

## Public Opinion and *Sensus Fidelium*

### Opinión pública y *sensus fidelium*

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**Abstract:** Public opinion and religious opinion are located within plural societies, connected to social networks. The experience of the phenomenon of public opinion by the believers interacts with the experience of religious opinions. What are the mediations employed by the *sensus fidelium* to explain the contradictions between public and religious opinion? This article discusses the proximity between public and religious opinions through the categories of publicity, contradiction, utility and truth. In networked societies, the faithful exercise the right to express their opinions and religious convictions. The phenomenon of the *sensus fidelium* immediately evidences the experience of faith of the believers as subjective convictions and religious opinions. Afterwards, these opinions are mediated by the collegiate spheres of the Church, expressing the coherence of the belief, that is, its truth. The proximity between public and religious opinions points to more complex scenarios for the Church and the believers.

**Keywords:** Public Opinion; Religious opinion; *Sensus Fidelium*.

**Resumen:** La opinión pública y la opinión religiosa están ubicadas dentro de sociedades plurales, conectadas a las redes sociales. La experiencia del fenómeno de la opinión pública por parte de los creyentes interactúa con la experiencia de las opiniones religiosas. ¿Cuáles son las mediaciones empleadas por *sensus fidelium* para explicar las contradicciones entre la opinión pública y la religiosa? Este artículo discute la proximidad entre las opiniones públicas y religiosas a través de las categorías de publicidad, contradicción, utilidad y verdad. En las sociedades en red, los fieles ejercen el derecho a expresar sus opiniones y convicciones religiosas. El fenómeno del *sensus fidelium* evidencia inmediatamente la experiencia de fe de los creyentes como convicciones subjetivas y opiniones religiosas. Luego, estas opiniones son mediadas por las esferas colegiadas de la Iglesia, expresando la coherencia de la creencia, es decir, su verdad. La proximidad entre las opiniones públicas y religiosas apunta a escenarios más complejos para la Iglesia y los creyentes.

**Palabras clave:** Opinión pública; Opinión religiosa; *Sensus fidelium*.

### Introduction

The theme of public opinion and the *sensus fidelium* are phenomena of culture and religious experience that need the mediation of articulated social intelligence in social networks. The phenomenon of public opinion is used to make diagnoses, trace scenarios and establish action plans. Likewise, religious public opinion becomes increasingly useful for Churches

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to investigate the opinions of the faithful with the aim of updating their pastoral actions, debating moral problems, being in tune with the challenges of the spirit of the times and interpreting the “signs of the times.” Both public opinion and religious opinion are met with a new fact: plural societies connected in social networks. Here, the opinion finds its special forum to be affirmed in the instantaneousness of the internet as well as to be denied in the opposition of plural societies, constituting itself in the moment of the contradiction that seeks institutional mediations in order to influence public opinion and the establishment of themes that constitute the world agenda.

The problem discussed in this text exposes public opinion firstly as situated within the field of publicity, secondly as a phenomenon of contradiction and finally as something useful for the relationship between societies and churches. In interpellative terms: how do the phenomena of public opinion, religious opinion and the *sensus fidelium* are articulated interdisciplinarily? How do they contribute for relationship in plural societies?

This article is structured according to the following objectives: (i) to evidence the proximity between public opinion and religious opinion, showing how both pass through the assessment of publicity, contradiction, utility and truth; (ii) to present the fact of network society, in which religious citizens exercise the right of expressing their opinions and religious convictions; (iii) to describe the phenomena of the *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium* as being, on the one hand, the clarification of the experience of faith among the religious citizens in their immediacy and, on the other, subjective convictions and religious opinions that are objectivized through the collegiate mediation of the Church; (iv) to point to diagnoses and scenarios for churches in times of networked societies, plural societies connected through religious public opinions as experiences in the sense of faith and plural beliefs.

Firstly, public opinion is approached in face of the new scenario of networked societies, having in mind three complementary principles: publicity, contradiction, and utility. Afterwards, the *sensus fidei*, the *sensus fidelium* and the *consensus fidei* are described as inclusion, expression and mediation of religious opinion of the faithful in face of plural societies.

