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extended essay:

**Is Roman Catholic's *sensus fidei*
reflected on the Holy Rosary?**

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Abstract

Sensus fidei, or sense of faith, is a theological term to describe what is believed by all, it is the “universal consent in matters of faith and morals”. It is conformed objectively through the teachings by the magisterium and believed by the whole Church; and subjectively by the interpretation given by each faithful. This extended essay intends to determine whether *sensus fidei* is reflected on the Holy Rosary; considering if the Holy Rosary's mysteries are a result of both aspects of *sensus fidei*, and if the faithful praying can acknowledge faith through this prayer by the infallibility of *sensus fidei*.

The Holy Rosary is a reflection prayer, based on repetition, of 20 mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ and Mary; 18 of them are fragments from the Gospel, representing the objective aspect of *sensus fidei* because they are public revelations through the Liturgy. Nevertheless, the other two mysteries are Marian Dogmas. They are believed and accepted by the whole church but they were not declared as ‘official’ until pope Pius XII in 1950 did so. It is specially clear how *sensus fidei* is reflected on the Holy Rosary with these Marian mysteries widely believed by the community but not taught by the magisterium. Nevertheless, they became part of the objective side of *sensus fidei* after only being part of the subjective side.

Sensus fidei infallibility is not completely effective because not every thought of the faithful is compatible with faith, which causes *dissent*. During the reflection of the mysteries of the Holy Rosary, the faithful grows in focus through the prayer structure in order to clear as much elements than can cause dissent from the truth. Therefore, the results of meditation through the Holy Rosary can help the faithful to know faith thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through *sensus fidei*.

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Table of Contents

Abstract i

Introduction 1

*Is Roman Catholic *sensus fidei* reflected on the Holy Rosary?* 2

TWO ANCIENT HERITAGES 2

IN THE PRAYER STRUCTURE 3

IN THE OBJECTIVE ASPECT 4

IN THE SUBJECTIVE ASPECT 5

Conclusion 8

Bibliography 9

Introduction

From *Japa mala* or *Juzu*, used in Hinduism and Buddhism, to *Prayer Ropes* and *Misbaha*, used by Eastern Orthodox and Islam consecutively, various religions of the world use prayer beads as an ancient tradition—or actually contemporary in the case of Lutheran *Pearls of Life*—to count the repetitions of prayers, chants, devotions, or to aid meditation, relaxation and energy channelling (“Prayer Beads”). Roman Catholic Christianity also employs a type of prayer bead in order to pray the Holy Rosary.

Down to its origins, the Holy Rosary comes from the tradition of reading 150 psalms to honor the death of brothers; instead of singing the psalms, illiterate faithful repeated 150 *Hail Mary*. Centuries have passed, and the Holy Rosary survived until our times evolving from a repeating prayer to a meditation one; where the faithful himself reflects about the *mysteries*, which are objective faith realities taken from eighteen passages of the New Testament and two Marian Dogmas (Kelly 1). This meditation returns subjective thoughts about the *mysteries*. It is natural to think that the essence of these reflections about the *mysteries* can mislead the faithful praying the Holy Rosary, because the attached subjectivism it implies. However, according to the Second Vatican Council, the faithful “cannot err in matters of belief” (*Lumen Gentium* no. 12), because the faith is revealed through *sensus fidei*, or sense of faith, by the Holy Spirit.

Sensus fidei, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is the “universal consent in matters of faith and morals”(no. 92) by the whole body of faithful. However, it is conformed by a subjective and an objective aspect that together form the theological truth of the church. The objective side refers to the faith matters that are considered as truth by “all”, while the subjective part comes from the way each faithful interprets the teachings and dogmas given by the *magisterium* to him or her.

This extended essay intends to determine if the Holy Rosary reflects the sense of faith of Catholic Christian faithful; considering how the Holy Rosary mysteries show the result of *sensus fidei* from objective and subjective aspects of faith, and if theological truth can be found through *sensus fidei* by the faithful reciting this prayer. The importance of this topic relies on the popularity this prayer has among the community, and the impact it can produce in the faithful due its reflective nature. Both official documents by the Holy See and alternate catholic theologians publications will be taken into account to establish a relationship.

