The aim of this piece is to analyze the International Theological Commission’s 2014 document *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* through a Rahnerian lens. Thus, while I am sure that most readers are familiar with the text, I think it appropriate to give a just *very brief* introduction to the document itself, before moving into the agenda proper.

The 2014 text obviously sought to address theological issues involved in the understanding of the *sensus fidelium* which have arisen since its explicit phrasing in the council’s writings. There has been little change to the Commission which produced this text, and that which wrote the 2012 document entitled *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria*. The subcommittee listed as drafting both is in fact exactly the same, made up mostly of clerics, but also including one woman, Sara Butler, and one lay man, Thomas Söding. The texts were, however, authorized by two different Prefects of the CDF – Cardinal William Levada for the former, and Cardinal Gerhard Müller for the latter. As of this writing, the official translations produced by the Vatican for the 2012 text are available in quite a few more languages than its later counterpart, including Chinese, Hungarian, Polish, Korean, and Lithuanian.

The general structure of the relevant text at hand includes an introduction, four thematic chapters with a number of subsections in each, and a conclusion. The chapters contain reflections on the *sensus fidei* in terms of (1) Scripture and Tradition, (2) the personal life of the believer, (3) the life of the Church, and (4) the need to develop strategies for discerning authentic manifestations of such a *sensus*.

Most of the conversation regarding the document, which at a macrocosmic level really hasn’t been all that much, surrounds its interpretation of the relationship between the magisterium, theologians, and the wider faithful; the theology of the laity present in or undergirding the text; and particular applications of the *sensus fidelium* in terms of both what the text calls “popular religiosity” and of public opinion. The historical background to the concept’s place in the life of the church is fairly straightforward, and accordingly has warranted little further attention.

Interesting to note is the text’s explicit and repeated references to the theology of Congar, who it is claimed “contributed significantly to the development of the doctrine” and whose thought was reflected in the work of the council.¹ He is posited as being instrumental in arguing for the organic unity between the *ecclesia docens* (the teaching church) and the *ecclesia discens* (the learning church), which is a crucial theme consonant with the *sensus fidelium* and with wider developing notions of theological reception. Rahner is nowhere mentioned, either in the body of the text or footnotes; perhaps as is fair, for as Pamela McCann recently pointed out in a 2013 article in *Philosophy and Theology*, he “provided no systematic treatment of the topic of the *sensus fidelium*,” though he does allude to it and related concepts both implicitly, and even

¹ SF 43-44.
explicitly in some of his later writings. She argues that ecclesiologists do often reference his contributions to these discussions.\(^2\) Again, the ITC chose not to do so directly.

However, Rahner’s legacy and influence upon ecclesial life in the postconciliar period both in Catholic circles and beyond, is at this point unquestioned. So it seems a fitting project to read the recent document through the lens of this legacy, and to explore what questions it raises and what insights Rahnerian theology can provide, perhaps all the more so with a Jesuit pope wreaking synodal havoc in Roman circles – where I have spent the last year.

McCann’s article on Rahner and the *sensus fidelium*, which is a distillation of her larger dissertation, argues that his influence on theological thinking about the topic can be felt mainly in two general areas: what she calls attending to the “right relation” between the faithful and the magisterium and in attention to communal consensus building in terms of dialogue and experiment in the church.\(^3\) Her analysis has proved invaluable in this project.

Let me then say a bit about both Rahner and the ITC text and what they each envision regarding the interaction among the magisterium, theologians, and the wider church, here understood in a Catholic context – though much of this has ecumenical implications as well. I will then explore what I see as the two most important applications of the *sensus fidelium* in terms of issues important to Rahner (and at the fore of this pontificate): “popular religiosity;” and determining authentic expressions of the *sensus* vis-à-vis statistical majorities, or public opinion.

I. The interplay between the magisterium, theologians, and the faithful at large

The ITC text claims “As the faith of the individual believer participates in the faith of the Church as a believing subject, so the *sensus fidei* (fidelis) of individual believers cannot be separated from the *sensus fidei* (fidelium) or *sensus Ecclesiae* of the Church herself…” (SF, 66). Its terminology then equates the *sensus fidelium* with the *sensus Ecclesiae*, and follows this shortly later with two very concise statements: First, “The magisterium listens to the *sensus fidelium*” (SF, 2a, preceding #74), which it goes on to call unequivocally “the living voice of the people of God” (SF, 74). And secondly, “The magisterium nurtures, discerns, and judges the *sensus fidelium*.”(SF, 2b, preceding #76). Again adding “Judgment regarding the authenticity of the *sensus fidelium* belongs ultimately not to the faithful themselves nor to theology but to the magisterium” (SF 77).

