

Sensus Fidei—Whom? Retrieving Insights from Johann Adam Möhler

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IN MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS'S JUDGMENT, "The *sensus fidei* may be the single most misunderstood and abused concept in the post-Vatican II era."¹ Specifically, Winters elaborates, "The sense of the faithful has been conflated with public opinion, repeatedly, and used to undermine Church teaching. It has been used to justify a stance of dissent."² Others agree that the term is misused in this way.³ Indeed, the magisterial tradition is clear that one should not equate the *sensus fidei* with public opinion, and such misuse is found in the literature.⁴

Theologians who stress the importance of the *sensus fidei* as a *locus theologicus* and who disagree with Church teaching on controversial issues, typically are careful to qualify their appeals to popular opinion, e.g., they state that popular opinion "may indicate" the *sensus fidei*.⁵ Still, to other theologians, any appeal to popular opinion is

¹ Michael Sean Winters, "The *Sensus Fidei*," *National Catholic Reporter* 2014, www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/sensus-fidei.

² Winters, "The *Sensus Fidei*."

³ See, for instance, David A. Tamisica, "Vatican II, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the *Sensus Fidelium*," in *Wisdom and the Renewal of Catholic Theology: Essays in Honor of Matthew L. Lamb*, ed. Thomas P. Hammon and Roger W. Nutt (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 100.

⁴ As Winters specifies, "the commentariat" (Winters, "The *Sensus Fidei*"), at least, have misused the term. For instance, the National Catholic Reporter Editorial Staff write: "Our message is that we believe the *sensus fidelium* is that the exclusion of women from the priesthood has no strong basis in Scripture or any other compelling rationale; therefore, women should be ordained" (NCR Editorial Staff, "Editorial: Ordination of Women Would Correct an Injustice," *National Catholic Reporter* 2012, www.ncronline.org/news/parish/editorial-ordination-women-would-correct-injustice).

⁵ For instance, Lawler and Salzman write, "John Paul II teaches that 'the church values sociological and statistical research,' but immediately adds the proviso that 'such research alone is not to be considered in itself an expression of the *sensus fidei*.' The pope is correct. Neither empirical research nor public opinion polls are necessarily expressions of *sensus fidei*, but each may contribute to the illumination of *sensus fidei* and may manifest both *fides qua creditur* and *fides quae creditur*" (Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, "Human Experience and Catholic Moral Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76, no. 1 [2011]: 17).

problematic, given that the *sensus fidei* is only found,⁶ or at least only reliably found,⁷ among practicing Christians. In turn, this view is critiqued for wrongfully excluding persons from the *sensus fidei*.⁸ Thus, the literature on the *sensus fidei* is replete with disagreements regarding, inter alia, who are “the faithful,” the relationship between the *sensus fidei* and the Magisterium, and the role of public opinion with respect to the *sensus fidei*. Nonetheless, there are also important points of consensus among theologians.

To help illuminate points of consensus and offer balanced responses to points of dissensus, I would like to turn to Tübingen scholar Johann Adam Möhler. While Johann Adam Möhler’s work is mentioned in histories of the concept of the *sensus fidei*,⁹ the mention is brief and often suggests that Möhler is too vague to offer a substantive contribution to the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic debate on the topic.¹⁰ However, though Möhler does not treat systematically the topic of the *sensus fidei*, nor indeed even use the term *sensus fidei*,¹¹ I will demonstrate how his relevant insights can contribute substantively to theological discussion.

I begin this paper by summarizing and commenting regarding magisterial and other theological treatment of the *sensus fidei*, noting both points of consensus and disagreement among authors, as well as the lack of clarity in the literature regarding what the *sensus fidei* is metaphysically. In an effort to clarify the concept, I propose that the *sensus fidei* is best understood as referring to the connatural aspect of

⁶ See, for instance, E. Christian Brugger, “*Sensus Fidei*, the Magisterium, and the Formation of Conscience,” in *Christianity and the Laws of Conscience: An Introduction*, ed. Jeffrey B. Hammond and Helen M. Alvaré, Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 82.

⁷ See, for instance, Tamisiea, “Vatican II, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the *Sensus Fidelium*,” 105.

⁸ See, for instance, John J. Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005): 452; Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, “Church Teaching on Marriage and Family—a Matter of *Sensus Fidelium*?,” in *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam, Readings in Moral Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 2017), 289.

⁹ Daniel J. Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era* (Bethesda, MD: International Scholars, 1996), 137–141; Peter Hünemann, “*Sensus Fidei*,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. Walter Kasper (3rd ed., Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 466; International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), no. 34, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

¹⁰ Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Paul Schrod, *The Problem of the Beginning of Dogma in Recent Theology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978).

¹¹ Note that both the concept and term are found in the writings of theologians who predate Möhler. See Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium*, 18.

the theological virtue of faith along with the connected gifts of understanding and knowledge. In addition to proposing this understanding of the *sensus fidei* as a contribution to the broader literature on the *sensus fidei*, this understanding will also guide my retrieval of Möhler's relevant insights.

With this understanding of the *sensus fidei* in mind, I present four ways in which Möhler can contribute to contemporary discussion on the *sensus fidei*: First, Möhler's insistence that "God can be known by the individual only through the whole"¹² supports a via media between individualistic and authoritarian understandings of the *sensus fidei*. Second, Möhler's attention to living faith's preceding and exceeding doctrinal formulations helps to flesh out the *sensus fidei*'s role in the development of doctrine. Third, Möhler's positive appraisal of the role of heresy in the clarification and purification of doctrine helps to underscore the benefit of public opinion, even while the *sensus fidei* is not the same as public opinion. Fourth, Möhler's distinction between antithesis and contradiction can serve as a principle of discerning the *sensus fidei*.

MAGISTERIAL TRADITION ON THE *SENSUS FIDEI*¹³

In this section I summarize explicit magisterial¹⁴ statements on the

¹² Johann Adam Möhler, *Unity in the Church, or, the Principle of Catholicism. Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the First Three Centuries.*, ed. and trans. Peter C. Erb (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 153.

¹³ In contemporary literature, the terms *sensus fidelium* ("sense of the faithful"), *sensus fidei* ("sense of faith"), *sensus fidei fidelium* ("sense of faith of the faithful"), and *sensus fidei fidelis* ("sense of faith of the faithful one") all appear. Authors use these terms variously to emphasize the objective versus subjective *sensus*, the individual versus communal *sensus*, or the commonality versus difference between these senses. However, authors do not seem to agree on which term emphasizes what. For analysis of these terms (though they seem to take different positions on which terms emphasize which aspect of the *sensus fidei*), see: John J. Burkhard, "*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: I. 1965–1984," *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993): 41–59; Ormond Rush, "*Sensus Fidei*: Faith 'Making Sense' of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 232; International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 3. I will use *sensus fidei* to refer to both the individual and communal senses, in order to emphasize that both the individual and the Church are the subjects of the same *sensus fidei*, as I will elaborate on later. However, the term *sensus fidelium* features in this paper's title, since it is more conducive to puns.

¹⁴ I use "magisterial" in a semi-broad sense to include conciliar teaching and statements made or approved by the pope.

sensus fidei.¹⁵ The first explicit magisterial statement on the *sensus fidei* is found in the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium*:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith¹⁶ 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 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. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life (no. 12).

Here *Lumen Gentium* outlines the subjects of the *sensus fidei* ("the entire body of the faithful," the whole "people of God"), from where the *sensus fidei* comes (the Holy Spirit), when it is manifest (in "universal agreement"), what falls within its purview ("matters of faith and morals"), what assists it (the teaching of the Church), and what it enables (infallibility in belief, "supernatural discernment," unwavering adherence to "the faith given once and for all to the saints," the penetration of this faith "more deeply with right thinking," and the application of this faith "more fully in ... life").

