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The *Sensus Fidelium*: Discerning the Path of Faith

Susan K. Wood

Marquette University, susan.wood@marquette.edu

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The ecumenical commitments of Christian churches today contribute an interesting complexity to a consideration of the *sensus fidelium* and its relationship to a *consensus fidelium*. By definition, the division among churches is a division in faith, so the question arises, how can this be if we suppose that baptized persons endowed with the Spirit participate in the *sensus fidei*? What are the implications of a *sensus fidelium* among separated Christians for ecumenical work? In this presentation I explore the source of the knowledge that is the *sensus fidei*, the kind of knowledge that is the *sensus fidei*, and will then apply it to the ecumenical movement.

A consideration of the *sensus fidei* must with its reference in *Lumen gentium* 12, which attributes to the universal body of the faithful, anointed by the Holy Spirit, a supernatural sense of the faith when it expresses the consent (*consensum*) of all in matters of faith and morals. This body “adheres indefectibly to the ‘faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ and “penetrates more deeply into that same faith through right judgment and applies it more fully to life.”

Faith

The term *sensus fidei* has two parts. The first, *sensus*, refers to the type of knowledge we are dealing with and the second, *fidei*, refers to the object of that knowledge, that is, faith. Let me begin with the latter, faith. The text from *Lumen Gentium* 12 refers to faith in the singular as in “supernatural sense of the faith,” and “penetrates more deeply into that same faith,” but it also slips into a plurality where it speaks of “matters of faith and morals.” We can ask, then, is the *sensus fidei* about all kinds of things that are to be believed, a plurality, or is faith unitary, a whole, a “one”?

Dei Verbum famously identifies Jesus Christ as the fullness of all revelation (DV 2). Given this identification, one would expect a personalist account of faith to correspond with this personalist account of revelation. One of the curiosities of this document, however, is the scant attention it gives to faith, the reception of the revelation that is Jesus Christ. It only treats it in one paragraph, largely repeating what was said about faith at Vatican I:

In response to God’s revelation our duty is “the obedience of faith” (see Rom 16:26; compare Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5–6). By this a human being makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering “the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals,” and willingly assenting to the revelation he gives (DV 5).

Assent of intellect and will corresponds to the more propositional concept of revelation that prevailed at Vatican I. Even though the text places Vatican I’s emphasis on the assent of faith by intellect and will in the broader context of total self-commitment, it does not develop this personal aspect of faith in any detail, nor does it develop the dialogical character of faith. Although *Dei Verbum* repeats Vatican I’s propositional description of revelation as the “eternal decrees of his [God’s] will concerning the salvation of human kind” at the end of chapter 1, it subordinates this propositional concept of revelation to a personalistic concept of

Jesus Christ as the fullness of revelation. This personalistic presentation, however, failed to carry through to a correspondingly robust personalistic account of faith.

A more personalistic account of faith appears in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* within a context of invitation and response correlated to the relationship between revelation and faith. God addresses his people as friends and the adequate response is faith (§ 142). Faith is not only the submission of intellect and will to God, but an assent given with one's whole being, this response identified with the "obedience of faith" (§ 143). The Catechism interprets "obedience of faith" as the human response to God when a person gives her assent to God with her "whole being," including intellect and will.¹ The text then draws on a personal typology of faith, presenting Abraham and Mary as models of faith. The specific advances over *Dei Verbum* are 1) the dialogical dynamic of faith within the exchange of invitation and response, and 2) the personal typology.

The document from the International Theological Commission, "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church" (2014), further develops this dialogical and personal account of faith, speaking of it as a response to the Word of God, identified with the Gospel (§ 8). As the text notes, "The Gospel as a strong subject; Jesus himself, the word of God" (§ 9). Like the Catechism, the document appeals to the faith of Abram, "who trusted completely in God's promises (Gen 15:6; cf. Rom 4:11,17)" as the meaning of faith in the New Testament (§ 9). However, in the language of the evangelist Mark, it describes the whole person responding in faith "with your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk 12:31). Faith is "both an act of belief or trust and also that which is believed or confessed, *fides qua* and *fides quae*." (§ 10). Finally, the document of the International Theological Commission integrates the personal dimension of faith into the ecclesial dimension (§ 11).

