

Is There a Saving Judgment?

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SUMMARY: The present paper has three parts which in turn deal with the following three questions: 1. Does Sacred Scripture permit us to judge? 2. Is it philosophically speaking possible to judge? 3. If it is permissible and possible to judge, how do we judge well? In the first part, we examine different Scripture passages on the topic, some of which seem clearly to forbid judging, while others seem not only to condone it, but explicitly to call for it. We attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction by looking at how different ecclesial authors have interpreted the biblical sayings. In the second part we confront the challenge posed by so-called “weak thought”, which denies the existence of the criteria necessary for judgment, such as human nature, reason or natural law and proposes a redefinition of “truth” as solidarity or charity. We suggest that much of the difficulties to which weak thought tries to respond are posed by a “univocal metaphysics” that essentially thinks of “being” as a genus and makes of God the highest being (ens) among beings, with consequent repercussions on the idea of truth. Our response is that instead of proceeding to abolish metaphysics tout court, one should explore the benefits of an “analogical metaphysics”, which should allow us to speak of God, nature, reason and truth in a meaningful way without turning these into idols. In the third part, we reflect on Hannah Arendt’s insight that common sense is the mother of judgment. In order to judge well, one has to be inserted into a community and be discriminate about choosing one’s company. We then proceed to correlate Arendt’s notion of common sense to Vatican II’s account of the sensus fidelium or sensus

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fidei, proposing that what the Council calls the “supernatural appreciation of the faith” can and should be understood as the common sense of the whole Church, including all its members currently living, from the Pope to the last of the faithful and also including all those who have gone before.

*Reverence not thy neighbor in his fall:
And refrain not to speak in the time of salvation
(Sirach, 4,27-28, Douay-Rheims)*

1. SCRIPTURE ON JUDGMENT

1.1. *A Contradiction?*

“Linguistic investigations have shown that NT allusions to judging and judgment are mostly connected with God’s eschatological judgment of mankind. Justice and righteousness emanate from God and Christ. For this reason human beings are explicitly forbidden to pass judgment on their fellow men”¹. After reading these observations by Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, we will immediately be able to think of many well-known passages from Scripture that can be cited in support. There are Jesus’ own authoritative words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Judge not and you shall not be judged” (*Mt 7,1*). In his *Letter to the Romans*, St. Paul strongly exhorts the Jewish and Gentile Christians not to judge each other: “Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself” (*Rom 2,1*), and the *Epistle of James* explicitly seems to want to leave the judgment up to God, just the way Schüssler-Fiorenza claims: “There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbor?” (*James 4,12*). It is before God’s throne of judgment that each of us stands. Who are we to pass judgment on the servant of another, whose “Master is able to make him stand” (*Rom 14,4*)?

1 E. SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, “Judging and Judgment in the New Testament Communities”, in W. BASSETT - P. HUIZING (eds.), *Judgment in the Church*, The Seabury Press, New York 1977, 4.

But then again, Schüssler-Fiorenza's claims notwithstanding, in the New Testament we find many verses that would seem to take a different stance on judgment. On numerous occasions, St. Paul himself does not hesitate to express a quick and acute judgment on others. "God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall!" (*Acts* 23,3), he says to a judge who treats him unjustly: "Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" (*Acts* 23,3). It is true that Paul apologizes, but only upon learning that the addressee of his words was the Jewish high priest in person – and after all it is written, "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people" (*Acts* 23,5). Another, perhaps even more remarkable instance, of St. Paul's judgment is the episode in Antioch where the Apostle of the Gentiles thinks it necessary publically to reprimand no one less than the Rock of Peter himself, who had fallen into hypocritical behavior: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (*Gal* 2,12). There are, of course, more passages: In First Corinthians, St. Paul rebukes the community for tolerating an open sinner in their midst, exhorting them "not to associate with anyone who bears the name brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber – not even to eat with such a one. [...] Is it not those inside the Church whom you are to judge?" (*1 Cor* 5,12-11). In the same letter the Apostle shows himself to be perplexed that no one in the Church feels competent to decide a case among brothers who hence proceed to take it out in front of a worldly judge: "When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?" (*1 Cor* 6,1-2).

1.2. *Scripture Interpreted by the Tradition*

Are there perhaps two irreconcilable positions on judgment in the New Testament? Before denying that Scripture is divinely inspired and thus necessarily free from flagrant contradictions, we may do well to consider how these passages of Sacred Scripture have been interpreted in Sacred Tradition. There may well be plausible ways of reading them that would

see them as consistent and that may help us to understand better what is meant by judgment. Thus, St. John Chrysostom interprets the Matthean formula as an injunction “not to assault arrogantly, but to correct with love”², reminding us that Christ taught Peter that if his brother sinned against him, he should go and tell him his fault (cfr. *Mt* 18,15) and considering that a stricter reading would be incompatible with the authority which Christ has given to Peter and the apostles: “And how did he give them the keys? Since if they are not to judge, they will have authority in nothing, and it will be in vain that they have received the authority to bind and to loose”³.

“Judge not and you shall not be judged” (*Mt* 7,1). For St. Augustine this command signifies that “we should always put the best interpretation on such actions as seem doubtful with what mind they were done”⁴. This is particularly the case with actions that are in themselves indifferent and thus admit of being done with either good or bad purpose, so that here it would indeed be “rash to judge, and especially so to condemn”⁵. However, he also points out that there are actions “such as cannot be done with good purpose, as adulteries, blasphemies, [...] and the like”, in which case, Augustine is convinced that “we are permitted to judge”⁶.

St. Thomas Aquinas’ exposition on judgment is particularly noteworthy. In the context of interpreting verse 1 of chapter 2 of Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another”, the Angelic Doctor also discusses *Matthew* 7,1: “Judge not and you shall not be judged”. He points out that “this does not mean that every judgment is a cause of condemnation”⁷,

2 JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Commentarius in Sanctum Mattheum Evangelistam*, Patrologia Graeca, Vol. 57, XXIII, 1: “Nec arroganter insurgere, sed cum dilectione corrigere”.

3 *Ibid.*: “Cur autem illis claves dedit? Nam si iudicaturi non sunt, nullam habebunt auctoritatem, et frustra ligandi atque solvendi auctoritatem acceperunt”.

4 AUGUSTINE, *De sermone Domini in monte*, Patrologia Latina, Vol. 34, II, 18, 59: “Hoc loco nihil aliud nobis praecipere existimo, nisi ut ea facta quae dubium est quo animo fiant, in meliorem partem interpretemur”.

5 *Ibid.*, II, 18, 60: “Sunt ergo quaedam facta media, quae ignoramus quo animo fiant, quia et bono et malo fieri possunt, de quibus temerarium est iudicare, maxime ut condemnemus”.

6 *Ibid.*, II, 18, 59: “Quod enim scriptum est: Ex fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos, de manifestis dictum est, quae non possunt bono animo fieri, sicuti sunt stupra vel blasphemiae [...] et si qua sunt alia, de quibus nobis iudicare permittitur”.

