




For a synodal Church
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BIBLICAL RESOURCES FOR SYNODALITY



SYNOD OF BISHOPS



Commission on Spirituality
Biblical Sub-Group
March 2022

Biblical texts in English from the
Revised New American Bible
and The Abbey Psalms and Canticles
With the authorization of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.



Nature of this Document

This document contains all of the papers that have been authored, edited and discussed by the Biblical Sub-Group of the Commission on Spirituality.

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Scripture at the Heart of the Synodal Journey

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Introduction

For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently, these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess 2:13).

(DV 21)

From the beginning scripture, both Old and New Testaments, have been at the centre of the Church's life. We can see how often in the Gospels, Jesus quotes from the prophets and the Psalms. Many times, too, in the Gospels and in the Letters, we see how the words of the prophets offer ways of understanding who Jesus is. At the same time Jesus himself becomes a new source of understanding for the books of the Old Testament and the promise of God and the hope of its fulfilment that they contain. For the Church and for everyone, scripture, especially the New Testament is a meeting with Christ and the Father he reveals.

Through the quiet and subtle action of the Holy Spirit, the words of scripture become living words in the Church. They renew and inspire and lift our hearts and imaginations to see God's redeeming and healing love at work in our lives, our Church and our world.

The word of God is truly our 'food for the journey' so that no matter how difficult or tiring we may feel it to be, the weary soul is refreshed, and the sorrowful soul is comforted (Jer 31:25). For the word of the Lord is like a fountain of water in a dry land, springing up to eternal life (Jn 4:14). This is why scripture is at the heart of the synodal journey. As we read it and pray it, we encounter Christ in our midst and see ourselves, our Church, and our world through the eyes of faith.

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we can experience our hearts burning within us through life of the Holy Spirit and we know that He is with us always 'until the very end of the age' (Matt 28:20).¹

¹ *Verbum Domini* §51.

Some ways of praying scripture:

The Church has many ways of praying and listening to the word of God in scripture. Two of the oldest and most effective are *lectio divina* and *imaginative contemplation*. In both ways we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. Through the texts and words of scripture we are brought into an ever-deeper relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We enter an intimate conversation; in some way the whole of scripture is a conversation with many different tones and modulations between God and Israel, Christ and us, his Church.² Sometimes this will happen in the words and images, the memories and desires that are stirred and brought to our mind and heart. This sort of prayer in, with and through scripture is as much a movement of the heart as of our mind. Often, is not so much what is said or thought or understood, but we find ourselves drawn into the reverent and adoring still silence of presence.

We may discover, too, that it is not we who reads a text, but the text that read us. It opens aspects of our life and experience which we had not seen or understood so well before; it can help us to see our patterns of avoidance and our fears. Always, it moves us into a sort of conversion of heart and mind; expanding our horizons, opening and renewing us, redirecting our actions, giving us a new way of seeing and understanding.³ It can give us a new sense of direction and purpose in serving Christ and letting him 'make his home in us'.

It does not matter if this happens suddenly or over a long period of time like the waves of the sea smoothing and reshaping the rocks on the shore. In whatever way we experience it, we always recognise that it comes to us as gift. While practices and techniques, knowledge and study can help us, it is only when we approach with humility and faith, reading with love that we can receive the gift and enter its new world – our world.

In praying scripture, we make our home in Christ – for scripture is the simple manger in which he dwells and where, through the Holy Spirit, we are nourished into life. In this home of scripture, we can always find him no matter how we come or whatever our condition may be. When we pray scripture, we hear his voice and we learn to recognise it among so many other voices that come to us in the clamour of our daily life.

² *Verbum Domini* §6.

³ *Verbum Domini* §39, 61, 87.

In the scriptural house of the Lord, we also meet so many others - it is the home for all who follow him and the place where all who seek him can find him. In the house of scripture is filled with every type and condition of person; no one is excluded for 'in my Father's house are many mansions'. In these living pages we discover the whole of humanity and we become more human. We experience God's compassion, passionate justice, patient and gentle love, its majesty and humility. By spending time living in this home like children with their parents, brothers and sisters, we come to take on the family traits and characteristics. Through the life we touch on every page we, too, learn how to live God's compassion, hunger for God's justice and be a home, a refuge, for the suffering, the abandoned and despairing of our world. As we live in this home, we become his disciples and apostles; we become his friends.

"You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another." (Jn 15: 14-17).

Lectio Divina and Imaginative Contemplation⁴

Lectio Divina

As Synod 2021-2023 emphasizes listening attentively to the Word of God, the practice of *Lectio Divina* remains a long-standing tradition in the Christian Church. Many date the practice of *Lectio Divina* with the twelfth century Carthusian Guido II, who organized the four-point system of its practice. But if we read the sources of the early Christian tradition, we discover that that *Lectio Divina* comes early in the life of the Church. Combing the writings of St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Augustine of Hippo, John Cassian, St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Gregory the Great, St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom and more, we see that *Lectio Divina* was a daily part of their spiritual exercises. They connected the idea of “reading the Scriptures,” with then “praying from the Scriptures” as one single act. Reading the sacred texts would then lead to praying spontaneously from those texts.

Guido II (d. 1188) gave a clear four-point plan for approaching the Scriptures: first, you *read* the text slowly and deliberately; second you *meditate* or *reflect* on what you have just read, focusing on what touched your heart, stopped you in your reading; third, you *pray* from what inspired or touched you in the text, drawing from your life experiences, your hopes, your relationship with God; and fourth, you *contemplate* further from what you read, pondered, and prayed in an environment of silence. This practice, often done for centuries in monastic communities, has now become a mode of reading the Scriptures for priests, religious and lay men, and women. Today *Lectio Divina* is practice by individuals in private, and by groups in common. Before 1985, there was hardly an article written about this practice; now there are numerous books which explain its early origins, its development, and its present practice. Believing that the Scriptures contain God’s Word to us today, engaging in this practice teaches us to pray by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ *Verbum Domini* §6.

Imaginative contemplation

One of the great gifts that God has given human beings is the power of imagination. Without it we would have no great literature, art or music. Our capacity to imagine ourselves into the life or situation of another is an important feature of our moral capacity. Compassion, especially when it translates itself into transformative action, requires our affective imagination for it often goes beyond duty, rules and customs to the distress of the person or persons in need.

In his parables and stories, Jesus frequently engages our imagination to help us see things in a new way, or to challenge our prejudices and resistances. The obvious example here is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) or those beautiful passages when Jesus uses images from nature and scenes from daily life to give us a new vision and understanding of God (Matt 6:25-34, Lk 12:22-32). The fact that they can still move us is a testimony to their continuing power to stimulate our imagination and through it we are also drawn into the world seen through the eyes of Christ.

In these instances, 'imagination' is more than fantasy; it becomes another way of knowing or gaining access to new knowledge. It can be a way of helping us gain insight into things and enables us to understand reality more clearly and vividly. In fact, as the great prophets show us, through the power of imagination, we can make the past present as a resource for situations in the present and we can have a vision of a future that inspires hope. So, when we speak of 'imaginative contemplation' we are not speaking of some diversion or escapist fantasy, we are engaged in a prayerful exercise that is normally controlled by scripture and uses the intelligence of faith. We are opening our heart, mind and senses to experience God and God's presence in our world. This is not something we can command or invent. It comes as a gift in which the Holy Spirit moves our imagination which has God as its subject. The exercise of our imagination engages all our powers and capacities, but most of all it engages our heart.

In a sense, imaginative contemplation is a heart that has eyes; Christ is at its centre. The prayer of imaginative contemplation is always a movement of love — purified in waiting and longing — that draws us into the life of God who is Love. In every experience of imaginative contemplation, we give expression to our desire: to be enrolled in this school of God's love, to begin to see and understand our world in the light of God's grace.

'Imaginative contemplation'

is an ancient way of praying. Elements of it are present in the Fathers and in the monastic tradition, in the writings of Anselm and Aelred of Rievaulx and passing from the Cistercians to the Franciscans and Carthusians. In fact, together with the *Lectio Divina*, it is a way of praying that can be found in all the great schools of prayer and, especially in the great teachers of Christian prayer. It is one of the principal ways of praying recommended by St Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises. In a sense, Ignatius 'popularises' this form of contemplative prayer. *Imaginative contemplation* is especially accessible to everyone, and it normally takes as its subject a scene from scripture or an action of Christ. At its heart are the mysteries of Faith, especially the mysteries of the life of Christ. In it we place ourselves in relation to Christ through a scene usually taken from scripture or it can be drawn directly from our own situation. It is an affective prayer, a prayer of the heart. In the monastic tradition, *imaginative contemplation* is proposed as privileged way of seeking union with God. In the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, it is offered as a way of following and imitating Christ more closely. Whatever school we draw from, the purpose is always constant: a deep, affective knowledge and love of Christ, and a deeper understanding love of the mysteries of faith. Through the practice of *imaginative contemplation*, we gradually become accustomed to apprehending all things in Christ, putting on Christ, as St Paul says (Rom 13:14; 1Cor 2:6). We not only grow in this 'interior affective knowledge' of Christ, but we also grow in gratitude for the grace of our salvation. As well as deeper understanding and love, a fruit of *imaginative contemplation* is also an increase in our desire to serve Christ and our neighbour whatever the circumstances in which we find him or her (Matt 25:31ff.). *Imaginative contemplation* is a prayer that is completed in a graced compassion for the world.

Lectio Divina and Imaginative Contemplation: Two Examples

Psalm 34 – The Text

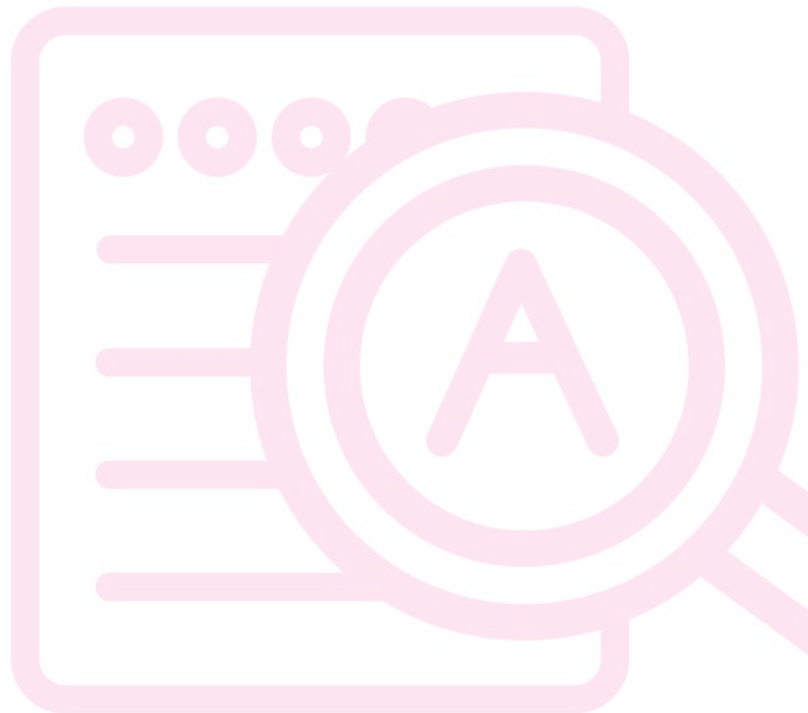
- ¹ *Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech,^[b] who drove him out and he went away.*
- ² *I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall be always in my mouth.*
- ³ *My soul will glory in the LORD;
let the poor hear and be glad.*
- ⁴ *Magnify the LORD with me;
and let us exalt his name together.*
- ⁵ *I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
delivered me from all my fears.*
- ⁶ *Look to him and be radiant,
and your faces may not blush for shame.*
- ⁷ *This poor one cried out and the LORD heard,
and from all his distress he saved him.*
- ⁸ *The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and he saves them.*
- ⁹ *Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the stalwart one who takes refuge in him.*
- ¹⁰ *Fear the LORD, you his holy ones;
nothing is lacking to those who fear him.*
- ¹¹ *The rich grow poor and go hungry,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.*
- ¹² *Come, children,^[c] listen to me;
I will teach you fear of the LORD.*
- ¹³ *Who is the man who delights in life,
who loves to see the good days?*
- ¹⁴ *Keep your tongue from evil,
your lips from speaking lies.*

- ¹⁵ Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.
- ¹⁶ The eyes of the LORD are directed toward the righteous
and his ears toward their cry.
- ¹⁷ The LORD's face is against evildoers
to wipe out their memory from the earth.
- ¹⁸ The righteous cry out, the LORD hears
and he rescues them from all their afflictions.
- ¹⁹ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted,
saves those whose spirit is crushed.
- ²⁰ Many are the troubles of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him from them all.
- ²¹ He watches over all his bones;
not one of them shall be broken.
- ²² Evil will slay the wicked;
those who hate the righteous are condemned.
- ²³ The LORD is the redeemer of the souls of his servants;
and none are condemned who take refuge in him.