While the document does discuss “reception” of this judgment by the wider community, and goes on to describe the role of the theologian in this exchange, its emphasis seems to remain on how “resistance *as a matter of principle* is incompatible with the authentic *sensus fidei*” (SF, 80). No discussion follows on that phrase – “resistance as a matter of principle” – on which the whole meaning of the statement seems to turn.

Theologians are described as helping “the faithful to know with greater clarity and precision the authentic meaning of Scripture, the true significance of conciliar definitions, the proper contents of the Tradition,” etc. While there is an allusion to those “areas [in which] a revision of previous

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\(^3\) Ibid., 316. See also her dissertation “Karl Rahner as a resource for the theology of the sensus fidelium: the canonical implications of his vision,” University of Toronto, 2011.
positions is needed,” as a whole the vocation of the theologian appears here, to my mind at least, to have a less robust and dynamic role than most theologians would describe themselves as having, and as Rahner almost certainly would. What does it mean to “resist” within a faith context when the theologian has not only the right but the duty to do so? Is this the same thing as “resisting as a matter of principle”? Resisting is best understood here as a transitive verb, and so clarification is necessary as to what is being resisted, even as “a matter of principle.” Resisting the magisterium is different from resisting corruptions or pathologies present even in the church’s official teaching office, which can obfuscate instead of illumine the gospel.

See for instance, as evidence Rahner’s much more nuanced position in reaction to 1973’s *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, making clear that there are mutually conditioning elements within the church. He rhetorically asks whether the “hierarchy alone has the exclusive task of teaching the Gospel authentically?”

Rahner’s answer: “The Church is governed by a mutually conditioning relationship, as must be the case in a unity consisting of pluralistic elements: the community of faith would not exist at all if it did not have institutional form; in that way the faith of the whole Church is essentially co-conditioned by the specific function of its authentic teachers. *On the other hand*, their function is conceivable only as *one aspect* of the eschatologically indestructible community of faith. It does not supervene from outside, by means of an authorisation which is simply conceived of in juridical terms. A true understanding of the Church’s infallibility is possible only if we heed this relationship between the authority of the magisterium and the whole Church’s invincible grace of faith, from [and in] which even the office-bearers, with their specific function, live.”

He goes on: “To put it honestly and soberly: the Roman authorities apparently proceed from the assumption that they have to state correct doctrine and issue the correct edicts, appealing to their formal authority; and that when they have done this they have performed their task adequately. They still presuppose as a matter of course that what they have in front of them is an obedient flock.”

Rahner is unambiguous regarding his stance that theology is to be of service to the church in both preaching and teaching, and thus possibly in “resisting.” The authority of the bishops – for him a real and permanent dimension of the Catholic faith – can never, however, replace theological discourse. The magisterium then, as he puts it “learns and should continue to learn” from the actual faith of the People of God, of whom theologians are a part. He emphasizes that in past times, “in the Church’s awareness of the faith, the accent has shifted.” Perhaps we are ready for – or already beginning to undergo – such a shift in accent or emphasis during this pontificate, when (at least some) voices within the hierarchy seem less willing to silence or reproach theologians who appear critical of static understandings of some doctrinal articulations. The ITC text does not deny any of this, but could further emphasize such insights.

Now, on to the second theme in this sort of constellation of reflections to which Rahner can contribute…namely, II. *Popular Religion and the Sensus Fidelium*

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6 *TI* 22: 173.
The ITC text is quite positive in its appraisal of what it calls “popular religiosity,” citing such sources as CELAM, the catechism, and even scripture itself (Mt 11:25, Lk 10:21, Rom 5:5). It recognizes the need to evangelize popular religion if it tends toward distortions or superstitions, but on the whole when “well-oriented” and appropriately “ecclesial,” both popular religious expression and the *sensus fidei*—which the texts describes as “understanding it”—are “great resources for the Church’s mission” and “work of the Holy Spirit.” (SF, 112).

