

## Unanimous Consent of the Fathers

By Steve Ray

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The Unanimous Consent of the Fathers (*unanimem consensum Patrum*) refers to the morally unanimous teaching of the Church Fathers on certain doctrines as revealed by God and interpretations of Scripture as received by the universal Church. The individual Fathers are not personally infallible, and a discrepancy by a few patristic witnesses does not harm the collective patristic testimony.

The word “unanimous” comes from two Latin words: *únus*, one + *animus*, mind. “Consent” in Latin means agreement, accord, and harmony; being of the same mind or opinion. Where the Fathers speak in harmony, with one mind overall-not necessarily each and every one agreeing on every detail but by consensus and general agreement-we have “unanimous consent”. The teachings of the Fathers provide us with an authentic witness to the apostolic tradition.

St. Irenaeus (AD c. 130-c. 200) writes of the “tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome’ (*Against Heresies*, III, 3, 2), and the “tradition which originates from the apostles [and] which is preserved by means of the successions of presbyters in the Churches” (Ibid., III, 2, 2) which “does thus exist in the Church, and is permanent among us” (Ibid., III, 5, 1). Unanimous consent develops from the understanding of apostolic teaching preserved in the Church with the Fathers as its authentic witness.

St. Vincent of Lerins, explains the Church’s teaching: “In the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense “Catholic,” which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors” (*Commonitory* 2). Notice that St. Vincent mentions “almost all priests and doctors”.

The phrase *Unanimous Consent of the Fathers* had a specific application as used at the Council of Trent (Fourth Session), and reiterated at the First Vatican Council (*Dogmatic Decrees of the Vatican Council*, chap. 2). The Council Fathers specifically applied the phrase to the interpretation of Scripture. Biblical and theological confusion was rampant in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther stated “There are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads; this one will not admit Baptism; that one

rejects the Sacrament of the altar; another places another world between the present one and the day of judgment; some teach that Jesus Christ is not God. There is not an individual, however clownish he may be, who does not claim to be inspired by the Holy Ghost, and who does not put forth as prophecies his ravings and dreams.”

A fine definition of Unanimous Consent, based on the Church Councils, is provided in the *Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary*, “When the Fathers of the Church are morally unanimous in their teaching that a certain doctrine is a part of revelation, or is received by the universal Church, or that the opposite of a doctrine is heretical, then their united testimony is a certain criterion of divine tradition. As the Fathers are not personally infallible, the counter-testimony of one or two would not be destructive of the value of the collective testimony; so a moral unanimity only is required” (Wilkes-Barre, Penn.: Dimension Books, 1965), pg. 153.

The Council Fathers at Trent (1554-63) affirmed the ancient custom that the proper understanding of Scripture was that which was held by the Fathers of the Church to bring order out of the enveloping chaos. Opposition to the Church’s teaching is exemplified by William Webster (*The Church of Rome at the Bar of History* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995]) who misrepresents the Council Fathers by redefining and misapplying “unanimous consent”. First in redefining, he implies that unanimous consent means each Father must have held the same fully developed traditions and taught them clearly in the same terms as used later in the Church Councils. This is a false understanding of the phrase and even in American law unanimous consent “does not always mean that every one present voted for the proposition, but it may, and generally does, mean, when a [verbal] vote is taken, that no one voted in the negative” (*Black’s Law Dictionary*). Second he misapplies the term, not to the interpretation of Scripture, as the Council Fathers intended, but to tradition. His assertions are not true, but using a skewed definition and application of “unanimous consent”, he uses selective patristic passages as proof-texts for his analysis of the Fathers.

As an example, individual Fathers may explain “the Rock” in Matthew 16 as Jesus, Peter, Peter’s confession or Peter’s faith. Even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to the “Rock” of Matthew 16 as Peter in one place (CCC 552) and his faith (CCC 424) in another. Matthew 16 can be applied in many ways to refute false teachings and to instruct the faithful without emphasizing the literal, historical interpretation of Peter as the Rock upon which the Church has been built his Church. Webster and others emphasize various patristic applications of a biblical passage as “proof” of non-unanimous consent.

Discussing certain variations in the interpretations of the Fathers, Pope Leo XIII (The Study of Holy Scripture, from the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, Nov., 1893) writes, “Because the defense of Holy Scripture must be carried on vigorously, all the opinions which the individual Fathers or the recent interpreters have set forth in explaining it need not be maintained equally. For they, in interpreting passages where physical matters are concerned have made judgments according to the opinions of the age, and thus not always according to truth, so that they have made statements which today are not approved. Therefore, we must carefully discern what they hand down which really

pertains to faith or is intimately connected with it, and what they hand down with unanimous consent; for ‘in those matters which are not under the obligation of faith, the saints were free to have different opinions, just as we are,’ according to the opinion of St. Thomas.”

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Referred works:

St. Irenaeus’ quote: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Roberts and Donaldson, Eerdmans, 1985, vol. 1, p. 415, 417).

St. Vincent’s quote: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Eerdmans, 1980, vol. 11, p. 132.