7 THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Letter of Paul to the Romans*, Latin-English Edition, trans. R.F. Larcher, The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine,

distinguishing three kinds of judgment: one that is just, one that is unjust and one that is rash. While he takes for granted that the reader understands what is meant by a just or unjust judgment, he deems it useful to dedicate a few paragraphs on the one that is rash. For him, a judgment is rash on two occasions, namely “when a person passes judgment on a matter committed to him without due knowledge of the truth”, or “when a person presumes to judge about hidden matters, of which God alone has the power to judge”⁸. Thus, in order to avoid a rash judgment, one must investigate a matter well, making sure to have a sufficient basis in sure knowledge. And some matters of judgment are indeed by their very nature precluded from human reach, inasmuch as they require knowledge that is exclusive to God, such as that about “the thoughts of the heart” and “the contingent future”⁹. We simply do not know what went on in the heart of someone who acted, nor do we know what will become of him in the future; if he is righteous now, he may still fall; if he is living sinfully now, he may still convert. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Thomas explains his meaning further: While God “has entrusted us with judging externals, [...] he has reserved internals to himself. [...] For no one ought to judge that another is an evil man, for doubts must be interpreted in the more favorable light”¹⁰.

We may note that it is this distinction between the external and the internal that allows St. John Paul II to emphasize that “the judgment of one’s state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one’s conscience”¹¹. Here, in conscience, each person stands or falls before God, who is his or her ultimate master

Lander, WY 2012, Chapter 2, Lesson 1, 174: “Non tamen credendum est, quod omne iudicium sit condemnationis causa”.

8 *Ibid.*: “Est autem tertium iudicium temerarium [...] Quod quidem dupliciter committitur. Uno modo, quando aliquis procedit circa id quod est sibi commissum iudicium absque debita veritatis cognitione [...] Alio modo, quando aliquis usurpat sibi iudicium de occultis, de quibus solus Deus iudicare habet”.

9 *Ibid.*, 175: “Est autem aliquid occultum, non solum quoad nos, sed secundum sui naturam, ad solam Dei cognitionem pertinens. Primo quidem cogitatio cordis [...] Secundo, contingens futurum”.

10 *Id.*, *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, Chapter 7, Lesson 1: “Domini est iudicium, nobis commisit iudicare de exterioribus, de interioribus vero sibi retinuit. [...] Nullus enim debet iudicare de aliquo quod sit malus homo: dubia enim in meliorem partem interpretanda sunt”. The English translation used was made by R. F. Larcher and is available online: <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/SSMatthew.htm>

11 JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, n. 37.

and judge (cfr. *Rom* 14,4). And yet there are also matters that pertain to externals, which is why the Polish pope continues: “However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved”¹², and hence to pass a judgment, not on the person’s heart but on the person’s outward conduct, which may be such as to bar him or her from the Eucharistic table.

Hence, thus far we have learned from Scripture as interpreted by Tradition that God alone judges the human heart; believers, and especially competent authority, can and at times must judge external behavior. And if they judge others in a proper manner, they will do so because it is the loving thing to do, for “whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (*James* 5,20). Yet a further question arises, namely that of the state of the one who admonishes. Here, it is interesting to note that for St. Augustine, the possibility of “judging” fellow believers, that is, of pointing out their sin to them and calling them to conversion, does not depend on the righteousness of the one who is giving the exhortation. In other words, for the Doctor of Grace, even a sinner can rightly and without hypocrisy call another sinner to conversion, namely by inviting him to join in the common effort of conversion:

When necessity shall compel us to find fault with or rebuke any one, we may reflect first whether the fault is such as we have never had, or one from which we have now become free; and if we have never had it, let us reflect that we are men, and might have had it; but if we have had it, and are now free from it, let the common infirmity touch the memory, that not hatred but pity may go before that fault-finding or administering of rebuke. [...] If, however, on reflection, we find ourselves involved in the same fault as he is whom we were preparing to censure, let us not censure nor rebuke; but yet let us mourn deeply over the case, and let us invite him not to obey us, but to join us in a common effort¹³.

12 *Ibid.*

13 AUGUSTINE, *De sermone Domini in monte*, II, 19, 64: “Cum aliquem reprehendere vel obiurgare necessitas coegerit, primo cogitemus, utrum tale sit vitium quod numquam habuimus vel quo iam caruimus. Et si numquam habuimus, cogitemus et nos homines

St. Thomas puts it this way: if someone is “secretly guilty of the same sin, he does not sin by judging another about the same sin, especially when he does so with humility and with an effort to rise again”¹⁴. Hence, judgment, as understood by the Church, does not mean to say that one is better than the one whom one judges. It is not a matter of proudly exalting oneself by abasing another, but an attempt to help someone to come back on his feet, with “fear and trembling” (cfr. *Phil* 2,12) and in awareness of one’s own need for conversion inasmuch as one is also always an individual believer, even if perhaps one holds a particular office that requires one to speak in the name of the Church as such.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF “WEAK THOUGHT”

2.1. *A Univocal Metaphysics*

Apart from the objection that the New Testament forbids judgment, which – *pace* Schüssler-Fiorenza – we have shown not to be the case, there is a still more fundamental, philosophical challenge. It is the challenge of so-called “weak thought” that, if admitted, would make any judging impossible, whether it be about internal or external matters. The expression “weak thought” was introduced into public debate to a large degree by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, and is perhaps more common in Romanic countries than in Anglo-Saxon or German-speaking ones. Nonetheless, what it refers to is a major challenge for philosophical and theological debate in all Western countries alike. “Weak thought” declares metaphysics obsolete and ultimately denies that human beings have any access to truth. It advocates an incomplete thinking and accuses all those who claim the ability to make reference to God,

esse et habere potuisse; si vero habuimus et non habemus, tangat memoriam communis infirmitas, ut illam reprehensionem aut obiurgationem non odium sed misericordia praecedat [...]. Si autem cogitantes nosmetipsos invenerimus in eo esse vitio in quo est ille quem reprehendere parabamus, non reprehendamus neque obiurgemus, sed tamen congemiscamus; et non illum ad obtemperandum nobis sed ad pariter conandum invitemus!”.

14 THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, cit., Chapter 2, Lesson 1, 177: “Si vero sit in eodem peccato occulte, non peccat iudicando alium de peccato eodem, maxime cum humilitate et conatu ad resurgendum”.

nature, or reason to justify their judgments as idolaters who have turned God into a being they comprehend. Alternatively, the charge is that of bigotry: whoever speaks of God and truth and right sets himself up as the voice of reason, while simply masking his own pretenses to which he tries to add weight by reference to a higher authority. In what follows we will present the hypothesis that much of what “weak” or “incomplete” thought is about has its roots in late Scholasticism and ultimately derives from what Brad Gregory aptly calls a “univocal metaphysics”¹⁵.

The issue of weak thought is about whether metaphysics, as a science that reflects about God and being, about substances and natures, is possible or not. Whether or not we think metaphysics possible will in turn hinge around the question, sometimes asked in jest: “What do you mean by ‘is’?” What does it mean for anything to be and in particular, what does it mean for God to *be*? In his synthesis of Christian thought up to his day, St. Thomas proposed an analogical metaphysics that permitted him to affirm that God is, but that for him to be does not mean the same as it means for us. As Gregory sums it up, “According to Aquinas, God in metaphysical terms was, incomprehensible, *esse* – not a being but the sheer act of to-be, in which all creatures participated insofar as they existed and through which all creation was mysteriously sustained”¹⁶. God is not to be found among the things of this world, he is not an object, not even the highest and most perfect being (*ens*) in the world. God is immanent and at the same time completely transcendent. His mode of being is so different from ours that we cannot grasp it with the concepts of our mind. As Augustine famously says, “If you comprehend it, it is not God”¹⁷. And yet, given that being is not a genus, for St. Thomas it can be predicated analogically even of God, without thereby making him a “thing” within creation, without thereby reducing him to our concepts, turning God into an idol made by our own hands, or at least by our own thought.

