

The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation

Ormond Rush

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This is an important book on a complex subject of great relevance. It demands and rewards careful study. Early in the book, OR describes his project as proposing “a hermeneutical approach to a systematic theology of the *sensus fidelium*” [5]. Accordingly, “interrelated theologies of the Trinity, revelation, faith, the church, and the teaching office of the church” come into play. A special emphasis, however, is given to the role of Holy Spirit who inspires the receptivity of faith to divine revelation at every stage in the formation of scripture and tradition, theology and church teaching.

The category of reception is stretched to function both as an integrating notion for a theology of the “sense of the faithful”, and at the same time as connoting the dynamic involved in investigating the data of revelation. [5] When theology is receptive to the actuality of God’s gift, it will be less inclined to take the grace of revelation simply *for granted*, and more prepared to appreciate it *as granted*. Before there is any expression of or response to what has been revealed, there will be, at the heart of faith, a moment of receptivity. It leads to the “sense of faith”, that is, as “a spiritual sensibility for understanding, interpreting and applying salvific revelation in a meaningful way, and for discerning what interpretations of salvific revelation are true to that revelation and what are not” [68].

OR proposes, therefore, to articulate a “heuristic principle that opens up new ways of understanding Christian faith not previously appreciated” [6]. Reception, after all, is usually considered in very particular contexts: e.g., the reception of Nicaea, or Trent, or even Vatican II (on which OR has already written extensively). Obviously, too, reception here means something more than in its more customary usages, as in “reception of the sacraments” or “receiving holy communion”. How all such meanings and activities are related is a worthwhile question that we will defer for the moment.

But what we have in this systematic theology of reception is what we might term a synthesis “from below”, or even “from the inside out”, in an area usually focused on event of revelation “from above” or perhaps “from the outside in”. Consequently, the process of reception has its passive and active aspects—reception of the Gift, but a gift that calls forth many levels of human response as the Holy Spirit works through mind, heart and sensibilities of faith. The systematic treatment of reception requires a breadth of consideration of many topics and a deftness in holding them together in a proper proportion. The author indicates that he uses “reception” in at least nine different senses as determined “by current philosophical, aesthetic, literary, biblical, theological, historical, canonical and ecumenical literature” [8]. Each of these fields of reference affects the reception of revelation –spanning all the way from the psychological receptivity inherent in human relationships to the openness and hospitality of ecumenical dialogue.

As a result, this book is less a consideration of the church in the activity of teaching, and more intent on the ecclesial dynamic of learning to witness to Christ in history—in its every member, community and institution. The matter is complex, and requires careful attention lest readers lose their way in the numerous distinctions and divisions. For instance, there are the *nine* meanings of reception, *five* ways in which the church is a community of reception [42ff], *four* marks of the Spirit in the Church [46ff], and the participation of the faithful in the *three* “offices” of Christ [56ff]. That is to say nothing of the ever expanding spiral of the hermeneutical circle of interpretation [76ff], and the *five* overlapping responsibilities of the teaching office in the Church [193f]—with all this leading to the *eight* characteristics of the *sensus fidei* [238ff]. One detects the hand of a skilful teacher putting a clear schema in the hands of his students: the reader, however, does not have the advantage of a semester length presentation; and the pullulating divisions and distinctions can be a distraction.

Nonetheless, there is a demonstrable clarity, since there are three parts to the book, each with three chapters: [11]. Part 1 is focused on the Holy Spirit as the *principle* by which revelation is received. As animating the Church, the Spirit works in the hearts and minds of all believers to infuse a “sense of faith” which is objectified by the community and its members in an endless variety of ways. Part 2 deals with the *norm* as the Spirit-inspired sense of faith, focused in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, produces what we now recognise as the writings of the New Testament—and accepts them, along with the sacred writings of Israel, as making up the biblical canon. This leads to Part 3 which explores the *task* for the Church deriving from its reception of the Gospel and the imperative to proclaim it. In the manifold Spirit-guided reality of the Church’s mission through history, there are interwoven into the overall sense of the faith the witness of the People of God as a whole, the authority of those who bear the office of the magisterium in a formal sense, and the contribution of theologians. All share and enrich the one *sensus fidelium*, and the more so, if this common sense of faith leads to dialogical communication. [11]

Not the least value of this book is its astute comment on the documents of Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum*. Here, the sense of faith animating the whole extraordinary project of the Council opens the way to a greater appreciation of that deep sense of faith—and its differing modalities—moving in the laity, theologians and bishops alike. This book in effect depicts what we might call the “ecology” of the sense of faith in the whole Church. In that vital context, there are consequences for the ecclesial exercise of authority, and for theology too as intent on serving the instinct, sense and sensibility of faith with creative expression and critical insight [269f]. In this context, the particular sense of faith appropriate to the members of the Roman Curia—particularly the CDF—is briefly but coyly touched on as “somewhat ambiguous when considering the authority of the magisterium” [271]. Moreover, the spate of personal journals and diaries emerging from those who once participated in Vatican II suggest something of the dynamic of teaching and learning in relation to the sense of faith working in the magisterium at that amazing time [272].

