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# Devotion, Theology and the Sensus Fidelium

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## Abstract

The potential unwieldiness of popular religiosity and devotional spirituality and their ambiguous relationship with the liturgy have made them objects of perennial ecclesiastical concern. More recently, magisterial discussion of popular religiosity has come to value more positively its cultural and anthropological value and its spiritual content. The reforms of Vatican II were followed by a significant demise in devotionalism amongst Northern European and North American Catholics, yet demographic change and other factors have resulted in the resurgence of popular religious devotions. Manifestations of grassroots faith may express valuable convictions and important insights, including the value of the collective and the non-verbal. However, these values may be easily dismissed by social elites for aesthetic reasons, or by academic theologians for reasons of the cultural milieu and preferences of academia. Given the preference of the theological tradition for lexical intelligibility, and the symbolic and the physical nature of many kinds of popular religiosity, how the sub-disciplines of theology may now responsibly and respectfully treat these perduring phenomena is not clear. A healthy relationship between the *fides qua* and the *fides quae* demands taking seriously the *sensus fidelium,* understood as a broad experience that embraces the daily lives and local circumstances of Christians as well as their worship. The contemporary construal of the discipline of Christian Spirituality, understood as the study of Christian experience, promises to provide a multidisciplinary approach that can address the topic of popular religiosity and devotional practice.

## Keywords

Spirituality, Devotion, Theology, Sensus fidelium, Popular religiosity

During my initial theological studies at the Pontifical University of Salamanca, my professors included three who had had Karl Rahner as their *Doktorvater*, several future bishops and two future cardinals. This was a solidly academic formation, fully in line with

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post-conciliar theological trends. Only in pastoral theology did we ever touch on the topics of popular religiosity and devotional spirituality. Much of my initial pastoral work, however, was in an Andalusian parish which, like many there, houses a Brotherhood – the Penitential Fraternity of *Our Father Jesus the Fallen Nazarene and Our Lady of Sorrows*. This lay group was responsible for taking out in the Holy Week processions their parish statues. It was a source of tension with the parish priest that their religious practice did not include going to mass very often; I doubt that they read the Bible ever; but the men – and they were all men, often young – were devoted to the statues and to making sure that all ran well in the procession. One told me, "I have a lot of faith: I kiss the crucifix every night before I go to bed." His statement did not pass muster with my theological schemes.

Subsequently, when I was a deacon in South Wales, finding the UCM at their weekly Benediction addressing the Blessed Sacrament with the Litany of Loreto scandalized my sense of liturgical logic. As a newly minted curate, I was sent in the early 90s to a working-class parish of mostly Irish descent. Many parishioners still practised their devotions to the Sacred Heart, and I was puzzled by confessions where people confessed having missed first Fridays. There was also a large population of Italians whose mass attendance was sporadic, but whose houses were filled with holy pictures, and who always came on pilgrimages to Lourdes. In a town of solid Non-Conformist tradition where Catholics had received their share of prejudice, my ecumenical nerves were jangled when a new parish priest wanted to reinstate a May procession. My neo-Jansenist clericalism was, however, outshone by a fellow priest, who upon noticing that a parishioner was praying her rosary rather than listening attentively to his Sunday homily, bellowed, "Madam, put that *thing* away!"

These vignettes witness to a devotional sensibility that long preceded the Second Vatican Council and which seems to continue to flourish. This perdurance raises pastoral and theological issues, and these give rise to a third question: the connection between religious praxis and its intellectual elucidation. Given that popular devotion represents something of a railway junction at which many lines meet, this study can only propose questions rather than provide a grand overview.

The terminology of the field is unwieldy. Devotion is both a mass noun and a count noun. Devotion is a psychological state, which may or may not take religious form. In Catholic parlance, devotions – such as the rosary, or a novena – are individual or collective practices that express and strengthen faith. They exist in a variety of relationships to the official liturgy of the church: in parallel to it; in rivalry with it; in symbiosis with it; incorporated into it; or in a combination of all four. Public processions, such as Holy Week in the Hispanic world,

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are fully *leiturgia*, in that they are a work of the people of God. But they are not part of the reformed Holy Week, and because they take place on the street, they exist in parallel, in analogy with the church's official liturgical cycle rather than fully incorporated into it. There is, for example, no traditional practice for Easter Sunday morning, and the Holy Saturday evening processions are still in Passion mode. If these devotions show liturgical inconsistences, other practices such as the lighting of the Advent wreath, can appear always to have existed as part of the liturgy.