With William of Ockham’s nominalism the thought of an analogical metaphysics got increasingly lost. Gregory puts it this way: “In Occamist

15 Cfr. B.S. GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation. How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA 2012.

16 *Ibid.*, 38.

17 AUGUSTINE, *Sermones*, Patrologia Latina Vol. 38, LII, 6, 16: “Si cepisti, non est Deus”.

nominalism, [...] insofar as God existed, ‘God’ had to denote some *thing*, some discrete, real entity, an *ens*”¹⁸. This view had a great historical success, so that “at the outset of the sixteenth century, the dominant scholastic view of God was not *esse* but *ens* – not the incomprehensible act of to-be, but a highest being among other beings”¹⁹. The reasons for this loss do not necessarily have to be sought in any inherent weakness of this idea, unless, perhaps we want to call a certain conceptual complexity a weakness. An external contingent reason was that the Reformers tended to have a preference for nominalism as undermining the authority of the Roman Church, while at the same time possessing an outspoken dislike of analogy as something that they perceived to be strengthening the Catholic case. Thus, speaking a couple of hundred years later, but always from the heart of the Protestant tradition, Karl Barth claimed that the analogy of being was the invention of the antichrist and the main reason that kept him from becoming a Catholic²⁰.

By the beginning of modernity, metaphysics had become univocal, even among many Catholic thinkers. On a univocal metaphysics, saying that God is, turns him into the highest being of all the beings in this world, a being that can be grasped by the human mind and that has lost its transcendence. Such a God is of course highly improbable, which is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer insists that “there is no God who ‘is there’”²¹. In the same vein, Gianni Vattimo expresses his hesitancy about attributing existence to God: “What does it mean to say that God exists? Where? Here, or in heaven, or hiding under the table, or only in church?”²² Along the same lines, even a thinker who is Catholic like Jean-Luc Marion prefers to speak of a “God without being”²³.

18 GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation*, cit., 38.

19 *Ibid.*

20 K. BARTH, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, T.&T Clarke; London 2004, I/1, xiii: “I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Catholic”.

21 D. BONHOEFFER, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, trans. H. M. Rumscheidt, *Works*, vol. 2, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1996, 115, as cited in: G. VATTIMO - R. GIRARD, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith. A Dialogue*, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2010, 115.

22 VATTIMO - GIRARD, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, cit., 54-55.

23 Cfr. J.-L. MARION, *God without Being*, trans. T.A. Carlson, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991.

A univocal metaphysics will not only make it difficult for us to say that God “is” without turning him into an idol, it will also have important repercussions on the notion of truth. For St. Thomas, “*true* expresses the correspondence of being to the knowing power. [...] This agreement is called ‘the conformity of thing and intellect’. In this conformity is fulfilled the formal constituent of the true, and this is what the true adds to being, namely, the conformity or equation of thing and intellect”²⁴. Truth is the correspondence between the intellect and reality or the being of things. An opinion is true if it corresponds to the way things are; it is false if it does not correspond to reality. The question that remains open is of course: Which way are things? The things judge the human intellect, but how are they? Who judges the criteria that judge the human mind? This is where the transcendent God comes into play. Even in the case of the divine intellect, truth is a relation between intellect and things. Only that now it is not the divine intellect that is judged by things, but rather things are judge by God’s intellect: “Natural things from which our intellect gets its scientific knowledge measure our intellect. Yet these things are themselves measured by the divine intellect, in which are all created things – just as all works of art find their origin in the intellect of an artist”²⁵. It is God’s knowledge that makes things, and things are “true” or “false” to the extent they correspond to the idea, to the plan, he has for them: “A natural thing [...] is said to be true with respect to the conformity with the divine intellect in so far as it fulfills the end to which it was ordained by the divine intellect”²⁶. The way things are, which is the criterion that judges the human intellect, is judged by the divine intellect. The truth of things is the way God knows them. Inasmuch as God is transcendent and inasmuch as his

24 THOMAS AQUINAS, *On Truth*, I, Art. 1, Resp., trans. R. W. Mulligan, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1954. “Convenientiam vero entis ad intellectum exprimit hoc nomen verum. [...] Quae quidem concordia adaequatio intellectus et rei dicitur; et in hoc formaliter ratio veri perficitur. Hoc est ergo quod addit verum super ens, scilicet conformitatem, sive adaequationem rei et intellectus”.

25 *Ibid.*, II, Art. 2, Resp.: “Res naturales, a quibus intellectus noster scientiam accipit, mensurant intellectum nostrum, [...] sed sunt mensuratae ab intellectu divino, in quo sunt omnia sicut omnia artificata in intellectu artificis”.

26 *Ibid.*, I, Art. 2, Resp.: “Res ergo naturalis [...] secundum enim adaequationem ad intellectum divinum dicitur vera, in quantum implet hoc ad quod est ordinata per intellectum divinum”.

knowledge is creative, his judgment of things is not conditioned by any particular perspective, as ours necessarily is. He alone knows things the way they really are, since he made them and since he transcends them. Without God's intellect judging things by knowing them, there would be no truth of things; there would be no ultimate criterion for "the way things are" and hence neither could the human intellect be judged by "the way things are".

Now on a univocal metaphysics that makes God a being among beings, God's perspective on things, i.e., his judgment of them, would be as relative and conditioned as any other judgment. A perspective from within this world is always a particular perspective. God's intellect could no longer judge all things as they are in themselves. According to Robert Spaemann, this intricate relationship between a transcendent God and truth was well seen by Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote in his *The Gay Science*: "It is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine"²⁷. Spaemann comments this passage in the following way: "If there is no God, Nietzsche writes, then there is no such thing as truth. Then there are only subjective perspectives in the world, but there is no such thing as a true world beyond these perspectives. Only when there is the universal glance of God, God's universal perspective, from which the world derived, then there is such a thing as an absolute, unchangeable truth. If there is *no* truth in this sense, then there is no Enlightenment, and then the Enlightenment, by abolishing God, destroys itself. This was precisely Nietzsche's conviction"²⁸. This, as Spaemann points

27 F. NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, trans. J. Nauckhoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2001, 201.

28 R. SPAEMANN, "Wahrheit und Freiheit", in ID., *Schritte über uns hinaus. Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze I*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2010, 329: "Wenn es Gott nicht gibt, so schreibt Nietzsche, dann gibt es so etwas wie Wahrheit nicht. Dann gibt es nur subjektive Perspektiven auf der Welt, aber es gibt nicht jenseits dieser Perspektiven so etwas wie eine wahre Welt. Nur wenn es den universalen Blick Gottes gibt, die universale Perspektive Gottes, der die Welt entsprungen ist, dann gibt es so etwas wie eine absolute, unveränderliche Wahrheit. Wenn es Wahrheit in diesem Sinne *nicht* gibt, dann gibt es auch keine Aufklärung, und dann zerstört sich die Aufklärung mit der Abschaffung Gottes zugleich selbst. Und genau das war Nietzsches Überzeugung" (translation my own).

out, is also Richard Rorty's position, whom he cites on a different occasion. Rorty says, "There would only be a 'higher' aim of inquiry called 'truth' if there were such a thing as ultimate justification – justification before God, or before the tribunal of reason, as opposed to any merely finite human audience"²⁹.