It was concluded that *sensus fidei* is indeed reflected on the Holy Rosary. The two dogmatic Marian mysteries clearly show the way *sensus fidei* is the cause of these mysteries; because they were part of the subjective aspect, believed by the community, and became part of the objective aspect. On the other hand, the faithful praying the Holy Rosary can acknowledge truth through their reflections because of the prayer structure—that helps them to avoid any element that may cause dissent by focusing on the mysteries—because of *sensus fidei* infallibility.

Is Roman Catholic *sensus fidei* reflected on the Holy Rosary?

TWO ANCIENT HERITAGES

The Holy Rosary nowadays basically consists in the repetition of ten decades of *Hail Mary* with an *Our Father* and the *Trinitarian Doxology* between each. Additionally, in each set, the faithful is meant to meditate about mysteries, taken from eighteen passages of the New Testament and two Marian Dogmas (Kelly 1). Further catholic prayers are usually added to the beginning and end of the Holy Rosary. As Liz Kelly states, the Holy Rosary has a physical component and an intellectual meditation (1). Both of these parts are result of an ancient heritage. The apparatus to count the prayers can be found even since Niniveh sculptures. But in a more Catholic approach, the oldest records of the Holy Rosary's prayer bead can be traced until the year 800, when priests would "say one Mass and also fifty psalms" when a brother expired ("Rosary"). The recitation of 150 or 50 psalms was born from this practice. However, a variation of this tradition for illiterate faithful was to repeat 150 *Paternoster* instead of reading the psalms. In order to keep an accurate count of the chants—or prayers in case of *Paternosters*—, the use of pebbles, berries, or discs of bone threaded on a string, became a common exercise, to such level that the term "*paternosterer*" appeared to designate those craftsmen who manufactured the prayer beads ("Rosary"). For centuries the prayer bead was used to count the repetition of *paternosters*.

Since the year 650, the "*Hail Mary, the Lord is with thee*" can be found on the Roman Missal, used as a prayer or as antiphon (Sálesman 3). But the prayer only became widely popular until the twelfth century (3), when it started to be a familiar form of salutation to the *Virgin Mary*. Thus, it was frequent for faithful to repeat the prayer 50, or 150 times ("Rosary"). Unlike popular belief, St. Dominic did not invent the Holy Rosary (Sálesman 4). By the time the Dominicans started to eagerly promote the approach to the *Virgin Mary* with the repetition of *Hail Mary*, it was already a common practice for the faithful to repeat the salutation to *Mary*. However, St. Dominic suggested the reflection about Christ's life while repeating the *Hail Mary* prayer (4), giving this praxis a new perspective.

Two centuries after, the meditation of mysteries while praying the *Marian psalter* became familiar. In 1521, the Dominican Priest Albert arranged the mysteries in three groups of five called the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries (4). In 1888, pope Leo XIII published three hymns that defined the groups of mysteries. In 2002, pope John Paul II added a fourth group of mysteries called the mysteries of Light, as a way to improve the range of reflection of the Rosary. Many popes like John XXIII, and specially Paul VI, have encouraged the faithful to pray the Holy Rosary, attributing it with a "powerful" character (pope John Paul II no. 2).

Sensus fidei is a concept evolved from past theological terms that have all attempted to make more specific the group of faith matters considered as “truth”. Rino Fisichella accurately states that “*sensus fidei* is at the same time a new and very old concept” (195). Vincent of Lerin’s rule of faith “*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*”, which can be translated as “What is believed everywhere, always, and by all” (Lawler 131), was first introduced in the fifth century, and defined the *sensus fidei* concept in a more explicit way. However, hints of the sense of faith that the *people of God* share can be found on the New Testament as “*sensus domini*,” “eyes enlighten by the heart,” or “spiritual intelligence” (Fisichella 95).