Background to the text

Psalm 34 is classified as a Wisdom Psalm. By its very title, Wisdom Psalms often intend to teach and to give instruction. Some verses will encourage the reader to action; other verses express a beatitude or blessed way of living in accord with God's law. Experience itself is highlighted as a way of finding one's way in life. One of their characteristics is that they follow the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; the first line begins with a word beginning with the letter *aleph*, and the second line, *beth*, and so forth. Some scholars have suggested this was to help memorize the Psalm; others have suggested that having all the letters of the alphabet, it expresses a fullness or plenitude of teaching about both human and spiritual wisdom. Sometimes the letters of the alphabet suggest that the Psalm contains an anthology of right conduct, or praise of God, or reasons for being grateful. The Psalms classified as Wisdom Psalms are 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145.





Some key aspects for reflection

- 1) **Notice the commands given.** As Wisdom Psalms intend to instruct, take note of the number commands that are given: Glorify the LORD; Look toward God and be radiant; Taste and see; Fear the Lord; Come children, and hear me; Guard your tongue from evil; Turn aside from evil and do good; Seek after peace. Each of these commands is worth careful and serious reflection, drawing us into the life of Christ and affecting the way we relate to one another. Serious meditation on the words of Scripture can include simply pausing on one word and savouring its meaning for our lives and present situations.
- 2) **The LORD.** The divine name in small caps tells the reader this is the name of God as revealed to Moses in the burning bush – Yahweh, I am who I am. Throughout this Psalm, the repetition of the Divine Name shows God in relationship with us. Whether it is a call to praise or thanks God, to fear or to trust, it reminds us that the Scriptures call us to an ever-deepening union with the One who created us and still promises us new and abundant life.
- 3) **Justice.** The biblical notion of justice is not so much about weighing things to find a balance. Rather, justice is concerned with right relationship. Throughout this Psalm, we find the levels of right relationship which draw us closer to God and to our neighbour. As the just person cries out to God in need, deliverance follows (v. 18). The LORD turns away from the wicked and remembers them no more (v. 17). The Psalmist reveals to us the ways in which the justice of God unfolds in our human existence. While there is suffering, the Psalmist can still praise and thank God.
- 4) **Praise and blessing.** It is significant that this Psalm begins on a note of praise and exaltation of God. We notice how the Psalm emphasizes praise of God “at all times” (v. 2). Yet in the Psalm itself, there are expressions of suffering that come from enemies; despite these difficulties, the Psalmist continues to offer gratitude and praise to God. And with this, the Psalmist gives examples of those who look to God with confidence and find that a just life and faithful prayer will bring blessings.



Implications for Synodality

- 1) **Sense of communion/unity.** Throughout Psalm 34, there is an invitation to offer praise and gratitude for God's goodness. There is a sense of communion in several of the expressions used: "Glorify the LORD with me; together, let us praise God's name" (v. 4); Fear the LORD [...] they lack nothing who fear (v. 10); Those who seek the LORD lack no blessing (v. 11b); see also vv. 7, 12, 16, 18-19, 23.
- 2) **Invitation to decision.** As a Wisdom Psalm intends to instruct, the teachings found here also have implications both for God's blessings and the difficulties that come with wrong decisions. In the end, synodal movements will try to encourage others to listen openly, and to choose the way they think is the wisest to follow.
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Questions for reflection

- 1) According to the back section of the Lectionary, we note that Psalm 34 is used very often in the liturgy as a responsorial Psalm. What might be synodal contexts in where this Psalm could be used to considerable benefit for those who are entering a discerning process?
- 2) The expression “fear the LORD” appears four times in this Psalm (cf. vv. 8, 10a, 10b, 12). In Hebrew this is probably best translated “revere the LORD.” How does “reverence” of God and divine instruction also manifest a synodal way of listening not only to God, but to one another?

Psalm 34. Imaginative Contemplation

1. Take time to read through the text slowly. Then put the text aside and in your imagination recall it.

2. We can assume that Jesus knew the Psalms intimately and prayed them. We can imagine him praying this Psalm and how, in him, its words of praise become alive in his life.
 - o Take each verse and let its images and sounds come to your imagination. How do they move you? What other images do they produce in you/us?

 - o The Psalm can be said or sung as a personal prayer or by a community. It is an invitation to gather people into a community that knows God and God's justice and care. Imagine the community that the Psalm wishes to gather and the experience of God that might produce this Psalm.

 - o The Psalmist has a very vivid sense of God that comes through the Psalm. Who is the God that the Psalmist speaks of? What images are used to convey this sense of God's glory and God's love?

 - o Can you imagine in what circumstances and situations the words of the Psalm can speak?
 - o The Psalm is also a prayer – what prayer does it inspire in me/us?

 - o Conclude by saying or singing the Psalm again and letting its sense of God and our intimate, living and vivid relationship stay with you/us.



The Voice of the Fathers, Psalm (33)34: It Takes Humility to Bless the Lord all the Time⁵

"I will bless the Lord, at all times; his praise shall be in my mouth always." Christ says this,⁶ so let every Christian say it too, because each Christian is part of Christ's body, and Christ is human to the end that every Christian who says, I will bless the Lord, may be an angel. When are you to bless the Lord? When he showers blessings on you? When earthly goods are plentiful? When you have a plethora of grain, oil, wine, gold, silver, slaves, livestock; while your mortal body remains healthy, uninjured and free from disease; while everything that is born on your estate is growing well, and nothing is snatched away by untimely death; while every kind of happiness floods your home, and you have all you want in profusion? Is it only then that you are to bless the Lord? No, but at all times. So, you are to bless him equally when from time to time, or because the Lord God wishes to discipline you, these good things let you down or are taken from you, when there are fewer births or the already-born slip away. These things happen, and their consequence is poverty, need, hardship, disappointment and temptation. But you sang, I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be in my mouth always, so when the Lord gives you these good things, bless him, and when he takes them away, bless him. He it is who gives, and he it is who takes away, but he does not take himself away from anyone who blesses him.

⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Exposition on Psalm 33*, (1), 3 Translated by M. Boulding, OSB, (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century III/16*), Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1999, 25

⁶ Note that according the Patristic prosopographic exegesis, to the quaestio "*Quid loquitur?*", the Fathers answered "*Christus*". It's Christ who speaks in the Psalm, at times as the Head and at other times as the Body, forming One single person (*Una persona*) (Cf. Augustine's *Christus totus*)

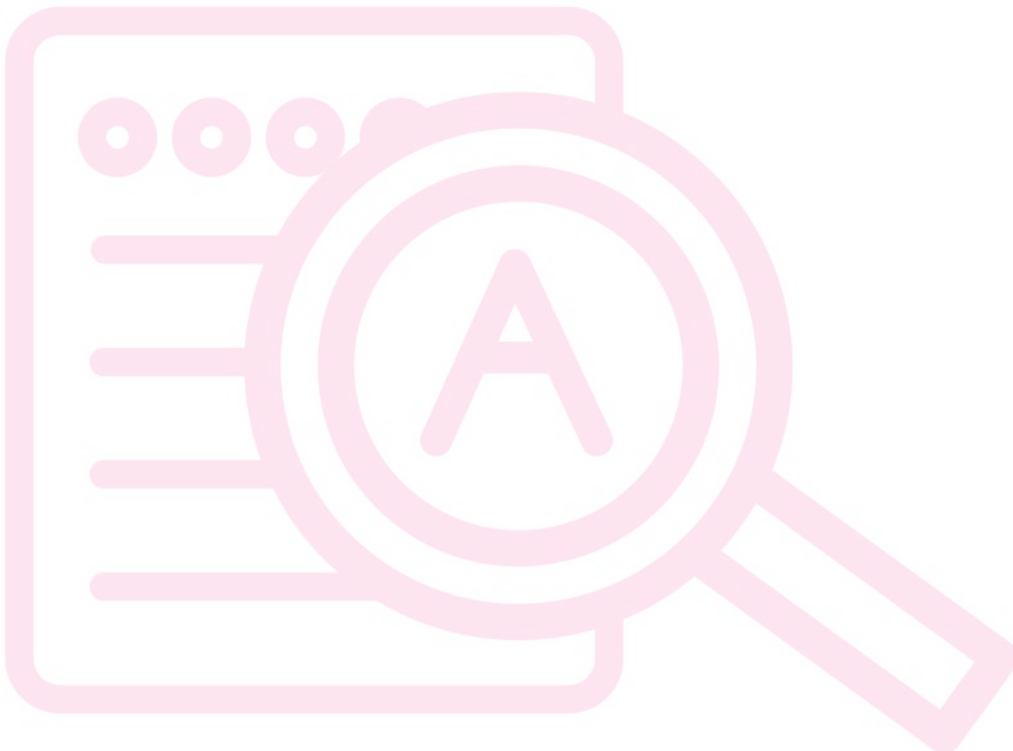
Lectio Divina: Mark 2:1-12

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. ³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts?⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹ "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." ¹² And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"



Background

This passage in Mark's Gospel stands within a series of narratives about Jesus' healing miracles and his confrontations with those who oppose his teaching and example. The language that Jesus uses carries a strong sense of authority, and the people respond to it (7:37). The point of conflict here centres around Jesus' authority to forgive sin (2:6-7). His opponents' comment, "Who can forgive sins but God alone." Jesus then moves from saying something to acting, that is, bringing healing to the paralytic. The conclusion to this passage resonates with the response of the people: "This amazed everyone, and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'" We note that their praise is given to God who has acted in this context; this is followed by the amazement of those who are the eyewitnesses of this miracle.