## 1. Public opinion: publicity, contradiction and utility

We initially present a brief exposition of some theories concerning public opinion that we believe are important for understanding the phenomenon of opinion in social networks, specifically how the believers’ opinion are constituted (*religious opinion*) and the believers’ expressions of faith in order to understand the logic that moves the new networked social subjects and actors and their religious experience.<sup>1</sup> The concept of social networks here is understood in an operational sense, that is, when a computer network connects a network of people, groups and organizations in all levels.

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1 This part is the reproduction of a chapter of a book, already published in: BAVARESCO, A.; SOUZA, Draiton Gonzaga de. Epistemologia das redes sociais, opinião pública e teoria da agenda. In: Draiton Gonzaga de Souza; Agemir Bavaresco. (Org.). “Direito e Filosofia I”. Porto Alegre: Letra e Vida, 2013, p. 92-115.

a) *The Principle of Publicity*<sup>2</sup>

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) (*Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*) was the document that synthesized the ideals of the French Revolution, in which individual and collective rights of humans are clarified; preoccupied with universality, they advocate for the freedom of opinion in two articles:

10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.

11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

Afterwards, in the 20th Century, the Declaration of Human Rights will consolidate this principle:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (Human Rights, article 19).<sup>3</sup>

Modernity had already instituted the principle of publicity as groundwork for the advancement of the protection of the right of freedom of the press and opinion. This principle is simultaneously constituted by the formation of the public sphere. Therefore, there is a mutual imbrication between publicity and public sphere, freedom of the press and public opinion.

On a philosophical level, Kant theorizes about the principle of publicity as a stage of majority, as an emancipation of humanity. Kant inaugurates, as we have seen, the discussions about public opinion through the *principle of publicity* presented in *Perpetual Peace: Justice* “[...] can only be thought of as publicly disclosable” (KANT, 2010, p. 75). Publicity is a political concept that creates, in political philosophy, the idea of public sphere as a structure that ensures individual and public rights; the formal principle of publicity ensures legitimacy to juridical norms. The right of expressing one’s own opinion has, in the principle of publicity, its legitimation.

Publicity is the formal principle and public opinion is the practical-phenomenological device that mediates between the formal principle of publicity and the empirical dimension that is effected in civil law, in international law and in cosmopolitan law (LIMA, 2011, p. 286).

2 Cf. BAVARESCO, A.; KONZEN, Paulo Roberto; SORDI, CAETANO. Mídias, democracia e opinião pública: diagnósticos, teorias e análises. In: BAVARESCO, A.; VILLANOVA, Marcelo Gross; RODRIGUES, Tiegüê Vieira. (Orgs.). “Projetos de Filosofia II”. Porto Alegre: EDIPUCRS, 2012, v., p. 8-39. Disponível em: <http://www.abavaresco.com.br/publicacoes.html#capitulos>

3 United Nations Human Rights: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Pages/WelcomePage.aspx>

Kant, in publishing the work *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, triggered a great debate, since it was understood as a challenge to the emperor of the theistic Christian State of his time. There is no publicity in the court, since there is no public space, only private, that is, the sovereign space. In this context Kant introduces the principle of publicity, disclosing the conflict between the public use of reason and private reason within the religious and political ambit that is thematized in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Kantian public reason foreshadows the idea of freedom of expression implemented in contemporary democratic constitutions as well as introduces the legitimacy of public opinion in the modern State.

It is Hegel, notwithstanding, who will explicitly posit the theory of public opinion by thematizing the principle of contradiction as being its immanent movement. Public opinion is a phenomenon of the contradiction of opinions on all the levels of society.

#### b) *Contradiction of Public Opinion*<sup>4</sup>

Hegel understands public opinion as a phenomenon of contradiction that needs to pass from immediacy to mediation. The phenomenon of public opinion is contradictory, because it contains within itself both the universality of constitutional principles, of Law and Ethics, and the singularity of rights and interests of citizens and of the expression of their subjectivity. This contradiction finds its solution through the mediation of freedom of the press itself within a framework of democratic lawfulness. This is the strength of contradiction: to effect the mediation of the dialectic tension between the opposite poles of the universal and the singular in the freedom of the press, ensuring the right of every citizen to publicly express his or her opinion.