Where *Lumen Gentium* notes that the *sensus fidei* comes from the Holy Spirit, Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5) and Pope Francis¹⁷ specify that the *sensus fidei* is a "gift" of the Holy Spirit. The CDF explicitly connects the *sensus fidei* to the theological virtue of faith, explaining that the *sensus fidei* is "a property of theological faith" (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 35). Pope Benedict XVI characterizes the *sensus fidei* as "a sort of supernatural instinct which has a vital co-naturality with the object of faith itself,"¹⁸ thus suggesting the sort of "property of theological faith" (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 35) the *sensus fidei* is; viz., "a vital co-naturality."

¹⁵ In so doing, I do not by any means reject the opinion of many theologians that implicit reference to the *sensus fidei* is found throughout the magisterial tradition. Rather, I limit this section due to space constraints.

¹⁶ "Supernaturali sensu fidei" in the official Latin text.

¹⁷ Francis, "Address to Members of the International Theological Commission," December 6, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica.html.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, "Address to the International Theological Commission on the Occasion of Its Annual Plenary Assembly," December 7, 2012, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121207_cti.html.

Statements by Pope Paul VI,¹⁹ Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio*, nos. 5 and 73; *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 80), and Pope Benedict²⁰ follow *Lumen Gentium* in recognizing that the whole “people of God” are the subjects of the *sensus fidei*. Moreover, Pope Benedict emphasizes that the *sensus fidei* may manifest in the practice and belief of the people of God even before the belief is worked out theologically. “Thanks to that supernatural *sensus fidei*,”²¹ Pope Benedict writes, Marian doctrine was “already present in the People of God, while theology had not yet found the key to interpreting it in the totality of the doctrine of the faith.”²² However, Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5),²³ the CDF (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 35), Pope Benedict,²⁴ and Pope Francis²⁵ caution against equating the *sensus fidei* with public opinion. Pope Benedict²⁶ and Pope Francis²⁷ add that criteria are needed to discern authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidei*. In this vein, Pope Paul VI,²⁸ Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 73), the CDF (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 35), and Pope Benedict²⁹ follow *Lumen Gentium* in affirming that the *sensus fidei* is assisted by the teaching of the Church. Furthermore, Pope Benedict avers that “the *sensus fidei* cannot be authentically developed in believers, except to the extent in which they fully participate in the life of the Church.”³⁰ Yet, bringing together the role of the whole people of God and the role of the Magisterium, Pope Francis speaks of the Magisterium’s duty to attend to the *sensus fidei*.³¹

Magisterial statements after *Lumen Gentium* also expand upon what the *sensus fidei* enables. Pope Paul VI adds: deciphering “the signs of the times” and “wise insight”;³² Pope John Paul II adds: “a more profound understanding and activation of the word of God” and a shining forth in the laity of “the power of the Gospel ... in their daily

¹⁹ Paul VI, “General Audience: Signs of the Times,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (1969): 1.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, “General Audience: John Duns Scotus,” July 7, 2010, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100707.html.

²¹ Benedict XVI, “General Audience.”

²² Benedict XVI, “General Audience.”

²³ See also John Paul II, “Letter to Cardinal Roger Etchegaray.”

²⁴ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

²⁵ Francis, “Address to Members.”

²⁶ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

²⁷ Francis, “Address to Members.”

²⁸ Paul VI, “General Audience: Signs of the Times.”

²⁹ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

³⁰ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

³¹ Francis, “Address to Members.”

³² Paul VI, “General Audience: Signs of the Times.”

social and family life” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5); Pope Benedict adds: discernment of “whether or not a truth belongs to the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition”;³³ and Pope Francis adds: discernment of “what is truly of God” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 119).

CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION ON THE *SENSUS FIDEI*

While theological discussion regarding the *sensus fidei* is extensive and includes many fascinating points, I will mostly limit my summary and remarks here to points of consensus and dissensus in contemporary literature.³⁴ John J. Burkhard, who provides four helpful summaries of theological discussion of the *sensus fidei* from 1965 to 2001,³⁵ proposes five points of agreement among theologians: (1) Vatican II understood the *sensus fidei* as pertaining to “the infallibility of the whole Church,”³⁶ that is, the *sensus fidei* is received by the Church and by each believer, “in the context of the community of all believers.”³⁷ (2) The *sensus fidei* is a “‘sense’ of the faith,”³⁸ and a gift of the Holy Spirit. (3) While not irrational, the *sensus fidei* indicates a “realm of knowledge, but where knowledge is understood to be a form other than discursive reasoning.”³⁹ (4) For the Magisterium as much as for the laity, the *sensus fidei* has an “active”⁴⁰ character. (5) There are “limitations, dangers, and temptations”⁴¹ related to the *sensus fidei*. To these five points of consensus, I would add a sixth: (6) The *sensus fidei* has a role in the development of

³³ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

³⁴ For the historical context, see Hünemann, “*Sensus Fidei*”; International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*.

³⁵ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: I. 1965–1984,” 41–59; John J. Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993): 123–136; Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” 450–475; John J. Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part II,” *Heythrop Journal* 47 (2006): 38–54.

³⁶ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

³⁷ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

³⁸ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

³⁹ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁴⁰ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁴¹ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

doctrine.⁴² Arguably consensus point 6 is contained within, or implied by, Burkhard's points of consensus, but it seems important enough to name independently.

The magisterial tradition, which I have summarized above, seems to fall within all six points of theological consensus. Regarding consensus point 1, the magisterial tradition seems to follow Vatican II's understanding of the *sensus fidei* as pertaining to the infallibility of the whole people of God. Consensus point 2, the *sensus fidei* is a "'sense' of the faith" and a gift of the Holy Spirit, is explicit in magisterial statements. Pope Benedict XVI's reference to the *sensus fidei* as a "a sort of supernatural instinct which has a vital co-naturality with the object of faith itself"⁴³ and Pope Francis' very similar reference to the *sensus fidei* as "a kind of 'spiritual instinct'"⁴⁴ align with consensus point 3 (the *sensus fidei*'s indicating a "realm of knowledge, but where knowledge is understood to be a form other than discursive reasoning"⁴⁵). Much of what the Magisterium attests that the *sensus fidei* enables in the lives of all believers⁴⁶ has an active character (consensus point 4) and plausibly underlies the development of doctrine (consensus point 6).⁴⁷ Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5), the CDF (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 35), Pope Benedict XVI,⁴⁸ and Pope Francis's⁴⁹ caution, as summarized above, regarding the equating of public opinion with the *sensus fidei* all point toward

⁴² Due to space constraints and my belief that this is not a contentious point, I will not present a detailed argument for this consensus point in this paper. See Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium*; International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 74.

⁴³ Benedict XVI, "Address to the International Theological Commission."

⁴⁴ Francis, "Address to Members."

⁴⁵ Burkhard, "*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989," 133.

⁴⁶ Viz., penetration of faith "more deeply with right thinking" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12), the application of this faith "more fully in ... life" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12), deciphering the signs of the times (Paul VI, "General Audience: Signs of the Times"), "wise insight" (Paul VI, "General Audience: Signs of the Times"), "a more profound understanding and activation of the word of God" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5), a shining forth in the laity of "the power of the Gospel ... in their daily social and family life" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5), discernment of "whether or not a truth belongs to the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition" (Benedict XVI, "Address to the International Theological Commission"), and discernment of "what is truly of God" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 119).

⁴⁷ The ITC document also points to the Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum* as implicitly acknowledging the *sensus fidei*'s role in the development of doctrine. International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 46.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, "Address to the International Theological Commission."

⁴⁹ Francis, "Address to Members."

“limitations, dangers, and temptations,”⁵⁰ related to the *sensus fidei* (consensus point 5).