The semantic field includes the terms popular devotion or devotions; popular religiosity; and folk religion. Popular in this case refers to the *populus* – the religious practice of the laity rather than the *foi savante* of the clerisy. But the terms are slippery: until the last ten years Vatican documents talked of popular *piety*, rather than devotion. Salvador Ryan neatly points out that one way of defining popular religion is "simply as doctrine responded to and appropriated by the people."[1] Doctrine, he continues, "might be described as 'official' religion . . . . Reception is . . . a dynamic creative process which implies interpretation, criticism, enrichment . . . , a process of filtering through culture, communities and individuals before it is truly 'received.'"[2] Carl Dehne further elaborates the notion of "popularity":

> These devotions are *popular* in several senses. [1] They are pitched at and practiced by ordinary Christians, and not mainly by religious professionals. [2] They attract and are spontaneously cultivated by relatively large numbers. [3] They are capable of communal celebration and are typically so celebrated; they are the prayers of structured groups and not only of individuals.[3]

There exists a body of literature on the field in Spanish, but translation further complicates the terminological tangle. *Devoción* has a different semantic field from "devotion" and can simply be rendered as "faith," while *religiosidad popular* is equivalent to "working class faith" as well as "popular religiosity" or "folk religion." In all cases, such terms are not internal self-descriptions. Rather, they are deployed in what anthropologists call "etic" perspectives, i.e., attempts to provide objective, neutral evaluations.[4] Yet in this would-be objectivity, issues of class, education, authority, cultural location and preferential aesthetics inevitably come into play, consciously or not. Importantly, for its practitioners, what is described as popular religiosity may well be no more or less than simply "being a believer."

[1] Salvador Ryan, "Some Reflections on Theology and Popular Piety: A Fruitful or Fraught Relationship?", *Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012), p.961.

[2] Ryan, op. cit, pp.964-5.

[3] Carl Dehne, "Roman Catholic Popular Devotions," *Worship* 49, no.8 (1975), p.449.

[4] See Conrad Kottak, *Mirror for Humanity* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), p.49ff.

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Jaroslav Pelikan, writing on Marian devotion, notes that "the connection between technical theology and the piety of ordinary believers [is] difficult to handle."[5] Connections of theological style, content and intention may be even looser when theological investigation is undertaken primarily by academics. Writing of Marian devotion across the centuries, John Shinners notes three characteristics of popular religion: "First, it does not concern itself with theological nuance . . . . It craves certainty (and) eschews doubt." Second is its focus on the tangible, on material objects and physical signs as proofs of conduits of the divine, in a profoundly incarnational world-view. Third, and perhaps most important of all, is its strong affective component: "it comes from the heart, is emotionally focused, and intensely human."[6] Marina Herrera claims that the values of popular religiosity are

> not so easily found in other areas of the church's life. They include a thirst for God, generosity in giving to the point of heroism, a profound sense of providence and constraint and loving presence; and the cultivation of a sense of interiority not often found in those without this sense of piety.[7]

Dehne points out the qualities that have accounted for the appeal of popular devotional religiosity: it is expressive, rather than didactic; it is inter-relational and centred on concrete persons (Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the saints); it is frequently doxological in tone as well as intercessory; it is 'circular' or 'spiral' rather than linear in structure, more like a conversation than a lecture; it is ritualized; and it eschews innovation for its own sake.[8]

Other writers add more qualities: "supra-rational, symbolic, imaginative . . . experiential, festive, theatrical."[9] Devotions to the Five Wounds or to Our Lady of Sorrows signal the persistence of the Cross in human existence, and are therefore likely to be of special appeal to the poorest and most powerless and vulnerable in the world. Finally, popular religion is particular, and particularistic; by nature it is incarnational, the fruit and also the maker of culture. As such, it tends to be bound up in questions of socio-religious identity, a factor that is particularly salient in the experience of exile,

[5] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p.103.

[6] John R. Shinners, Jr., "Mary and the People: The Cult of Mary and Popular Belief," in Doris Donnelly, ed., *Mary, Woman of Nazareth.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp.161-2.

[7] Marina Herrera, "Popular Devotions and Liturgical Education," *Liturgy* 5:1 (1985), p.36.

[8] Dehne, op. cit., pp.457-9.

[9] Luis Maldonado, "Popular Religion: Its Dimensions, Levels and Types," *Popular Religion, Concilium* 186, eds. Norbert Greinacher and Norbert Mette (Edinburgh: Clark, 1986), p.71.

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immigration and rapid social change. Since its expressions are particular, they may be somewhat opaque to those who do not share in the same social background or inhabit the same imaginative universe.