Luther quote: (Leslie Rumble, *Bible Quizzes to a Street Preacher* [Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1976], 22).

Maryknoll quote: (*Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary*, pg. 154).

William Webster’s quote: (*The Church of Rome at the Bar of History*, 31).

Black’s Law Dictionary: *Black’s Law Dictionary*, Henry Campbell Black, St. Paul, MN: West Publ. Co., 1979, p. 1366.

Pope Leo XIII quote: Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* [London: B. Herder Book Co., 1954], 491-492).

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Yves Congar on the “Unanimous Consent of the Fathers” from his book TRADITION AND TRADITIONS published by Macmillan Company, New York, 1966. Republished by Basilica Press and available at the Basilica website at [Missionaries of Faith Foundation](#).

“The unanimous consensus of the Fathers or of the Ecclesia clearly indicates a “locus” of the divine action” taken from Traditions and Tradition: An Historical and a Theological Essay (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), pgs. 397-400. A new edition has just been published by Basilica Press. “In every age the consensus of the faithful, still more the agreement of those who are commissioned to teach them, has been regarded as a guarantee of truth: not because of some mystique of universal suffrage, but because of the Gospel principle that unanimity and fellowship in Christian matters requires, and also indicates, the intervention of the Holy Spirit. From the time when the patristic argument first began to be used in dogmatic controversies-it first appeared in the second century and gained general currency in the fourth-, theologians have tried to establish agreement among qualified witnesses of the faith, and have tried to prove from this agreement that such was in fact the Church’s belief. As a matter of fact, a few testimonies sufficed, even that of one single man if his particular situation or the consideration accorded him by the Church were such as to give to what he said the value of coming from a quasi-personification of the whole Church at that time. The decisive factor was not mere quantity but the representative quality of the testimony: “Non numerentur, sed ponderentur!” “Unanimous patristic consent as a reliable locus theologicus is classical in Catholic theology; it has often been declared such by the magisterium and its value in

scriptural interpretation has been especially stressed. "Application of the principle is difficult, at least at a certain level. [It is here where Bill is no surgeon. Rather than understanding the concept in its complexities, he swings the axe and slashes through the whole concept with the precision of wood chopper, not a surgeon or theologian.] In regard to individual texts of Scripture total patristic consensus is rare. In fact, a complete consensus is unnecessary: quite often, that which is appealed to as sufficient for dogmatic points does not go beyond what is encountered in the interpretation of many texts. But it does sometimes happen that some Fathers understood a passage in a way which does not agree with later Church teaching. One example: the interpretation of Peter's confession in Matthew 16.16-18. Except at Rome, this passage was not applied by the Fathers to the papal primacy; they worked out an exegesis at the level of their own ecclesiological thought, more anthropological and spiritual than juridical. "This instance, selected from a number of similar ones, shows first that the Fathers cannot be isolated from the Church and its life. They are great, but the Church surpasses them in age, as also by the breadth and richness of its experience. It is the Church, not the Fathers, the consensus of the Church in submission to its Saviour which is the sufficient rule of our Christianity. This instance shows too that we may not, at the doctrinal as distinct from the purely historical level, take the witnesses of Tradition in a purely material sense: they are to be weighed and valued. The plain material fact of agreement or disagreement, however extensive, does not allow us to speak of a consensus Patrum at the properly dogmatic level, for the authors studied in theology are only "Fathers" in the theological sense if they have in some way begotten the Church which follows them. Now, it may be that the seed which will be most fruitful in the future is not the most clearly so at present, and that the lifelines of faith may not pass through the great doctors in a given instance. Historical documentation is at the factual level; it must leave room for a judgement made not in the light of the documentary evidence alone, but of the Church's faith. We shall come back, in the next chapter, to this problem which we have already, in fact, encountered: that is, the question of the precise distinction to be made between material (historical) and formal (dogmatic) Tradition. "It can, however, be seen that as regards the explanation of a particular text, or a particular article of doctrine, the theological weight of the consensus Patrum is subject to so many conditions' that it cannot be easily assessed. Students and devotees of the Fathers-among whom I should wish to number myself-might well feel disappointed if they had no other guidance. But, for a start, there are the foundations of faith, the articles on which the whole structure rests; there are the directions, meanings and spiritual climate in which the content and implications of our covenant relation, as attested in Scripture, have been lived, developed, specified and defended. As far as the reading of Scripture is concerned, there has been built up in that way something more valuable than an interpretative exegetical consensus on some individual verse, I mean the total framework, inside which and starting from which all Catholic reading of written revelation has been formed and educated. This is the most important element, the essential contribution of the Fathers to the formation of an exegetical Tradition. "When we see the Fathers in this way, as those who have formed the milieu of the Church's historical growth (see the next chapter), we find that they are unanimous, we are at the heart of their real consensus. We have seen that Tradition is for a Christian almost what the educational milieu is for man in general; the child needs to form its own conclusions in a milieu which provides him with security; it is fundamentally the role of the

consensus of the Fathers to provide such an element in the Church.”