Rahner, too, spoke positively about the role of popular religion in the lives of the faithful. In an article in *Theological Investigations* 22, Rahner argues that popular religion has a more substantial role to play in the life of the church than merely one of subordination to the teachings of the magisterium and the explanations of theology. Rather, an active reception process, as is more recently developed more fully in the work of Ormond Rush, that can be understood as present in popular religion, “exerts on theology itself an influence what is to some extent normative and creative.” There is a more dialogical reality at play here than a sheery passive acceptance of official church ‘teaching’ of bishops and theologians by the ‘simply pious’, and in fact, in many cases popular religion can be seen to be “superior” to theology—because it is closer to “the first source of genuine religiosity and real faith that consists in God’s universal standing invitation to accept divinization.”

Of course it is important to define what we mean by popular religiosity. To my mind, it describes the interface between the faith lives of believers, both in their local church settings and private devotions, and the wider cultural context in which they live. It can of course include such things as individual and communal prayer, pilgrimages, veneration of relics, Eucharistic adoration, and major events like World Youth Day, the World Day of Peace, or the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, but also wider realities like artistic and literary expression, charitable work undertaken in a religious context, and a wide variety of holistic articulations of a life of faith expressed in a particular place and time.

Pope Francis has seemingly endorsed the Spirit’s role in fostering such articulations, saying to a gathering of 50,000 European members of confraternities of faith, many of whom share an emphasis on lay spirituality: “Popular piety is a road which leads to what is essential, if it is lived in the church in profound communion with your pastors…You have a specific and important mission,” he said, “that of keeping alive the relationship between the faith and the cultures of the peoples to whom you belong. You do this through popular piety.

“You express this faith, born of hearing the word of God, in ways that engage the senses, the emotions and the symbols of the different cultures,” he said. “In doing so, you help to transmit it to others, and especially the simple persons whom, in the Gospels, Jesus calls the little ones.” *Evangelii Gaudium* echoes such themes (cf. 122) and strikes a completely different tone than the Congregation for Divine Worship’s earlier *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (2001).

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8 Ibid., 143.
9 Ibid, 145.
10 “Pope Celebrates Diversity of Popular Piety, Unity of Church” CNS, 6 May 2013.
http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1302012.htm
which is decidedly more muted and hesitant in its analysis: “Forms of popular religiosity can sometimes appear to be corrupted by factors that are inconsistent with Catholic doctrine. In such cases, they must be patiently and prudently purified through contacts with those responsible and through careful and respectful catechesis - unless radical inconsistencies call for immediate and decisive measures” (5).

Rahner’s famous analysis that we were moving into the third great epoch of church history (after a brief Judeo-Christian one and a lengthy Hellenistic/Eurocentric one) calls for a greater attention to the polycentric nature of contemporary Christianity and to the plurality of voices and popular expressions of the faith around the globe, and thus to popular piety. As he once put it:

“I am envisioning a Catholic theology that is courageous and does not shun relative and restricted conflicts with Church authorities. I am thinking of a theology which can no longer be uniform in a Neo-scholastic approach…I envisage a theology which in the Church at large must be a theology of a worldwide Church. This means a theology which does not recite its own medieval history but, one that can listen to the wisdom of the East, to the longing for freedom in Latin America, and to the sound of African drums. I envisage a systematic theology that is an inner unity and what trinitarian theologians call (literally a dancing around together) perichoresis of fundamental and dogmatic theology. I envisage a theology that enables human beings of our time to have a real grasp on the message of freedom and redemption, a theology that courageously abandons external stanchions of seemingly self-evident truths and things, something which does not stem necessarily from what is Christian, but rather from the changing historical situation structured by its intellectual and social elements. I envisage a theology that does not only move along the numbers in our familiar friend ‘Denzinger,’ interpreting old ecclesiastical pronouncements, but a theology which breaks new ground for new pronouncements of the Church…[This theology] would not pride itself upon its clear concepts but would force them to open over and over again into the incomprehensibility of God himself…. [O]ur time calls also us theologians sleeping under the broom tree of orthodoxy like Elijah in the old days: Surge, grandis tibi restat via – Arise, a long journey lies ahead of you.”  

While the ITC document does recognize the right to exist and role of the popular expressions of the faith which seem to be implied by Rahner’s ‘grand vision,’ it perhaps does not emphasize them to the degree he, or for that matter Pope Francis, might.

III. The Sensus Fidelium and Statistical Majorities

To my mind, sections 113-126, “The sensus fidei and public opinion” – the second of two particular applications given under the heading “How to discern authentic manifestations of the sensus fidei” – is the most important passage in the document.