If there is no God that transcends any partial perspective and whose intellect contains and judges all things, then any human claim to truth would have to be arrogant. As Vattimo says, "It's absolute certainties that have got us where we are now, speaking of tragedies. So let's get rid of them altogether, these truths!"³⁰ Indeed, some pages down Vattimo goes on exclaiming, "Jesus Christ has set me free from belief in idols, in divinities, in natural laws, and so on, and so in this sense I define myself as an atheist. But an atheist only with respect to the God of philosophers, obviously, meaning God as 'pure act', 'omniscience', and so on"³¹. If we are convinced that there is no transcendent judge of truth and falsity, whether we are atheists of the strict observance or whether we thank God for our being atheists³², it will necessarily seem to us that any human being who affirms, "this is *true*", intending to refer to something objective, would set *himself* up as the ultimate arbiter of all reality. We should want to recommend some more humility, as does Paolo Flores d'Arcais in one of his highly polemical writings: "We have already encountered in passing the clerical cunning with which one passes for 'natural law' one's own morality and one's own debatable life style, which one intends to turn into law, depriving others of liberty"³³. A reference to the truth of things would add nothing to an expression of personal preference or desire except a claim to the absolutization of this preference or desire. It would mean to put an exclamation mark behind the "I

29 R. RORTY, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, New York 1999, 38. The passage is cited and referenced in German by R. SPAEMANN, "Gottesbeweise nach Nietzsche", in *Das unsterbliche Gericht. Die Frage nach Gott und die Täuschung der Moderne*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2007, 45.

30 VATTIMO - GIRARD, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, cit., p. 42.

31 *Ibid.*, 53.

32 Cfr. *ibid.*

33 P. FLORES D'ARCAIS, "*La democrazia ha bisogno di Dio*" – *Falso!*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2013, 108: "Abbiamo già incontrato *en passant* il sotterfugio clericale con cui si spaccia come 'diritto naturale' la propria morale e il proprio opinabile stile di vita, che si intende far diventare legge prevaricando l'altrui libertà" (original emphasis; my own translation).

want!” and tyrannically seek to exclude all other opinions or preferences. Questions of “truth” and “falsity” would thus have to be negotiated in the same way as questions of likes and dislikes. This is why Richard Rorty can suggest to think of truth in terms of solidarity³⁴, while Gianni Vattimo would prefer to speak of truth as charity: “It is still possible to speak of truth, you understand, but only because we have realized *caritas* through agreement. *Caritas* with respect to opinion, with respect to choices about values, will become the truth when it is shared”³⁵.

The question, then, is when and why we have “killed God”, as Nietzsche put it³⁶, and with him metaphysics, nature, reason. I would like to suggest that the answer is that we “killed God” when we introduced a univocal metaphysics. In other words, if there is any “murderer” of God, his name is Ockham rather than Nietzsche. It was this God of the univocal metaphysics of late scholasticism and modernity whose death Nietzsche announced, but he was not really murdered but died of weakness and old age. The force of Martin Heidegger’s charge against all metaphysics since Socrates as onto-theology and as being forgetful of being rests on a univocal metaphysics that indeed thinks of being-as-such (*esse*) as a being (*ente*) among beings and calls this being “God”, who undeniably would be a God before whom “man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor [...] play music and dance”³⁷. Gregory formulates it this way: “Heidegger sensed but seems not to have seen that the ‘forgetfulness of being’ (*Seinsvergessenheit*) pertained not to a Christian understanding of God per se but only to a univocal metaphysics, which, especially since the advent of medieval nominalism, has indeed tended

34 R. RORTY, “Solidarity or Objectivity”?, in M. KRAUSZ (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 1989, 169: “Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity – call them “realists” – have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. So they must construct a metaphysics that has room for a special relation between beliefs and objects which will differentiate true from false beliefs. [...] By contrast, those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity – call them ‘pragmatists’ – do not require a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William James’ phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. [...] From a pragmatist point of view, to say that what is rational for us now to believe may not be *true*, is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea”.

35 VATTIMO – GIRARD, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, cit., 51.

36 Cfr. NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, cit., 120: “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers!”

37 M. HEIDEGGER, “The Ontological Constitution of Metaphysics,” in ID., *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002, p. 72.

toward a recurrence of the ancient pagan conception of god(s) as the highest being(s) *within* the universe”³⁸. Afraid of turning being-as-such (*esse*) into a particular being (*ens*), the only solution Heidegger saw was to *turn being into becoming* and ultimately in a paradoxically productive “Nothing”, resulting in an *idea of truth as “needless” freedom*. This, at least, is the interpretation that in his monumental work on the analogy of being Erik Przywara proposes of Heidegger’s thought:

In Heidegger’s existential phenomenology [...] both the absolute of being and the absolute of truth give way to the pure becoming of a creature incurvated upon itself (as shaped by “care” “in the world”). Just as being comes to mean becoming, truth comes to mean a “needless [*notgewendet*] freedom”. [...] The Hegelian “contradiction” has been radicalized in the Heideggerian “Nothing”. But this Nothing, as Nothing, is the fundamental principle determining and producing all things³⁹.

Our present proposal is this one: could it be that we have not killed, but merely forgotten the true God? Could it be that while, granting to Heidegger that this God would certainly not be a being among beings, there could still be a meaningful, namely analogical, way of speaking about him, which would allow us to ascribe existence to him without turning him into an idol? Could this God not be the condition for the possibility of there being a truth that no human being can possess or grasp completely, but that is nonetheless objective, having as its standard the absolute intellect of God, and that humans can approach and share in – as “in a mirror dimly” (cfr. *1 Cor* 2,12), and yet truly? Could it not be that this God has indeed a plan for his creatures, the first indications of which he has written in their nature? And is this idea that beings have natures really all that implausible? Even the most convinced nominalists tend to speak of human beings, dogs, bears and lions, all of which are universal terms the meaningfulness of which is denied by nominalism. And even if the nominalist were to reply that these terms are just conventional, based on family-resemblance, he would still tend to deal with a full-grown tiger in a way that is much different from his dealings with

38 GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation*, cit., 65.

39 E. PRZYWARA, *Analogia Entis. Metaphysics. Original Structures and Universal Rhythm*, trans. J.R. Betz and D. Bentley Hart, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2014, 202.

a cat, any resemblance notwithstanding, practically admitting that there is something in a tiger's and a cat's very being (i.e., their "nature") that warrants such a differentiated treatment. Thus, in brief, a first response to "weak thought" is this: One may grant that the problem to which "weak thought" tries to respond is a real one. A univocal metaphysics turns God into an idol, whereupon claims to objective truth may easily become little-veiled affirmations of one's own will. Its solution, the abolition of *any* metaphysics may just be too high a price to pay, given that one could look for an alternative, ultimately more plausible solution in a quest to rediscover an analogical metaphysics.

