived in unity and conviction, which, as testimony arising from the practice of faith, is very important for the faithful passing on of Revelation. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council remarks in this context: “The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity... .”³⁶ The witness of lived faith echoes the preaching of the truth and is thus a valuable support and a source of inspiration for the hierarchy. Newman's demand to recognise the *consensus fidelium* in its importance “rests on the authority of the testimony of faith in practice, which, in his view of authority, logically has to be subordinated to and incorporated into the *Magisterium* of the Church.”³⁷

Newman repeatedly speaks in this context of the *conspiratio pastorum et fidelium*, which is not to be seen only as cooperation of pastors and faithful, but also as mutual encouragement and sharing of the Spirit. Initiatives from believers who demand that the bishops and the Holy See change the doctrine or discipline of the Church, or threaten deeds of disobedience, have nothing to do with the genuine *sensus fidelium* of the People of God, but express a political misunderstanding or a worldly view of the Church, which can only lead to disappointment and confusion. In a subsequent letter, Newman complains about the problems that arise “if a number of little Popes start up, laymen often, and preach against bishops and priests, and make their own opinions the faith, and frighten simple-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ Günter Biemer, *Die Wahrheit wird stärker sein. Das Leben Kardinal Newmans*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2002, 309. Our translation.

minded devout people and drive back inquirers.”³⁸ The *consensus fidelium* shows itself not in questionable campaigns against the *Magisterium* and the constant Tradition of the Church, but in the everyday witness of faith, hope and love, in lives lived according to the Gospel and Church doctrine, even amid the challenges of the modern world.



3. The role of the Papacy and of the Episcopate is intrinsic to the preservation of the faith. Even if Newman stresses the importance of the *sensus fidelium* of the People of God, he also and equally stresses the irreplaceable mission of the shepherds.

He writes graphically of the fourth century, a time when there were indeed great Episcopal figures and doctors of the Church, but a time also when

³⁸ Charles Stephen Dessain, Thomas Gornall (eds.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. XXIII, Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1973, 272; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum veritatis* on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (24 May 1990), 35: “Actually, the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply identified with the *sensus fidei*. The sense of the faith is a property of theological faith; and, as God’s gift, which enables one to adhere personally to the Truth, it cannot err. This personal faith is also the faith of the Church, since God has given guardianship of the Word to the Church. Consequently, what the believer believes is what the Church believes. The *sensus fidei* implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, *sentire cum Ecclesia*. Although theological faith as such then cannot err, the believer can still have erroneous opinions, since all his thoughts do not spring from faith. Not all the ideas which circulate among the People of God are compatible with the faith. This is all the more so given that people can be swayed by a public opinion influenced by modern communications media. Not without reason did the Second Vatican Council emphasize the indissoluble bond between the *sensus fidei* and the guidance of God’s People by the *Magisterium* of the Pastors. These two realities cannot be separated. Magisterial interventions serve to guarantee the Church’s unity in the truth of the Lord. They aid her to ‘abide in the truth’ in face of the arbitrary character of changeable opinions and are an expression of obedience to the Word of God.”

many pastors did not fulfil their mission because they had fallen victim to heresy, compromise or apathy. Newman's hope was that such a period of confusion would never again befall the Church. Notwithstanding his desire, however, and despite the notable differences between the periods following the Councils of Nicea and Vatican II, it is possible to discern a certain parallel between these two post-conciliar eras. Just as after the first Council of the Church that clarified the question of Christ's divinity, there followed a long phase of arguments within the Church about belief in Christ, so after the last Council, at which the doctrine of the Church was deepened and presented in a more balanced way, our time has been marked by deep-seated insecurity and confusion precisely in ecclesiology.

Newman argues that the problems in the fourth century were fundamentally caused by the failure of many bishops. In searching for the causes of today's crisis of Church and belief, we must avoid one-sided answers that do not do justice to the complexity of the situation. Nevertheless, perhaps the fourth century can teach us that the collaboration, in fact, the mutual support of courageous bishops and committed lay persons, is fundamentally important. In this sense, the Church more than ever needs shepherds who fearlessly proclaim and defend sound doctrine: confessors in the model of an Athanasius, a Hilary or an Augustine, in whom the faithful can find direction and support.

4. What effectively is the *consensus fidelium* at its core? With great theologians, Newman describes this *consensus* as witness for the Apostolic doctrine, as leadership by God's Spirit, as an answer to the prayers of the faithful. The *consensus fidelium* may be seen as a fruit and converging manifestation of the *sensus fidelium*, which is a gift of God that enables the faithful, in a profound agreement with the Church and under the guidance of its *Magisterium*, to adhere to the Truth and to apply it faithfully in daily life. With Möhler, Newman describes the *sensus fidelium* as ecclesiastical mind or ecclesiastical conscience.³⁹

As the individual conscience enables one spontaneously to choose between good and evil, so the ecclesiastical conscience helps God's people, as it were instinctively, to accept the truth and reject error. Even some years before the *Rambler* article, Newman wrote: "In that earliest age, it was simply the living spirit of the myriads of the faithful, none of them known to fame, who received from the disciples of our Lord, and husbanded so

³⁹ Cf. Coulson, *On Consulting the Faithful*, 74.

well, and circulated so widely, and transmitted so faithfully, generation after generation, the once delivered apostolic faith, who held it with such sharpness of outline and explicitness of detail, as enabled even the unlearned instinctively to discriminate between truth and error, spontaneously to reject the very shadow of heresy.”⁴⁰

Ecclesiastical conscience makes possible this instinctual or, theologically speaking, Spirit-given distinction between truth and error. It is a conscience which involves agreement among all believers, from the Pope to the least of the faithful; and which is in continuity with the ecclesial stream of Tradition through the centuries, and with the Church of heaven, that is, with the great saints, the martyrs and confessors, pastors and teachers, the known and unknown believers who kept the Apostolic doctrine to the end. As the individual’s conscience requires formation, however, the ecclesiastical conscience of the people of God, too, must be constantly formed – by pastors who mediate to the faithful the truth in its fullness and beauty, in which the believers hear the voice of the Master, and which transmits to them something of the infectious joy of belief.

To sharpen this ecclesiastical conscience in the faithful is one of the great concerns of the Church in our day. For, with Newman, we must say that the Church can only fulfil its duty in the world when all its members are mature in faith, when their ecclesiastical conscience is formed, and not deformed by the spirit of the world. Newman’s prophecy that uneducated Christians will be prey either to indifference or to superstition has, unfortunately, in our time turned out to be troublingly true. Today, the education of the faithful needs furthering on all levels. “The Church can only succeed in mediating belief in a pluralistic society if the laity actively regard themselves as bearers of the sign of faith and thus, with knowledge and love, bear witness in the world to the faith and the creed of the Church.”⁴¹ Today, a new *conspiratio* of pastors and believers is needed, so that all can share with conviction in the mission of the Church, fulfil their own duties and contribute to a new evangelisation through a faith lived joyfully and firmly.

⁴⁰ John Henry Newman, *Historical Sketches*, vol. I, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1872, 209.

⁴¹ Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *John Henry Newman*, Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2010, 144. Our translation.



Newman writes in a letter: *"You must look off from this world, from the world in the Church, from what is so imperfect, and the earthen vessels in which grace is stored, to the Fount of Grace Himself, and beg Him to fill you with His own Presence."*

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