Some key aspects

- 1) **The word of Jesus.** We note that Jesus speaks, and what he says comes into being. There is a likeness to the account of creation where God spoke a word, (let there be light) and the element came into being. The word of Jesus holds an amazing and wondrous power. This Gospel passage expresses this in giving witness to the numerous people who gathered to hear him speak (2:2). This will give rise to another important element in the development of Mark's interpretation of this passage and it will touch on the development of synodality in the text.
- 2) **The manner of healing.** We note that Jesus first tells the man that his sins are forgiven. It was only later that, with the negative response of the teachers of the law, that the healing takes place. We remember that sickness was often associated in biblical times with punishment for sinful acts. We can see here a connection of how forgiveness leads to healing, wholeness.
- 3) **The interiority of Jesus.** The text reads that "Jesus knew in his spirit" what they were thinking in their hearts. Then in all honesty, Jesus confronts the reactions toward him. He then moves to show that his words have authority and power. Yet it is important to note how the Gospel account emphasizes the honest reactions of Jesus, and an interior sense of what was wrong in this situation.
- 4) **Faith.** This passage touches on various expressions of faith: the people who came to listen and see him, the men who assisted the paralyzed man, and the paralytic himself. Expressions of faith can come in different sizes: the greater the need, the stronger the faith. And the expression of blessing which comes with faith, builds the level of trust in those who experience it in themselves, and/or in others.



Implications for Synodality

- 1) **Unity in the service of another.** The action of the four men who come together to be sure that, despite the crowd that kept the paralytic from contact with Jesus, they would do whatever it would take to establish closeness. Here the synodality is found in the service of a common goal for the good of another. It might be expressed in an old adage, "Where there is a will, there is a way." When there is a goal that needs the support and encouragement of others, the way forward is synodality. It leads to common efforts for the good, and usually produces much advantageous fruit.
- 2) **Rejection of division.** While Jesus saw both those who were ready to accept the word he had from the Father, there were those who denied, rejected, and named it blasphemy. Jesus saw what was just and right, guided by the Spirit within him. Within the process of synodality, the honesty that comes forth can bear fruit; and it also can produce rejection, hostility, and anger. The synodal process needs to keep its vision focused on what is honest and true in those who share their thoughts and ideas. When there seems to be deep division, there must be a process of continue listening with an open heart, remaining honest, and striving for a positive end.



Questions for prayerful reflection

- 1) How can a synodal process of discernment be a source of healing and wholeness, truth, and blessing? And can we imagine that our simple and honest efforts are able to make a difference in the lives of others?
- 2) One of the thoughts that came to mind in reflecting on this passage is the old adage, "The truth will set you free." Am I able to see how the synodal process can change my own perspective on a matter, and free both me and others in working through an issue with honesty and goodwill?

Mark 2: 1-12. Imaginative Contemplation

a) Take time to read through the text slowly. Then put the text aside and in your imagination recall it.

- What sort of place? Use all your senses – the colour, the sound, the smell, the touch of the place and the people.
- Imagine the faces of the crowd, the women, the children, the old men and the young men etc. What are they wearing? What expressions do they have? Can you tell from their faces and physical appearances what sort of work they do and what hardships have left their mark?
- What questions, memories, hopes, histories do they bring? In what ways might they also be 'paralysed'?
- The paralytic and his friends. Try to visualise them. What hope or desperation might the paralytic have? How might he feel about having to trust his friends and rely on them and their determination and ingenuity.
- And the friends - what about them? What sort of words or feelings might describe them? When he looks around the crowd what does he see and feel?
- At the centre is Jesus. What does he look like? What does his voice sound like?
- And the scribes? What do they see and how do they feel?
- Consider the different reactions to the healing: The paralytic, his friends, the crowd, the scribes?
- And where are you in this scene?
- Take some time to notice your own feelings – what moves you? What holds you? What do you resist?
- Is there anyone you wish to bring to Christ? Are there friends who have carried you? Are there times when you regret not carrying someone?

b) Take some time to reflect on the whole movement of your imaginative prayer. What is it that you wish to say to Christ or ask of him? What is the grace or gift that you desire?

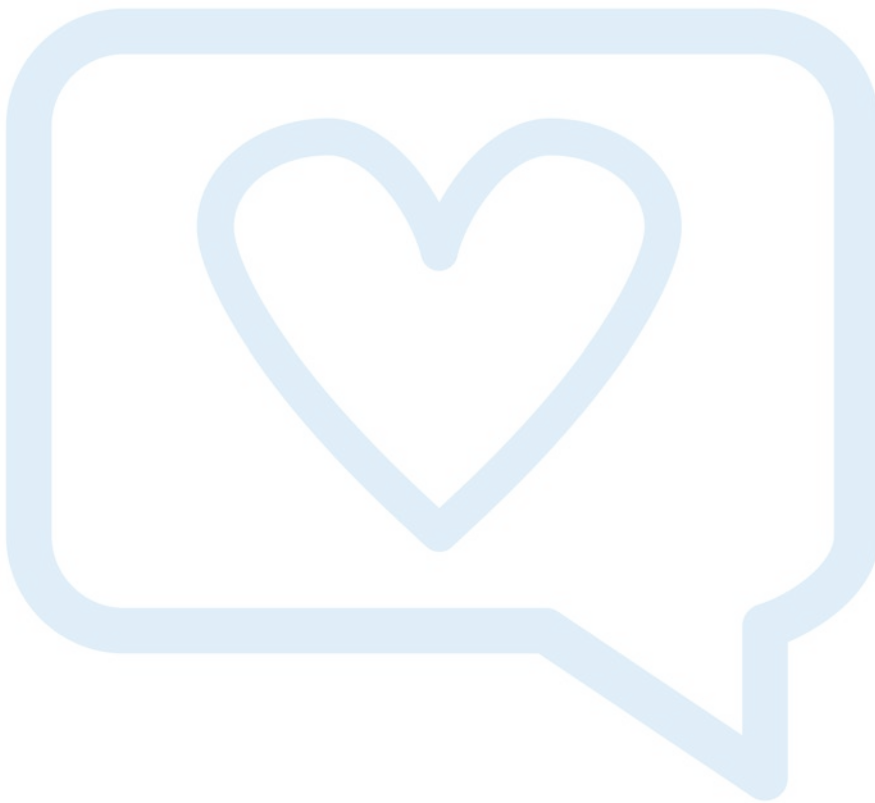
- Conclude the prayer with some gesture of gratitude and thanksgiving.

c) When the prayer is concluded, take some quiet time to reflect upon it, especially what it may say about the experience of community, healing, Christ and the nature of the Church.



The Voice of the Fathers, Mark 2. 1-12: Healing the Whole Person (Clement of Alexandria)⁷

The physician's art, according to Democritus, heals the diseases of the body; wisdom frees the soul from its obsessions. But the good Instructor, Wisdom, who is the Word of the Father who assumed human flesh, cares for the whole nature of his creature. The all-sufficient Physician of humanity, the Saviour, heals both body and soul conjointly. "Stand up," he commanded the paralytic; "take the bed on which you lie, and go home"; and immediately the paralytic received strength.



⁷ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Christ the Educator* 1.4.



The Voice of the Fathers, Mark 2. 1-12: Reverse Your Relation with Sickness (Peter Chrysologus)⁸

Take up your bed. Carry the very mat that once carried you. Change places, so that what was the proof of your sickness may now give testimony to your soundness. Your bed of pain becomes the sign of healing, its very weight the measure of the strength that has been restored to you.

⁸ PETER CHRYSOLOGUS, Homily 50, 6, in M. F. Toal, trans. and ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers. A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading and Meditation*. Vol. 4, N.J.: Preservation Press, 1996, 191.

Searching for Synodality in the Old Testament

Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, OSB

As the Church prepares for the Synod of Bishops on the topic of Synodality, the point of departure should take into account the words of Sacred Scriptures. There, in the Bible, God has spoken to his people in ways that continue to speak to us today. Yet, we understand that we are stepping into another moment long ago in history, observing a different culture, and interpreting texts from another language, all of which can still speak to us today. The Confessions of Saint Augustine speak of God as the “Beauty ever ancient and ever new;” we can also apply this adage to the Scriptures, for these texts are one of God’s special ways of speaking to his people. In this paper we will consider two texts of the Old Testament that can lead us to reflect on the topic of Synodality: Psalm 107 and Joshua 24, the first a prayer in poetic form, the second a narrative at an important juncture in biblical history.

Psalm 107

- ¹ *“O give thanks to the LORD for he is good; for his mercy endures forever.”*
- ² *Let the redeemed of the LORD say this, those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,*
- ³ *and gathered from far-off lands, from east and west, north and south.*
- ⁴ *They wandered in a barren desert, finding no way to a city they could dwell in.*
- ⁵ *Hungry they were and thirsty; their soul was fainting within them.*
- ⁶ *Then they cried to the LORD in their need, and he rescued them from their distress,*
- ⁷ *and he guided them along a straight path, to reach a city they could dwell in.*
- ⁸ *Let them thank the LORD for his mercy, his wonders for the whole human race;*
- ⁹ *for he satisfies the thirsty soul, and the hungry he fills with good things.*

¹⁰ Some dwelt in darkness and the shadow of death,
prisoners in misery and chains,
¹¹ having rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the plan of the Most High.
¹² He humbled their heart with toil.
They stumbled; there was no one to help.
¹³ Then they cried to the LORD in their need,
and he rescued them from their distress.
¹⁴ He led them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and broke their chains to pieces.
¹⁵ Let them thank the LORD for his mercy,
his wonders for the whole human race;
¹⁶ for he bursts the gates of bronze,
and cuts through the iron bars.
¹⁷ Some fell sick on account of their sins,
and were afflicted on account of their guilt.
¹⁸ They had a loathing for every food;
they drew near to the gates of death.
¹⁹ Then they cried to the LORD in their need,
and he rescued them from their distress.
²⁰ He sent forth his word to heal them,
and saved their life from destruction.
²¹ Let them thank the LORD for his mercy,
his wonders for the whole human race.
²² Let them offer a sacrifice of thanks,
and tell of his deeds with rejoicing.
²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
to trade on the mighty waters.
²⁴ These have seen the deeds of the LORD,
the wonders he does in the deep.
²⁵ For he spoke and raised up the storm-wind,
tossing high the waves of the sea
²⁶ that surged to heaven and dropped to the depths.
Their souls melted away in their distress.
²⁷ They staggered and reeled like drunkards,
for all their skill was gone.
²⁸ Then they cried to the LORD in their need,
and he rescued them from their distress.
²⁹ He stilled the storm to a whisper,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

- ³⁰ They rejoiced because of the calm,
and he led them to the haven they desired.
- ³¹ Let them thank the LORD for his mercy,
his wonders for the whole human race.
- ³² Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people,
and praise him in the meeting of the elders.
- ³³ He changes rivers into desert,
springs of water into thirsty ground,
- ³⁴ fruitful land into a salty waste,
for the wickedness of those who live there.
- ³⁵ He changes desert into pools of water,
thirsty ground into springs of water.
- ³⁶ There he settles the hungry,
and they establish a city to dwell in.
- ³⁷ They sow fields and plant their vines,
which yield an abundant harvest.
- ³⁸ He blesses them; they grow in numbers.
He does not let their cattle decrease.
- ³⁹ They are diminished and brought low by oppression,
evil, and sorrow.
- ⁴⁰ He pours contempt upon princes,
makes them wander in trackless wastes.
- ⁴¹ But he raises the needy from distress;
makes families numerous as a flock.
- ⁴² The upright see it and rejoice,
while all the wicked close their mouths.
- ⁴³ Should not one who is wise recall these things,
and understand the merciful deeds of the LORD?