2.2. *The Medical Analogy*

A second, somewhat less complex, observation about "weak thought" and judgment may well be in order. Even proponents of weak thought, one may suppose, would go to the medical doctor when they feel physically unwell. Even Paolo Flores d'Arcais, who claims that "natures" are cunningly devised by clerics to impose their will on the faithful⁴⁰, would presumably have the sense that going several days in a row at a body-temperature of 39°C is an indication of a physical problem, even though theoretically he would have no grounds for doing so. Notice how the affirmation "Healthy human beings have a body temperature of about 37°C" implies a presupposition about human nature (a universal) and a judgment about a truth with respect to that nature. If there is no human nature, what will keep me from assuming that perhaps my own best body temperature lies at 35°C or at 38,5°C? Of course, when I'm at 39°C, I may feel pretty bad, but what would it even mean to feel "bad" without any standard of feeling "good"? And would not a medical doctor assessing my temperature at 40°C immediately take measures to lower it, even if I did not complain that I felt weak or uncomfortable? The medical science can work only if it presupposes a human nature that implies certain standards of proper or improper functioning of the organism. Trying to help sick persons, doctors judge them all the time in many ways, and no one blames them for trying to exalt themselves

40 Cfr. again: FLORES D'ARCAIS, "*La democrazia ha bisogno di Dio*" – *Falso!* cit., 108.

and their own health by debasing others, nor for claiming to find the ultimate standard for right or wrong in their own arbitrary will.

A doctor first judges that there is indeed something wrong with a patient. Then he proceeds to make a diagnosis. When he or she tells the patient: “You have diabetes”, this judgment neither serves to exalt the doctor nor to debase the patient. It is a judgment that is meant to heal. Indeed, medical science is highly advanced; it still cannot heal everything, but it can heal a lot, and yet it can only heal if the proper diagnosis is made, preferably at the opportune time⁴¹. Is the diagnostic judgment always right? No. A doctor may get it wrong. But from the mere fact that at times a judgment is wrong, no one would come to the conclusion that in matters of physical health, the question of truth or falsity is not applicable, that there *is* no right or wrong. It is precisely the fact that a judgment may be wrong which indicates that truth and falsity apply to it. Wrong things can be said about an issue only if true things, too, can be said.

We must also consider that a doctor does not only judge about possible illnesses, but also about actual lifestyles. He will say, “Drinking a bottle of whiskey a day is not good for you”, or “Physical exercise will benefit your health”. But who is he to judge? Well, he has studied the human organism; he believes that, at least in terms of organic life, there is such a thing as human nature; he believes that in their organism human beings are more or less wired the same way, which justifies him in pronouncing such general sweeping judgments. He will of course keep in mind a person’s sex, age, and general constitution. This will not keep him from affirming that too much alcohol or smoking are bad and that exercise is good for us. Also this is quite independent from his own personal conduct. He may be drinking like a fish and still be saying the same things, because he believes that their truth does not depend on him.

Now if we are inclined to believe that there exists something like truth or falsity in our bodies, that is, in the physical aspect of our nature, why would it be implausible to look for truth and falsity also in the

41 Watching the TV series *Dr. House*, which is about an ingenious diagnostician, one may almost get the impression that the *only* thing needed to cure a patient is the proper diagnosis, which is of course exaggerated. And yet the series does well to underline the importance of the diagnostic judgment for the curing of a patient.

spiritual aspect of our nature, i.e., in our relationships? Can a relationship between a human being and God, between a husband and his wife, between a mother and her children, not be in a healthy or unhealthy state? Can we not speak of acts that always and everywhere hurt a relationship just as smoking always hurts the organism? Vattimo advocates charity as the overall rule and on top of this proposes what he calls “traffic rules” to prevent hurting others: “Ever fewer idols, ever more ‘atheism’. No natural proofs of God, only charity and, of course, ethics. I always say that ethics is merely charity plus the traffic regulations. I respect the rules of the road because I don’t want to cause the death of my neighbor and because I ought to love him. But to suppose that there is something about running a red light that goes against nature is ridiculous”⁴². One may grant that traffic regulations are somewhat conventional and are useful to the extent that they indeed help us to keep safe on the road. No one who advocates natural law would claim that running a light goes against nature. Natural law is much more basic, so basic that even Vattimo presupposes it without noticing. In what he says, he presupposes that risking the death of my neighbor is opposed to charity. What permits him to do so? Here, natural law comes in as something that I do not need to learn but originally find in me. I originally know that life is good, and that if I want to love people – if I want their good – then I need to respect their lives, for instance. If really everything were as relative as Vattimo claims in other places, if really “God can only be a relativist”⁴³, then we could not even say as much, namely that to love someone implies to respect his or her life. Just as our organism wants to keep our body temperature at around 37°C, the spiritual or rational part of us originally wants to respect the life of others, only that this latter aim is entrusted to our freedom in a way that the former is not: it is not only a fact but also a task. Respect for other people’s lives belongs to the “health” of our relationships. In any case, this respect, too, is a “law” of our nature and cannot be reduced to a merely conventional “traffic rule”.

42 VATTIMO - GIRARD, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, cit. 35.

43 *Ibid.*, 48.

3. COMMON SENSE: THE BASIS OF JUDGMENT

3.1. *Common Sense and Judgment in Kant and Arendt*

Having dealt with the possible scriptural and philosophical objections against the possibility of judgment and believing that judging is both permitted and possible, we now have to consider a third question that is by no means trivial, namely the question of how to judge well. We have argued that judgment is not an act of the will (in which case it would be indifferent to truth or falsity), but that it is an act of the intellect whereby the intellect conforms to reality, though not infallibly so. To see how one can reduce the real possibility of error in judging, we will turn to Hannah Arendt's discussion of common sense, which is inspired by Immanuel Kant.

We have all been wrong before, giving a wrong judgment, a wrong "diagnosis" about what we thought to be the case, about another person or about ourselves. Sometimes we overhear just fragments of a conversation, our mind supplying the rest based on our prior expectations. How much did we really hear, and how much did we simply think we heard? Indeed at times we do well to question our judgment. But on which basis? Isn't any questioning of our judgment just another judgment? Here, for Hannah Arendt, common sense in its Kantian meaning comes in. We read in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*:

By the name *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a public sense, i.e., a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement. This is accomplished by weighing the judgement, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else⁴⁴.

44 I. KANT, *Critique of Judgement*, N. WALKER (ed.), trans. J. Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, 123 (§40).

For Kant, when common sense expresses judgments on a matter, it takes into account the way others think about the issue, in some way reaching up to “the collective reason of mankind”. Kant, to be sure, was not known for his field research. For him, this taking into account of others could be done by considering their potential and not necessarily their actual judgments. It is enough to place myself in the position of others, thinking “from the standpoint of everyone else”. I do not “count noses” as Arendt puts it, who is indeed able to find a convincing example that shows that Kant’s “enlarged mentality”⁴⁵ does not always need to be the result of a survey of people’s opinions:

Suppose I look at a specific slum dwelling and I perceive in this particular building the general notion which it does not exhibit directly, the notion of poverty and misery. I arrive at this notion by representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller. The judgment I shall come up with will by no means necessarily be the same as that of the inhabitants whom time and hopelessness may have dulled to the outrage of their condition, but it will become an outstanding example for my further judging of these matters. Furthermore, while I take into account others when judging, this does not mean that I conform in my judgment to theirs⁴⁶.