Fathers of the church amended such signs in the New Testament to represent the way faithful share a sole true faith, they called it *sensus ecclesiae et catholicus* (96). Fisichella adds that later on, Lerin’s rule of faith would introduce the double dimension of the sense of faith, involving both personal and objective aspects. Within this reasoning, Lawler relates *sensus fidei* to the traditional objective and subjective faith: *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur* (130). The objective part comes from the realities that the church has been carrying through tradition, history and revelation. This knowledge would be received and accepted by the faithful from the magisterium; while the subjective part would be from the way each faithful believes and understands what the church taught him or her, from his personal experiences through life, as well as the conclusions he gets after reflection about faith.

It was not until the Second Vatican Council, started in 1963, when *sensus fidei* and its role in church was defined in a straightforward manner, specially in *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum*. It is in *Lumen Gentium* in which *sensus fidei* is listed as a resource for all faithful, from both clergy and laity, to understand, and not err in their faith because it is the Holy Spirit who revealed it to them.

IN THE PRAYER STRUCTURE

Faithful have a richly nourished base to acknowledge theological truth in the meditation of the Holy Rosary with the use of *sensus fidei*. The faithful reciting the Holy Rosary is not only repeating prayers, he or she is also “assimilating” the mystery of Christ. The repetition is a way to pray with a “deep and simple concentration” (Kelly 80). As pope John Paul II states, the Holy Rosary is a “method” to communicate with God (no. 26); hence *sensus fidei* is present all along the recitation. Just as sacraments have a ritual to infiltrate in the dimensions of the person and establish a relationship with God, the Holy Rosary is a method that gets the faithful closer to Him in terms that “our humanity understands” (27). The structure of the Holy Rosary that the faithful follows and if it reflects *sensus fidei* will be discussed in this section.

The Holy Rosary is composed of a series of *mysteries*, separated in four groups: the joyful mysteries, the mysteries of light, the sorrowful mysteries, and the glorious mysteries. The groups of

mysteries constitute the specific meditations that the faithful will consider while praying the Holy Rosary (“The mysteries of the Rosary”). Each of these mysteries are meditated with the pray of one *Our Father*, the repetition of ten *Hail Mary*, and the *Doxology*. The constant repetition of prayers have caused people to argue that the Holy Rosary is “outdated”, or “repetitive and nonsensical” (Kelly xii). And it in fact is nothing but a bland repetition of words if the prayers are not used to serve a deep, yet simple, meditation about the mysteries.

According to Pope John Paul II, the *Our Father* at the beginning of each mystery is what helps the faithful to have their mind “*to be lifted up towards the Father*”(no. 32), getting them to focus more on the mystery. John Paul II continues explaining the crucial roll of the *Hail Mary*. He claims that it represents the bound between the prayer and the Mystery of Jesus Christ. From this point is that communities of faithful usually put a form of emphasis to the name of Christ in the *Hail Mary* according to the mystery they are meditating (no. 32). The Gloria, or Doxology, is the “goal of all Christian contemplation”(no. 34) so all the focus on the mystery reaches its highest point at this moment.

Just as in *sensus fidei*, the Holy Spirit is who reveals faith and the ability to not err in matters of faith to the believer, this connection through the Rosary is reached by achieving a deep meditation. The structure of the prayer aids the faithful to focus on the mystery he is reflecting about. Starting with a simple annunciation of the mystery, the faithful grows on focus about it until a climax is reached during the Doxology. As a result of the deep meditation, a short prayer after the meditation shows what the faithful was able to know by *sensus fidei* about the mystery. This results are mostly part of a subjective aspect of *sensus fidei*, but should actually coincide with the objective aspect of the sense of faith due the infallibility the faithful has.