Background

Psalm 107 begins the fifth and final book of the Psalter. Its placement at this point in the Book of Psalms ushers in a collection of Psalms that lift up deep gratitude and profound praise to God for his saving action in the lives of the people of Israel. In times of misfortune and danger, this Psalm recalls the ways in which God has come to the aid of the people, bringing them redemption and deliverance. The way that the Psalm is arranged suggests that it comes from a liturgical context because of the repeating refrain: “Let them thank the LORD for his mercy, his wonders for the whole human race” (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). Then following each of these verses of the refrain, there comes an expression of divine mercy given to the community or a call for a united expression of gratitude: “for he satisfies the thirsty soul and the hungry he fills with good things” (v. 9); “for he bursts the gates of bronze, and cuts through the iron bars” (v. 16); “Let them offer a sacrifice of thanks, and tell of his deeds with rejoicing” (v. 22); “Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people, and praise him in the meeting of the elders” (v. 32). These repeated refrains and expressions of divine assistance suggest that the events of the past now look to a brighter and more hopeful future.



Some key aspects

The imagery found here speaks of a language we can easily identify with even today: hunger and thirst, sickness and death, rebellion and agitation toward God, deep waters and storms. Yet the merciful and loving hand of God brought them food, healing, peace and safety; all these are reasons for praise and gratitude. The language of this Psalm is evocative of the exodus event, the pilgrimage of a people on the march. The repeated refrain, "Let them thank the LORD for his mercy, his wonders for the whole human race" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31), strikes a chord that God is the One who has been with them throughout this journey; God has personally redeemed them to know and experience divine care and concern. As a people, united in their understanding of God's presence and care, there is a unity which comes forth in the repeated expression of their gratitude for all that has been, all that is now, and may we suggest, all that is yet to come.



Implications for Synodality

- a) In the context of Psalm 107's structure, we find a refrain of the people, and also a recitation of the deeds, sins, and blessings that have shaped their history. While the refrain is repeated by all, the community *listens and reflects* on their history. As they listen to the deeds of the past, now the decision is where do we go from here? Do we trust that God has been and is now with us?
- b) Hearing the history which brings together both a sinful past and a divine rescue, the people see a common *unity* which they share as a people. As we suggest this Psalm as used in a liturgical context, its regular recitation in the liturgy forms and builds the unity of a people saved and redeemed. Its repetition reminds the people of their past, and encourages them to *reflect* on their present and future.
- c) As a liturgical Psalm, the *participation of the whole community* serves to create a *communion of belief* in the way that God has acted toward them. Their recitation of the refrain reminds them of their past, but also points out a path to renewal of heart and action, a *mission* to be faithful to God's way to newness of life.



Questions for prayerful reflection

- 1) How carefully do I listen, truly listen to God's voice in the words of a Psalm in the liturgy? So often we recite the words, taking them as a prayer from past ages. How can I allow the words of the Psalmist to be a springboard to my own prayer?
- 2) When I participate in a liturgy, what truths can I remind myself to deepen a sense of communion or unity with those who have gathered with me, even if I do not know them?
- 3) When the celebrant of the Mass says, "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord," what does that mean to me, or does it just a way of saying, "we are finished here"? Can I carry a sense of mission to be an instrument of God's loving action in my life?
- 4) How do "listening" and "responding" in the liturgy express the virtues of synodality?

Joshua 24

Covenant Ceremony. ¹ Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, summoning the elders, leaders, judges, and officers of Israel. When they stood in ranks before God, ² Joshua addressed all the people: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: In times past your ancestors, down to Terah, father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and served other gods. ³ But I brought your father Abraham from the region beyond the River and led him through the entire land of Canaan. I made his descendants numerous and gave him Isaac. ⁴ To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I assigned the mountain region of Seir to possess, while Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.

⁵ "Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and struck Egypt with the plagues and wonders that I wrought in her midst. Afterward I led you out. ⁶ And when I led your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors to the Red Sea with chariots and charioteers. ⁷ When they cried out to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, upon whom he brought the sea so that it covered them. Your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. After you dwelt a long time in the wilderness, ⁸ I brought you into the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I delivered them into your power. You took possession of their land, and I destroyed them at your approach. ⁹ Then Balak, son of Zippor, king of Moab, prepared to war against Israel. He summoned Balaam, son of Beor, to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam. Instead, he had to bless you, and I delivered you from his power. ¹¹ Once you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, but I delivered them also into your power. ¹² And I sent the hornets ahead of you which drove them—the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites—out of your way; it was not your sword or your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land you did not till and cities you did not build, to dwell in; you ate of vineyards and olive groves you did not plant.

¹⁴ "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve him completely and sincerely. Cast out the gods your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ If it is displeasing to you to serve the LORD, choose today whom you will serve, the gods your ancestors served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

¹⁶ But the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods. ¹⁷ For it was the LORD, our God, who brought us and

our ancestors up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. He performed those great signs before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among all the peoples through whom we passed.¹⁸ At our approach the LORD drove out all the peoples, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹ Joshua in turn said to the people, “You may not be able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God; he is a passionate God who will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve strange gods, he will then do evil to you and destroy you, after having done you good.”

²¹ But the people answered Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”
²² Joshua therefore said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.” They replied, “We are witnesses!”²³ “Now, therefore, put away the foreign gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”²⁴ Then the people promised Joshua, “We will serve the LORD, our God, and will listen to his voice.”

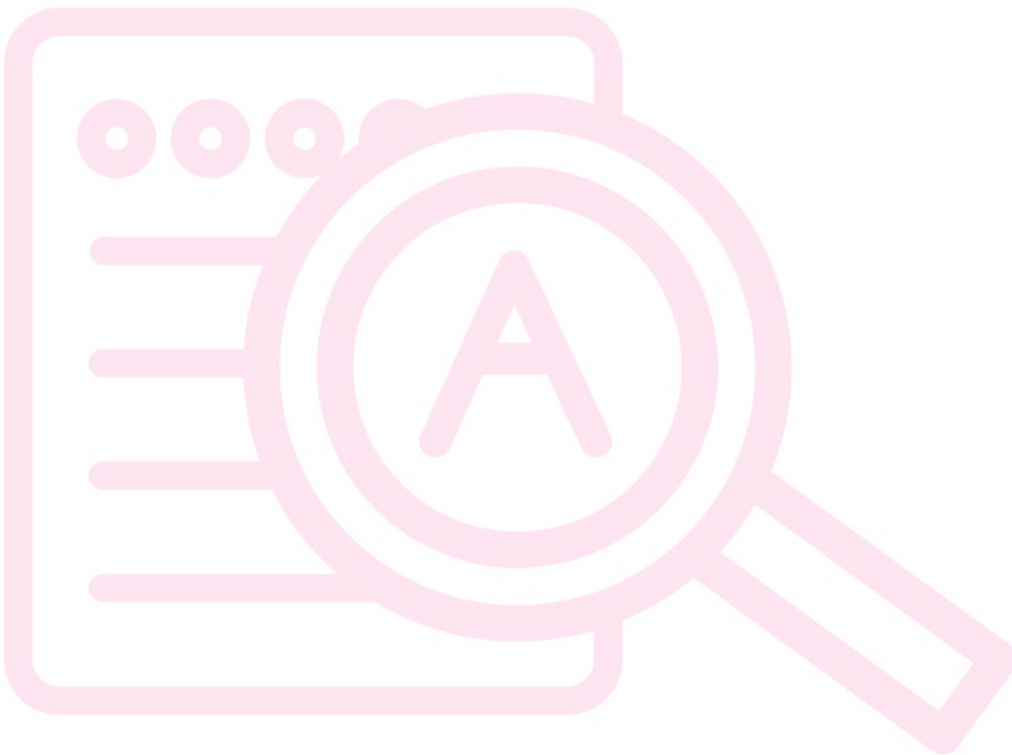
²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.²⁶ Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was in the sanctuary of the LORD.²⁷ And Joshua said to all the people, “This stone shall be our witness, for it has heard all the words which the LORD spoke to us. It shall be a witness against you, should you wish to deny your God.”²⁸ Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own heritage.

Death of Joshua.²⁹ After these events, Joshua, son of Nun, servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten,³⁰ and they buried him within the borders of his heritage at Timnath-serah in the mountain region of Ephraim north of Mount Gaash.³¹ Israel served the LORD during the entire lifetime of Joshua, and of those elders who outlived Joshua and who knew all the work the LORD had done for Israel.³² The bones of Joseph which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried in Shechem in the plot of ground Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money. This was a heritage of the descendants of Joseph.³³ When Eleazar, son of Aaron, also died, he was buried on the hill which had been given to his son Phinehas in the mountain region of Ephraim.



Background

The scene in Joshua 24 brings together all the people of Israel following the conquest of the land. From the exodus out of Egypt, through the desert, and into conquest of the Promised Land, God manifests divine care for them, despite their sinfulness and infidelity. God had offered this group of recently escaped Hebrew slaves an alliance (Exodus 19-23). While they later broke the covenant by disobeying the precepts given them by God (cf. especially, Exodus 32 and Numbers 11-12, 14), Moses served as a mediator to renew and ratify the relationship in these moments of infidelity. The end of the Book of Joshua describes that sacred moment when, after God had fulfilled his promises, the question is posed to the people, do you wish to renew your covenant with God? They are at a point of decision as they look to their future.





Some key aspects

Joshua 24 stands in the context of a covenant renewal ceremony. The location of this ceremony is Shechem, once a place of worship of Canaanite gods. Now that the Hebrew slaves have taken control of the land, choosing Shechem as the place to renew the covenant suggests that now the God of Israel is the Lord of the land. The whole chapter is set in the structure of a covenant renewal ceremony; it tells the story of their past and God's role in it. Thus, Israel is called to make a choice. The recitation of the peoples' history is important because it outlines for them both the sins of the people and the contrasting compassion of God. All of this becomes an important element to see God's love and care for the people. God's fidelity stands in contrast to the infidelity of the people.



Implications for Synodality

- 1) This concluding chapter of the Book of Joshua brings together all the people of Israel for the renewal of the covenant. The *inclusive* manner in which the covenant renewal is described walks closely with the hope of synodality (24:1). Everyone is summoned to be a part of it.
- 2) How important it was for the whole community to listen attentively to the recitation of the history of their recent generations (24:2-13). Hearing and reflecting on all of this is important as they consider whether they are ready to renew the covenant and take on its responsibilities.
- 3) We see there is an indirect question to the people as to their willingness to live in accord with the formerly made promises. "Will you be able to serve the LORD? If you forsake the LORD and follow strange gods, then he will do evil to you" (Josh 24:19-20). Together they must *ponder* their past, their present, and their future. What will their choice be, and how will they carry it out with a sense of *mission*?
- 4) Having heard the story of their ancestors, the response of the people is "No, we will serve the LORD ... We are witnesses of this ... Then the people promised Joshua, 'We will serve the LORD our God, and will listen to his voice'" (Jos 24:21, 22b, 24b). The people have actively participated in affirming their testimony. We find here an expression of *unity* in the renewal of the covenant.
- 5) Now with the renewal of the covenant, there is a sense of *mission*, a way forward in which they have committed themselves to act (Jos 24:24). And Moses both wrote down their pledge to follow the covenant in the sanctuary (Josh 24:26), and he set up a stone as a witness to their testimony (Jos 24:27). Joshua then dismisses the people, each to its own heritage to carry out what they have committed themselves to do, to live, to carry forward, now as people of this new land to which they have been travelling. With a renewed mission, they have become a renewed people.



