

Sense of the faithful: what it means in practice

Richard Curtain, Chair, [Sense of the Faithful](#) editorial group¹

18 April 2024

Catholics in the 21st Century are only now realising that they have ecclesial citizenship rights and responsibilities that they should be exercising rather than being mere passive members of the church. This was a key message of the 2014 report on the Vatican's International Theological Commission entitled [Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church](#). See the [excellent summary](#) of the report by its Chair Fr Paul McPartlan where he states:

The [Second Vatican] Council duly taught that the people of God as a whole shares in Christ's prophetic office ([Lumen Gentium](#), 12). 'All of the faithful, united in communion by the same Holy Spirit, actively bear witness to Christ in their respective ways; no one is passive'...

The sensus fidei is, therefore, to be understood not just reactively, as a means by which the faithful recognise God's truth when it is preached to them, but also proactively: it enables the faithful to probe and understand the Gospel which lives in their hearts and prompts their witness to it by word and action.

Francis, in his apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world called the Joy of the Gospel (2013), has also highlighted the importance of the sense of the faithful:

God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – sensus fidei – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians ... a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression (Para 119).

The Church clearly recognises the importance of the *sensus fidei*, but the key issue is how do we interpret the content of the sense of the faithful for a given religious community at a given time. This is particularly important when times are changing rapidly, and reform is underway. I outline below two recent attempts to discern this content.

Response to the call to take part in the Plenary Council consultations

The opportunity to identify the type and extent of the changes the Australian Catholic laity want for their Church came when the whole community was invited to take part in consultations at the parish level in the lead up to the 2020-22 Plenary Council. It was the first time the Catholic Church Australia-wide had initiated such a broad based and intensive consultation process.

This first-in-our-lifetime opportunity encouraged a small group of us from five parishes in Melbourne to form the Sense of the Faithful group to set up a [website](#), with two broad objectives. We wanted to facilitate discussions between parishes in Australia on the key issues facing the Church. We were also seeking to articulate and promote via a consultative process a shared view across parishes, to the extent to which such a shared view exists.

¹ I am grateful for the feedback provided by Peter Sheehan and Rowan Ireland.

Identifying the key issues based on prayerful discernment

The 2014 International Theological Commission report on the *Sensus Fidei* spells out six criteria for discerning what is an authentic *sensus fidei* manifestation as distinct from simply expressions of popular opinion, particular interests, or merely the spirit of the age (Para 87). The six defining criteria are as follows (see paras 89 to 105, and McPartlan 2014):

- (1) Active participation in the life of the Church, namely, in her liturgy, mission and service.
- (2) Attentive listening to the word of God, in a spirit of thankfulness and praise.
- (3) Openness to reason as a vital partner to faith.
- (4) Willing attentiveness to the teaching of the magisterium of the Church.
- (5) The document highlights holiness, and has hallmarks of humility, freedom, joy, and peace, and identifies the saints, and Mary outstandingly, as ‘light-bearers of the *sensus fidei*’.
- (6) The edification of the Church, building others up and avoiding what divides.

We saw the results of the consultations for the Plenary Council (PC) as providing the basis for identifying the key concerns of practising Catholics, based on their prayerful discernment. The results are the product of a process that complies with the six criteria for identifying an authentic expression of the sense of the faithful of the laity. However, the way the results were presented by those organising the consultations for the Plenary Council was disjointed, which made them difficult to interpret as a whole.

For example, this was the case with the deliberations of six publicly identified writing groups focused on six broad themes, distilled from the early PC related consultations. The six thematic reports listed 159 recommendations made by the writing groups after a protracted discernment process. However, the recommendations in each report often overlapped and were presented in a way that made them hard to aggregate to provide an overall picture of the most important recommendations. The second example below shows how we addressed this problem. But first, let me outline our efforts to identify the key issues arising from the initial consultations.

Early efforts at distilling the key issues for the PC: Joint parish statement 2019

Our initial response was to organise an archdiocese-wide meeting. We brought together interested parish representatives to prepare a joint statement of key issues for the Plenary Council to consider. The meeting was held at the Melbourne Theological College on 13 April 2019 and was attended by 62 representatives of 32 parishes. The attendees were asked to rank the top priorities for the Plenary Council based on a list of issues identified from the parish group submissions. The meeting established a drafting group to prepare a joint statement, based on those identified priorities. This statement was vetted by representatives of the 32 parishes and 24 parishes endorsed the [Joint Statement](#).

The *Plenary Council 2020: Joint Parish Statement* identified nine key issues. These were: address the sexual abuse crisis; change the nature of the plenary council; encourage an open and inclusive church; promote servant leadership for a humble church; change the composition of the priesthood, including a greater role for women; implement new governance changes;

make the liturgy more relevant; renew our focus on the poor and marginalised; and protect and restore the earth.

Analysis of the recommendations of six thematic writing group reports

A second example of our efforts to identify the laity's key priorities was to work out the relative importance of the issues identified in the 159 recommendations of the thematic reports, available [here](#). Two issues stood out with the most mentions in the recommendations of all six thematic reports. These were: the need to implement new governance changes and the need for humble leadership and changes to the priesthood. Next in importance were the issues related to the need to promote mission and evangelisation and to encourage an open and inclusive Church, with mentions in five and four thematic reports respectively.

These examples show how the sense of the faithful can be identified from consultations with the laity, if properly conducted. They highlight the crucial role that further analysis of the results of the consultations can play to identify the key issues. A related exercise we are currently undertaking is to scrutinise the websites of all the archdioceses compared with two dioceses known for the synodal approaches (Parramatta and Sandhurst). Our aim is to record the extent to which the archdioceses have adopted synodal policies and practices. These include the specific changes recommended by the Plenary Council decrees and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference that do not require any prior Vatican approval. We will post the findings on our website shortly and plan to present the findings at a public meeting in Melbourne in June 2024.