The text makes clear that the church respects democracy, but is not itself structured strictly along such democratic lines. As such, “public opinion cannot, therefore, play in the Church the determinative role that it legitimately plays in the political societies that rely on the principle of popular sovereignty, though it does have a proper role in the Church” (SF, 114). As a

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consequence, “there can be no simple identification between the sensus fidei and public or majority opinion. These are by no means the same thing” (SF, 118).12

Yet there is room for an analysis of differing perspectives within the church, which by their very nature can result in majority and minority positions.13 The important thing to make clear is that being in the majority does not ensure orthodoxy or the sense of the faithful. Newman made this clear regarding different aspects of the Arian crisis. As Ormond Rush employs Rahnerian theology to explain: “The object of the sensus fidei, therefore is ultimately the revelatory and salvific event of God’s self-communication in history, i.e., revelation itself.”14 Thus, while there can be discrepancies between what the church officially teaches and what the average person actually believes (especially one not fluent in Denzinger), to those who respond in the depths of their being to God’s offer of self-communication, they participate in the Holy Spirit’s charism of the “sense of the faith” regardless of whether or not they outnumber others holding contradictory positions.

To counterbalance the polarization which takes place when the statistical majority (whether in line with the magisterium’s position on an issue or not) is set over and against a contrary position, we can turn to Rahner’s argument for an “open Church.”15 Because of the nature of society today—and even Rahner’s world was quite different than ours when it comes to social connection and immediacy of information—he calls for an increased role of lay participation in official decision-making and charisms in the church, even in terms of governance. This finds strong resonance in the ITC text, where the authors trace concrete and practical ways of consulting the laity to gauge the sensus fidelium, including particular councils, diocesan synods, and pastoral councils at the diocesan and parish level. While clear that an “insufficiently critical embrace of contemporary culture” can lead to aberrations in the traditio and receptio processes, the authors readily admit that “in some cases [these problems] indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration of the experience and the sensus fidei of the faithful, or without sufficient consultation of the faithful by the magisterium” (SF, 123). This is a refreshingly honest and still quite remarkable, though not unprecedented, position.16

As Rush’s interpretation of Rahner makes clear, a diversity in expression of the faith is neither purely negative, nor a reality that can ever be denied. “Even given optimum education,” he says “diversity in interpretation will still remain, and indeed cannot be avoided. It is the concreteness and distinctiveness of both a person’s fides qua and fides quae which enables a sense of the faith

12 Both Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI encouraged the ITC to reflect upon this distinction in addresses to that body.
13 Of course, the multifaceted and complex issues at hand necessitate that majority and minority are here understood in a more nuanced way than “for” or “against” a particular point, doctrine, teaching, or prudential application. Yet, pluralities of opinion are always present and need to be studied and reflected upon as such, for the faith can never be understood in a monolithic or merely propositional sense.
16 On similar statements where the magisterium’s need to be open to further, ever-clearer articulations of teachings is presented see Mysterium Ecclesiae 5 and Pope John XXIII. “Opening Address to the Second Vatican Council” October 11, 1963. Acta Apostolicae Sedis 54 (1962), 792.
that is grounded in their Christian experience.”\textsuperscript{17} This is applied not only to individuals, but also to the communal wrestling with doctrine and prudential applications thereof. Thus, ‘minority’ expressions and voices have always and will continue to exist in the church. An asymptotic \textit{metanoia} and life-long process of conversion toward Christ and towards his community enlivened by the Spirit must continue to form and shape one’s sense of the faith, whether in the majority or minority on a particular issue. As the ITC text puts it nicely: “Structures of consultation such as those mentioned above can be greatly beneficial to the Church, but only if pastors and lay people are mutually respectful of one another’s charisms and if they carefully and continually listen to one another’s experiences and concerns. Humble listening at all levels and proper consultation of those concerned are integral aspects of a living and lively Church” (SF, 125).

\textbf{Conclusion}

To conclude with brevity. Rahner’s theological vision enables us to explore a sort of constellation of themes related to the \textit{sensus fidelium} in general and the ITC text on it in particular. Ongoing questions regarding the relationship between the magisterium, theologians, and the wider community of believers, the role of popular piety in Catholicism, and the nuanced distinction between statistical majorities and the sense of the faithful are greatly aided by turning to the great German theologian. It is my conviction that many of his insights are especially helpful when read with a hermeneutical framework which gives due attention to an active reception process in both theological and ecclesiological development, and the ways in which we come to analyze, interpret, and understand information in general.

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\textsuperscript{17} Rush, ‘Making Sense,’ 245.