Questions for prayerful reflection

- 1) I call to mind occasions when I met with a group of considerable size. What did I find helpful? What did I find discouraging?
- 2) What helps me keep a sense of mission alive in my day-to-day life?
- 3) In the context of the liturgy, how well do I listen to the Word of God as the “word of life” for me? In the context of the liturgy, how can I better prepare myself to listen to the Word of God and receive it as the “word of life” for me?
- 4) Which concrete signs of my commitment am I taking in response to the commission of Christ to be an instrument of peace in our world today?
- 5) How does this scene from Joshua 24 reflect the kind of synodality that the Church desires to express in its commitments and renewal of mission?

Coming Together around God's Word

Fr. Denis Kulandaisamy

Nehemiah 8:1-12

¹ All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.

⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

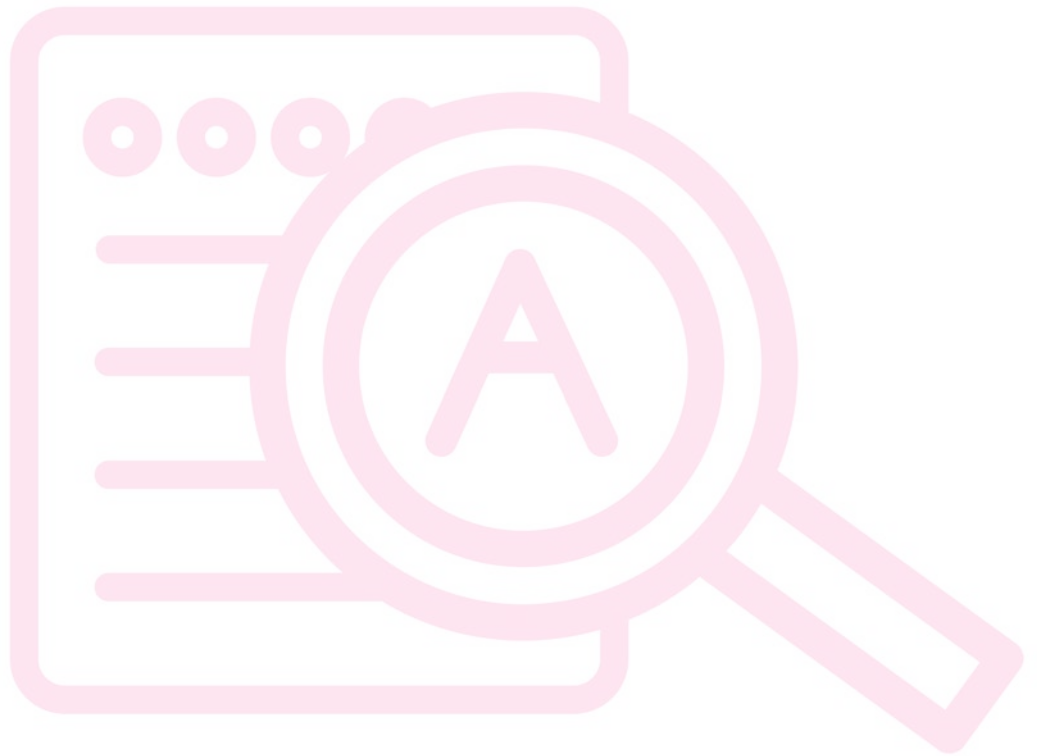
¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

(NIV)



Background to the text

Nebuchadnezzar, the head of the Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple and the city wall in 587 BC. The people were taken into captivity. After a long period of captivity in Babylonia, the Jews returned to their homeland in 538 BC by the decree of Cyrus. The book of Nehemiah shows God's people returning from captivity in accordance with the promises of God. It speaks about the story of God redeeming his people and the restoration of Jerusalem. The eighth chapter of the book Nehemiah narrates how the people loved the book of the law of Moses and how great was their respect for the Word of God.





Some key aspects: points for reflection

Having returned from captivity, the people were longing to listen to the Word of God. They journeyed together a long way from Babylonia to Jerusalem. As it was a journey of sufferings and hardships, they understood that journeying together was not easy.

Now that they are back to their homeland, they long for the Word of God. As they are gathered together and listen to the Book of Law, their hearts were overwhelmed with mixed feelings: Sorrowful about their sins and at the same time extremely joyful for the grace granted by God to listen to His word. In our life journey, we may come across infidelity, disobedience, betrayal and disappointments, but when we attentively listen to God's Word, our wounds are healed and our eyes are open again to see the wonders done by God in our lives. In our journey of faith, God walks along with us and transforms our sorrows into joy.





Implications for Synodality

1. Communitarian dimension

Notice that the text says all the people were present there: Children and everyone else who could understand participated in the assembly. They gathered together as one family. All of Israel willingly participated in the gathering. No one was excluded. Synodal process is also a journey that welcomes everyone to participate. The communitarian dimension of their faith journey is an inspiring element for our synodal process.

2. Reverence for the Word of God

All of them were longing with great interest to listen to the Scriptures. That is why they asked Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses and to read it to them. Note the detailed description about the reaction of the people, as they were listening to God's Word: "All the people *listened attentively* to the Book of the Law, *lifted their hands* and *responded*, "Amen! Amen!" Then they *bowed down and worshiped* the LORD with their faces to the ground. All the people *had been weeping* as they listened to the words of the Law." Such was their respectful attitude and obedient response to the Word of God. Synodal process is a time to listen to the Word of God as one community gathered in the name of the Lord. Divine reading (*Lectio Divina*) is an essential and most important element of our spiritual journey.

3. Synodal process is a journey through joys and sorrows

Nehemiah 8:9 says: "all the people were weeping as they listen to the words of the law". They were sorrowful for their sins. They were filled with sadness. In our faith journey, we too come across difficulties, crisis, difficulties and sorrows. But we should not let our trials discourage us. Nehemiah says to the people: "*This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*" The joy of the Lord comes out of true repentance. God and His Word are a source of great joy for the believers. We too are called to rejoice and be glad in the Lord (Ps. 5:12, 9:2-3; 32:11; Phil. 3:1; 4:4). The joy of the Lord comes out of proper understanding of God's Word. Synodal process is a time to rejoice together in the Lord, giving him thanks for his continuous presence in our life journey.



Questions for reflection

1. As God's people gathered, the Jews listened attentively to God's Word and to God's Servants who helped them to understand. Do I/We make efforts to attentively listen to the Word of God and seek help from others to better understand the biblical teachings?
2. For our synodal process, what encouragements and guidelines do I/We find in the Word of God?
3. What efforts do I/We make to become like the Jews (Nehemiah 8), who lived with "one accord" and in prayer?
4. Am I (Are We) able to rejoice in the Lord and to make others happy?



Voice of the Fathers

Instruction through Divine Discourses (Bede)⁹

After we have done good work, is the form of our rest that is most beloved and most acceptable to the Lord: to abstain from servile work (that is, from sin) and devote ourselves to hearing and fulfilling his commandments with due diligence. This is why the Feast of Trumpets, by whose blast the people, amid their prayers and offerings, were more fervently moved to remembrance of the divine law, was placed in the beginning of this seventh month also.

Even today too, according to the spiritual meaning, the construction of the holy city should be followed by divine reading and the frequent sounding of trumpets, no doubt because it is necessary that when a people has been initiated into the heavenly sacraments they should also, as occasion requires, be carefully instructed by divine discourses how they should live.

To Rejoice in Hope (Bede)¹⁰

For it is a holy day of the Lord for us when we take pains to hear and carry out his words. On this day it is proper that, however much outwardly we have endured the obstacles of tribulations, we should be “rejoicing in hope,” in keeping with the apostle’s saying: “As if sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” On this day we are also commanded to eat fat food and drink sweet drink, that is, to rejoice over the abundance of good action bestowed on us by God and over the very sweetness of hearing God’s Word.

⁹ BEDE, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 3.26 in *Translated Texts for Historians* vol 47, G. Clark, M. Gibson and M. Whitby, eds. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1985, 192–93.

¹⁰ BEDE, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 3.26 in *Translated Texts for Historians* vol 47, G. Clark, M. Gibson and M. Whitby, eds. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1985, 192–93.

Mary in prayer with the Apostles

Fr. Dennis Kulandaisamy

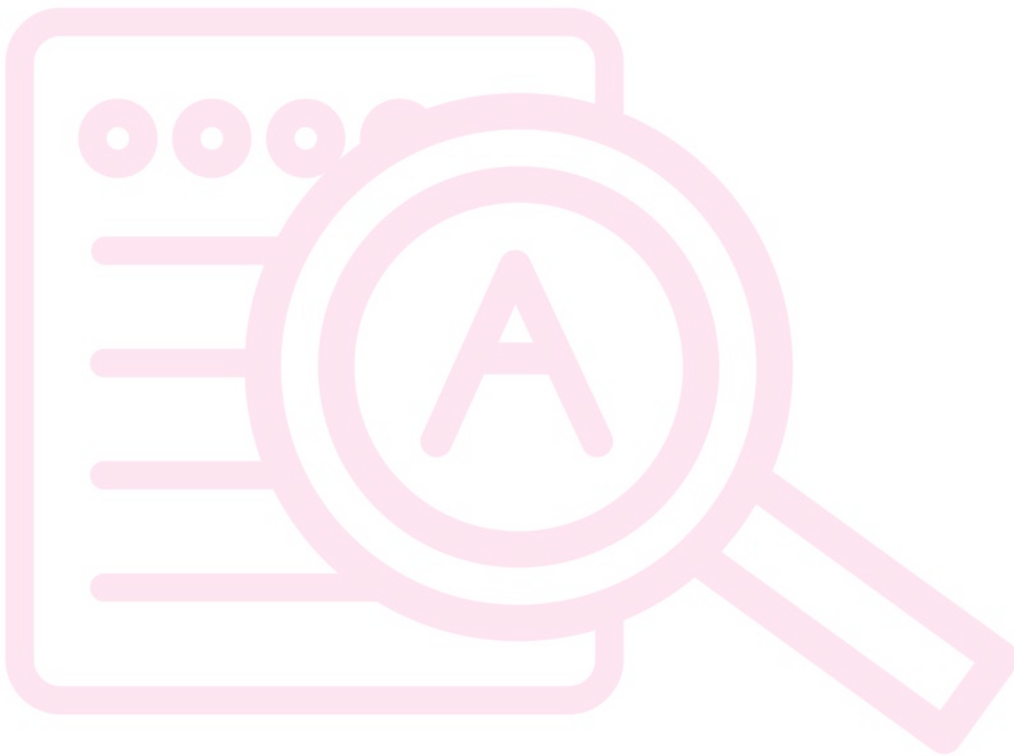
Acts 1:13-14

“And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying: Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord continued steadfastly in prayer., together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.”