At the same time, at least four points of dissensus emerge in the contemporary theological literature on the *sensus fidei*: (1) Who, more precisely, are the whole people of God? Only practicing Christians?⁵¹ All baptized Christians?⁵² (2) What precisely is the relationship of the Magisterium to the *sensus fidei*?⁵³ (3) What, if anything, is the role for public opinion in the *sensus fidei*?⁵⁴ (4) What ought to be the criteria for discerning the *sensus fidei*?⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁵¹ See, for example, Thomas Dubay, “The State of Moral Theology: A Critical Appraisal,” in *The Magisterium and Morality*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology (New York: Paulist, 1982), 352. Wolfgang Beinert recommends that the more one is committed to Christian practices, the more credibility he/she has regarding the *sensus fidei*. Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” 468. David Tamisica likewise holds that only practicing Christians “can be trusted to express an authentic *sensus fidelium*” (Tamisica, “Vatican II, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the *Sensus Fidelium*,” 103).

⁵² See Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” 450–475; Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part II,” 38–54; Patrick J. Hartin, “*Sensus Fidelium*: A Roman Catholic Reflection on Its Significance for Ecumenical Thought,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (1991): 74–87.

⁵³ For discussion, see, for example, Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue (ARCIC-II), “The Gift of Authority,” *Origins* 29, no. 2 (1999): 17–29; Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium*; Knieps-Port le Roi, “Church Teaching on Marriage and Family—a Matter of *Sensus Fidelium*?”; Brian N. Massingale, “Beyond ‘Who Am I to Judge?’ The *Sensus Fidelium*, LGBT Experience, and Truth-Telling in the Church,” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Bradford E. Hinze (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016); Leo Scheffczyk, “*Sensus Fidelium*-Witness on the Part of the Community,” *Communio* 15 (1988): 182–198; Paul Valadier, “Has the Concept of *Sensus Fidelium* Fallen into Desuetude?,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics*, ed. James Keenan (New York: Continuum, 2007).

⁵⁴ For discussion, see, for example, Christian Duquoc, “An Active Role for the People of God in Defining the Church’s Faith,” in *The Teaching Authority of Believers*, ed. J. B. Metz and E. Schillebeckx, Concilium (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985); Abraham Peter Kustermann, “Observations Concerning the Tübingen ‘Axiom’ Then and Now,” in *The Legacy of the Tübingen School: The Relevance of Nineteenth-Century Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Donald J. Dietrich and Michael J. Himes (New York: Crossroad, 1997); Lawler and Salzman, “Human Experience and Catholic Moral Theology”; Hervé Legrand, “Reception, *Sensus Fidelium*, and Synodal Life: An Effort at Articulation,” in *Reception and Communion among Churches*, ed. Julio Manzanares, Hervé Legrand, and Antonio García (Washington, DC: Canon Law Department of the Catholic University of America, 1997).

⁵⁵ For proposed criteria, see International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, nos. 88–105; Tamisica, “Vatican II, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the *Sensus Fidelium*,” 104–106.

A PROPOSAL: THE SENSUS FIDEI AS THE CONNATURAL ASPECT OF THEOLOGICAL FAITH PLUS THE GIFTS OF UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGE

Having summarized the magisterial tradition as well as points of theological consensus and dissensus regarding the *sensus fidei*, I would like to turn to the work of Tübingen scholar Johann Adam Möhler, to retrieve his relevant insights. While Möhler is one of the few pre-Vatican II theologians mentioned in histories of the concept of *sensus fidei*,⁵⁶ Möhler does not treat systematically the topic, nor indeed even use the term *sensus fidei*. Thus, there is some question regarding how I or others can retrieve Möhler's thinking related to the *sensus fidei*. Certainly, theologians could have a clear understanding of what the *sensus fidei* is, even if they disagree on certain aspects of it, and so could recognize in Möhler's writing when he has something in mind like the *sensus fidei*. But do theologians have a clear understanding of the *sensus fidei*? Despite the points of consensus he identifies, Burkhard concludes his *New Catholic Encyclopedia* entry with the admission that "the term has no commonly agreed meaning among theologians."⁵⁷ A sketch of the *sensus fidei* emerges from the theological consensus: its subjects are the whole people of God, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit pertaining to faith, it has an active quality, it plays a role in the development of doctrine. But still, what precisely, or one might say, metaphysically, is the *sensus fidei*? Again, consensus point 2 is that the *sensus fidei* is a gift of the Holy Spirit pertaining to faith. But, more specifically, is the *sensus fidei* one or more traditional gifts of the Holy Spirit, is it simply an aspect of the theological virtue of faith, is it a more newly identified gift of the Holy Spirit annexed to theological faith, or is it something else? Clarity regarding the metaphysical referent of the *sensus fidei* is important. Such clarity not only aids retrieval of insights from theologians who do not use the term, but also helps, *inter alia*, to delineate proper use of the term, to add depth to points of consensus, and resolve points of disagreement.

As I noted earlier, the CDF states that the *sensus fidei* is "a property of theological faith" (*Donum Veritatis*, no. 35). An International Theological Commission (ITC) document on the *sensus fidei* likewise submits that the *sensus fidei* "is intrinsically linked to the virtue of

⁵⁶ See Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium*, 137–141; Hünermann, "Sensus Fidei," 466; International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 34.

⁵⁷ John J. Burkhard, "Sensus Fidelium," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale, 2003).

faith itself; it flows from, and is a property of, faith.”⁵⁸ The ITC proceeds helpfully to specify the sort of property of faith that the *sensus fidei* is: “The *sensus fidei* is the form that the instinct which accompanies every virtue takes in the case of the virtue of faith.”⁵⁹ Pope Benedict XVI seems to say something similar when, as I indicated above, he characterizes the *sensus fidei* as “a sort of supernatural instinct which has a vital co-naturality with the object of faith itself.”⁶⁰ I will follow the ITC in accepting that the *sensus fidei* metaphysically refers to the intuitive aspect of faith, or to use Pope Benedict’s (and Thomas Aquinas’s⁶¹) language, the “connatural” aspect of faith.

However, it seems that the connatural aspect of theological faith does not capture all of what the Magisterium and other theologians mean by *sensus fidei*. Rather, when the Magisterium and other theologians speak of the *sensus fidei*, they seem implicitly to refer to the gift cluster of theological faith *and* the gifts of understanding and knowledge. Thus, I would like to propose that the *sensus fidei* is best understood as referring to the connatural aspect of the theological virtue of faith along with the gifts of understanding and knowledge. For ease of reference, I will refer to this understanding of the *sensus fidei* by “*sensus fidei* cluster.” In the rest of this section, I will first establish the plausibility of this understanding of the *sensus fidei* as a development of consensus point 2, and as an aid to retrieving Möhler’s insights on the *sensus fidei*. Next, I will provide evidence that the Magisterium and other theologians implicitly assume the understanding of the *sensus fidei* that I am proposing. Lastly, I will outline some ways in which this clear metaphysical referent benefits theological discussion of the *sensus fidei*.

Thomas Aquinas’ account of theological faith,⁶² the gifts of understanding and knowledge, and their connection, is foundational for demonstrating that the *sensus fidei* plausibly refers to this gift cluster, as well as for showing that when the Magisterium and other theologians speak of the *sensus fidei*, they seem implicitly to refer to this gift cluster. Aquinas distinguishes between “lifeless,” “dead,” or

⁵⁸ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 49.

⁵⁹ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 53.

⁶⁰ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

⁶¹ See ST II-II q. 45, a. 2. All translations of the *Summa Theologiae* in this paper are by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁶² Of course, in his account of faith, Aquinas draws from Scripture and other theologians. Stephen F. Brown, “The Theological Virtue of Faith: An Invitation to an Ecclesial Life of Truth (IIa IIae, qq. 1–16),” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

“imperfect” faith, and “living” faith (ST II-II q. 4, a. 4), the latter of which is a *theological* virtue, rather than a mere acquired virtue, because it is “infused” into us by God (ST II-II q. 6, a. 1).⁶³ By the virtue of faith, one believes in God and His revelation (ST II-II q. 2, a. 5 and II-II q. 5, a. 3). God’s revelation is not evidently true to the intellect (ST II-II q. 1, a. 4 and II-II q. 4, a. 2). As a result, the human intellect cannot assent to God’s revelation on its own, but must remain undecided as to its truth. For Aquinas, the undecided intellect can be moved by the will (ST I q. 82, a. 4 and I-II q. 17, a. 6), which can desire only some true or apparent good (ST I-II q. 8, a. 1). In the case of dead faith, the mere acquired virtue, the will commands the intellect to assent to God’s revelation⁶⁴ (ST II-II q. 4, a. 7) insofar as it sees it as good.⁶⁵ At this point, however, faith is not living faith—faith sufficient for salvation (ST II-II q. 2, a. 5)—though it “is a perfection of the intellect” (ST II-II q. 4, a. 4).