England, for the historical reasons that we all know, does not have a rich history of *public* manifestations of Catholic piety such as are found in Catholic countries – where these exist here, they are restorations, and carry a weight of both romanticism and religio-poltical claims on public space and therefore public life. But I am struck by the perdurance of a *domestic* devotional spirituality, typified by what is on sale in gift shops in pilgrimage centres such as Lourdes. There clearly exists an inexhaustible market for statues and holy pictures. Such low art objects do not sit well with the more middle-class conventions of theological propriety of post-conciliar Catholicism in northern Europe and North America.

The potentially embarrassing unruliness and bad taste of popular religiosity has been a historical anxiety for church elites and the theologically educated. The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* provides a history of Christian antagonism to various forms of popular and devotional spirituality: movements that include Byzantine iconoclasm and Jansenism, while Erasmus, Melanchthon, and Luther are named as notable opponents. Some thirty-five pages of the entry for "Dévotions" catalogue a non-exhaustive list of practices and foci of prayer. Not all are liturgical. Here the *Dictionnaire* is cautious: while noting that "liturgy has never been enough to express religious faith,"[10] and understanding the phenomenon of devotional praxis as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, the authors are anxious about religious authenticity. The readers' attention is drawn to "possible deviations" that include insufficient connection with dogma, an individualistic piety and a tendency towards seeking novelty.[11] Importantly, the following entry, the "Dévotions Prohibées" is only a little shorter than "Dévotions." The list of obscure and long-banished foci of prayer includes "the Broken Heart of Jesus," "The Holy Shoulder of Jesus," "The Pure Blood of the Holy Virgin," "The Priest-Virgin," the recitation of an "Ave Joseph" and the practice of swallowing small paper images of the Virgin Mary dissolved in water or made into pills (allowed, but only under strict ecclesiastical supervision).[12] Clearly, these are picturesque forms of outlandish theologies, but the awareness of the general volatility of the field continues to be found, for example, in the 2001 *Directory of Popular Piety and the Liturgy.*

[10] *Dictionnaire*, p.756.
[11] *Dictionnaire*, p.754.
[12] *Dictionnaire,* p.793ff.

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If grassroots manifestations of faith emerge from the bedrock of the church, they can also threaten it. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* notes that:

> [p]opular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church, above all when they are ordered by the Apostolic See. Devotions proper to individual Churches also have a special dignity if they are undertaken by mandate of the bishops according to customs or books lawfully approved. But these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them.[13]

*Marialis Cultus*, following from this stricture, and also the Mariological nervousness expressed in *Lumen Gentium* 67, likewise issues caveats about certain devotional practices. The Apostolic Exhortation seeks to anchor them in the theology of the Trinity, Christology and ecclesiology, and subordinates them to the liturgy. *Roma locuta est*, but *causa* hardly *finita est*.

Following the positive evaluation of culture offered in many of the Council's documents, and the development of consciously inculturated liturgy, the magisterium has gradually moved to considering the autonomous, anthropological value of popular religious practices. The *Directory* sees these as inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from culture, referring to them as "a treasure of the people of God."[14] The length and detail of the *Directory* witness to the continuing difficulties of handling popular piety. The potential dyspepsia that popular religiosity seems to cause the ecclesiastical hierarchy is also to be found in the echelons of academic theology, where such practices do not play well in the post-conciliar Catholicism of the north of the northern hemisphere. In the interests of intellectual humility, what might academic theologians learn from the hermeneutic of continuity in religious practice in this devotional spirituality that seems to speak of a survival of pre-conciliar Catholicism?

Patrick L. Malloy usefully points out that "emerging devotional forms, while they may look like post-Tridentine piety, have a different ecclesial function than they did before the Council and therefore merit a fresh hearing."[15] What might that hearing reveal? Three points offer themselves. First, the visceral power of imagery and ritual to move hearts and minds in a way different from words. This is a truth

[13] *Sacrosanctum Concilium,* 13.

[14] *Directory,* 9, quoting St John Paul II.

[15] Patrick L. Malloy, "The Re-emergence of Popular Religion among Non-Hispanic American Catholics," *Worship* 72, no.1 (1998), p.23.