Background to the text

Acts of the Apostles is an authoritative document of the early Church. Luke describes the life of the early Christian community, which was steadfast in prayer. These two verses (Acts 1:13-14). Are considered as a “summary statement” or “end of Luke’s Introduction,” which prepares for the further events of this book. These verses focus on the incident that the disciples return to Jerusalem, where they form the first congregation of the believers in the Risen Christ. It is important to note that the presence of women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brethren is intentionally mentioned by Luke, so as to mark their significant role in the life of the early church. The liturgical context of the passage is also note-worthy.





Some key aspects

- 1) The list of eleven apostles mentioned by Luke indicates the apostolic nature of the church.
- 2) The expression “with one accord” refers to the bond of Christian love that united all of them as one family.
- 3) Prayer is a very essential element of the Christian communities in their faith journey.
- 4) The community was awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. The event of Pentecost marks the birth of the new church – a church which was and is solidly strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in its missionary journey.
- 5) Mary, mother of Jesus, is actively involved in the life of the church through her prayerful presence. Her maternal love and concern for the members of the church is made evident from this biblical text. She is a woman of prayer and a mother who gathers all her children as one family.



Implications for Synodality

1. Ecclesial spirit

Acts of the Apostles provides us with a model of the Church that we are called to imitate in our Synodal process. Synodality is a faith journey accompanied by the “ecclesial spirit”. No one is excluded. In the Jewish community women were neglected but here women are included. It is an important aspect of Synodal process. Synodality of the church has a deep root in the cenacle event, where the Apostles along with Mary and others received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the universal mission to proclaim the Risen Christ to all the people (cfr. Acts 2:1-40).

Mary, through her maternal mediation, brings us close to her Son Jesus Christ. In our Synodal process, this mediating role of Mary helps us to walk in the right direction. We should not forget that Jesus Christ is the only mediator (1 Tim 2:5). And yet the mediation of Christ includes and does not exclude cooperation by human persons. The maternal mediation of Mary does not obscure or diminish in any way the unique mediation of Christ. The Church in its synodal process is guided by the mediating role of Mary. Mary walks along with us as a mother and a sister.

2. Mary’s intimate relation with the Holy Spirit

In our synodal journey, Mary is a great example for us how to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, because she completely let herself be guided by the Holy Spirit. At the annunciation, Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, “as the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling place” (Ex 40:34). It was by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:28) that she conceived Jesus in her womb. In other events too, she was led by the Holy Spirit: Visitation to Elizabeth, Proclamation of the *Magnificat*, Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, etc. The culmination of these events is Pentecost, where Mary is awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. She is also the one who knows and recognizes the Holy Spirit, therefore in some way she is a touchstone for discernment and she is certainly there as the guide for discipleship.

Mary, mother of Jesus, is the first member of the church, because she was the first one to believe Jesus and become his first disciple. She was the first evangelized and the first evangelizer. The Second Vatican Council

teaches us that the Church regards Mary as “its most beloved mother,” its “preeminent member,” and its “prophetic type and image”.

3. *Mary, the listener of the Word*

In the Annunciation, Mary listens to the God’s word brought to her by the angel Gabriel and she manifested her obedience with her “Fiat.” Her listening to God is not a simple or superficial listening, but she is very attentive to listen to God’s will in every event of her life. Mary listened to the Angel and she questioned: “How can this be, since I do not know man?” (Lk 1:34). This question indicates Mary’s discernment. The synodal process too involves our discernment. Mary’ exemplary act of listening, questioning, discerning and obeying should be an inspiring element of being a synodal church.

Mary treasured up everything and pondered in her heart (Lk 2:19). The evangelists present Mary as a woman of contemplation and also at the same time a woman who was at the service of others – for example her loving care and concern towards Elizabeth and her intervention at the Wedding at Cana. Mary’s capacity and availability to listen to God’s Words and contemplate on his divine intervention in her life journey becomes an inspiring element of our Christian discipleship.

4. *Mary, Queen of Apostles*

The biblical root for the title “Queen of Apostles” is found in Acts 1:13-14, which shows Mary in the midst of the Apostles. Traditionally the Church celebrates the Feast of Mary, Queen of Apostles on the first Saturday after the feast of the Ascension. Her presence in the midst of Apostles marks the maternal love and guidance she offered to the Apostles. Mary is an exemplary and model for the Apostles to evangelize, as she was the first evangelist by bringing Jesus into the world.

5. *Mary is walking with us in our Synodal process*

Mary is mother of the Church. Two biblical passages serve as the foundation of this Marian title: Jesus entrusting his disciple John to the maternal care of his mother (Jn 19:25-27) and Mary’s active role in the early Christian community (Act 1:14). Being mother of Christ, she is also mother of the Church, which is the mystical body of Christ. As she was united with the Apostles in prayer, her spiritual presence continues in our Church today. She loves and nurtures the Church. Her presence is not a matter of simple belief but an undeniable fact. Mary cares for us as she cared for her only Son Jesus. Her unceasing intercessions to her Son in favour of her sons and daughters bring us God’s grace to live our Christian vocation. With her maternal love, she is walking with us in our synodal journey.



Questions for reflection

1. During the synodal process, what efforts do I/We make to become like the early church which lived with “one accord” and in prayer?
2. Do I/We really feel the presence of Mary in the Church and what relevant values do I/We learn from her for my/our synodal process?
3. During this synod that invites us for communion, participation and mission, do I/We present Mary as “Mother of unity” and thus overcome the divisions in the Church in order to create communion of all the baptized with an ecumenical perspective?
4. How does Marian spirituality help me/us live my/our Christian discipleship in listening to the Word of God and to the Holy Spirit?



Voice of the Fathers

Growing Great by Bringing Forth God (Arator)¹¹

They sought by a swift path, with which it was possible to go a mile on their sabbath, the well-known walls where Mary, the gateway of God, the virgin mother of her Creator, formed by her own son, was sitting at a religious gathering. The second virgin put to flight the woes of Eve's crime; there is no harm done to the sex; she restored what the first took away. Let grief not raise up complaints or vex mourning hearts with groaning over the old law; these very forms of wickedness and crime rather cause delight at this bargain, and a better lot comes to the redeemed world from the fall. The person, not the nature [of a woman], caused ruin; in those days [of Eve] a pregnant woman [brought forth] peril. In these [of Mary] one grew great to bring forth God, the one begetting mortal things and the other bearing divine—she through whom the Mediator came forth into the world and carried actual flesh to the heavens.

¹¹ ARATOR, *On the Acts of the Apostles 1*, in *Arator's On the Acts of the Apostles*. Edited and transl. by R. J. Schrader, Jo. L. Roberts III and J. F. Makowski. The American Academy of Religion Classics in Religious Studies Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987, 26-27.

Conversion: Path to Communion

Mario and Anna Cappello

Acts 10:1 – 11:18

The Vision of Cornelius. ¹ Now in Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Cohort called the Italica, ² devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly. ³ One afternoon about three o'clock, he saw plainly in a vision an angel of God come in to him and say to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ He looked intently at him and, seized with fear, said, "What is it, sir?" He said to him, "Your prayers and almsgiving have ascended as a memorial offering before God." ⁵ Now send some men to Joppa and summon one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with another Simon, a tanner, who has a house by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from his staff, ⁸ explained everything to them, and sent them to Joppa.

The Vision of Peter. ⁹ The next day, while they were on their way and nearing the city, Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray at about noontime. ¹⁰ He was hungry and wished to eat, and while they were making preparations he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something resembling a large sheet coming down, lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all the earth's four-legged animals and reptiles and the birds of the sky. ¹³ A voice said to him, "Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "Certainly not, sir. For never have I eaten anything profane and unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and then the object was taken up into the sky.

¹⁷ While Peter was in doubt about the meaning of the vision he had seen, the men sent by Cornelius asked for Simon's house and arrived at the entrance. ¹⁸ They called out inquiring whether Simon, who is called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ As Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said [to him], "There are three men here looking for you. ²⁰ So get up, go downstairs, and accompany them without hesitation, because I have sent them." ²¹ Then Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your being here?" ²² They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So he invited them in and showed them hospitality.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went with him. ²⁴ On the following day he entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. ²⁶ Peter, however, raised him up, saying, "Get up. I myself am also a human being." ²⁷ While he conversed with him, he went in and found many people gathered together ²⁸ and said to them, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with, or visit, a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean ²⁹ And that is why I came without objection when sent for. May I ask, then, why you summoned me?"

³⁰ Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this hour, three o'clock in the afternoon, I was at prayer in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling robes stood before me and said, ³¹ 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your almsgiving remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and summon Simon, who is called Peter. He is a guest in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and you were kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to listen to all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Peter's Speech. ³⁴ Then Peter proceeded to speak and said] "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. ³⁵ Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the word [that] he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, ³⁷ what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazaret with the holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and [in] Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. ⁴⁰ This man God raised [on] the third day and granted that he be visible, ⁴¹ not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commissioned us to preach to the people and testify that he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name."

The Baptism of Cornelius. ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word.[s] ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, ⁴⁶ for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?" ⁴⁸ He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. ⁴⁹ Then they invited him to stay for a few days.



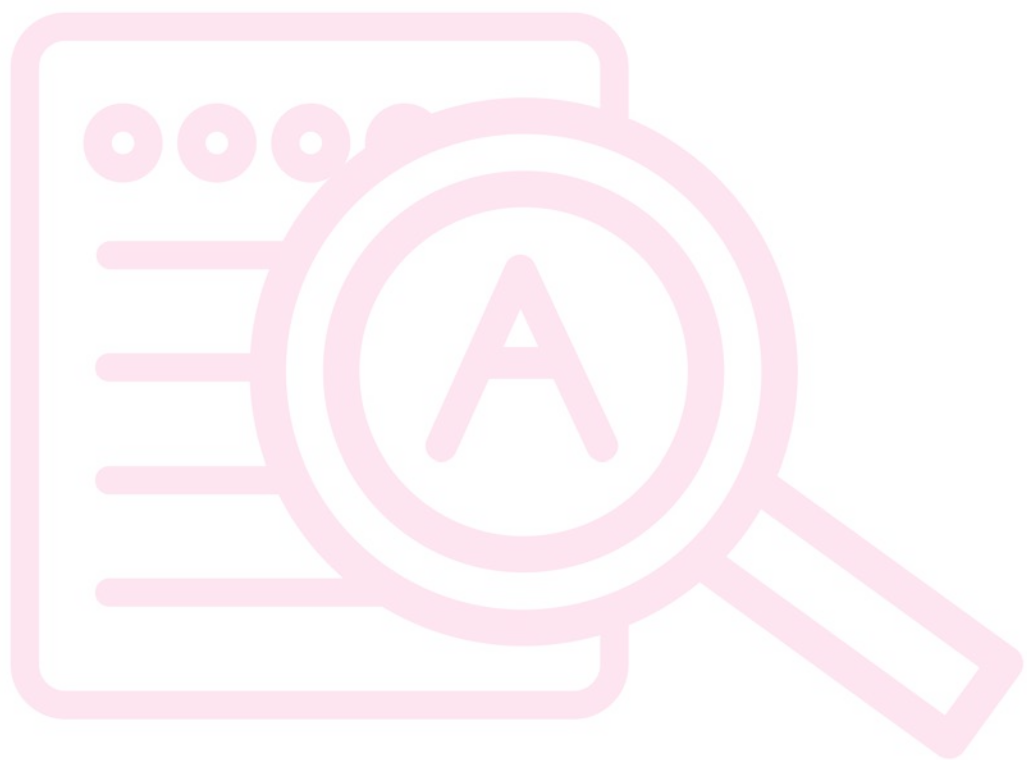
Introduction: Background to the Text

The conversion of Cornelius and the related 'second conversion' of Peter, along with their explanation, is the event that occupies the longest section in the book of Acts (Acts 10:1 - 11:18), even longer in fact than the account of Saul's conversion (Acts 9:1-19). This pericope describes a breakthrough in the development of the early Church with the discovery that God opened "the door of faith" (Acts 14:27) for the Gentiles too. This critical development is solemnly recognized at the gathering of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Their assembly in the Holy Spirit ("The Holy Spirit and we have decided" Acts 15:28) becomes a model for all synods and councils of the Church and remains referred to as the 'Council of Jerusalem' in Christian reflection.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion, an army officer in charge of a hundred soldiers. Caesarea was seen as a 'Roman capital' of the area and there, a centurion was well placed among the ruling class. The baptism of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48) is a significant event in the history of the early Christian church, along with the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). The original disciples and followers of Jesus, including Jesus himself, were Galilean, except for Judas, who was Judean. All males in the first Christian community were therefore Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. They were circumcised and observed the Law of Moses. The reception of Cornelius was heavily debated among the leaders of the new community of followers of Jesus, until the decision was reached to allow Gentiles to become Christians without conforming to Jewish requirements for circumcision, as recounted in Acts 15.