IN THE OBJECTIVE ASPECT

Defining who decides what the objective truth in faith has always been a challenge. It is relevant to note that after, and since, Lerin's rule of faith the definition of “*all*” caused controversy between theologians and priests whom believed that faith was a gift given to apostles—which was then transmitted to bishops who would transmit it to obedient faithful—, and the theologians that claimed faith depended on the socio-historical context of the faithful (Lawler 130–131). For the first group mentioned, the *all* would mean the *magisterium* because it had the infallible character to dictate the faith, according to the First Vatican Council. In reply, the theologians from the second group argued *that the church's faith was preserved in the faith of all the faithful, lay and clerical together* (131).

In 1859, Cardinal deacon Newman proposed that the church should involve the laity in a more active role when defining matters of faith. He stated referring to the laity when the magisterium is defining a faith concept, “Doubtless their advice, their opinion, their judgment on the question of

definition is not asked”(54). After the Second Vatican Council, *sensus fidei* appears as an efficient method to bring the whole faithful belief to be considered as truth. Because it is the Holy Spirit whom reveals the faith to the whole church and every individual, with no distinction in clergy or laity.

In the recitation of the Holy Rosary, it is essential to contemplate the mysteries about “significant moments in the life of Jesus and Mary”. These mysteries are what makes this prayer a “compendium of the entire gospel” (“*Marialis Cultus*” no. 42) because 18 of them can be found on the Gospel, the mysteries represent objective truths since they constitute public revelations through the Liturgy.

However, the other 2 mysteries are faith dogmas: The *Assumption* and the *Crowning of Mary*. Both of these are nowadays acknowledged as a theological truth accepted by all the faithful. But they were not declared as such until the time of pope Pius XII (Lawler 131). *Sensus fidei* plays a highly important role in the definition of these two glorious mysteries. As Lawler claims, the pope Pius XII only consulted the bishops of the world in order to define new faith matters (131); but this two dogmas were not exactly new. Pope Pius XII was just formally recognizing a faith issue that was already present in the community. Thus, he was transferring faith gained from the interpretation of faithful to the stricter, objective side of *sensus fidei*. Both the Assumption and Crowning of Mary are present in countless pieces of art specially since the 13th century, and the 18th century when it reached its momentum (“Queen of heaven”). Therefore the composition of these Marian dogmas are a result of the tradition of the laity, and the magisterium study. The Holy Spirit would aid the magisterium to determine whether individual revelations regarding the Assumption and Crowning of Mary are of authenticity and value for the piety of the faithful (pope John Paul II footnote 11).

Furthermore, after the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See gives an infallible character to *sensus fidei* because it is a gift given by the Holy Spirit to the faithful. As it is expressed in the Second Vatican Council, “*The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief*” (*Lumen Gentium* no. 12). By this, both laity and clergy get infallibility in their faith; giving the individuals the capability to discover faith on their own, through prayer and reflection, which is exactly what the Holy Rosary poses. However, does this means that the subjective side of *sensus fidei*, that permits results in the recitation of Holy Rosary, is also pure theological truth by itself?

IN THE SUBJECTIVE ASPECT

As it has been mentioned before, the Holy Rosary proposes reflection to the faithful, specially about the mysteries. This is a personal reflection in which the individual itself attempts to discover faith, meaning a subjective scent with a tendency to err. However, the faithful have *sensus fidei* as a tool to find truth, guided by the Holy Spirit. In this meditation about the mysteries the subjective part of

sensus fidei is used; it is the way they understand the faith taught to them by the magisterium and their personal experience. Since *sensus fidei* guides the believers praying the Holy Rosary in the truth, their reflections should not be mistaken. But there are many factors that may interfere with the purity of *sensus fidei* infallibility, which can lead to “dissent”, as Joseph Ratzinger—now pope Benedict XVI—identifies (no. 32).

Even though the mysteries on the Holy Rosary are not exhaustive, they do bring the faithful to a deeper meditation about the mystery of Christ in the gospel (pope John Paul II no. 24). Therefore, with the guide of the Holy Spirit through *sensus fidei*, the faithful can conclude what each mystery means to him. As John Paul II says, the Holy Rosary helps to assimilate the mystery (no. 40). Nevertheless, *sensus fidei* cannot determine truth only with the subjective part of each individual, specially with the mysteries as they are mostly part of the gospel. Because, as Lawler claims, interpreting scriptures by not skilled people can mislead them because of the specific knowledge required to understand what the context of the Gospel means (136).