Since the primary object of what is believed is the person of Christ, this suggests that the dynamic within which a *sensus fidei* occurs must be one of dialogical encounter. The *sensus fidei* begins with an encounter with the transformative love of Christ. Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, echoes *Dei Verbum's* personalist understanding of divine disclosure and the theme of dialogical encounter in his invitation to all Christians to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ (§ 3).² He advocates a loving contemplation of the Scriptures in which we read with the heart (§ 264). He urges a personal transparency to Christ, a posture of an open heart and a reception of Jesus' gaze of love as when he told Nathaniel "I saw you under the fig tree" (§ 262). This encounter is also an experience of God's mercy, and the fruit of this encounter is joy, the "joy of the Gospel."

To summarize the characteristics of the kind of faith involved in the *sensus fidei*, we can say that it is a fiduciary faith, understood as a confident and trusting faith in God's promise, in which one commits oneself to the object of faith. It begins with this experience of encounter and return to the heart of the gospel message, namely the risen Christ. This encounter with Christ occurs in daily prayer, in the renewed study

¹ The phrase, "obedience of faith," always associated with the *sensus fidei*, originates in Romans 1:5 and 16:26. See also Acts 6:7, where it is "obedience to the faith."

² Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 24 November 2013.

of the Scriptures in the liturgical life of the church, and in service to the poor. This encounter with Christ is the source of both a universal and unitary faith, that which all the faithful share in common, as well as the particular, multiple, and individual vocations to moral actions, states of life, and missionary impulses experienced by the faithful. The knowledge obtained through this experience is intellectual, involves a connaturality to grace, and involves the whole person including the will as appetitive.

Sensus

Now I turn to the other term in *sensus fidei*, namely *sensus*, and consider the kind of knowledge represented by the *sensus fidei*. In what follows I will define connaturality according to Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain, then relate that to Ignatian discernment and Rahner's work on a formal existential ethic and knowledge of particulars. All of this will set up an interpretation of the religious experiences of Martin Luther and John Wesley that gave rise to interpretations of justification by faith that set churches issuing from the Reformation at odds with the Roman Catholic Church. I suggest that understanding these experiences interpreted as instances of the *sensus fidei* through Otto Pesch's categories of sapiential and existential theology gives us an insight as to how to proceed ecumenically in evaluating the difference in the two approaches to justification.

Connatural knowledge in Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas refers to connatural knowledge in his discussion on moral judgment. He distinguishes two different ways to make a moral judgment. In the first, we possess a conceptual and rational knowledge of virtues that produces in us an intellectual conformity with the truths involved. In the second instance, we possess the virtue in question in our own powers of will and desire, have it embodied in ourselves, and are thus co-natured with it. In this second instance, when we are asked about a moral virtue, we give the right answer by looking at and consulting what we are and the inner bent or propensities of our own being.

In Thomas connaturality is associated with wisdom that is the gift of the Holy Spirit to judge right about things on account of connaturality with them. Furthermore, "this sympathy or connaturality for divine things is the result of charity which unites us to God (1 Cor 6:17)."³ Even though wisdom as an intellectual virtue pronounces right judgment about divine things after reason has made its inquiry, the gift of the Spirit judges aright on account of connaturality with them.⁴ Significantly, Thomas uses the language the language of charity to describe this relationship.

Connaturality, then, is possible only on account of the gift of the wisdom given on the initiative of God. As distinct from the other gifts, wisdom is knowledge of divine things through union, that is, through love. Since this wisdom resides in the will, the will moves the intellect to judge rightly. The role of the will here contrasts wisdom to the other intellectual gifts in that wisdom is knowledge of divine things through taste and affective union. It is knowledge through union rather than through reason.

³ *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Connatural knowledge in Jacques Maritain

Jacques Maritain attempts a quasi-definition of connatural knowledge, defining it as affective and non-conceptual. In his essay, "On Knowledge Through Connaturality," he says

In this knowledge through union or inclination, connaturality or congeniality, the intellect is at play not alone, but together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them. It is not rational knowledge, knowledge through the conceptual, logical and discursive exercise of reason. But it is really and genuinely knowledge, though obscure and perhaps incapable of giving account of itself, or of being translated into words.⁵

In another essay Maritain observes, "the intellect in order to bear judgment, consults and listens to the inner melody that the vibrating strings of abiding tendencies made present in the subject."⁶

Maritain here emphasizes that connaturality results in real knowledge even though it results from a form of non-discursive reason. Furthermore, this knowledge remains rather inchoate insofar as it may not be expressed in clear descriptive language. Finally, he describes it as a sort of resonance between the knower and the known, echoing Thomas' example of the chaste person forming a right judgment about chastity through connaturality through the possession of that virtue.