Dead faith is imperfect faith, as it is not yet moved by the perfection of the will (ST II-II q. 4, a. 2). God perfects the will through a separate theological virtue, charity. Charity requires imperfect faith, “because the will cannot tend to God with perfect love, unless the intellect possesses right faith about Him” (ST II-II q. 4, a. 7). Charity, then, directs the will no longer merely towards the willer’s good, but towards God as the willer’s good (ST II-II q. 23, a. 7). With the theological virtue of charity now perfecting the will, the will can command the intellect to assent to God’s revelation as “the Divine Good” (ST II-II q. 4, a. 3). In this way, charity “quickens the act of faith” (ST II-II q. 4, a. 3) to conceive living faith. Importantly, human freedom is preserved, but the command of the will and subsequent assent of the intellect are accomplished by God working in us;⁶⁶ God is the cause of one’s assent to God’s revelation (ST II-II q. 6, a. 1 and II-II q. 23, a. 2). The theological virtue of faith has God and His revelation as both its material object (what is known) and its formal object (means by which it is known) (ST II-II q. 1, a. 1). Thus, Aquinas

⁶³ Aquinas defines infused virtue thusly: “a good quality of mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us” (ST I-II q. 55, a. 4).

⁶⁴ It is important to note here that Aquinas thinks that whenever we will any good, even if it is not salvific, God has to help us in some way (ST I-II q. 109, a. 2). It follows from this that for the will to move the undecided intellect to assent to God’s revelation, some grace must be at work. See ST II-II q. 5, a. 2 and II-II q. 6, a. 2.

⁶⁵ Because the will can desire only some true or apparent good, one whose will commands his intellect to assent to God’s revelation must perceive that assenting to God’s revelation is good; see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 364.

⁶⁶ For Aquinas, our will must be moved internally, to preserve human freedom, and by the movement of God, to preserve our *inability* to do anything good without God’s grace. See ST I q. 105, a. 4 and I-II q. 9, a. 6.

affirms the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for” (what is known), and the evidence of things that appear not” (means by which it is known) (ST II-II q. 4, a. 1). Accordingly, by the theological virtue of faith the intellect will “infallibly tend towards its object, which is the true ... since nothing false can be the object of faith” (ST II-II q. 4, a. 5).

The theological virtues, like all of the infused virtues, are aided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While the infused virtues grant to man the “supernatural perfection” (ST I-II q. 68, a. 2) of his reason, the gifts of the Holy Spirit make man “amenable to the promptings of God” (ST I-II q. 68, a. 2). In so doing, the gifts of the Holy Spirit perfect even the infused virtues, for “the motion of reason does not suffice, unless it receive in addition the prompting or motion of the Holy Ghost” (ST I-II q. 68, a. 2). For Aquinas, the gifts of understanding and knowledge are the gifts that perfect the virtue of faith. The gift of understanding, “denotes a certain excellence of a knowledge that penetrates into the heart of things” (ST II-II q. 8, a. 1); it is an intuitional grasp of things. The gift of knowledge is knowledge of human affairs that is likened to God’s knowledge; God’s knowledge involves “a sure judgment of truth, without any discursive process, by simple intuition” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 1). The gift of knowledge grants, “a sure and right judgment on [things proposed to be believed], so as to discern what is to be believed from what is not to be believed” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 1).

Thus, one can see the intimate connection between the theological virtue of faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge: the gifts of understanding and knowledge directly help to perfect the theological virtue of faith. It is this intimate connection between theological faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge that I believe makes it plausible that the *sensus fidei* refers to them together; that the *sensus fidei* refers to connaturality with God and His revelation arising both from the perfected intellect (theological faith) and from certain promptings of the Holy Spirit (the gifts of understanding and knowledge). Importantly for this paper, I also think that it is reasonable to use a Thomistic understanding of faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge to aid retrieval of Möhler’s insights relevant to the *sensus fidei*. Arguably, Möhler’s understanding of faith has enough inheritance from Aquinas to allow a Thomistic understanding to guide retrieval of Möhler’s insights. Consider Möhler’s description of faith:

The word faith signifies not so much the act of thinking, or opining, but it has the sense of a firm obligation (contracted in virtue of a free act of submission) whereby the mind decisively and permanently assents to the mysteries revealed by God. Catholics consider faith as the reunion with God in Christ, especially by means of the faculties of

knowledge, illuminated and confirmed by grace, with which the excitement of various feelings is more or less connected. It is in their estimation, a divine light, whereby man discerns, as well as recognizes, the decrees of God, and comprehends not only what God is to man, but also what man should be to God.... But if faith passes from the understanding, and the feelings, excited through the understanding, to the will; if it pervades, vivifies, and fructifies the will ... if love is enkindled out of faith, as fire out of brimstone, then, only after faith and love doth regeneration or justification ensue. Hence, the schools of the middle-age recognised, likewise, a faith, whereof they said, that it alone justified; it is known by the designation of the *fides formata*, under which the school-men understood a faith, that had love itself as its vivifying, its plastic principle (*forma*); and on this account it was called *fides charitate formata, animate, fides viva, vivida*.⁶⁷

Möhlér, like Aquinas, suggests: the object of faith as “the mysteries revealed by God,” the necessity of grace, and that love requires a type of faith, though faith is not living faith until it is vivified by love. Möhlér also assigns to faith functions that sound quite similar to the functions of the gifts of knowledge and understanding, which Aquinas says perfect the theological virtue of faith. Möhlér writes that, by faith, “man discerns, as well as recognizes, the decrees of God,” suggestive of knowledge, “and comprehends not only what God is to man, but also what man should be to God,” suggestive of understanding. Although Möhlér does not specify these functions as the gifts of knowledge and understanding, he certainly sees these functions as closely connected to faith, as does Aquinas. Möhlér plausibly has Aquinas in mind when he refers to “the school-men” of the middle-

⁶⁷ Johann Adam Möhlér, *Symbolism. Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by Their Symbolical Writings*, trans. James Burton Robertson (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997), 120–121. Consider also, Möhlér, *Symbolism*, xxvii: “The very essence of faith ... its nature consists in embracing, with undoubting certainty, the revealed truth, which can be only one ... For with belief in Christ, as a true envoy of the Father of light, it is by no means consistent, that those who have been taught by him, should be unable to define in what his revelations on divine things consist, and what, on the other hand, is in contradiction with his word and ordinances” and Möhlér, *Symbolism*, 150: “But the Catholics say, if this adherence be a mere connection of ideas—an empty union of feeling or phantasy with Christ—a mere theoretic faith in him—a mere recognition of Christian truths, in opposition to works wrought in the vital communion of the will with Christ, as well as to the love engendered by faith, and to all other virtues; then this faith is in itself by no means sufficient to render men acceptable to God, or to justify. But if faith, on the other hand, be understood as a new divine sentiment, regulating the whole man—as the new living spirit (*fides formata*); then to this alone, even according to the Catholic system, is the power given to make us the children heirs of eternal happiness.”

ages. Indeed, on the page following the above passage, Möhler directly appeals to Aquinas on faith.⁶⁸

Having presented a fairly detailed Thomistic account in order to establish the plausibility of understanding the *sensus fidei* as the gift cluster of theological faith plus the gifts of understanding and knowledge, I now provide evidence that when the Magisterium and other theologians speak of the *sensus fidei*, they seem implicitly to refer to this gift cluster. A table format allows a clear and compelling presentation of the evidence. See table 1 below.