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so obvious that it can easily be ignored or downplayed. In a celebrated article, Dehne criticized the principles of Vatican II liturgical reform, noting the primacy that the reform gave to "dignity, serenity, moderation, lexical intelligibility, discomfort with ritual unless it is rendered safe by verbalization, and – above all – variety." Dehne calls these preferences "losers," noting that the implied model of the new worship comes from outside the experience of worship – in fact from the classroom.[16]

The Second Vatican Council was followed by a widespread decline in devotional practice and the demise of the use of religious images. Direct causality cannot be easily proved, but correlation seems self-evident. A new ecumenical sensitivity looked for commonality with other Christians, in practice as well as belief. Devotions were among the most salient signs of Catholic difference. A generalized *ressourcement* and a historical awareness questioned the need for particularistic devotions. The renewed emphasis on scripture came packaged with the preferential hermeneutics of academic biblical studies, including fealty to historical-critical method. Things that could not be found directly in scripture – devotion to the Sacred Heart, for example, or those problematic Marian mysteries – came under the inquisitorial eye of theological specialists. The triumph of the vernacular gave a massive importance to word over image and gesture. Paradoxically however, given the increased role of the laity envisaged by Council the demise of devotional services and the sublation of liturgy into Eucharist meant a greater dependence on the presence of a priest.

The very different accounts of the Second Vatican Council given by John O'Malley and Roberto de Mattei both show how the tensions within the Council aula were rooted *inter alia* in questions of culture.[17] Not only geo-cultural location, but also social class, education, epistemological presuppositions, and preferential aesthetics impacted deeply on how the Council was received and put into practice. At a distance of over fifty years, it is, I think, appropriate and intellectually responsible to investigate respectfully these inchoate factors. The changes made themselves immediately salient also in those parts of Catholic life that most directly involve the physical senses – in the experience of collective spiritual expression. We might wonder what the insights of the psychology of perception have to say about this downplaying of the physical in a religion that holds that the Word became Flesh and in which the one important image of the Church is that of the body.

[16] Dehne, op. cit., p.448.

[17] John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)/ Roberto de Mattei, *The Second Vatican Council – An Unwritten Story* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2012).

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A second consideration that academic theologians might ponder about the resilience of devotional spirituality is the question of communality. In popular devotions, the pioneers of the liturgical movement had seen practices that underwrote the individualism that was championed by the Enlightenment,[18] and the observation that devotional piety is both individualistic and otherworldly remains a reason why popular religion is *un*popular in some academic theological circles. Yet while some forms of popular devotion are individualistic, others are resoundingly communitarian, the faith expression of the People of God. For the mindset of much of the global North they are signally counter-cultural. The Chilean theologian Diego Irarrázabal says that devotees "come to their images asking for health, social and economic progress, personal, familiar, (and) communitarian well-being . . . . The images of Christ summon and gather people, groups, crowds."[19] The 2007 Aparecida Document of the Latin American Bishops' Conference reminds us that "popular piety is a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly."[20] Some three years ago, I attended a Mass for immigrants at the Cathedral of Los Angeles, attended by well over 5000 people, mostly Latinos. Many could not get into the church and had to pray outside on a hot Californian afternoon. After mass, most lined up for hours to kiss, touch, light candles before and offer flowers to the statue and relics of the Mexican St. Toribio Romo González. Santo Toribio has become the unofficial patron saint of those crossing the US Mexican border illegally.[21] The event was a gutsy lived theology of a community that has never lost its instincts for the value of communal prayer, manifesting faith in public spaces, sacramentals, and, above all, of the embodied senses. One might also think of the over 100,000 people who queued to pray before, touch and kiss the relics of St Therese at Westminster Cathedral. These devotees were described angrily by Matthew Parris in *The Times* online with the terms "dupes . . . preposterous . . . Flat Earth Society."[22] In a similar tone at *The Guardian,* Simon Jenkins preached: "Relics are religious placebos for the credulous classes, which presumably includes the inmates of Wormwood Scrubs. Most of us find them ghoulish. We do best to regard it as a test, not of

[18] See Malloy, op. cit, pp.2-3.

[19] Diego Irarrázabal, "Religious Windows in the Latin-American Christology," *Ciberteología: Journal of Theology and Culture"* 12, July-August 2007, pp.11-12. http://ciberteologia.paulinas.org.br/ciberteologiaen/wp-content/ uploads/2009/08/03Religious windows.pdf.

[20] http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf, 263.