People living in misery may indeed be “dulled to the outrage of their condition”. If I were I to ask them how they are doing, they might just say that all was fine. For me to think in their place means to think how “I would feel if I had to live there” – it is not necessary to take opinion polls in this case.

Nonetheless, in his discussion of common sense, Kant does seem to imply that for him the privileged access to the world is his own mind. Arendt, in contrast, is getting somewhat more concrete and practical, even though in her own view she does nothing more than interpret Kant. She insists that the reason why common sense is called “common”

45 Cfr. *ibid.* 124. The “enlarged mentality”, as Arendt usually renders Kant’s “*erweiterte Denkungsart*”, or the “broadened mind”, as it is translated in the present English edition, is the result of putting ourselves in the position of others.

46 H. ARENDT, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy”, in *ID.*, *Responsibility and Judgment*, J. KOHN (ed.), Schocken Books, New York 2003, 140-141.

is not based on the fact that it simply happens to be common to all of us. Rather, it is common inasmuch as it “fits us into a community with others, makes us members of it and enables us to communicate things given by our five private senses”⁴⁷. Given the capacity of the imagination, common sense can indeed “have present in itself all those who actually are absent”⁴⁸. But for Arendt, in contrast to Kant, these people “who actually are absent” are indeed real people, whose judgments on similar occasions I am familiar with, whom I know and with whom in some ways I share my life. Thus, “when somebody makes the judgment, this is beautiful, he does not mean merely to say this pleases me [...] but he claims assent from others because in judging he has already taken them into account and hence hopes that his judgments will carry a certain general, though perhaps not universal, validity⁴⁹”. Common sense makes sure our judgments are not based on our individual whims. If I judge a particular painting or piece of music as beautiful, I am confirmed in my judgment by my friends who likewise find it beautiful. And even if one day I walk alone through a museum, my friends will in some way be present through my imagination. I know their taste and can imagine their judgment and will take their judgment into account in my own. The common sense of the community of which we are a part greatly influences our judgment, in all aspects of our lives, whether it be politics, science, aesthetics or morals.

There are moments, even when it comes to judgments about ourselves, when it is reasonable to trust the judgment of others more than our own, especially if they know us well or possess an expert knowledge on particular issues. This is why Alasdair MacIntyre writes, “What is or would be good or best for me is something on which, apart from the fact that generally and characteristically I know more about myself than others do, I may in many and crucial respects be no more of an authority than some others and in some respects a good deal less of an authority than some others. My physician, or my trainer, if I am an athlete, or my teacher, if I am a student, may well be better placed to make judgments

47 *Ibid.*, 139.

48 *Ibid.*, 140.

49 *Ibid.*

about my good than I am”⁵⁰. My judgment is always influenced by the community of which I am a part, and it is also very reasonable that it be so. In order to grow up and come of age, what we need to do is not to isolate ourselves and ward ourselves off from any influence of others. This is neither realistically possible nor practically helpful. What we can and should do is be discriminate in choosing the people who influence us. Here, Arendt puts great emphasis on the examples and role models that guide our lives⁵¹, while Livio Melina insists that “the first and fundamental moral choice is the choice of our friends”⁵². According to Arendt, the validity of judgment “will reach as far as the community of which common sense makes me a member”⁵³. Kant, no doubt, was very optimistic about this. Thinking himself a “citizen of the world,” he “hoped it would reach to the community of all mankind”⁵⁴. But even if this side of heaven there may be different communities, all of which differ in their judgments on certain issues, the fact remains that “the community among men produces a common sense. The validity of common sense grows out of the intercourse with people”⁵⁵. For Arendt, this common sense, “is the mother of judgment”, so that “not even a painting or a poem, let alone a moral issue, can be judged without invoking and weighing silently the judgment of others just as I refer to the schema of the bridge to recognize other bridges”⁵⁶.

To say that common sense, the sense that is produced by the community of which we are a part, is the mother of judgment does not at all mean that judgment is relative or arbitrary. It simply means that we have

50 A. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Open Court, Chicago 1999, 71.

51 Cfr. ARENDT, “Some Questions”, cit., 145: “We judge and tell right from wrong by having present in our mind some incident and some person, absent in time or space, that have become examples. There are many such examples. They can lie far back in the past or they can be among the living. They need not be historically real; as Jefferson once remarked: ‘the fictitious murder of Duncan by Macbeth’ excites in us ‘as great a horror of villainy, as the real one of Henri IV’ and a ‘lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on a son or daughter by reading King Lear, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written’”.

52 L. MELINA, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues. For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. W. May, CUA Press, Washington, DC 2001, 31.

53 ARENDT, “Some Questions”, cit., 140.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*, 141.

56 *Ibid.*, 141-142.

to choose our community well. This may also be the meaning of Cicero's affirmation that "by Hercules" he would much rather "be wrong with Plato" than be right with the Pythagoreans⁵⁷. The contradiction with the classical Latin adage "Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas"⁵⁸ may be a seeming one only. Most certainly "reason prescribes that all men should prefer truth to their friends"⁵⁹, and Cicero may not actually intend here to subject truth to friendship⁶⁰, but rather to suggest that we are more likely to arrive at truth if we stay in the company of someone we can trust. We need to judge our judgment. In whose company will our judgment place us? If your judgment on a certain issue implies that Plato, whom we admire, is wrong and that philosophers whose opinions we usually disdain are right, then it may actually be more *reasonable* for us to suspend your judgment, part company with these latter and maintain your loyalty to Plato, whom we know to be reliable. Our best bet at getting at the truth may at times be to stay with Plato and to avoid the company of others.

3.2. *The Sensus Fidelium as the Church's Common Sense*

Thus, for Kant, and for Arendt who reads him, judgment is based on common sense which at the same time constitutes and derives from a given community. Now evidently the Church, too, is a community. Thus, she, too, would need to have a common sense that is at the basis of

57 CICERO, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I, xvii: "Errare mehercule malo cum Platone [...] quam cum istis vera sentire".

58 "Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend". This saying is often attributed to Aristotle. It paraphrases *The Nicomachean Ethics* I, vi, 1096a15: "δόξειε δ' ἂν ἴσως βέλτιον εἶναι καὶ δεῖν ἐπὶ σωτηρία γε τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ οἰκεία ἀναρεῖν, ἄλλως τε καὶ φιλοσόφους ὄντας: ἀμφοῖν γὰρ ὄντων φίλοιον ὅσιον προτιμᾶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν - However, it seems indeed better, and in fact especially obligatory on philosophers, to sacrifice even the rights of friendship for the sake of truth. While it is commendable to have love for both, we ought to honor truth as sacred above friends".

59 THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, I, Lecture 6, 76: "Id est alia ratione pertinente ad omnes homines veritas sit praefereunda amicis".

60 This is actually Hannah Arendt's reading of Cicero's statement: "It is matter of taste to prefer Plato's company and the company of his thoughts even if this should lead us astray from truth" (H. ARENDT, "Crisis of Culture", in ID., *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, New York, 2006, 221). While it is possible to understand it this way, we suggest that a different interpretation is thinkable, too.

ecclesial judgment. In this last part of the paper, we would like to suggest that one does not need to look far to find the Church's common sense. According to the hypothesis we would like to propose, this common sense, which fits us into the ecclesial community and allows believers to judge well, can be found in the idea of the *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium* of which the Second Vatican Council speaks, implicitly basing itself on the writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman⁶¹.