When the Day of Pentecost came, Peter was the one who stood up and preached the Good News with the result that 3,000 people were converted (Acts 2:14-41). In Acts 10, he is in Joppa and already established as a great leader in the early church; but he is also in crisis. Peter, a person of his time and era, as prejudiced as anyone of his faith and heritage would be, could not imagine lodging in the house of a Gentile (Acts 10:6), nor eating food

considered “unclean” (Acts 10:14, cf. Lev 11). The change in Peter who would have lived out his prejudice had he not had an encounter in a dream with God on a roof (Acts 10:9-16) is as dramatic as when he made his confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:16). We could call it his ‘second conversion’ in terms of having experienced a radical shift from an established horizon into a new horizon of knowing, valuing, and acting. Nevertheless, in Antioch, Paul openly rebuked Peter for acting inconsistently with the truth of the Gospel by refraining from eating with the Gentiles for fear of the circumcision faction (Gal 2:11-14). Peter’s path of conversion highlights its nature as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Caution needs to therefore be exercised in any form of leadership in the Church not to idealise itself but equally, to prevent any tendency to idealise those holding positions of leadership. Leadership requires accountability and the humility to allow others to speak into one’s life.





Key Points for Reflection

- Peter's conversion is a *process*. In the beginning, we have Peter following in Jesus' footsteps:
"Peter went here and there among all the believers ..." (Acts 9:32). In the healing of Aeneas (Acts 9:33-34) and the resurrection of Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41), Peter's words and gestures resemble those of Jesus (healing the paralytic, resurrecting the young man of Nain and Jairus' daughter: Lk 5:17-25; 7:11-17; 8:49-56). Even so, Acts 10:14 reveals that Peter was in need of a deeper conversion that questioned his firmly held beliefs about Christ's salvation of which he was the frontline ambassador. Despite his breakthrough described in Acts 10, we later find him wavering by acting hypocritically and eliciting Paul's reproof (Gal 2:11-14). Finally, in the Council of Jerusalem, he makes a strong case that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:7-11).
- Peter's breakthrough resulted from the fact that he took up residence in an *inappropriate* place, at the house of someone considered "unclean" - Simon the tanner (Acts 10:6). The Mosaic law stated that touching a dead thing made one unclean. Therefore, a tanner would have been almost perpetually unclean. Peter would have felt constrained to receive Simon's hospitality which would have included sharing food with him and his household.
- While food was being prepared downstairs, Peter went up on the roof, on the terrace, to pray (Acts 10:9). He went to a secluded place that was conducive to silent reflection, although he did so during an uncomfortable hour when the sun reaches its peak and when he was hungry. Prayer prepares Peter directly for a major breakthrough. We too are invited to go to the "terrace of prayer" regardless of the time of day and our personal comfort. Sometimes, moments and situations that are humanly the least appropriate become crucial for our spiritual life and vocation.

- The Spirit interrupts Peter out of his endless meditation (Acts 10:19). God had just given Peter a puzzling vision with a warning, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." (Acts 10:15). The Spirit then instructed Peter to go with the men sent by Cornelius, a Gentile, without hesitation. *Meditatio* should turn into *actio*. Prayer and life are inextricably linked.

"If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2725).

- Peter's conversion was a transformation of his criteria for decision-making in relation to Gentiles once he was able to perceive *the inherent biases in himself, his culture and in history*. Consequently, his understanding of what God was doing in the world was dramatically changed.
- Peter's conversion is expressed in the key word "I understand" (Acts 10:34), literally "I catch", "I grab" (Greek: *katalambanomai*). All the pieces come together into one whole. Peter, submissive to the Spirit, learned to connect God's words spoken to him with the events that were unfolding around him. *A new quality of listening* to God's divine inspiration emerges.
- Cornelius is described as "devout and God-fearing" (Acts 10:2). He was characterized by inner honesty, sensitivity to the needs of the poor and faithfulness in prayer. He was one of those Romans who were impressed by the monotheistic religion but did not formally convert to Judaism. Jesus willingly associated with people who were socially emarginated. He intentionally chose to stay in the homes of people like Zacchaeus (Lk 19:5) and dialogue with Nicodemus (Jn 3) and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:4-26). Today, the Church continues to be sent to people in this "grey area", to noble and seeking individuals who are ready to accept the Gospel. To them also, as to Cornelius, angels come carrying God's invitation (cf. Acts 10:3).
- "Get up, I am also a man" (Acts 10:26). The mission of evangelisation in the Church begins with human gestures, signs of respect, gestures through which we acknowledge the other as equal in dignity.

- Within the Christian community, Peter's conversion is a process of hope whereby persons are caught up in the promise of the new creation (cf. Is 65:17-25; Rev 21:1-8) and the metamorphosis promised in the covenant (cf. Jer 31:33; Heb 8:1-13).
- The distance that exists between the two protagonists, the Roman centurion and the Apostle Peter, is a striking element in Acts 10. Firstly, it is a spatial distance; Cornelius is in Caesarea and the Apostle Peter is in Joppa. Cornelius is not a Jew, and moreover, a Roman officer, a hated occupier. Neither culture nor social status connect Cornelius with Peter. What separates them seems insurmountable even if both seek God. In the course of this narrative, a paradigm shift occurs that is initiated by God, in the form of two visions. Journeys must be undertaken to bridge the distance between Cornelius and Peter - the journey of Cornelius' servants to Joppa and Peter's journey to Caesarea. Through journeys initiated by God's action, something completely new emerges at the destination which corresponds to God's intention that all, no matter the nationality, culture and status, can receive the Spirit and be baptised. And how great is the astonishment of those witnessing this happening! (Acts 10:45)



Implications for Synodality

1. The mosaic of God's intentions does not take shape until the meeting between Peter and Cornelius happens.¹² Up until then, each of them is aware of only "his" part of the conversation with God. We have the different parts come together in an *encounter* between the two, made possible through *dialogue, mutual listening to one to another, and new outpourings of the Spirit* (Acts 10:44).

2. Reflecting on the narrative of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, synodality can truly be understood as a *journeying together*. The common journey makes an *encounter* possible; an encounter that in turn can give rise to *true communion* and a *synodal mentality* that includes entering with courage into a *conversion process*.

Journeying together allows us to listen to the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of all Christians but also to the men and women of our time (cf. GS n. 1), including "the least" of these brothers and sisters (cf. Matt 25:40). Journeying together implies bridging the distance that divides us and making space for God to bring about a new reality in the Church and her institutions.

3. The *presence and action of the Spirit of God* is what underpins the journeying together of the People of God. The Spirit prepares the Church "to listen" to the voice of God guiding and shaping it. The divine preparation for the "listening" to the Spirit by the Church in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) is marked by an impressive presence of the Spirit, mentioned 24 times in the preceding seven chapters.

¹² The "assembling" of God's inspirations given to Peter and Cornelius separately is an echo of the collecting (*symballein*) of the truths of faith, which the Church professes in the "symbol of faith". This is the task of the community (*communio - koinonia*) and its assembly (*synaxis*), especially the liturgical one. This community is to avoid anything that might separate it (*diaballein*, hence *diabolos* - the devil).

Three chapters of events (Acts 7 to 10) led to Peter (and the Jewish-Christian Church) accepting table-fellowship with Gentiles (Cornelius represents the universal Roman Gentile power) and consequently, the sharing of the Gospel. Furthermore, even though the event (and synodal image) narrated in Acts 10 was fundamental to the Church at that point in time, yet it had a contained consequence in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Peter shares his first-hand experience at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7-11); Paul and Barnabas do the same on their part (Acts 15:12).

The events in Jaffa and in Caesarea, more specifically Cornelius' openness and the transformation in Peter, led to the critical decision of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. It was equally God's direct intervention in the conversion of Saul at Damascus that contributed to the extraordinary development in the early Church.

The Spirit has guided the Church's journey through history to the *here and now* and prepared her to *listen to the Spirit* on the synodal journey she embarked on, at both the local universal levels. Like the wind, the Spirit "blows where it wills; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (Jn 3:8). The Church stands at the threshold of potentially being surprised again by the Spirit. Proceeding boldly on the path of conversion with Peter, and fostering the same openness and humility of Cornelius could "awaken a dawn of hope...and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands" (Pope Francis) as together we participate in the mission of the Church to reveal God's love to the world.



Questions for Prayerful Reflection

- What is the quality of my/our prayer? Do I/we pray persistently and sincerely (cf. Acts 10:2)? How can I/we emulate Cornelius' inner honesty and care for the poor? As I/we resolve to be more attentive to my/our daily encounter with God's Word, how will I/we allow it to change my/our thinking and lead me/us to conversion?
- The strife and prejudices between the Jews and Gentiles in Peter and Cornelius's day were just as strong as those prejudices we experience today, whether due to ethnicity, religious background or sex. Who is the Cornelius, the Gentile, that Jesus is sending to me/us today? Or is there perhaps a Peter for whom I/we must send and call on so as
- "to hear what he has to say" (Acts 10:22)? What inner resistances am I/are we aware of as I/we consider the persons, or category of persons, that God is sending me/us to in order to become a synodal person/community?
- Recalling how Peter came to understand that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34) what is it that I am/we are being *persuaded about, understanding, grasping*? As part of its synodal journey, what is my community grasping and understanding in a new light in relation to the mission of the Church, our mission?
- What new quality of listening to God's voice is necessary for the Church today? Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, what new connections between God's word and events or facts are necessary for our community to make today on its synodal path?