In the left column, I have placed quotations from Aquinas on faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge, with one row devoted to theological faith, one to the gift of understanding, and one to the gift of knowledge. In the middle and right columns, I have placed quotations by the Magisterium and other theologians on the *sensus fidei*, respectively, which seem to correspond to how Aquinas characterizes theological faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge. I have simply placed the quotations by the Magisterium and other theologians in the “gift” row that seems most fitting.

For example, Aquinas says that the gift of understanding “denotes a certain excellence of a knowledge that penetrates into the heart of things” (ST II-II q. 8, a. 1). In the “Magisterium” column of the “gift of understanding” row, I have placed a quote from *Lumen Gentium*, which characterizes the *sensus fidei* as penetration of faith “more deeply with right thinking” (no. 12). Thus, the Magisterium seems to use the term *sensus fidei* implicitly to refer to the gift of understanding as well as to theological faith. Likewise, Aquinas says that the gift of knowledge gives “a sure and right judgment on [things proposed to be believed], so as to discern what is to be believed, from what is not to be believed” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 1). In the “Magisterium” column of the “gift of knowledge” row, I have placed a quote by Pope Benedict XVI, which characterizes the *sensus fidei* as enabling discernment of “whether or not a truth belongs to the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition.”⁶⁹ In the “Other Theologians” column of the same row, I have placed a quote by the ITC, which characterizes the *sensus fidei* as “a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is or is not in conformity with the Gospel and with apostolic faith.”⁷⁰ Thus, the Magisterium and theologians seem to use the term *sensus fidei* implicitly to refer to the gift of knowledge as well as to theological faith.

⁶⁸ Möhler, *Symbolism*, 122.

⁶⁹ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

⁷⁰ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 49.

In addition to such implicit reference to these specific gifts of the Holy Spirit in their characterization of the *sensus fidei*, a few authors, including the ITC,⁷¹ speak explicitly of a relationship between the *sensus fidei* and other gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁷² Such explicit discussion of a relationship between the *sensus fidei* and specific gifts of the Holy Spirit seems further to support my proposal, perhaps to the point of proving it unoriginal! However, these authors do not articulate the precise way that they think the *sensus fidei* is related to the other gifts. David A. Tamisiea, for instance, specifically considers the gifts of understanding and knowledge as related to the *sensus fidei*, but it is unclear whether he thinks that the gifts of understanding and knowledge are constitutive of the *sensus fidei*, or whether they are distinct but help to ensure the *sensus fidei*. With respect to the latter, Tamisiea might think that the gifts of understanding and knowledge help perfect the *sensus fidei*, insofar as they help perfect theological faith. While I am open to this understanding of the relationship between the *sensus fidei* and the gifts of understanding and knowledge, I appeal to the Magisterium's and other theologians' implicit characterization of the *sensus fidei* as including the gifts of understanding and knowledge to defend my proposal that the *sensus fidei* is best understood as referring to the gift cluster. At minimum, I hope to have shown that the *sensus fidei cluster* is a plausible development of consensus point 2 (the *sensus fidei* pertains to faith and is a gift of the Holy Spirit).

The clear metaphysical referent of the *sensus fidei cluster* also has more to recommend it with respect to the theological consensus and dissensus points listed above. I will now outline some ways in which the *sensus fidei cluster* benefits theological discussion of the *sensus fidei*. The first point is specific to the inclusion of the gifts of understanding and knowledge in the referent; the second and third points pertain even if *sensus fidei* refers only to the connatural aspect of theological faith.

First, understanding the *sensus fidei* as the *sensus fidei cluster* strengthens the conception of the *sensus fidei* as indicating a "realm of knowledge, but where knowledge is understood to be a form other than discursive reasoning"⁷³ (consensus point 3). Speaking of the gift of

⁷¹ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 58.

⁷² See Sara Butler, "The Instinct That Guides Christians," *L'Osservatore Romano* (2014): 14; Tamisiea, "Vatican II, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the *Sensus Fidelium*," 103–104.

⁷³ Burkhard, "*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989," 133.

wisdom,⁷⁴ Aquinas says that it is right judgment based on “sympathy or connaturality for Divine things,” rather than “right judgment about Divine things after reason has made its inquiry” (ST II-II q. 45, a. 2). In this, Aquinas distinguishes two modes of knowing: knowing on the basis of a graced connaturality for Divine things, and knowing on the basis of discursive human reasoning. For Aquinas, all infused virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit seem to have this intuitive or connatural quality, due to the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁷⁵ In this vein, the ITC document states, “The *sensus fidei* is the form that the instinct which accompanies every virtue takes in the case of the virtue of faith.”⁷⁶ However, recall that the infused virtues perfect human reason, albeit supernaturally, while the gifts of the Holy Spirit perfect the individual’s response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit (ST I-II q. 68, a. 2). Thus, though Aquinas does not say so explicitly, plausibly he thinks that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have an even stronger connatural quality than the infused virtues. Indeed, Aquinas does not speak explicitly of the connatural aspect of faith, but, as I have indicated, Aquinas says that the gift of knowledge involves “a sure judgment of truth, without any discursive process, *by simple intuition*” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 1). Thus, the inclusion of the gifts of understanding and knowledge in the *sensus fidei cluster* strengthens the basis on which the *sensus fidei* can be said to indicate an intuitive or connatural “realm of knowledge” (consensus point 3).

Second, understanding the *sensus fidei* as the *sensus fidei cluster* validates the *sensus fidei* as an active quality (consensus point 4) of the whole people of God (consensus point 1). Moreover, the *sensus fidei cluster* enables the import of a wealth of theological reflection on guaranteed and possible avenues of God’s grace, benefiting discussions of “who are the whole people of God” (dissensus point 1) and the role of public opinion (dissensus point 3). Through Christian baptism, persons receive, *inter alia*, the infused virtues (including the theological virtues), along with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, each to a degree sufficient for salvation.⁷⁷ Thus, on the Thomistic understanding I have proposed, it is certain that all baptized Christians in a state of grace, laity and bishops alike, have theological faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge; that is, it is certain that all baptized Christians in a state of grace, laity and bishops alike, are part

⁷⁴ Wisdom is the gift that perfects the virtue of charity, and, as previously explained, charity enlivens the virtue of faith (ST II-II q. 45, a. 2).

⁷⁵ See ST II-II q. 45, a. 2; II-II q. 5, a. 2; Eleonore Stump, “The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas’s Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2011): 37–39.

⁷⁶ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 53.

⁷⁷ See *Catechism*, no. 1266.

of the whole “people of God” and share in the *sensus fidei*. Furthermore, understanding the *sensus fidei* as including the gifts of understanding and knowledge, and in particular the gift of knowledge which grants “sure judgment,” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 1), secures the active character of the *sensus fidei* for both laity and bishops alike. Note that God may also give prevenient graces akin to theological faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge to the baptized who are not in a state of grace and to the unbaptized.⁷⁸ Therefore, expressions of the *sensus fidei* may not be limited to baptized Christians in a state of grace, and public opinion may have value.