Rahner's formal existential ethic and the sensus fidei

St. Ignatius of Loyola incorporates the concept of connaturality into his rules for the discernment of spirits. According to Harvey Egan, Rahner's teaching on consolation, desolation, and Election constitutes the first attempt in the history of spirituality to give systematic instructions for finding the individual will of God through the discernment of spirits.⁷ I suggest that this discernment rests on the principles of connatural knowledge and further contributes to the concept of connaturality through the experience of consolation without previous cause.

Karl Rahner utilizes the dynamic of Ignatian discernment, and implicitly connatural knowledge, to explain how an individual arrives at knowledge of the moral requirements of the Christian life in his article, "On the Question of a Formal Existential Ethics."⁸ That this method is not restricted to moral knowledge is evident from his essay, "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge of Ignatius of

⁵ Jacques Maritain, "On Knowledge Through Connaturality," *The Review of Metaphysics* 4 (1951): 473–74.

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 91–92.

⁷ Harvey D. Egan, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 132.

⁸ Karl Rahner, "On the Question of a Formal Existential Ethic," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. II (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), 217–34.

Loyola,”⁹ which incorporates the same dynamic. Rahner’s formal existential ethic seeks to account for specific moral imperatives apart from the application of syllogistic deductive reasoning applied to a universal norm. The major problem is an epistemological one: how does the individual perceive the individual moral reality and its obligation? In the instance of the *sensus fidei*, the question is how does the individual perceive what is to be grasped in faith?

Rahner approaches a solution through a combination of his transcendental horizon and the teaching on choice in the second mode of election in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. For Rahner, any particular object of conceptual knowledge is known against a “horizon” which is apprehended, but which remains unthematic and is not itself grasped as a conceptual object. The pre-apprehension of this horizon constitutes the condition of possibility for the human knowing of any particular object. He holds that a direct, although unconceptualized, experience of this horizon constitutes consolation without previous cause.

The process of discernment consists in having simultaneously present in consciousness a finite object and some part of the experience of consolation without cause. This experience of consolation now constitutes the divine criteria of the rightness or wrongness of the object for the individual. The aptness of the object of election is determined by experiencing over a period of time the coherence or disharmony between the object of election and the experience of divine transcendence by frequently confronting the object of Election with the fundamental consolation, the experimental test is made whether the two phenomena are in harmony, mutually cohere, whether the will to the object of Election under scrutiny leaves intact the pure openness to God in the supernatural experience of transcendence and even supports and augments it or weakens and obscures it. . . And the will to this limited finite objection of decision produces peace, tranquility, and quiet, so that true gladness and spiritual joy ensue, that is, the joy of pure, free, undistorted transcendence; or whether...sharpness, tumult and disturbance arise.¹⁰

The knowledge of individual prescriptions, then, is derived from this experimental, non-discursive knowledge in which the affective states of consolation and desolation are decisive rather than reason. This knowledge is characterized as felt, personal, connatural, intuitive, nonverbal, mystical, and is most often described as a “tasting” or a “savoring.” This harmony is experienced as “peace”, “joy”, “tranquility”, or “quiet”. Egan notes that this experience of consolation can be explained only through the interior harmony and unity that results when the total body-person has become connatural to grace.¹¹

In spite of its emotional dimension, however, Rahner is careful to note that this experience is not reducible to “feeling,” instinct, or something similar contrary to or apart from the intellect. However, neither is it a cognition that is rationally discursive and conceptually expressible. It is, rather, “a thoroughly intellectual operation of the “intellect,” in the metaphysical, scholastic sense of the word, in which it is capable of

⁹ Karl Rahner, “The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola,” in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 84–170.

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 158.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

apprehending values.”¹² Rational reflection is an indispensable element in the motion of spirits since the motions themselves contain an objective conceptual element and can be expressed and verified since the experience of consolation and desolation is the result of impulses having a rational structure.¹³

This experience of consolation is identified with the human person’s graced transcendence oriented towards God who is always present as the horizon of any explicit consciousness. In the experience of consolation, the source itself is perceived as something not distinct from the consolation itself. Rahner concludes, “if there is a non-conceptual mode of knowing, it can only be the non-conceptual awareness of transcendence or a heightened prolongation of it.” This experience, then, is a “perception” or “sense” of God.