What did the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, or Cardinal Newman for that matter, mean when they were speaking of the *sensus fidei* or the *sensus fidelium*? At times the "sense of the faithful" is understood to be something that appertains specifically to the laity, that is, to those Christians who are not ordained and who have not taken religious vows. And indeed Cardinal Newman's historical examples in *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (the Arian crisis of the fourth century and the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception) do suggest a certain polarity here, at least between the laity and bishops. According to the English Cardinal, during the Arian crisis it was the common believers who upheld the Church's faith as proclaimed at the Council of Nicaea, while many of the bishops, for political reasons, became unfaithful⁶². Before defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Pius IX made it a point to consult the way ordinary Christians honored the Blessed Virgin⁶³. Thus, in the first example, there is a clear tension between the laity's sense of the faith and the bishops' wavering. In the second example, there is no tension, but nonetheless a

61 Cfr. J.H. NEWMAN, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD 2006.

62 Cfr. *ibid.*, 75-76: "It is not a little remarkable, that, though, historically speaking, the fourth century is the age of doctors, [...] nevertheless in that very day the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate. [...] in that time of immense confusion the divine dogma of our Lord's divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the '*Ecclesia docta*' than by the '*Ecclesia docens*'; that the body of the episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism".

63 *Ibid.*, 104-105: "In most cases when a definition is contemplated, the laity will have a testimony to give; but if ever there be an instance when they ought to be consulted, it is in the case of doctrines which bear directly upon devotional sentiments. [...] And the Blessed Virgin is preeminently an object of devotion; and therefore it is, I repeat, that though Bishops had already spoken in favour of her absolute sinlessness, the Pope was not content without knowing the feelings of the faithful".

polarity between the laity and the Pope as representative of the Church's Magisterium.

Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, clearly bases itself on Newman's thought, though it does not cite him and does not actually speak of "*sensus fidelium* – the sense of the faithful", but rather of the "*sensus fidei* – the sense of the faith". It mentions the *sensus fidei* in two places, in its n. 12 and its n. 35. In the latter instance, on a superficial reading, one may even here get the impression that the *sensus fidei* is something that belongs to the laity in particular. We read: "Christ [...] fulfils this prophetic office not only by the hierarchy [...] but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and the grace of the word"⁶⁴. Evidently, the mere affirmation that the laity have the appreciation of the faith does not as such mean that this appreciation is something exclusive to them, just as the grace of the word could hardly be restricted to them. And yet, given that the document speaks of *sensus fidei* only in two places, and given that in the second case this expression is used in the context of a discussion of the laity, some have concluded that it had to be understood as an attribute peculiar to those of the faithful who are neither ordained nor professed⁶⁵. This would of course be entirely illogical. How could anyone acquire a specific attribute simply by *not* doing something, that is by simply not getting ordained or taking religious vows? It would mean that clerics and religious, at the moment of their ordination or profession, would *lose* the *sensus fidei* they had before inasmuch as they were laity up to that point but no longer thereafter.

64 VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, n. 12.

65 Cfr. for instance, K.B. OSBORNE, *The Permanent Diaconate: Its History and Place in the Sacrament of Orders*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 2007, 121, who suggests that theology has commonly understood the *sensus fidelium* as the voice of laypeople: "In theology [...] the phrase *sensus fidelium* – the sense of the faithful – has usually been interpreted as the voice of the laypeople. Although the term *sensus fidelium* has had many differing interpretations, it has consistently been an honored theological principle. It means that the laypeople have a sort of intuitive understanding of God's presence in a given situation". If this were the meaning of *sensus fidelium*, one should much rather speak of *sensus laicorum*.

To understand better what Vatican II means by *sensus fidei*, and to give sustenance to our thesis that the *sensus fidei* could possibly be read in terms of the Church's Arendtian "common sense", we need to look at *Lumen Gentium* n. 12:

The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cfr. 1 *Jn.* 2:20 and 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, "from the bishops to the last of the faithful" they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (magisterium), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God (cfr. 1 *Th.* 2:13)⁶⁶.

Here the Council clearly speaks of the "whole body of the faithful", of which also bishops, priests, and religious would seem to be a part. To eradicate any doubt about the matter, the passage continues by speaking of the "whole people", explicitly also including bishops. The *sensus fidei* is thus nothing exclusive to the laity, but it is the "appreciation of the faith" that is "aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth" and that belongs to the whole People of God.

Thus we need to underline that the sense of the faith belongs to the whole Church, which includes the laity, but also the bishops, priests, and religious. This supernatural appreciation of the faith belongs to those of the faithful who are indeed faithful, "guided by sacred teaching authority [...] and obeying it". It is nothing that could be ascertained by looking at majority opinions proposed by sociological surveys⁶⁷. It is true that Pius IX consulted the sense of faithful regarding doctrine, namely before defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. But, as Newman puts it, the Pope consulted the faithful not in the way one "consults" with one's advisors, but as one "consults" a watch:

⁶⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 12.

⁶⁷ Cfr. FRANCIS, *Address to Members of the International Theological Commission*, December 6, 2013: "Of course, it is clear that the *sensus fidelium* must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion".

Now doubtless, if a divine were expressing himself formally, and in Latin, he would not commonly speak of the laity being “consulted” among the preliminaries of a dogmatic definition, because the technical, or even scientific, meaning of the word “consult” is to “consult *with*”, or to “take *counsel*”. But the English word “consult” [...] includes the idea of inquiring into a matter of *fact*, as well as asking a judgment. [...] We may consult a watch or a sun-dial about the time of day. A physician consults the pulse of his patient; but not in the same sense in which his patient consults *him*. It is but an index of the state of his health⁶⁸.

Thus, Pope Pius IX did not intend to enter into consultation with the laity, nor did he as such want to establish the majority opinion. He rather sought to ascertain their practice – according to the old adage *lex orandi, lex credendi*. What do those of the faithful who are faithful believe with regard to something that had not been defined as a dogma before? How do they pray? Is there a cult of the Immaculata among the faithful? What was being consulted was not theological opinion but pious practice. We see that Pius IX did not hold an opinion poll. He did not indifferently ask all the baptized – faithful or not to their baptismal vows – what they thought about possibly updating a well-established dogma, say, the divinity of Christ, but rather asked those of the faithful who had cultivated a prayer life whether they cherished the veneration of the Immaculata.