Third, by the same token, the *sensus fidei cluster* is still compatible with consensus point 4, the “limitations, dangers, and temptations”⁷⁹ related to the *sensus fidei*, which also has implications for the role of public opinion (dissensus point 3). While it is certain that all baptized Christians in a state of grace share in the *sensus fidei*, those who seem to others to be in a state of grace may not be. In addition, those in a state of grace have theological faith plus the gifts of understanding and knowledge sufficient for salvation, but still imperfectly (ST I-II q. 68, a. 6), which may also account for some imperfection of the *sensus fidei* even among those in a state of grace. For instance, those in a state of grace may yet have false faith-related beliefs. As *Donum Veritatis* notes, “Although theological faith as such then cannot err, the believer can still have erroneous opinions since all his thoughts do not spring from faith” (no. 35). Aquinas clarifies that while neither living nor lifeless faith is compatible with “obstinate disbelief” in “one article of faith” (ST II-II q. 5, a. 3), “simple people” may be misled by others in matters of faith through no fault of their own (ST II-II q. 2, a. 6). Thus, those who have false faith-related beliefs yet are “free from obstinacy in their heterodox sentiments” (ST II-II q. 2, a. 6), Aquinas implies, may still have living faith. Additionally, Aquinas observes that faith is compatible with believing things “more or less explicitly” and with differing degrees of “certitude and firmness” on the part of the intellect, and differing degrees of “promptitude, devotion, or confidence” on the part of the will (ST II-II q. 5, a. 4).⁸⁰ Likewise,

⁷⁸ See *Catechism*, no. 1257.

⁷⁹ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁸⁰ Thus the possibility of the *sensus fidei*’s growth in the individual: “Since it is a property of the theological virtue of faith, the *sensus fidei fidelis* develops in proportion to the development of the virtue of faith. The more the virtue of faith takes root in the heart and spirit of believers and informs their daily life, the more the *sensus fidei fidelis* develops and strengthens in them” (International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 57). As I noted above, Pope Benedict also suggests that the *sensus fidei* can “be authentically developed” in individuals (Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission”).

Burkhard has noted the “pilgrim character of all saving knowledge, both for the individual believer and for the whole community of believers.”⁸¹ And so it is true that apparent manifestations of the *sensus fidei*, whether in small, orthodox communities or in majority opinion, may not be “authentic manifestations”;⁸² rather, authentic manifestations must be discerned.

MÖHLER’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE *SENSUS FIDEI*

Having established the plausibility, concordance with the literature, and other merits of the *sensus fidei cluster*, I will now at last retrieve Möhler’s relevant insights based on where Möhler seems to speak of theological faith and the gifts of understanding and knowledge.⁸³ I will present four ways in which Möhler can help to illuminate points of consensus and offer balanced responses to points of dissensus, and thus contribute to contemporary discussion on the *sensus fidei*.

First, in response to dissensus point 2 regarding the relationship of the Magisterium to the *sensus fidei*, Möhler’s insistence that “God can be known by the individual only in the whole”⁸⁴ supports a *via media* between individualistic and authoritarian understandings of the *sensus fidei*. Möhler contends that “God can be known by the individual only in the whole. As only the All of his revelation reveals him completely, one can truly know him only in the All, living in him, embracing the All with a full heart. This is the mystery of our knowledge of God: only in the whole can he who created the whole be known because he reveals himself completely only in the whole.”⁸⁵ Möhler explains that individuals are part of a whole both horizontally (united to other

⁸¹ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part II,” 52.

⁸² Francis, “Address to Members.”

⁸³ Some (see, for instance: International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 35) see Möhler’s “ecclesiastical consciousness” in the following passage as a reference to the *sensus fidei*: “The Church is the body of the Lord: it is, in its universality, his visible form—his permanent, ever-renovated, humanity—his eternal revelation. He dwells in the community—all his promises, all his gifts are bequeathed to the community—but to no individual, as such, since the time of the apostles. This general sense, this ecclesiastical consciousness is tradition, is the subjective sense of the word. What then is tradition? The peculiar Christian sense existing in the Church, and transmitted by ecclesiastical education; yet this sense is not to be conceived as detached from its subject matter—nay, it is formed in, and by this matter, so it may be called a full sense. Tradition is the living word, perpetuated in the hearts of believers” (Möhler, *Symbolism*, 278). However, the understanding of the *sensus fidei* that I have proposed enables deeper probing of Möhler’s relevant insights. I believe that the relation of what Möhler says to theological faith and gifts of understanding and knowledge will be apparent, so for the sake of space, I will not argue for the relation each time I present a quote from Möhler.

⁸⁴ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 153.

⁸⁵ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 153.

believers through the Church⁸⁶) and vertically (united to God). Both horizontal and vertical elements are necessary for individuals to know God. Individuals cannot know God apart from unity to other believers in the Church. It is a falsity, Möhler argues, to think that we can “lift ourselves”⁸⁷ to God apart from other believers in the Church; apart from the horizontal whole, individuals can only ever know God partially.

In this, Möhler indicates one “limitation”⁸⁸ of the *sensus fidei* (consensus point 5): the partial knowledge of the individual. Möhler’s insight regarding the partial knowledge of individuals helps to explain the importance of “the context of the community of all believers”⁸⁹ for the *sensus fidei* (consensus point 1). Moreover, if the *sensus fidei* can be shared “by the individual only in the whole,”⁹⁰ then what follows from this is that the *sensus fidei* cannot be invoked in an individualistic or an authoritarian sense. In the language of consensus point 5, individualistic and authoritarian understandings of the *sensus fidei* are both “temptations.”⁹¹

Möhler stresses: “To no individual, considered as such, doth infallibility belong; for the Catholic, as is clear from the preceding observations, regards the individual only as a member of the whole; as living and breathing in the Church. When his feelings, thoughts, and will are conformable to her spirit, then only can the individual attain to inerrability.”⁹² The *sensus fidei* cannot reliably be said to be operating when individuals have cut themselves off from the Church, and so the *sensus fidei* cannot be understood in an individualistic sense. Rather, individuals participate in the *sensus fidei* insofar as they are united to other believers through the Church. In this, Möhler

⁸⁶ Möhler does not speak directly about the Church in this section of *Unity in the Church*, however he does make clear in other writings that “the essential form” of this unity of believers is the Church (Möhler, *Symbolism*, 288). Consider, for instance: “for the Catholic, as is clear from the preceding observations, regards the individual only as a member of the whole; as living and breathing in the Church” (Möhler, *Symbolism*, 261). Earlier in *Unity in the Church*, Möhler favorably quotes Irenaeus: “Therefore, none can have a part in the Spirit who have not been nourished to life at the breasts of the mother and who have not received the pure source streaming from the body of Christ (the Church)” (*Against Heresies*, 3.24.1, trans. Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 84).

⁸⁷ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 153.

⁸⁸ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁸⁹ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁹⁰ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 153.

⁹¹ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

⁹² Möhler, *Symbolism*, 261.

anticipates Pope Benedict XVI's affirmation quoted above: "The *sensus fidei* cannot be authentically developed in believers, except to the extent in which they fully participate in the life of the Church."⁹³

That the *sensus fidei* cannot be understood in an "individualistic" sense does not preclude it from having an "individual" sense. Indeed, Möhler's notion of individuals having only partial knowledge of God suggests that the lived reality of the *sensus fidei* will differ in individuals, though the same theological virtue and gifts of the Holy Spirit are operating. Along these lines, a Thomistic framework adds that God grants some individuals gratuitous graces (graces in excess of what is necessary for one's own salvation) of faith and knowledge (ST I-II q. 111, a. 1 and 4). The *sensus fidei* may be possessed and expressed differently, or more completely, by some individuals due to such gratuitous graces.

Just as individuals must not individualistically cut themselves off from the horizontal whole, claiming the *sensus fidei* apart from the Church, so the Magisterium must not cut itself off from the horizontal whole in an authoritarian manner, claiming the *sensus fidei* apart from other believers.⁹⁴ This is not to say that the Magisterium cannot teach authoritatively. Möhler upholds "the necessity of a living, visible authority which in every dispute can, with certainty, discern the truth, and separate it from error."⁹⁵ Nor is it to say that believers will never feel that Magisterial teaching is an imposition. Indeed, Möhler observes the reality that doctrine "born out of the inspired spiritual fullness of heart and the depth of the first beautiful Christian times now had to be accepted as an austere and rigid law imposed from outside."⁹⁶ Rather, Möhler cautions that Magisterial teaching is not true *because* it is taught by authority, but it is true because it teaches what the Holy Spirit teaches to all believers: "*The Catholic's faith was not faith in authority ... but the Catholic had all authority for himself or herself.... All the faithful have one consciousness, one faith, because one divine power forms them.*"⁹⁷ Here, Möhler opens the door

⁹³ Benedict XVI, "Address to the International Theological Commission."