Hegel develops the principle of contradiction in his *Logics of Essence*, describing the movement in which being is opposed insofar as it is reflected in itself and in the other. Contradiction is a logical concept that moves the whole of political reality. Hegel analyzes the fact of public opinion and understands it as a contradiction; the right the citizen has of freely expressing his or her opinion allows opposite opinions to be manifested. This is the logics of opinion, saying what one thinks immediately, surpassing the contradiction of prejudices, preferences, interests etc. The logics of opinion is the movement of contradiction of the right to freely express what one thinks and wants, passing through the mediation of sociopolitical institutions.

The Hegelian principle of contradiction provides us with a diagnosis and an understanding of public opinion that is relevant to understand both its time and the complex framework of contemporary society. However, how is public opinion treated afterwards by J. S. Mill? What is his diagnosis and interpretative horizon to analyze public opinion?

#### c) *Principle of utility*

The utilitarianist horizon is present in the political philosophy of J. S. Mill<sup>5</sup> and, therefore, in his irreducible defense of freedom of expression. In Mill's conception, a society

4 Cf. BAVARESCO, A.; KONZEN, P.R. Cenários da liberdade de imprensa e opinião pública em Hegel. "Kriterion", vol.50, n.119, Belo Horizonte, Junho 2009. Available at: <http://www.abavaresco.com.br/publicacoes.html#artigos>

5 Cf. ORLANS, Barbara. et al., *The human use of animals: case studies in ethical choice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. (1) The principle of utility: for utilitarianists, the idea that subjects seek the maximization

wherein freedom of expression flourishes has more positive consequences for its members than one in which freedom is restricted; and free opinion is a more adequate regime than censorship in face of the unavoidable partiality of individual opinions.

Mills stresses that there is also the *principle of utility* to guide the defense and maintenance of free public opinion, since it brings forth benefits for the collectivities in which it is applied. A democratic society allows its citizens to satisfy their desire of having the best opinions possible according to the scenario most fit for an impartial consideration of all the opinions without arbitrary privileges to one specific opinion. It could be said that Mill applied the moral principle of utility to public opinion: there is joy in conveying one's own opinion; more than that, expressing what one thinks is pleasurable. The individual seeks an advantage or an interest and may want his or her opinion to influence others. It is useful for the individual to ensure the moral pleasure of having his or her opinion acknowledged by the public. The interplay of opinions acknowledges the utility of everybody expressing their opinions. However, the justification of the many opinions occurs through impartiality, that is, the opinion needs to be useful for the largest number of individuals possible and not only satisfy the partiality of some opinions.

Thus, we have publicity, contradiction and utility as the three principles of public opinion. We think that they are very consistent to understand the fact of public opinion. Publicity of politics, the logics of contradiction and utilitarianist morals are constitutive principles of public opinion. They allow understanding the new scenarios of the public sphere constructed or influenced by the multimedia, social networks and nationally and internationally broadened in a dynamics of global self-communication (cf. Castells, 2012). Thus, it may be posited that the network of opinions follows a logics of contradiction moved by immediate perceptions and impressions in the utilitarianist conflict of interests, activated by the principle of the public that articulates the opinions in religious and social networks. This research will investigate to what extent these principles are also present in the religious public opinion in scenarios of plural societies.

Currently new scenarios for communication are built, having, on the one hand, the large corporations of television, radio, press and online media and, on the other, the role of the independent/alternative press, understood as not linked to a private, public or state company or some economic group. The constitution of opposition between conventional media and independent/alternative press is progressively configured, having as material support the new technologies of information.

In the networked society connected with plural societies, three processes of learning and changes are found: ( $\alpha$ ) on a technical level, television, radio, press and online media are articulated, having in mind that, with the advent of the internet and independent social

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of their well-being is indispensable. The postulate that the greatest happiness possible should be sought for the largest number of people involved in a determinate action is part, therefore, of utilitarianist ethics; (2) A scale of benefits: utilitarianists defend that the benefits and evils of the consequences of an action may be measured through items that count as goods or primary utilities; (3) Consequentialism: all utilitarian theories are consequentialist. This means that the actions will be morally right or wrong according to their consequences, far beyond the virtues that refer to any moral quality they may possess, such as fidelity, friendship or trust; (4) Impartiality: finally all the parts involved in the action should receive impartial consideration. Any partiality referring to particular individuals should possess a reasonable and strict utilitarian justification.

networks, there is a progression from the age of the mass media to the age of the media for all, that is, there is democratization of the media; ( $\beta$ ) on a communicational level, there is a progression from the concept of exclusive journalism to inclusive press and journalists; ( $\gamma$ ) on a political level, social networks question representative democracy and defy the implementation of digital democracy and the democratization of the media.