Hence we see that it is impossible to get at the sense of the faith by taking polls because these cannot distinguish between those of the faithful who are faithful and those who are unfaithful. A survey could possibly make baptism a criterion, but unfortunately, not all the baptized are faithful to their baptismal vows. However, there is still a further reason for why an opinion poll is of little use here. It can only survey the opinions of those who happen to be alive today, while *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the sense of the faith of the “whole body of the faithful” and of the “whole people”. Inasmuch as this “body” is an organism that in some ways extends the Incarnation of Christ in time⁶⁹, it consists not only of

68 NEWMAN, *On Consulting the Faithful*, cit., 54.

69 Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris mater*, March 25, 1987, n. 5: “The reality of the Incarnation finds a sort of extension in the mystery of the Church – the Body of Christ”.

those who are alive now, but also of those who have gone before. The “People of God” includes every baptized from the times of the Apostles until today. Surveys necessarily miss this element of perdurance in time – the diachronic element – of the *sensus fidei*. William Levada, eventual successor of Joseph Ratzinger as the Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, points at this fact in an article published in the 1980s, but still highly relevant today, acutely exposing the inconsistencies produced by surveys conducted in consecutive years:

Last summer [1985] *Our Sunday Visitor* carried the results of a Gallup Poll which had posed the question. “Do you think it is wrong for a man and a woman to have sex relations before marriage or not?” Of the Catholics who responded (50 percent described themselves as regular Massgoers), 33 percent said they believe premarital sex to be wrong, while 59 percent saw it as acceptable. [...] On the other hand, in 1969, 72 percent of the Catholics who responded to the poll said they thought premarital sex was wrong. Does this poll constitute a *sensus fidelium*? Has the Holy Spirit guided the *sensus fidelium* from 1969 to 1985 into a total reversal of values? Such a notion strikes me as suspect. Rather than accuse the Holy Spirit of lack of fidelity to the Gospel, it seems to me that we should analyze the data as indicating the enormous invasion of secular values⁷⁰.

The *sensus fidelium* is not constituted simply by the majority opinion of those who are now living. It refers to the sense, the “appreciation” – not the opinion – of all those of the faithful who are or were faithful,

Cfr. also the groundbreaking work by Johann Adam Möhler, first published in 1843: “The ultimate reason of the visibility of the Church is to be found in the *incarnation* of the Divine Word. [...] But since the Word became flesh, it expressed itself in an outward, perceptible, and human manner; [...] And as in the world nothing can attain to greatness but in society; so Christ established a community; [...] And thus a living, well-connected, visible association of the faithful sprang up, whereof it might be said, – there they are, there is his Church, his institution, wherein he continueth to live, his spirit continueth to work, and the word uttered by him eternally resounds. Thus, the visible Church, from the point of view here taken, is the Son of God himself, everlastingly manifesting himself among men in a human form, perpetually renovated, and eternally young – the permanent incarnation of the same, as in Holy Writ, even the faithful, are called ‘the body of Christ’” (J.A. MÖHLER, *Symbolism: or, Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by their Symbolic Writings*, Vol. II, trans. J.B. Robertson, Richards, London 1843, 5-6).

70 W. LEVADA, “Dissent and the Catholic Religion Teacher”, in CH. E. CURRAN – R.A. MCCORMICK (eds.), *Dissent in the Church*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 1988, 150.

whether now living or gone before. It is, as Pope Francis says, “a kind of ‘spiritual instinct’”, which allows the members of the Church “to *sentire cum Ecclesia* and to discern what conforms to the Apostolic faith and to the spirit of the Gospel”⁷¹. This is why in order to get at the sense of the faithful, the common sense of the Church, we cannot look exclusively at the present, but must include the past as it is given us in Sacred Tradition, as one of the ways in which the sense of the faith is expressed. G. K. Chesterton defines tradition as “the democracy of the dead”. He goes on explaining:

Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our father. I, at any rate, cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition; it seems evident to me that they are the same idea⁷².

Hence, to judge well, informed by an ecclesial common sense, we cannot simply look at the present. The community of which the ecclesial common sense makes us a member is larger than the Church that is now present. It also includes the Church of the past, her tradition, since she is one body, an organism that by divine assistance lives from the moment of her institution by Christ all the way to Christ’s coming in glory.

In its document on the *sensus fidei*, the International Theological Commission included an overview of the way this notion has been understood from the Patristic period to our own times. In this context it mentions not only the work of John Henry Newman, but also that of Johann Adam Möhler, whose position it summarizes in the following way:

Johann Adam Möhler sought to portray the Church as a living organism and to grasp the principles that governed the development of doctrine. In

71 FRANCIS, *Address to Members of the International Theological Commission*, December 6, 2013.

72 G.K. CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1995, 53.

his view, it is the Holy Spirit who animates, guides, and unites the faithful as a community in Christ, bringing about in them an ecclesial “consciousness” of the faith (*Gemeingeist* or *Gesamtsinn*) [...] This *sensus fidei*, which is the subjective dimension of Tradition, necessarily includes an objective element, the Church’s teaching, for the Christian “sense” of the faithful, which lives in their hearts and is virtually equivalent to Tradition, is never divorced from its content⁷³.

It may be worth rediscovering Möhler’s insights about the *sensus fidei* being the subjective aspect of tradition, and it may not at all be implausible to relate his discourse about the “general sense” of ecclesial consciousness to the idea of “common sense” as discussed above.

We all need to judge all the time, whether this judgment is about choices concerning our own lives or whether it is about decisions that bear on the larger community. In either case, to judge well, we need to base ourselves on common sense. As we have proposed, the common sense of the Church is the *sensus fidei*, that is, the appreciation of the faith that is common to all the members of the Church along the ages, which is why it includes tradition. Whenever as Christians we need to judge, discern, or decide, we do well to have our minds informed by this common or general sense. Particularly those of the faithful who have authority in the Church and need to judge on matters that directly bear on her life as a whole will find it necessary to consult the *sensus fidelium* – “consult”, that is, in Newman’s sense, as one “consults a watch” – which means taking into account the convictions and practices of the whole Body of Christ, including those of its members who have gone before. The *sensus fidei* is not opposed or juxtaposed to Sacred Tradition, but one of the ways Sacred Tradition expresses itself⁷⁴. In judging, for Kant,

73 INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, n. 35. It may be worthwhile citing Möhler directly: “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, in the subjective sense of the word” (MÖHLER, *Symbolism*, cit., 35).

74 Cfr. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Sensus Fidei*, cit., n. 66: “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, endowed and sustained

“we are suitors for agreement from everyone else”⁷⁵, that is, from all those who are part of our community and whose judgment is a measure for our own judgment. Thus, when making judgments that regard their own lives or the lives of their families or the workings of their parishes, their dioceses, or the Church Universal, all members of the Church, from the Pope and bishops “to the last of the faithful” will need to “woo the consent”, as Arendt puts it⁷⁶, not only of all the faithful currently alive, but also of those who have gone before. The Church’s common sense, the *sensus fidei*, is informed by the judgment of all the popes from Peter to Francis, including Gregory the Great no less than Pius IX, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It includes the judgments of all the Fathers, the Doctors, and the saints. We are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (cfr. *Heb* 12,1), by many friends whose judgments help to make our own judgments ever sharper and more accurate, whether we are part of the Church’s teaching office – which in its ministry enjoys the charism of truth by a special assistance of the Holy Spirit – or belong to the last of the faithful. Given that this supernatural appreciation of the faith belongs to the whole body, inasmuch as we are members of this body and in union with it, we can indeed say with St. Paul: “The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ” (2 *Cor* 2,15-16).

by the Holy Spirit, and the *consensus fidelium* constitutes a sure criterion for recognising a particular teaching or practice as in accord with the apostolic Tradition”.

75 KANT, *Critique of Judgement*, cit., 68 (§19).

76 Cfr. ARENDT, “Crisis in Culture”, cit., 219.