⁹⁴ For discussion of the dangers of an authoritarian Church, see Valadier, "Has the Concept of *Sensus Fidelium* Fallen into Desuetude?"

⁹⁵ Johann Adam Möhler, *The Spirit of Celibacy*, trans. Cyprian Blamires, ed. Rev. Emery de Gaál (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2007), 201.

⁹⁶ Möhler, *The Spirit of Celibacy*, 54.

⁹⁷ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 110. In this, Möhler undermines the division in eighteenth century theology between the *Ecclesia docens* ("teaching Church") and the *Ecclesia discens* ("learning Church"), which grants only a passive role to the laity (contrary to contemporary consensus point 4). John Henry Newman invokes the *sensus fidei* to issue a more stringent warning against an authoritarian Church (John Henry Newman, "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine," in *The Rambler*, New Series [London: Burns and Lambert, 1859]). Newman points to the Arian controversy of the fourth century in which most bishops were Arians, while the laity,

for Pope Francis' instruction referenced above: "For its part, the Magisterium has the duty to be attentive to what the Spirit says to the Churches through the authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidelium*."⁹⁸

Second, Möhler's attention to living faith's preceding and exceeding doctrinal formulations helps to flesh out the *sensus fidei*'s role in the development of doctrine (consensus point 6). For Möhler, that faith is "living" means that development of doctrine is possible, as growth and development are properties of living things: "Since Christianity is seen as a new divine life given to people, not as a dead concept, it is capable of development and cultivation."⁹⁹ Furthermore, Möhler sees that the faith living in believers underlies such development of doctrine: before the Church ever puts doctrine into words, the doctrine is already living among the faithful, and living faith always goes beyond what could be put into words. For example, "The doctrine of justifying faith experienced the same fate as all the other fundamental doctrines of Christianity. For fifteen hundred years, Christians had lived in and by that faith, had formed many intellectual conceptions upon it, and had laid down the same in numerous writings, but had withal felt much deeper things than could be comprehended in notions or defined by words."¹⁰⁰ To put this point more in the

led by the *sensus fidei*, held fast to the Nicene formula. Newman argued that the Arian controversy should serve as a reminder for the "teaching Church" to listen to the *sensus fidei* expressed by the laity.

⁹⁸ Francis, "Address to Members." See also International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 74: "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', 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. The magisterium should therefore refer to the sense of faith of the Church as a whole. The *sensus fidelium* can be an important factor in the development of doctrine, and it follows that the magisterium needs means by which to consult the faithful."

⁹⁹ Francis, "Address to Members."

¹⁰⁰ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 111.

¹⁰⁰ Möhler, *Symbolism*, 118. Likewise, for Möhler, living faith preceded scripture: "The living gospel always preceded the written gospel and went along with it" (Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 113). The idea that the *sensus fidei*'s preceding and exceeding doctrinal formulations in part underlies the development of doctrine is echoed in the ITC document: "The *sensus fidei fidelis* thus acquires a prospective dimension to the extent that, on the basis of the faith already lived, it enables the believer to anticipate a development or an explanation of Christian practice. Because of the reciprocal link between the practice of the faith and the understanding of its content, the *sensus fidei fidelis* contributes in this way to the emergence and illumination of aspects of the Catholic faith that were previously implicit"

language of Aquinas and contemporary theology: what makes living faith “living” is God Himself, and God, Who always precedes and exceeds human cognition and language, guides the Church’s ever deepening understanding of His Revelation through the development of doctrine.¹⁰¹

Third, in response to dissensus point 3 regarding the role of public opinion, Möhler’s positive appraisal of the role of heresy in the clarification and purification of doctrine helps to underscore the benefit of public opinion, even while the *sensus fidei* is not the same as public opinion. For Möhler, living faith, as I have explained, implies the possibility of growth and development of doctrine; but, for Möhler, the “living” metaphor does not mean that such growth and development of doctrine occur simply in an organic fashion.¹⁰² Rather, Möhler argues that, for example, human freedom operating through heresy stimulates the development of doctrine: “If Church doctrine were established only for itself and not surrounded by the assertions of heretics, our faith could not appear so bright, so proven.... Catholic doctrine is besieged by its contradiction so that our faith might not grow stiff in peace but, moved by practice, become more pure.... She [the Church] is not to be sorrowful that new error always arises so as to elevate her truth.”¹⁰³ Insofar as it allows faith to appear brighter and purer, Möhler views heresy positively.

For Möhler, heresy allows faith to appear brighter and purer partially because heresy always contains some partial truth. Separated from the fullness of truth (Möhler’s first contribution above), heresy cannot be a full, authentic expression of the *sensus fidei*. As I documented earlier, Pope John Paul II, the CDF, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis have all warned against equating public opinion with the *sensus fidei*, and rightly so, it would seem, in Möhler’s view.¹⁰⁴ However, Möhler helps to underscore that public opinion will likely contain what one may call a partial expression of the *sensus fidei*: “The whole heathen world was shot through with fragments of truth and

(International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 65).

¹⁰¹ See ST II-II q. 1, a. 7.

¹⁰² Grant Kaplan and Holly Taylor Coolman, “Development of Doctrine,” in *Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayers and Medi-Ann Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 618.

¹⁰³ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 158–160. See also Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 243: “A great new danger threatened to tear church apart, yet because of it she drew more firmly together, developed her basic principles more clearly than earlier.”

¹⁰⁴ “I am far from being ignorant of the power of the spirit of the age. But I believe we can stand above it, assess it truthfully, and accept only what there is of good in it as not absolutely bad: the rest however we must oppose. What a vast amount would have to be thrown away as outdated if we simply bowed to prevailing opinion!” (Möhler, *The Spirit of Celibacy*, 82).

traces of the divine. In it we encounter deep intimations, dimmer or clearer ideas of a higher world order, a feeling, indeed a desire (however weak) for something better, a widespread yearning for union with the divine. Everything that was believed in its fullness and divinely in Christianity we find foreshadowed in heathendom.”¹⁰⁵

Note that the likelihood that public opinion will contain what one may call a partial expression of the *sensus fidei* accords with the understanding of the *sensus fidei* as the theological virtue of faith plus the gifts of understanding and knowledge, given the possibility of prevenient grace, as discussed earlier.¹⁰⁶ Möhler also alludes to the role of such prevenient graces on a few occasions.¹⁰⁷

Thus, Möhler’s positive appraisal of the role of heresy in the clarification and purification of doctrine grounds a posture of being mindful of the “danger”¹⁰⁸ of equating public opinion with the *sensus fidei* (a specification of consensus point 5), while nonetheless taking seriously public opinion, to discern the truth in it (a response to dissensus point 3). The subjects of the *sensus fidei* are not always apparent, and even partial expressions of the *sensus fidei* with an admixture of error can play a positive role in the development of doctrine (a specification of consensus point 6). It is important for theologians and the Magisterium to pay attention to public opinion because public opinion may contain within it, even if distortedly, important truths that will contribute to the development of doctrine.¹⁰⁹

Fourth, in response to dissensus point 4, Möhler’s distinction between antithesis and contradiction can serve as a principle of discerning the *sensus fidei*. Consider Möhler’s distinction between true antithesis, which “can be found in unity,”¹¹⁰ and contradiction,

¹⁰⁵ Möhler, *The Spirit of Celibacy*, 31. See also Möhler, *The Spirit of Celibacy*, 43: “For the truth is that under every great error of the human race is a great truth, a deep need of the human heart, a dark mysterious longing and intuition” and Möhler, *Symbolism*, 66: “Even in the breast of the heathens such a divine spark beyond a doubt still glowed.”