The term “connatural” is used to mean that from within the very core of the human person, at the fine point of the spirit, at the place of deepest freedom and mystery, created grace recognizes and knows its source, the Creator. Like recognizes like, and that is the experience of unity and harmony. Rahner notes that theologically there is no difficulty in supposing that this experience of transcendence is always elevated by grace.¹⁴

Importantly, this is not an esoteric experience reserved for the privileged few. This experience of consolation is the fundamental principle in Ignatius’ method of supernatural logic by which every person makes decisions. This “mysticism of daily life” is present whenever a person comes fully to himself and herself and in full possessions of self, surrenders to “the loving Mystery of his life calling him beyond himself.”¹⁵ In daily life this occurs when a person makes decisions through a fundamental global awareness of self over a period of time and through a feeling of the harmony or disharmony of the object of choice, or we might say, object of belief with this fundamental feeling about the self.

Rahner’s analysis takes into account the religious structure of the human person at the same time that it explains how there can be a specific will or God for an individual, the paradigm of which is a vocation or choice of state in life. Through the process just described, an individual comes to an experiential knowledge of himself or herself in the congruence of the object of choice with his or her fundamental religious orientation. The characteristics of this knowledge, as given here, are that it is affective, intellectual, possible because of the human person’s transcendence, possible only on account of an individual’s graced nature, and finally, the result of a mutual inclination between God and the individual.

Existential theology and the sensus fidei

Any number of examples in spiritual autobiographies attest to a faith-filled encounter with Christ with an accompanying experience of consolation often resulting in an impulse to particular action. Certainly, Augustine’s account of his experience in the garden to “take and read” counts among them. After reading Rom. 13:14–15, Augustine recounts, “No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at

¹² Ibid., 94.

¹³ Ibid., 102–103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 144.

¹⁵ Eagan, 56.

the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.”¹⁶

Such experiences may represent an integrating insight for a person or provide the motivation at the root of the foundation of a religious community. Evidence also suggests that such experiences may be the origin of theological insights for religious movements that at times resulted in the division of churches. However, for our purposes here, namely the experiences of those whom Vatican II calls “separated Christians,” both give significant clues to the founding impulse of their movement and a clue to how to interpret the theology emanating from these foundational experiences.

Martin Luther’s Tower Experience, which occurred when he was studying Romans 1:17, was not just a personal religious experience; it became paradigmatic for his teaching on justification. Here is the experience as Martin Luther relates it:

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression “the righteousness of God,” because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust.

My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a just angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and the statement that “the just shall live by faith.” Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before “the righteousness of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.¹⁷

Luther’s account of his experience exhibits the characteristics of connatural knowledge. It results in intellectual knowledge of justification accompanied by an experience of consolation.

Luther was later able to describe this same insight in a more discursive theological style in his Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans. In the following excerpt, the first person discourse of his account of his Tower Experience shifts to third person discourse while expressing what is essentially the same experience and conviction:

Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God’s grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and

¹⁶ Aurelius Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward Pusey, Vol. VII, Part 1, The Harvard Classics, (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/7/1/, Book Eight, Chapter 12, Paragraphs 27–28 (accessed on July 10, 2015).

¹⁷ Martin Luther, Luther’s *Works* Vol. 54, Theodore Tappert, ed. (Saint Louis; Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 193–194.

knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire...

Now *justice* is just such a faith. It is called God's justice or that justice which is valid in God's sight, because it is God who gives it and reckons it as justice for the sake of Christ our Mediator.¹⁸

To take up another example, John Wesley describes his experience of hearing this same text from Luther:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹⁹

These texts share in common an encounter with the word of God, that is, the Word of God, Jesus, mediated by the word of the Scriptures. Each of these texts (either in the excerpt cited or in the complete account of the experience) describes a liberation from sin, an unmistakable experience of consolation, and, finally, a new insight into the interpretation of the Scriptures, particularly the text from Romans on justification. Both Luther and Wesley describe a fundamental insight into justification through faith that became the lynchpin of their theology. This insight begins in a personal experience of consolation, but its intellectual component renders it capable of being expressed theologically in such a way that it could become church doctrine for Lutherans and Methodists. The experience occurs within a dynamic of God's promise perceived as addressed personally to an individual and the reception of that promise in faith within a dynamic of direct address.