Overall, OR considers that the “two most important and potentially effective agents for listening to, receiving and determining the *sensus fidelium* are ‘the listening theologian’ and ‘the listening bishop’ “ [274], especially if these operate in a “culture

of dialogue” founded in the Trinity itself [275f]. At the other extreme, while secular opinion polls are rightly suspect, church-sponsored surveys can be a good indicator of deep judgments of faith;—and here the work of our Australian National Church Life Survey is recognised [278f].

The many divisions of material and distinctions that the topic of this book occasions, along with the serried ranks of footnotes defending it against any ill-advised assault, might suggest excessive complication, even for the theological student. Against such a possibility it is important to stress that the whole book is in effect an extended commentary on the venerable Scholastic axiom, *Quidquid recipitur, recipitur per modum recipientis* —“whatever is received, is received according to the capacity of the recipient”. Thus, if we are considering the self-revelation of God in general, or the Gospel in particular, we must take account of the capacities and abilities of the individuals, societies, historical epochs and cultural forms that have shaped the journey of the Church through time. More deeply, in every moment and aspect of receptivity, the Holy Spirit of truth and love is at work, inspiring a sense of what is given and what is at stake, even if defying adequate expression—a frequent consideration in traditional treatments of the “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit”.

One might also read the book as an extended exegesis of those explosive Johannine statements, ““The Holy Spirit... will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26), and also when Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...and will declare to you the things that are to come” (Jn 16:12-13). Then, most intriguingly of all, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge” (1 Jn 2:20); and, even more subversive of deep-frozen dogmatism, “As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you” (1 Jn 2:27). Theology has little attended to the Spirit-endowed depth in the experience of faith. This book shows that a fresh kind of “Spirit-ual” theology” is developing.

In a book of this size and range, there will be questions which we hope that OR will address in working out the implications of his work so far. For instance, there is a widespread phenomenological turn occurring in theology. Typically, it calls for a new receptivity to the “saturated phenomenon” of revelation (Marion), so that, preceding, as it were, the process of thinking and conceptualisation, there is a moment of receptivity, openness and surrender to the given— precisely as given in its uniqueness. Would this receptivity to the phenomenon be a tenth meaning of reception, or perhaps a dimension underlying the nine that the author lists?

I found myself wondering, too, what role art play in the process of reception —and in serving the sense (s) of faith? OR clearly appreciates the role of imagination [e.g., 223-236]. How, might we ask, does this include the role of art and the arts (music, writing, painting, dance, architecture and so forth) in embodying the consciousness of faith and communicating it? Art is not an adornment or decoration for the life of faith, but more an inner moment within it: what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor the human heart conceived cannot be expressed except through a faith-inspired art.

There is however a major question which OR will doubtless be eager to answer. Where is the eucharist in all this? In fact, in the book's admittedly slender index, there is no entry under "eucharist" or "sacraments" or even "liturgy". A theologian of OR's stature will no doubt be appalled that this paradigmatic mode of reception—as in receiving "holy communion" or "receiving the sacraments"—is not presumed to be implicit in his whole treatment. But I do not think it is necessarily wrong-headed on the part of the reader to ask why it is not explicit. Unless the reception of revelation and the senses of faith are set in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy, there is a danger that such crucial themes will be understood in a too cerebral, too verbal and too inward a fashion. When the Eucharist, however, is given its due in the all the dynamics involved—the Eucharist forming the Church, and the Church expressing itself in the Eucharist—there is an essential incarnate and holistic dimension within whole process reception and the experience of faith.

When the People of God enjoy not only a Spirit-given sense of faith, but also are incorporated into the paschal Body of Christ, there comes into being a sensorium or field of sensibility that is at once interpersonal, physical and material, inward to consciousness and outward to the whole created universe, that must surely affect the topic of this book and the dynamics it portrays. In other words, the sense of faith lives in the self-communicating objectivity of Christ truly present in the Eucharist—and in the sacramental economy. In this sense, the liturgy is the primary mode of communicating the realities of faith or "traditioning" [sic] the truth of revelation. OR has brought valuable clarification to the understanding of how the Christian Bible was formed and accepted in its canonical form. But something is missing when the Eucharistic or liturgical setting of many (all?) of the New Testament writings is bypassed. Of course, references to the Eucharist are found in the New Testament, but it is also true that the real meaning of the New Testament is found, received, shared, celebrated and communicated in the Eucharist.

I must conclude therefore, despite the overall excellence of this book, that there is a sacramental gap and a Eucharistic absence that cries out to be filled. Our author is no doubt aware of this, but he is so intent on accenting the role of the Spirit in the sensibilities of faith that the whole incarnate reality of ecclesial communication is muted, as when he writes, "During the Eucharist, the high point of Christian initiation, the *epiclesis* is a prayer for the sending and reception of the Holy Spirit upon the Eucharistic community" (218): receiving the Body of Christ has yielded to receiving the Holy Spirit. Of course, the two are interrelated, but the manner in which OR will choose to relate them will cause him to refine and reshape his topic to some degree.

To conclude: this is a fine book—an irreplaceable resource for any course in Fundamental Theology and an indispensable reference for any theology intent on refreshing itself in the experience of faith within the pilgrim reality of the Church. With his treatment of reception and the sense of faithful, the author goes a long way to answering the question he set himself on the frontispiece—taken from Robert Browning's *Death in the Desert*: "How then will it be when none more saith, 'I saw'"?

Reviewer: Anthony J Kelly CSsR, Signadou Campus, Australian Catholic University, Canberra ACT.