¹⁰⁶ As also referenced above, Aquinas avers that “a heretic who obstinately disbelieves one article of faith” can have neither living nor lifeless faith (ST II-II q. 5, q. 3). However, Aquinas allows that “if he is not obstinate, he is no longer in heresy but only in error” (ST II-II q. 5, q. 3), leaving the door open for faith.

¹⁰⁷ For example: “The Catholics were wont at times to refer to men, like Camillus, and from their lives demonstrate the moral freedom enjoyed even by the heathens, and the remnants of the good to be found in them. They defended, moreover, the proposition, that God’s special grace, communicated for the sake of Christ’s merits, working retrospectively, and confirming the better surviving sentiments in the human breast, is undeniably to be traced in many phenomena” (Möhler, *Symbolism*, 67).


¹⁰⁸ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: II. 1985–1989,” 133.

¹⁰⁹ For example, public opinion may aid the articulation of truth that has not yet been articulated, the clearer articulation of a truth, etc.

¹¹⁰ Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 195.

which is “in opposition” and threatens “danger and destruction.”¹¹¹ For Möhler, contradiction cannot exist in unity, but antithesis can, and in fact must.¹¹² Accordingly, among the faith-related propositions that must or may¹¹³ be believed, Möhler thinks there are antitheses, but there cannot be contradictions. Likewise, among authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidei*, there may be antitheses, but there cannot be contradictions. Discernment of whether a particular manifestation of the *sensus fidei* is authentic thus can be aided by consideration of whether the manifestation is an antithesis or contradiction of the deposit of faith. Moreover, Möhler has confidence that such discernment is possible: “For with belief in Christ, as a true envoy of the Father of light, it is by no means consistent, that those who have been taught by him, should be unable to define in what his revelations on divine things consist, and what, on the other hand, is in contradiction to his word and ordinances.”¹¹⁴

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have proposed the *sensus fidei* is best understood as referring to the gift cluster of the connatural aspect of theological faith as well as the gifts of understanding and knowledge. I have shown the plausibility of this understanding within a Thomistic framework, provided evidence that the Magisterium and theologians already implicitly assume this understanding, and indicated how I believe this understanding benefits theological discussion. With this understanding of the *sensus fidei* in mind, I have retrieved four ways in which Johann Adam Möhler can help illuminate points of consensus and offer balanced responses to points of dissensus. 

¹¹¹ Möhler, *Symbolism*, 7.

¹¹² Religion can make itself known completely only in an infinity of such variations” (Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, 196); “Unity in its essence is not identity” (Möhler, *Symbolism*, 7).

¹¹³ “True progress would be hindered if the style of presentation for a particular period, the manner of conceiving a doctrine according to a particular age according to that age’s explanation and foundations, would be viewed as one as the same thing as the doctrine itself” (Möhler, *Symbolism*, 354).

¹¹⁴ Möhler, *Symbolism*, xxvii.

Table 1: Comparison of Faith, Understanding, and Knowledge to Descriptions of the *Sensus Fidei*

Gift (Aquinas)	Magisterium on SF	Other Theologians on SF
Theological Virtue of Faith		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not” (Hebrews 11:1; ST II-II q. 4, a. 1) • “two things are required that this act may be perfect: one of which is that the intellect should infallibly tend to its object, which is the true” (ST II-II q. 4, a. 5) • “by the habit of faith, the human mind is directed to assent to such things as are becoming to a right faith, and not to assent to others” (ST II-II q. 1, a. 5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • infallibility in belief; unwavering adherence to “the faith given once and for all to the saints” (<i>Lumen Gentium</i>, no. 12) • personal, infallible adherence to the truth (<i>Donum Veritatis</i>, no. 35) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “act of faith”¹¹⁵ • “act of belief itself”¹¹⁶ • “the experience of the faith in the Spirit and the faith conviction of the whole community of the faithful”;¹¹⁷ “an interior predisposition for and an internal adhering to the whole revelation”¹¹⁸ • “the form that the instinct which accompanies every virtue takes in the case of the virtue of faith”;¹¹⁹ “comparable to a vital instinct or a

¹¹⁵ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: I. 1965–1984,” 43, citing Magnus Löhrer, *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss Heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965).

¹¹⁶ Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection since Vatican II: I. 1965–1984,” 54, citing Harald Wagner, “Glaubenssinn, Glaubenzustimmung und Glaubenskonsens,” *Theologie und Glaube* 69 (1979): 263–271.

¹¹⁷ Michael Seybold, “Kirchliches Lehramt und Allgemeiner Glaubenssinn. Ein Reformatorisches Anliegen aus der Sicht des I. und II. Vatikanischen Konzils,” *Theologie und Glaube* 65 (1975): 267. Translated by Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” 451–452.

¹¹⁸ Seybold, “Kirchliches Lehramt und Allgemeiner Glaubenssinn. Ein Reformatorisches Anliegen aus der Sicht des I. und II. Vatikanischen Konzils,” 274. Translated by Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” 451–452.

¹¹⁹ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, nos. 49, 53.

		sort of ‘flair’ by which the believer clings spontaneously to what conforms to the truth of faith and shuns what is contrary to it ... infallible in itself with regard to its object: the true faith.” ¹²⁰
Gift of Understanding		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “denotes a certain excellence of a knowledge that penetrates into the heart of things” (ST II-II q. 8, a. 1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • penetration of faith “more deeply with right thinking” (<i>Lumen Gentium</i>, no. 12) • “a more profound understanding and activation of the word of God” (<i>Familiaris Consortio</i>, no. 5) 	
Gift of Knowledge		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the knowledge of human affairs” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 2) • gives “a sure and right judgment on [things proposed to be believed], so as to discern what is to be believed, from what 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “supernatural discernment” (<i>Lumen Gentium</i>, no. 12) • discernment of “whether or not a truth belongs to the living deposit of the Apostolic Tradition”¹²¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “a kind of ‘connaturality’ or spontaneous knowledge”¹²³ • “permits each believer to ‘seize on what is in harmony with the authentic meaning of the Word of God or

¹²⁰ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, nos. 54–55.

¹²¹ Benedict XVI, “Address to the International Theological Commission.”

¹²³ William M. Thompson, “*Sensus Fidei* and Infallibility,” *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 167 (1973): 480. Thompson draws this idea of the *sensus fidei* as “a kind of ‘connaturality’” from Aquinas’s discussion of the gift of wisdom in ST II-II q. 45, a. 2.

<p>is not to be believed” (ST II-II, q. 9, a. 1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “to know what one ought to believe, belongs to the gift of knowledge” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discernment of “what is truly of God” (<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>, no. 119) • deciphering the signs of the times¹²² 	<p>what follows from it”¹²⁴</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “capacity to recognize the intimate experience of adherence to Christ and to judge everything on the basis of this knowledge”¹²⁵ • “an active capacity for spiritual discernment”¹²⁶ • “a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is or is not in conformity with the Gospel and with apostolic faith”¹²⁷
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primarily and principally indeed, regards speculation, in so far as man knows what he ought to hold by faith; yet, secondarily, it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a shining forth in the laity of “the power of the Gospel ... in their daily social and family life” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “enlightens and guides the way in which the believer puts his or her faith into practice”¹²⁸

¹²² Paul VI, “General Audience: Signs of the Times.”

¹²⁴ Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, “Autorité et mémoire dans l’église,” *Irénikon* 61 (1988): 340. Translated by Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Recent Theological Reflection (1990–2001). Part I,” 454.

¹²⁵ Zoltán Alszegey, “The *Sensus Fidei* and the Development of Dogma,” in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-Five Years After (1962–1987)*, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist, 1988), 147.

¹²⁶ Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue (ARCIC-II), “The Gift of Authority,” 24.

¹²⁷ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 49.

¹²⁸ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no. 59.

extends to works, since we are directed in our actions by the knowledge of matters of faith, and of conclusions drawn therefrom” (ST II-II q. 9, a. 3)	(<i>Familiaris Consortio</i> , no. 5) • the application of this faith “more fully in ... life” (<i>Lumen Gentium</i> , no. 12)	
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