Having these scenarios of communication and public opinion as expressed in social networks and plural societies in mind, religious opinion is also seen to be traversed by the three abovementioned principles of public opinion, so that the publicity of religious opinions is freely expressed in networks, generating the phenomenon of the contradiction of believers on various themes of society (ethics, politics, doctrines etc.) according to utilitarianist interests of the believers. It is known that religions suffer the impacts of this phenomenon of public opinion and that the religious opinion of the believers, in addition to being a part of this scenario, is guided by the principle of the truth of religious opinions.

## 2. *Sensus fidei, sensus fidelium and consensus fidei*

Initially it is worth positing that there is an implicative articulation among these three levels of experience of faith: *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium*, and *consensus fidei*. These expressions are connected to varied yet complementary contents. Herbert Vorgrimler defines (1) *sensus fidei* (SF) as “a determined species of knowledge that arises from faith and refers to the essential content of this same faith.”<sup>6</sup> It is a spontaneous, non-discursive, intuitive and immediate way of knowing. It is the sense of faith particular to anyone who believes in God’s revelation. It is the individual consciousness illuminated by the light of the Spirit of God. The (2) *sensus fidelium* is, according to the author, the sense of the faithful or the collective consciousness of faith. The (3) *consensus fidei* is the faithful’s agreement formed out of the sense of faith.<sup>7</sup>

According to Dario Vitali, the term *sensus* means sense; this noun corresponds to the Greek term *aisthesis* (αἴσθησις), which means perception, sensation or feeling, indicating a way of knowing from experience, acquired through the senses; a way of understanding or being conscious of something. On the other hand, the term *fidei* means faith as an attitude of deliverance, that is, the assent about that which is experienced as *sensus*.

The *sensus fidei* (personal consciousness) is connected to the *sensus fidelium* (collective consciousness). The individual Christian existence is situated within the context of ecclesial communion, that is, the Christian faith is, at the same time, personal, communitarian and ecclesial. Christian faith becomes explicit in the community, constituting the communicative relationship of the Church in its personal and communitarian dimension.

The *sensus fidelium* (*faithful’s sense*) has an objective meaning, referring not only to the believer as individual, but to that which is objectively believed in. It is an ecclesial and collegial function through theologians, the magisterium and the group of the faithful. It is, then, something objective, since it is made explicit in a communitarian level.

6 Cf. HAARSMA, Frans. Investigação empírica por um consensus da Igreja? In: “CONCILIUM”, n. 1 (1972), p.100 – 102.

7 Cf. VITALI, Dario. *Sensus fidelium. Una funzione ecclesiale di intelligenza della fede*. Brescia, Morcelliana, 1993, p. 148.

The *consensus fidei* (*consensus* of faith, that is, the universal agreement or *consensus* on questions of faith and moral action) has the value of a criterion of truth. Frans Haarsma relates the faithful's *consensus* to the sense of faith, positing that “the *consensus* is defined as a unisonous expression of faith by the totality of the faithful and may be confirmed by statistics in a kind of ecclesial public opinion<sup>8</sup> whereas the sense of faith should be based on theology.”<sup>9</sup>

In the experience of the *sensus fidei*, the phenomenon of the expression of faith occurs immediately as sensibility of the act of believing in God. Here, the freedom of the act of believing is manifested in its intuitive and spontaneous expression, that is, the freedom of opinion of the faith that the believer has the right of freely expressing, for instance, in the form of popular religion in face of God and its historical mediations.