[21] See http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-immigrants-saint-20140713-story.html; http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-immigrants-mass-20140721-story.html

[22] Quoted in http://thatthebonesyouhavecrushedmaythrill.blogspot.com/2009/09/matthew-parris-assails-one-true-faith.html

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our power of reason but of our power of tolerance."[23] (The "most of us" in whose name he spoke were, presumably, *Guardian* readers). Yet Wendy Wright writes of taking seriously "the power of images to attract and the important ways in which they function in religious traditions . . . . Images may variously help to order time and space, create a coherent world . . . structure individual and communal identity, console and challenge, embody forms of the divine, allow communion with the divine. . . . "[24] Monotheistic religious traditions are prone to allowing "the text to become the sole authority, and visual sources of belief, often labelled as 'idolatry' are downplayed or prohibited."[25] In such circumstances, despite a lack of explicit theological validation, popular devotional images, Wright claims, "function 'theo-iconically' for the communities that hold them dear, allowing devotees entry into the presence of the divine."[26]

A third point that demands consideration is that the resurgence in devotional spirituality is also a fruit of the rapidly changing demographics of the post-post-conciliar Catholic Church. For Catholic millennials, Vatican II is now as distant as the Andromeda galaxy. The faith of younger Catholics does not exclude the ethical concern of their parents and grandparents, but also shows an appetite for the devotional, the visual, and the public. More importantly, the demographic centre of Catholicism is no longer Europe or North America – even if its intellectual centre remains there – but Asia, Africa and Latin America. Ineluctably, these shifts are already re-ordering the dominant aesthetics and questioning of some of the shibboleths of academic theology. Roberto Goizueta writes that "the greatest threat to true faith is not that of mistaking a wooden statue for the real Christ," but rather "a rationalist . . . Christianity that preaches . . . a Christ without a face, without a body, without wounds, a cross without a corpus."[27] In the United States, one common consequence of the Enlightenment is to reduce the practice of faith to a commitment to social justice. With this reductionism, theology eventually becomes of value only for its potential to support particular contemporary ethical and political agendas.[28] Goizueta notes that while this moralism was also found among the first generations of liberation theologians,

[23] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/sep/17/st-therese-relics-wormwood-scrubs

[24] Wendy M. Wright, "Introduction," in Wendy Wright and Ronald A. Simkins, eds., "Religion and the Visual," *Journal of Religion and Society Supplement Series* 8 (12), p.2.

[25] Wright, "Introduction," p.3.

[26] Wright, "Introduction," p.5.

[27] Goizueta, "Making Christ Credible: U.S. Latino/a Popular Catholicism and the Liberating Nearness of God," chap. in Bruce Morrill, Joanna Ziegler and Susan Rodgers, eds., *Practicing Catholic: Ritual, Body, and Contestation in Catholic Faith* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.176.

[28] Goizueta, op.cit., p.169.

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sceptical as they were about the usefulness of popular devotions in the struggle for social justice, a later generation has come to see popular religiosity as a "source of hope and empowerment for the poor."

Of course, that focus on power relations has deep roots in European thought. But devotions cannot be reduced to their political impact only. As *Evangelii Gaudium* notes, "genuine forms of popular religiosity are incarnate. They are born of the incarnation of Christian faith in popular culture. They entail a personal relationship, not with vague spiritual energies or powers, but with God, with Christ, with Mary, with the saints. These devotions are fleshy."[29] In other words, while devotions may have significant ethical implications, they transcend the merely ethical.

That fleshiness, involving as it does both cultural and personal relationships, brings us to the second half of this discussion, which concerns theologizing about the epiphenomena of devotional spirituality and popular religiosity. (Of course, these are not identical but there is some considerable overlap given that popular religiosity tends heavily toward devotional practice.)

The 1992 General Conference of the Latin American Bishops taught that popular religion, as "a privileged expression of the inculturation of the faith . . . involves not only religious expressions but also the values, criteria, behaviors, and attitudes that . . . constitute the wisdom of our people, shaping their cultural matrix."[30] Yet theologians, says Orlando Espín, "have usually preferred to leave the field (of popular religion) to anthropologists and other social scientists."[31] A theology of popular religiosity certainly should avail itself of the insights of history, anthropology, sociology, and even particular ideological or social agendas, but it cannot limit itself to them. Faith is ontologically prior.

This consideration leads logically to pondering the milieu in which theology itself is done and its relation to theological method. In the United States, the loudest voices in Catholic theology come not from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but from the Catholic universities. Professional academics necessarily partake in the micro-culture of contemporary secular academia, with its own internal debates, tensions, ideologies and preferential hermeneutics. Of course, this culture is both class-based and historically contingent. According to David Tracy, "the peculiarly modern genre for theological reflection has been the

[29] http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/files/assets/basic-html/page73.html, 90.

[30] Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Santo Domingo and Beyond: Documents and Commentaries from the Historic Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), p.86.

[31] Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People* (Maryknoll, NY:Orbis Books, 1997), p.63.

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rational argument."[32] That genre assumes a preferential option for the textual not only as a medium of communication, but also as an object of study. But as e e cummings says, "birds sing sweeter than books tell how."[33] The rich layers of meaning present in popular religiosity might not be adequately mapped either by phenomenological description or some standard theological approaches. *Fides,* after all, can hardly be limited to concepts and words, and its in-house *intellectum* may be expressed in a variety of dialects. In many cultures, spiritual literacy and religious experience cannot be adequately described only in terms of texts, writers and readers.