I propose that the characteristics of this experiential and existential worldview correspond to the type of knowledge represented by knowledge obtained through the *sensus fidei*. I further suggest that the theology developed from such a *sensus fidei* corresponds to what Otto Pesch describes as an existential theology.²⁰ Broadly speaking, existential theology has as its theme the act of faith as well as its theoretical

¹⁸ Martin Luther, Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans, Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545), Trans. Bro. Andrew Thornton, O.S.B., from the "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe 1545", in *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 4, ed. Otto Clemen

Clemen, 6th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 421–28), available at <https://leroyng.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/luthers-tower-experience-martin-luther-discovers-the-true-meaning-of-righteousness> (accessed July 11, 2015).

¹⁹ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html> (accessed May 13, 2015).

²⁰ Otto Hermann Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology: The Theological Confrontation Between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 61–81 and 182–93.

implications. It is literally directed to one's one existential self-accounting before God, looks from the human person toward God and then from God back to the human person. It speaks prototypically within an I-Thou situation and only consequently and derivatively in the third person. It speaks in the mode of confession, and with respect to salvation, stresses faith, humility, and repentance.²¹ Prayer is the context of existential theology such that "every theological statement is in fact a variation on a word spoken in prayer and can be easily transformed into prayer by a simple change in its grammatical form."²² Pesch consequently asserts, "prayer becomes the norm in judging the legitimacy of theological affirmations."²³

In contrast to this, sapiential theology, which Pesch attributes to Thomas Aquinas, is directed to "wisdom," in the medieval sense of understanding through ultimate causes. Its perspective is one of God looking upon the human person. It speaks primarily in the third person and speaks descriptively.²⁴ In contrast, existential theology emerges from speaking with God rather than being descriptive speech about God.²⁵ Existential theology is confessional rather than theoretical speech. The difference between the two is evident when one compares Thomas' definition of theology (as a science insofar as "it flows from fonts recognized in the light of a higher science, namely God's very own which he shares with the blessed") with that of Luther, for whom "the proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the justifier and Savior of man the sinner."²⁶ Pesch's account of existential theology is consistent with the passages cited from Pope Francis, Augustine, Luther, and Wesley.

Even though the definitions of theology of Thomas and Luther clearly reflect an important difference between the two approaches to theology, it can be argued that Pesch does not take into account other aspects of Thomas' theology, namely his account of wisdom and connatural knowledge. It is precisely this aspect of Thomas' theology that is used in this essay to connect connatural knowledge, discernment of spirits, and existential theology. Sapiential theology also involves a "tasting" and a "savoring" by the very definition of wisdom and thus contains an experiential component identified with existential theology. Consequently, contrasting Thomas and Luther within Pesch's categories of sapiential theology and existential theology is only valid from a very limited perspective.

The existential theology described here gives a new insight into the response to revelation called "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26).²⁷ Within an existential theology that emerges from the self-actuation and confession of our existence in faith, "the obedience of faith" comprises not simply adherence to particular moral prescriptions, intellectual assent to propositions of faith, or acquiescence to a particular moral imperative, but the total personal orientation of a person towards God in holistic receptivity. Here the etymology of the word "obedience" is helpful,

²¹ Pesch, 76.

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ WA 40II, 328, 7. LW 12, 311.

²⁷ See "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church," § 21.

for it comes from *obedio* [*ob-audire*], to give ear to or to listen. “Obedience” is a hearing, a receiving of the word—not only teaching, or the Scriptures, but also Christ himself—in faith. It occurs only within a dialogical relationship.

When applying this distinction to ecumenical theology several cautions are in order. Pesch warns that it would be wrong to transpose his distinction between existential and sapiential into either personalistic vs. metaphysical modes of theological discourse or anthropocentric vs. theocentric, as one sometime encounters. Nor is it a psychologizing of our relationship to God. Nor can existential theology be exclusively identified with Lutheran theology over against Catholic theology, correspondingly exclusively identified with sapiential theology. Thus, Pieter de Witte argues that the two perspectives are asymmetrical, with the Catholic position more open to incorporating an experiential perspective along with the sapiential in certain contexts of prayer and worship, while the Lutheran perspective fears corruption by a sapiential perspective.²⁸

Perhaps all these cautions and qualification simply point to the fact that there are two kinds of legitimate knowledge, namely discursive knowledge and connatural knowledge and two perspectives from which to view a person’s relationship to God, namely, third person objective viewer and first person dialogical encounter. Both are legitimate, although each has its own theological methodology and grammar by which they are judged.