Afterwards, in the *sensus fidelium*, religious opinion experiences the contradiction of religious opinions, since there is a plurality of opinions about the same themes and issues. It is something typical of plural societies that show their faith as autonomous persons to say freely what they think about their experience of faith. However, there is a mediation to be made among the multiplicity of opinions of the faithful; this mediation aims at making explicit the contradictions of religious opinions so that the truth of faith may be achieved. This is the objective moment of the experience of faith that assumes the individual opinions and mediates them through theological debates, magisterial memory and the hermeneutics of the believers. Here opinion as *sensus fidelium* is achieved, that is, the ecclesial consciousness as faith made explicit by the faithful in the light of the mediations of the ecclesial community and its members.

Finally, in the *consensus fidei*, religious opinion is evaluated through the many collegiate instances of the Church—communities, magisterium, theologians, assemblies, synods, councils etc.—to establish agreements or understandings that ensure the unity and truth of opinions in terms of faith, embracing the universal acknowledgment of the Church.

To what extent may the *sensus fidelium* be brought near religious public opinion? That is, is there a public sphere in the Church, allowing the believers (the faithful, theologians, bishops) to freely express their opinion through social networks? To deal with these problems, the experience of faith is described in terms of the *sensus fidei*, the *sensus fidelium* and the *consensus fidei*, which constitute the subjects of the expression of the Catholic faith. Our objective is to bring the phenomenon of public opinion near the phenomenon of religious opinion, showing, at the same time, the specificity of religious public opinion.

### 2.1. *Sensus fidei: Experience as the epistemological place of faith*

The *sensus fidei* constitutes the starting point of the movement of faith and refers to the expression of a form of acknowledgment of belief, defining the ability of each baptized individual to live the religious experience. However, it is a personal and, at the same time, public experience of faith experienced and manifested in the community of believers whe-

8 VITALI, Dario. *Sensus fidelium. Una funzione ecclesiale di intelligenza della fede*. Idem, p. 274.

9 Cf. HAARSMA, Frans. Investigação empírica por um consensus na Igreja. In: “CONCILIUM”, Op. Cit., p. 95.

rein the act of faith is a vital and existential act in which the whole person is involved.<sup>10</sup> The experience of faith enables the person to express the *sensus fidei*, whereas personal consciousness experiences the relationship and identification with the object of faith.

Theology has the difficulty of bringing near *experience* and *sensus fidelium*. When *sensus fidelium* and experience come near, in Catholic theology, one oscillates between complementary opinions: on the one hand, in denying the role of experience, one equally denies the function of the *sensus fidelium*. According to D. Vitali, the moment of greater rejection of experience in modernist crisis is also the moment of greater suspicion in relation to the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, when in theology the experience is recovered, a return to the *sensus fidelium* occurs. Indeed, there is, between experience and *sensus fidelium*, a constitutive relationship; otherwise, the object of the *sensus fidelium* is empty without the object of the spiritual experience. Therefore, the spiritual experience is linked to the *sensus fidelium* when a content of the experience of revelation is made explicit.

According to E. Schillebeeckx, “praxis is the place wherein authentic theory is manifested. A clear idealistic-minded disposition between pure reason and practical reason does not hold. Concretely, Christianity is essentially a renovation of the concrete and real being in which the theory occurs interiorly and implicitly”<sup>12</sup>; that is, it is a practice lived in the experience of the people as community that practices the faith.

The reflection about the *theological places* and the understanding of the practice of faith occurs through the mediation of the local synods, of the articulation of the communities, of the liturgy in the life of communities. The life of families in their varied forms witnesses the *lex vivendi* according to the Gospel as well as the testimony of charity and the lives of Saints.

Experience is the *epistemological place of Faith*: the *fact* of the manifestation of faith is a practice that constitutes an object of analysis and theological knowledge in its own source from the subject that makes experience, that is, from the *sensus fidei*. Faith and experience together give meaning and identity to the interpretation of the experience in itself.<sup>13</sup>

The *Lumen Gentium* articulates the *supernatural sense of faith (sensus fidei)* and the *consensus* of the universality of the believers:

“The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, (cf. 1Jo 2, 20.27) cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole *peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith* when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” (8\*) they show *universal agreement in matters of faith and morals*. That discernment in matters of faith (*sensus fidei*) 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.”(LG 12a)

10 Cf. D. VITALI, *Sensus fidelium*, p. 251-252.

11 Cf. D. VITALI, *Sensus fidelium*, p. 259-260.

12 L.M. FERNANDEZ DE TROCONIZ, «La Teología sobre el *sensus fidei* de 1960 a 1970», *Scriptorium Victoriense* 31 (1984), p. 23.