It is, I suspect, certain presuppositions that lead to the sidelining of popular religiosity in academic theology. Malloy argues that "the customs of popular religion are disseminated and preserved apart from . . . theological academies or seminaries . . . . The official leadership may tolerate [them] as a 'shadow system' so long as it does not threaten the established system."[34] When "devotion" and "popular piety" are mentioned by the theological academy, they are, in my opinion, too easily and quickly labelled as "traditional," "traditionalist " or "conservative," (which is to say, the wrong sort of primitive) or at best consigned to the corner marked "ethnic" or "cultural" (the palatable sort of primitive).

Consequently, what *Evangelii Gaudium* says about expressions of popular piety has yet to be assimilated broadly: "they have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization."[35] Such academic neglect suggests a significant disconnect with contemporary pastoral realities. The change in who is sitting in the pews throughout the world calls theologians to take into greater account a complex that includes "faith expressions, social structures, cultural horizons, bodily existence, everyday lives, and the local circumstances of practitioners."[36] *Lex vivendi* and *lex orandi* ontologically precede *lex credendi* and in that order, they underpin *lex theologizandi*. This means engaging deeply with the *sensus fidelium*, a process that asks: Whose *sensus*?" Which *fideles*? If popular devotions are indeed a *locus theologicus,* what kind of *theologia* is this? Asking these questions is an ethical

[32] See Mark McIntosh, "Lover without a Name – Spirituality and Constructive Christology today," chap. in Dreyer and Burrows, *Minding the Spirit, Spirituality* (Baltimore, ML: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004), p.215ff.

[33] e e cummings "if everything happens that can't be done," in e e cummings,*100 Selected Poems,"* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994), pp.106-7.

[34] Malloy, op. cit., p.9.

[35] http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/files/assets/basic-html/page102.html, 125.

[36] Wendy Wright, *The Lady of the Angels and Her City: A Marian Pilgrimage* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), p.4.

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imperative. A worldview that undervalues or disdains the persistence and growth of devotionalism and the large universe of popular religiosity now looks intellectually parochial and dangerously outmoded. A small sign of this necessary change is that the insistence of Pope Francis on the value of popular religiosity seems to be gradually awakening English-language theological attention.[37]

The contemporary disconnect between academic theology and some important pastoral realities summons up a voluminous and contested *topos*: the relationship between *fides qua* and f*ides quae*. Popular devotion is very much of the *fides qua*. An ancient substrate underlies the experiential nature of this category. The biblical category of "faith", within its own cultural world, is most accurately rendered as "loyalty" or "commitment to another person."[38] In other words, *fides qua* is a relational, interpersonal reality, and the theological method used to discuss it and its relationship to systematic theology need to be adequate for that reality. Here, Robert Taft's classic distinction between the roles of *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda* in liturgical theology provides some insight. The former is

> the faith expressed in the liturgical life of the Church antecedent to speculative questioning of its theoretical implications, prior to its systematization in the dogmatic propositions of theologia secunda or systematic reflection on the lived mystery of the Church. Liturgical language, the language of theologia prima, is typological, metaphorical, more redolent of Bible and prayer than of school and thesis, more patristic than scholastic, more impressionistic than systematic, more suggestive than probative . . . it is symbolic and evocative, not philosophical and ontological."[39]

*Theologia secunda* – what Catholic theology for much of the last thousand years has thought of as "theology" – came early to involve systematization into the discreet dogmatic tracts*, De Deo Uno, De Deo Trino*, etc. These approaches are necessarily propositional and treat *fides quae* in the language of *fides quae*. Yet it is worth remembering the one statement of Evagrius that everyone knows: "If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian."[40] In similar wise, it is useful to consider that in Orthodoxy, according

[37] See for example Thomas Rausch and Richard Gaillardetz, eds., "*Go into the Streets! The Welcoming Church of Pope Francis* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016).

[38] See Bruce J. Malina, "Faith/Faithfulness," in John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), pp.67-68.

[39] Robert F. Taft, S.J., "The Liturgy in the Life of the Church," *Logos* 40 (1999), p.187.

[40] Evagrius, "On Prayer," 61, in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text, Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth,* trans. G. E. H. Palmer (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1983), vol.1, 62.

