

# Considering Mercy in the Human Agency of Sensus Fidelium

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## Abstract

Recent literatures on the human agency of sensus fidelium (sf) establish categorical criteria and require dispositions in determining authentic human agency. In particular, Ormond Rush sets three sources of sensus fidelium and the International Theological Commission (ITC) publishes necessary dispositions in the witness of authentic sf. This paper exposes the pattern, the theme of exclusion inherent in those arguments and proposes mercy as an enlarging, enriching, and inclusive principle of human agency in sf. Through biblical exegesis, systematic articulation, moral deliberation, and pastoral consideration on mercy, this paper aims to offer foundational arguments on mercy as basis towards a shared possibility of authentic witness of sensus fidelium beyond the Catholic ideals of human agency.

## Preliminaries

### Background

The Second Vatican Council is the first ecumenical council that explicitly recognizes and teaches the reality of sensus fidelium (sf). Among its conciliar documents, *Lumen Gentium* 12 and 35, *Dei Verbum* 8, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9, 15, and 16, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 30, *Gaudium et Spes* 7, 18, 52, 59 and 62, *Ad Gentes* 19, and *Perfectae Caritatis* 12 are cited as key and related references to sf.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the previous centuries when the laity (labelled as *ecclesia discens* or passive learning church) and the hierarchy (referred as *ecclesia docens* or active teaching church) are placed in sharp dualism or opposition, Vatican II, in its specific references to sensus fidelium, emphasizes the organic unity between the laity and the hierarchy as agents of sf based on the unique context of their own vocation and calling.

However, recent literatures on the agency of sensus fidelium present categorical criteria and require dispositions in determining its authentic human agency. Ormond Rush, in *The Eyes of Faith*, offers the concept of well-delineated sources of authentic sensus fidelium, namely: (1)

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2001).

primary, (2) secondary and (3) ancillary sources.<sup>2</sup> The primary sources refer to “baptized and committed Catholics”<sup>3</sup> who have an “insider knowledge through intimacy with Christ.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, secondary sources include “baptized Catholics but not ‘fully’ faithful to their baptismal commitment.”<sup>5</sup> They are Catholics referred as “inactive”, “lapsed”, “disaffected”, or “marginalized”.<sup>6</sup> Finally, ancillary sources pertain to “baptized Christians from other churches”<sup>7</sup> who also share “ecclesial experience of Christian salvation . . . outside the Catholic Church.”<sup>8</sup> Based on the well-defined sources, Rush puts premium on practicing Catholics as enjoying the witness of authentic *sensus fidelium* over all other sources.

On the other hand, the International Theological Commission (ITC) enumerates “a set of dispositions needed”<sup>9</sup> in discerning authentic *sensus fidelium*: (1) participation in the life of the Church, (2) listening to the Word of God, (3) openness to reason, (4) adherence to the magisterium, (5) holiness, and (6) seeking the edification of the Church.<sup>10</sup> The said criteria are drawn from the Commission’s “biblical, historical, and systematic investigation and are influenced by ecclesial, spiritual, and ethical factors.”<sup>11</sup> There is nothing in the commission’s statement that sets a minimum requirement of criteria to be fulfilled or a mandate which offers a selective combination of any of the said criteria. Apparently, it was the intention of the ITC that such criteria, being communicated as required and necessary, becomes binding for all baptized Catholics: “those characteristics which are required of the baptized if they are truly to be subjects of the *sensus fidei*; in other words, the dispositions necessary for believers to participate authentically in the *sensus fidelium*.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 244-274.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> International Theological Commission, *SensusFidei in the Life of the Church*, Series Vatican Documents (Pasay City: St. Pauls, 2014), 77.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*