13 Cf. A. GONZALEZ MONTES, «La experiencia, lugar epistemológico de la fe», *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 68 (1993), p. 417-431.



The *universal agreement in matters of faith and morals* includes that which the Church is and believes, that is, the *depositum fidei* and other forms of expression of the Christian faith that are the manifestation of the *sensus fidei* of the faithful in unity with the ecclesial institutions, in the liturgical-sacramental practice of the Church, in the theological reflection and in the practice of a Christian life.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, all this experience of faith by the believer is manifested as religious opinion through the *sensus fidelium*.

## 2.2. Sensus Fidelium 15: Religious opinion and unity of faith

The *sensus fidelium* is the religious experience as manifestation of the phenomenon of the divine Spirit that communicates its *charismas* to the believers. Thus, the *charismas* may be considered an expression of the *sensus fidelium* in the ecclesial community and in the world,<sup>16</sup> in a subjective and objective dimension.

**a) The subject of the *sensus fidelium*:** In the ecclesial language, the term *sensus fidelium* was habitually applied to the members of the Church that were not part of the hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> However, there is equivalence between the Catholic Church and the *sensus omnium fidelium*, that is, there is a coincidence between the *sensus Ecclesiae* and the *sensus omnium fidelium*, since there is only one subject to the *sensus fidelium* formed by the whole of the believing faithful. The members of the hierarchy and the faithful have different functions and missions, but both form “one only subject, which is the universal Church.”<sup>18</sup>

According to E. Schillebeeckx, the subject of the *sensus fidelium* is both the particular person and the Christian community (the universal Church). The *sensus fidelium* is among the subjects of the transmission of the Revelation, identified with the totality of the Christian people,<sup>19</sup> since the action of the Spirit is present in all those who were baptized, there being a complementariness of functions and opinions according to the plurality of missions. According to Y. Congar, the community of believers is the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, since it continues to transmit and actualize the content of the faith, being every faithful an active subject in the dynamics of ecclesial life, freely participating with his or her religious opinion.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the subject of the *sensus fidelium* is the Church as People of God: the People of God, professing the faith, contributes to expose it, publish it, manifest it, then, in the moment in which they believe, the People of God teaches. This implies that the *sensus fidelium* is present within the Christian community as an intuition, an opinion and an understanding of the faith.

14 Cf. A. ANTÓN, «Recezione e Chiesa locale. La connessione di ciascuna delle due realtà da punto di vista ecclesiale ed ecclesiologicalo», *Rassegna di Teologia* 40 (1999/2), p. 170-177.

15 For further aspects, cf. Dallagnol, W. (2005): *O Povo de Deus como sujeito na vida Igreja. O sensus fidelium como chave de leitura em ecclesiologicala*. Roma, Pontificia Universidade Gregoriana, PhD. Thesis.

16 Cf. G. BIONDO, (1989): *Il Sensus fidelium nel Vaticano II e nei Sinodi dei Vescovi*. Roma, Pontificium Athenaeum S. Anselmi de Urbe, p. 34, 76-78.

17 Cf. D. VITALI, *Sensus fidelium*, 157; cf. p. 321-322.

18 Cf. D. VITALI, *Sensus fidelium*, 158-161.

19 Cf. L.M. FERNANDEZ DE TROCONIZ, «La teología sobre el Sensus fidei de 1960 a 1970», *Scriptorium Victoriense* 31 (1984), p. 6.

20 Cf. L.M. FERNANDEZ DE TROCONIZ, «La teología sobre el *sensus fidei* de 1960 a 1970», *Scriptorium Victoriense* 29 (1982), 171-174.

The subject of the *sensus fidelium* is an *universalis coetus fidelium*, that is, all the faithful form this subject not as a sum of individuals, but as an expression of the unity of all those baptized in the function of intelligence of the faith.<sup>21</sup>

**b) The object of the *sensus fidelium*** is the very content of the revelation, that is, what the Catholic Church has “believed in everywhere, always and for all (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*),”<sup>22</sup> constituting the universality of the Christian faith. The revelation goes through the mediation of the faithful (bishops, theologians, missionaries, etc.), who, through their experience and practice of faith, develop their historical experiences that form the *sensus fidelium*.