The individual faithful opinion, or what he or she understands from the mysteries on the Holy Rosary cannot be completely taken as part of truth through *sensus fidei* either. Each faithful has specific attachments that causes his personal perspective to sometimes discern from the truth. In such interference between truth and the faithful subjective understanding, the ideology of philosophical liberalism can be counted. It is this idea of freedom of thought that can influence the believer to think against the tradition, considered as cause of servitude (Ratzinger no. 32). The impact of mass media, public opinion, cultural and linguistic roots of the individuals also affects significantly in the meditation of the mysteries and their interpretation (no. 32).

Even if a great number of faithful have a common belief in a matter of faith, it cannot be directly considered part of *sensus fidei*. As Lawler remarks, “theological doctrines can be properly evaluated only by believers who understands the historical, philosophical, and theological competencies involved” (136). Lawler continues arguing that the number of believers does not count as the quality of them. His suggestion that *sensus fidei* should only be decided by competent authorities is debated by Fisichella. He states that the sense of faith of the whole body of faithful is the scenario of most genuine revelation since it reveals the current state of the Church (99).

Despite the aid of the Holy Spirit to guide the sense of faith, the believer can certainly err on their subjective thoughts because not everything he things “springs from faith”. As Joseph Ratzinger remembers, the faithful—and specially the laity—activities and thoughts are not all compatible with the faith (Ratzinger no. 35). And as Lawler claims “an opinion that results from a lack of education, incompetence and can never be permitted to be the exclusive rule of faith” (136). This is the reason of why the Second Vatican Council remarks the bond between “*sensus fidei* and the guidance of

God's People by the magisterium of the Pastors. These two realities cannot be separated" (Ratzinger no. 35).

As a result of what has been discussed previously, the recitation of the Holy Rosary can take the faithful to accurate conclusions about the mysteries that would form part of the subjective part of *sensus fidei*. Because the constant repetitions that focuses the individual in the mystery of Christ. Thus, the thoughts are mostly coming from faith, and the Holy Spirit that allows us to personally "adhere" to the truth. In the conditions set by the Holy Rosary, the *sensus fidei* can act efficiently as Joseph Ratzinger says, "what the believer believes is what the Church believes"(no. 35).

Conclusion

Even though the historic process of the Holy Rosary and *sensus fidei* are almost independent from each other, *sensus fidei* is certainly reflected, and plays an active role on the Holy Rosary and the faithful praying it. It is important to remark that faithful can err on their reflections, despite *sensus fidei* infallibility. Because the faithful has a series of personal and cultural attachments that may cause his meditation results to discern from the objective faith.

In order to aid faithful acknowledge faith from the mysteries, and avoid distractions from faith which may lead to discern, the Holy Rosary's structure forms an ascending ladder of focus on faith. It reaches a climax in the Doxology, after having being cultivated through the repetition of Hail Mary that links the faithful with the mysteries on Christ and Mary. By this, the faithful is isolated from a significant amount of external elements that may lead them to dissent—such as the impact of the media and popular opinion. Under these circumstances *sensus fidei* infallibility can act efficiently in guiding the faithful meditation of the mysteries, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

As pope John Paul II stated, the truth is revealed from “above” (no. 18). He quotes a passage of the New Testament, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17), in which both concepts of *sensus fidei* are blended, because the objective beliefs are revealed by God to the Church, as well as the subjective faith is inspired to the faithful by the Holy Spirit. Therefore the mysteries of the Holy Rosary respond to the objective and subjective aspects of *sensus fidei*. They are taught by the magisterium, and accepted by both laity and clergy. As it was considered in this extended essay, most of the mysteries represent public revelations through the Liturgy, but the two Marian dogmas are a direct product of *sensus fidei*'s subjective aspect lived in the community that was transformed into an objective truth for the entire church.

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