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to Patriarch Bartholomew, "*experiencing* the Dogma of the Church is not something that is taught through intellectual teachings, but it is learned through the example of him who, through incarnation, joined Himself to us. To this point, dogma is life and life is the expression of dogma."[41] Bartholomew was reminding his western audience at this point of the ontological priority of religious experience. At the same time he was issuing against solipsistic intellectualism, a sterile theologizing that is divorced from lived realities. In other words, for the benefit of all, there has to be some mutual connection – in their respective practitioners and topics – between theology and religious experience.

Where then, in the current spectrum of theological specialties, might we responsibly reflect on the categories of popular religiosity and devotional spirituality? Certainly, theological anthropology has much to say, as does ecclesiology. Yet those perspectives do not exhaust the phenomena. Liturgical theology clearly has an important place in the conversation given the connections and tensions between the liturgy of the church, popular religiosity and pre-conciliar devotionalism. But popular devotions are frequently local and particular, and therefore include significant sociological and cultural aspects that are extra-liturgical. Moving beyond systematic theology, pastoral theology has important contributions: the dogmatic concerns of *Lumen Gentium* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* take flesh practically, for example, in the comments of *Marialis Cultus* on Marian devotion; and the 2001 *Directory on Popular Piety* is fundamentally a pastoral guide. Also at the table should be modern contextual theologies based on gender, class, and particular cultures, since these frequently concentrate their gaze on specific devotional practices.

Yet since spiritual experience is the topic under discussion, is not spiritual theology a ready-made home for considering popular religiosity? The answer depends on the nature and purpose of that discipline. "Mystical and Ascetical Theology" – its earlier iteration – functioned as a guide towards Christian perfection, conceived of as reaching beyond the merely moral towards the empyrean summits of spiritual union. Since the field was fundamentally individual in orientation, it was not germane to the collective nature of much popular devotional spirituality. In addition, the discipline showed its monastic roots, which made it *inter alia* ill fitted to consider lay experience. Its disciplinary successor, spiritual theology, according to the current guidelines for the training of priests in Italy,

[41] https://www.patriarchate.org/-/address-of-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-b-a-r-t-h-o-l-o-m-e-w-phos-hilaron-joyful-light-georgetown-university-washington-dc-october-21-1997

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> reflects theologically on the "spiritual life" of the Christian, and therefore the action of the Spirit of Jesus in him. It listens to the living faith of individuals and communities, to make it as consistent as possible with doctrine. In the Christian tradition, and especially in the New Testament, spiritual theology seeks the essential elements of the "spiritual man", in order to offer guidance to help direct the spiritual experience of the believer.[42]

This definition usefully allows for the communal, but the concern to align faith with doctrine does not promise to leave room for cultural particularity. Nor is the scope of this concept broad enough to be able to encompass the many dimensions of religious experience.

Taft's words for *theologia prima*: "faith expressed . . . life . . . metaphorical . . . impressionistic . . . symbolic . . . evocative," sound to me however like the leitmotifs of the study of spirituality in the way it has developed in North America. Under the tutelage of Sandra Schneiders and others, the focus of the field-encompassing field of the academic discipline called spirituality is lived experience, broadly construed. In a long series of articles, Schneiders has gradually delineated the subject matter of the academic discipline, as:

> the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration, though self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives. In Christian spirituality, the horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ; and the project involves the living of his paschal mystery in the context of the Church community through the gift of the Holy Spirit. (The) relationship to the whole of reality . . . in a specifically Christian way . . . constitutes (the experience of) Christian spirituality.[43]

Less abstractly, Philip Sheldrake understands the practice of Christian spirituality to be more or less synonymous with discipleship, namely being engaged in the mission of God.[44] Discipleship and mission invite Christians to share publicly what they believe, that is "learning how to be truly hospitable to what is different and unfamiliar, and establishing and experiencing a common life."[45] Sheldrake notes that the study of Christian life has refocused itself to include all aspects of human experience and has re-engaged with mainstream

[42] http://www.santamariadelmare.it/msm/Portals/0/documenti/spiritualita/Per uno studio della spiritualita.pdf. Translation my own.

[43] Sandra Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 (Spring 1998), pp.1, 3.

[44] Philip Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic," *Spiritus* 3 (Spring 2003), p.19.

[45] Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly," p.27.