Therefore, the object of the faith are concrete realities, the experience of people, that living sensibility of faith that J. Wicks understands as the common profession of faith, therefore being “the *sensus fidelium* an important criterion of the validity of an article of faith.”<sup>23</sup> From the dynamicity of the faith the dynamicity of the *sensus fidelium* emerges, inspiring the whole ecclesial body in a process of interaction and complementariness of charismas and missions, contributing to the ongoing renovation of the Church.

The *sensus fidelium* is the legitimate expression of the plurality of the experience of faith in the tension of the ecclesial unity. The *sensus fidelium* acquires a central place between the criteria of discernment of the faith, having an effective incidence in the formation of the opinions of the ecclesial will, thus becoming one of the means of assessment of the validity of the orientations of the Churches. Therefore, the *sensus fidelium* is a constitutive subject of the Church, ensuring that the believers express their religious opinions on the contents of the revelation. Therefore, a correct relationship between all the subjects of the revelation and of the ecclesial organization is established so that the *sensus fidelium* maintains and stimulates a symmetrical relationship in the ecclesial dynamics, achieving the unity of the practice of the faith through the *consensus fidei*.

### 2.3 *Consensus fidei: Opinion, ecclesiality and conspiratio*

The act of faith implies being professed, celebrated and manifested in the community of faith, constituting itself in *consensus fidei* that strengthens the identity and the mission of the Church as people of God in the history of ecclesiality.

#### a) The criterion of ecclesiality of the faith: *Consensus fidei*

The criterion to distinguish the ecclesiality of faith is the *consensus fidei* that emerges from the communion and participation in ecclesial procedures such as the relationship with the content of the faith through the mediation of the community of believers, as a space of credibility of faith and ecclesial credibility. The experience of faith and the theological reflection made explicit in formulations of faith move the teaching activity of the Church and the *consensus* as to what is taught.<sup>24</sup>

21 Cf. D. VITALI, (2001), *Sensus fidelium*, p. 173.

22 B. FORTE, *La Chiesa della Trinità*. Editrice Queriniana: Brescia 1984, p. 177.

23 J. WICKS, *Introduction to the theological method*, Edité par Piemme, Casale Monferrato, Italy, 1994, p. 128.

24 Cf. M.-T. NADEAU, «Le développement de l'expression *fides Ecclesiae*», *La Maison-Dieu* 174 (1988), 137.

The *sensus fidelium* of the people of God constitutes and moves the *sensus Ecclesiae*, the tradition and the fidelity to the history of the faith. The many expressions such as *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium*, *consensus fidelium*, *sensus Ecclesiae* are actually many criteria and moments of mediation of the sense that constitutes ecclesiality. According to G. Biondo, “the *sensus fidelium*” may be “considered as the objective element of the faith, that is, that which is exteriorly realized, the collective consciousness of faith of the Christian people that is concretized and becomes historical in an ecclesial community.”<sup>25</sup> Here, this sense is identified as *consensus fidelium*, so that the collective experience of the Church people of God is the expression of the *sensus Ecclesiae*.

According to J. H. Newman, the *sensus Ecclesiae* brings preachers and the faithful together in public acts that form ecclesiality through solidarity, liturgy, festivities, prayer and devotions of popular religiosity. These acts are the force of communion and communication of the religious opinions of the *sensus communis fidelium* advancing the ecclesial process.<sup>26</sup> For J.-M. Tillard, the *sensus fidelium* is one of the essential elements of the *sensus Ecclesiae*, one of the fibers sustaining the life of faith of the people of God.<sup>27</sup>

#### b) Ecclesial *Conspiratio*: Confluence of opinions

The term *conspiratio* (*spiratio*/breathe + *con*/together = to breathe together) means the act that constitutes a human group in their breathing together, which in the theological context is made explicit in the communion (inspiration) and communication (expiration) of the plurality of ecclesial opinions, traditions, ideas and practices. Therefore, the *conspiratio* as a dimension of the *consensus fidelium* enables the believers in their different articulations to express their opinions and religious missions in favor of conviviality, tolerance and the freedom between the churches and the society, triggering a fluent and confluent process of communication and changes on all the levels of reality.