Connatural knowledge and the consensus fidelium

Even though the analysis of connaturality and an existential theology that corresponds to it proceeds from an analysis of an individual, the individual *sensus fidei* is related to a *consensus fidelium* insofar as the more authentic a personal experience, the more that experience resonates with other individual experiences and therefore is characterized as universal. The *sensus fidei* is mediated through the individual, but there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the communal insofar as the individual encountering the gospel in faith encounters it as proclaimed to the people of God, within a community of faith constituted by the Spirit, and within a liturgy where the individual is constituted a member of the body of Christ.

Ecumenical conclusions

Lest there be any misunderstanding, clearly church divisions are not simply the result of an existential theology pitted against a sapiential theology. Any reader of Luther knows that the narrative of his broken relations with the Catholic Church of his time is not simply the result of a discernment of spirits. Nor is his experience one of unmitigated consolation. The interweaving of theological convictions and power politics as well as mutual prejudices and misunderstanding and also exaggerated

²⁸ Pieter de Witte, *Doctrine, Dynamic and Difference* (London, New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 59.

caricature created of theological opponents on all sides exacerbated the contentious divisions of the sixteenth century.²⁹

Nevertheless, I hold that seeing Luther's existential theology through the lens of the *sensus fidei* suggests some principles for proceeding ecumenically. First, when the binding positions of two traditions appear to be in conflict, it is good to examine what truth of the gospel and the experience of faith those binding positions protect. Second, it is important to discern the type of theological discourse that is under consideration. Existential theology cannot be evaluated according to the grammar of sapiential theology and vice versa. For example, Catholics have too frequently evaluated the Lutheran teaching of "*simul iustus et peccator*" against a metaphysical ontology which judges that one cannot occupy two conflicting states of being simultaneously, although within the language and experience of prayer no other posture is possible for a Christian. One simply does not proclaim her own righteousness before God. Third, since the *sensus fidei* cannot be reduced to cognitive or moral knowledge, but involves "the integration of every aspect of the human person within a communal journey of hearing and response," the methodology proper to ecumenical engagement is approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, and a hermeneutic of generosity.³⁰ Fourth, the principle of the hierarchy of truths, enunciated in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 11, is necessary in order to achieve "a fitting sense of proportion" in evaluating the confessional commitments of our dialogue partner.³¹ As Pope Francis insists, only when a focus on the foundation of faith is maintained can the rich doctrinal teaching, including moral and social teachings be rightly understood. It is no accident that the foundational experience of the *sensus fidei* by Augustine, Luther, and John Wesley was one of salvation in Christ by faith, considered as "an indispensable criterion that constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practices of the our churches to Christ."³²

Fourth, ecumenism can adopt the principles of Pope Francis for pastoral ministry in general. To join together in the missionary effort to proclaim the heart of the gospel, the churches are called "to concentrate upon the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the most time most essential."³³ Rather than get bogged down in a disjointed multitude of intricate doctrinal details, churches can and must unite around a simplified message of the gospel. This does not mean setting aside any of the rich heritage of the church's teaching and tradition, but rather relating individual truths to the "harmonious totality of the Christian message."³⁴

Within the ongoing ecumenical movement for unity, to which the church is irrevocably committed, this *sensus fidei* will have to be a sense of a shared faith.³⁵

²⁹ Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2013), §§ 231–33.

³⁰ These characteristics echo those advocated by Pope Francis for catechesis, Christian initiation, and Christian formation in general. See *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 165.

³¹ See *Evangelii Gaudium*, §§ 33–39, 246.

³² The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), § 18.

³³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, § 29.

³⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ut Unum Sint* (May 25, 1995), §3.

This is not only ecclesial in the sense of residing within a particular confessional community, but is also a shared faith that transcends confessional boundaries.

Finally, the *sensus fidelium* is performative, that is, faith in action. Rahner's formal existential ethic represented a *sensus fidei* oriented to moral action or to the choice of a state in life that committed an individual to a way of living in society and the church. The *sensus fidei* more generally represents faith that leads to Christian discipleship, a commitment to love of God and neighbor inseparable from acts of justice and love.