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theology.[46] An older stance, rooted in the conviction that "theology was a stable body of knowledge, rich in the tradition of the past and secure enough to answer the questions of the present and future" has yielded to a paradigm in which, he says, "the frontiers of theology increasingly seek articulation in a process and method that is experiential." Singing the same song, Ryan claims that "a healthy theology will always be prepared to recognize the lived reality of genuine religious expression . . . the ordinary lived expression of people's faith . . . , the practice of religion and belief – religion that is 'lived' and embodied."[47]

Such claims raise the questions of whose experience and which kinds of experience, and how such experiences are to be evaluated – a concern of the magisterium, given the potential for disruption of popular devotion. Patriarch Bartholomew's use of the term "experience" seems to be more narrowly focused on the evidently religious sphere. In contrast, the insistence of modern academic spirituality on experience shows the influence of Rahner's conception of transcendental experiences as the fundamental human experience of being *capax Dei.* Rahner's definition of this experience – "the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality"[48] – is capacious, so much so as to suggest that all experience can be, in one form or another, "spiritual."

A further consideration is that a turn to experience might be not only a matter of theological content and approach, but also of style. A given spirituality says Matthew Ashley, "can define . . . the atmosphere in which theology is undertaken and which permeates its methods and results."[49] Some North American Latino theologians for example propose a conscious project of "doing theology Latinamente" in terms of method, categories, style, and focus. Ashley argues that theology, when infused with spirituality, provides a "fruitful locus for posing questions correctly and interrelating them productively."[50] Effectively, in the terms sketched out above, a theology interlaced with spirituality represents a reintegration of *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda,* with a welcome place at the table for a broad *sensus fidelium.*

[46] Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. 2004), p.4.

[47] Ryan, op. cit., p.969.

[48] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1985), p.20.

[49] J. Matthew Ashley, "The Turn to Spirituality? The Relationship between Theology and Spirituality," chap. in Dreyer and. Burrows, *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, p.162.

[50] Ashley, op.cit., p.162.

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This nexus is well established in liturgical theology, frequently invoking as it does the adage *lex orandi, lex credendi.* Michael Downey argues that if systematic theology takes that principle seriously, then

> any theological understanding of the God-world relation cannot rely purely on doctrinal or scholastic descriptions. Similarly, attempts to articulate theological positions primarily in view of a Lonerganian, Rahnerian, Freudian, Jungian or Marxian framework prove deficient if account is not taken of the ways in which the perception of the God-world relation is lived out in liturgical practice and in the ethical implications of such practice.[51]

At the same time that liturgists make their claim for liturgy as *echt* theology, it is worthwhile noting Dehne's piquant observation that:

> the typical attitude of liturgical enthusiasts towards the devotions has been to consider them as competition . . . , for being peripheral to the central mysteries which should be the themes of Christian worship, for distorting the emphases of the gospel, for being "subjective," for having almost no explicitly scriptural content, for developing the worst sort of sentimental piety, for being unvarying – and this often in a way that obscures the most important seasons and rhythms of the church year – for being vulgar, shapeless and ugly.[52]

Dehne's *j'accuse* points out a truism: "every man his own liturgist."

The domain "experience and theology" extends far beyond what can be adequately discussed here. But in the ways I have attempted to sketch out, it can be argued that all theology is experiential, given that it is the lived experience of faith that goes in search of self-understanding. It is also relational (in both horizontal and vertical dimensions), and collective in that it is of the Church and for the Church. "Of the Church" includes the experience of those whose voices are too often unheard in the academy. Popular devotion, I would argue, can both inaugurate and nourish theology. The study of popular devotion needs to use the sciences of the humanities to deepen our understanding of the origin and nature of those experiences. The ultimate goal of that study would be to enrich our capacity not only for comprehensive theological reflection but ultimately for *theosis*.[53]

I have mentioned the need to keep a place of honour at the table for the *sensus fidelium.* Addressing the topic of popular religious experience and its relation to theology adequately would require something

[51] Michael Downey, "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: Taking It Seriously in Systematic Theology", chap. in Michael Downey and Richard Fragomeni, eds., *Promise of Presence* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1992), p.4.

[52] Dehne, op. cit., p.454.

[53] I am indebted to my colleague, the Ukrainian-American liturgical scholar Nicholas Denysenko, for the insights expressed in this paragraph.

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rather more than this on-the-hoof theological takeaway. We might imagine it as a lavish, even raucous dinner party of many courses and wines and a wide variety of guests. We would do well to have as our table companions Tyrell, von Hügel, and Schleiermacher. Karl Rahner would talk about his theology of revelation and Johan Baptist Metz would teach us about the importance of the concrete historical situation. Eating and drinking with women and men whose experiences have not garnered attention, we could talk amongst other things about the biases, silences, and lacunae in the theological examination of devotion, the relationship between faith lived and faith discussed, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the unexpected. During that party, we would need to listen seriously to – and indeed raise a toast to – the theological acumen of the lady with the rosary who got shouted at during Mass by the priest.

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