An example of *conspiratio* as expression of the *consensus fidelium* was the Second Vatican Council, which has articulated the intra-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial relationships in many typologies. Theology, after the Second Vatican Council, highlighted the issue of the subject of faith: the faithful. If in the manualistic the identification of the revelation with the dogma highlighted the primordial function of the ecclesiastic magisterium, now the faithful are emphasized. And here the affirmations in the perspective of the *sensus fidelium*<sup>28</sup> are developed. Then, “the transcendent subject of knowledge of the Mystery, the Spirit of the Living God, operates in the *conspiratio* of the historical subjects, not mortifying, but exalting in originality and in specificity the pneumatological and Trinitarian Ecclesiology.”<sup>29</sup>

That is why “the faithful are not, in the life of the Church, only receptive and passive receivers of the ecclesial doctrine, but participant subjects of the Church.”<sup>30</sup> The inheritance of the Second Vatican Council enables, then, an open hermeneutics counting on the participation of the faithful in the life of the Church.

25 Cf. G. BIONDO, *Il sensus fidelium*. p. 19-20.

26 Cf. J.H. NEWMAN, *On consulting*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1961, p. 65.

27 J.-M.R. TILLARD, «Le sensus fidelium : réflexion théologique», coll. «Cogitatio fidei», 87, Paris, 1976, p. 16.

28 Cf. D. VITALI, *Sensus fidelium*, p. 86.

29 B. FORTE. *La Chiesa della Trinità*. Editrice Queriniana: Brescia 1984, p. 15.

30 METZ, J. B. -SCHILLEBEECKX, E., «A herança do Concílio», *Concilium* (ed. brasil.) 200 (1985/4), p. 3.

For J. H. Newman, the *consensus fidei* is oriented by the pursuit of truth, but we should be attentive to the threat of homogenization, since the suppression of novelty leads to monotony, to impoverishment and ends up causing tension. The *consensus fidei* ensures the plurality of religious opinions, enabling debate and creativity about theoretical and practical questions within the Church, something that renders the ongoing *aggiornamento* of the institution feasible through the confluence of opinions and its mediation in the pursuit of truth.

The *conspiratio* is a form of mediation that strengthens the pursuit of truth in a communitarian manner, specifically through the plurality of opinions and ideas, the debate and the dialog that allow a creative and innovative hermeneutics of the Gospel and ecclesial tradition. The dialog between plural opinions is part of the very reality of human life. “The Ecclesiology of dialog and service is not the loss of identity of the Church, but the search for an identity of a higher level typical of the evangelical exigency of ‘losing’ one’s own life in order to ‘save it’” (cf. Mt 10, 39).<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

In public opinion and *sensus fidelium*, the principles that constitute the public opinion—publicity, contradiction and utility—were evidenced, pointing out that the mediation for the truth is a constitutive criterion for both public opinion and religious opinion. Afterwards, we have presented the *sensus fidei*, the *sensus fidelium* and the *consensus fidelium* as theological concepts that express religious phenomena close to public opinion as the freedom of freely expressing religious opinions.

The worldly and ecclesial context presents us with new scenarios of experience of faith, since we are living in ever more plural societies articulated by social networks that allow the free expression of public opinion and religious opinion in the public sphere as a phenomenon specifically traversing the Catholic ecclesial institutions and also all the religions in general.

Initially a difference between opinions is perceived, since the believers go from one level to the other, expressing their opinions in social networks. However, there is a difference between public opinion and religious opinion, since the *sensus fidelium* is the expression of the identity of the faith. If, on the one hand, there is indifference between the opinions binding all the citizens in plural societies, expressing their opinions publicly, on the other hand, there is the difference that identifies the *consensus fidei* or the community of faith. Nevertheless, this difference between the spheres is increasingly slight, since social networks instantaneously traverse all the institutions, influencing decision-making in the instances of power, which implies that they are ever closer to public opinion and religious opinion through the *sensus fidelium*.

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<sup>31</sup> Id. B. FORTE, *La Chiesa icona della Trinità*, p. 43.

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