Voice of the Fathers

Cornelius: A Worker Called at the 11th Hour (Basil the Great)¹³

Are there even now some who work from the first hour and others from the eleventh, and who are they? Perhaps [the answer to this] is most evident to anyone from the events recounted in the divinely inspired Scripture that while there are many, in the words of the apostle, who have learned the holy Scriptures from childhood, many still, such as Cornelius, although making good use of natural movements, are slow in coming to perfection of knowledge because of a lack of teachers. "For how," he says, "do they believe, if they do not hear?" If, therefore, it happens that some, like Cornelius, are engaged in nothing evil but rather are desirous of perfection and genuinely demonstrate the good that they can and that comes to their knowledge, to these God gives the same blessings as he did to Cornelius by not holding them culpable for the period of idleness, since it was not their fault, as I said, and he is content with their desire that was previously made manifest through their eager actions and what has been more diligently set right in relation to perfection.

Through the Ministry of People (Augustine)¹⁴

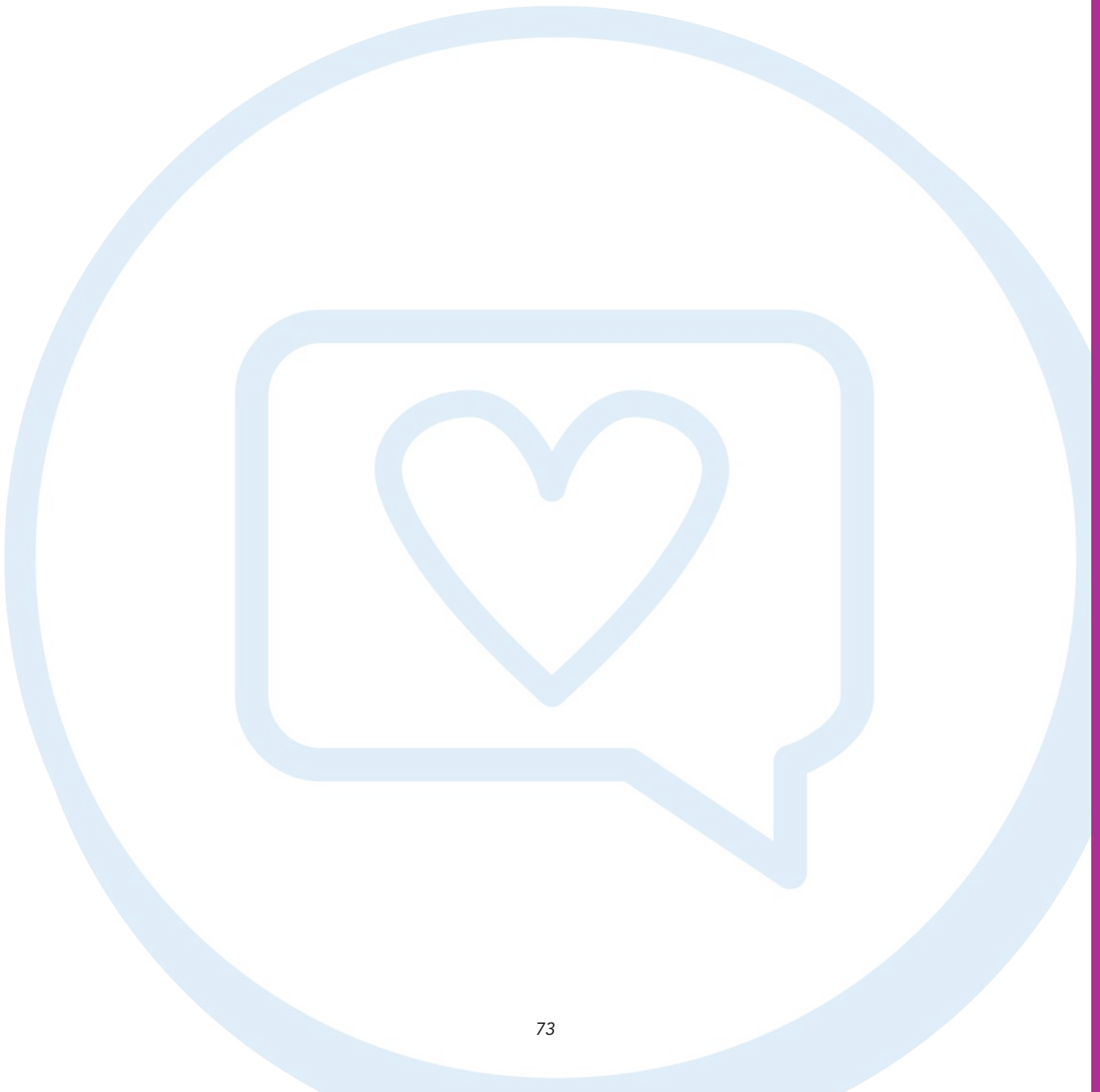
Let us be on our guard against all such dangerous temptations to pride, and let us rather reflect on how the same apostle Paul, although he had been struck down and instructed by the divine voice from heaven, was still sent to a man to receive the sacraments and be joined to the Church; and how the centurion Cornelius, although it was an angel who told him his prayers had been heard and his almsgiving acknowledged, was still handed over to Peter to be instructed and baptized. And it could all, of course, have been done by the angel; but then no respect would have been shown to our human status,

¹³ BASIL THE GREAT, *The Short Rules*, 2, 224., in *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture. New Testament V. Acts*, ed. Francis Martin, Downers Grove IL: Inter Varsity Press 2006, 120.

¹⁴ AUGUSTINE, *Teaching Christianity. Prologue 6*, transl. Ed. Hill, (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century I/11*), Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996, 103.

if God appeared to be unwilling to have his word administered to us by other human beings.

How, after all, could the saying be true, For the temple of God, which is what you are, is holy (1 Cor 3:17), if God never gave any answers from his human temple, but only thundered out his revelation from the sky and by means of angels? Then again charity itself, which binds people together with the knot of unity, would have no scope for pouring minds and hearts in together, as it were, and blending them with one another, if human beings were never to learn anything from each other.



The First Council: Acts 15:1-35

Rev. James Hanvey, S.J.



Background to the Text

The 'Council of Jerusalem' is the continuation and conclusion of the issues raised by the conversion of Cornelius and the apostle Peter's openness to a Gentile convert to the Christian faith (Cf. Acts 10-11). It is a critical moment for the new Christian community: is the message of the Gospel and the grace of Christ given only for 'the lost sheep of the House of Israel' or is it for the whole world, 'go and make disciples of all the nations' (Matt. 28:19)?

If the Council is about the nature of the Church's mission, it is also about identity and commitments. Clearly, it does not want to reject or deny its Jewish origin and inheritance. Jesus does not know or refer to any other God than the God of Israel; he does understand himself and his mission in terms of the covenant that God makes with the people of Israel and, indeed, understands himself and his community as fulfilling the promise of that covenant. Therefore, the question is what should be expected of Gentiles, for through their faith in Christ they have gained access to the God of Israel and the promise of the covenant and law (Torah). Should Gentile Christians, therefore, also be bound by the same practices and law as the Jewish people? Should they be circumcised or is faith alone sufficient, and to what extent do they need to observe the commandments of the Law, as would any Jew? All the apostles, remember, were themselves circumcised and observant Jews. So, the question is central and on it hangs the whole future of the Church. As we can expect, people are divided and the unity of the community is also threatened.

For all these reasons, the Council of Jerusalem is central to the future of the Church, and it also offers us important insights into synodality. In a sense, we can regard it as the first 'synod'. It is a watershed moment in the life and history of the Church.



Some key aspects: points for reflection

- The apostles and other key leaders of the Church are present to 'discern' and decide.
We can especially see the importance of Peter and Paul, who both have had a mission to the Gentile world.
- The narrative of the Council in Acts invites us to attend to the dynamics of decision making (discernment) in the Church, especially when it is called to resolve a dispute which threatens the unity and mission of the 'ecclesia'.
- It is important to observe how the author of Acts (Luke) establishes the elements of discernment:
 - o It is James who presides. Peter is not presented as the judge but as the witness to the work of the Holy Spirit. The same is true for Paul and Barnabas, who are also witnesses to the wonders the Spirit had produced for them among the Gentiles. The key insight is that it is the Holy Spirit who is leading the way and God can open unexpected paths.
 - o There is clearly a lot of debate and divided views but the text presents this as part of the process necessary for discernment and the witness of Peter is decisive.
 - o Scripture plays a key role in their discernment and is reinterpreted in the light of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Cf. the way in which James cites Jewish scripture and the recognition that this 'agrees with the Prophets' (15:15).
 - o Peter gives testimony to his own experience of the Holy Spirit leading him beyond his own Jewish practices (15:7-11).
 - o James also offers a text from the prophets. Throughout Acts, we see many references to Jewish scripture (the Old Testament). This

is important, for it locates the discernment of the community within the history of God's revelation and covenantal promise (tradition).

- o The consent of the community is sought. This is not just agreement among those present, but the decision of the Council is sent as a letter to all the communities (cf. 15:22-35).

Notice how the Council understands itself to be discerning God's initiative; it wants to be obedient to the Divine plan for the Church. Discernment, then, is a real search to come into alignment with the way in God is working and presenting new possibilities.

The final decision about the minimum requirements for Gentile Christians is not just a pragmatic one. They are about fidelity to the one God of Jesus Christ. They seem more designed to secure a real unity within Christian communities, for they would allow table-fellowship and full communion between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

They are also designed to stop those of strict Jewish observance harassing Gentile Christian converts.

Notice the language 'The Holy Spirit and we...' It is not as if the Council believes itself to be on an equal footing with God! Rather, that the Church's decision confirms the direction in which God is leading. The Church is God's work and not a purely human construction.



Implications for Synodality

- The whole narrative presents us with a community that is developing in a dynamic way. It recognises that there will be tensions and conflicts, but it is primarily concerned to follow the path that God is marking out for it, even when that has some unexpected turns.
- It is a community capable of resolving complex and divisive questions of membership and mission. Under the leadership of the apostles and the 'elders,' it gathers in Council to seek God's will and confirm it. It hears witnesses and testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit, it interprets scripture, it presents its decision in terms of its faith, it sends out delegations to inform and include the whole Church about its discerned decision, confirming it, and it aims to establish peace between communities.

At every point, the narrative attends to the different experiences, objections, perceptions and concerns but, above all, it seeks to let God have the initiative and it desires to create and confirm the 'koinonia' or fellowship/communion which is the work of the Holy Spirit.



Questions for Prayerful Reflection

The text shows that the news of the Gentiles being converted made all the believers very glad. How is this feeling of fellowship an important aspect of synodality?

How can the community deal in different ways with complex and divisive inputs that might and should be part of synodality? Can an opposite point be seen as a positive and necessary aspect to dialogue?

What can the process of synodality teach the community? What may the Holy Spirit inspire in the community that can remain after a synod is over?

May synodality not just be a process but also a way of life for a community?

'When they finished, James spoke up.' Why is silence also a key aspect to synodality? How can active listening be encouraged within the community?

The Journey of the Synodal Community

Ephesians 4:1-16 to 5:2

Rev. James Harvey, S.J.



Background to the Text

This part of Ephesians offers us a way into understanding the central dimensions of synodality. It reminds us that 'synodality' is not a new idea but has been a reality of the Church's life since its very beginning.

Here, we encounter 'Paul' expressing his deep apostolic solicitude for the community at Ephesus.¹⁵ He is concerned not only for the quality and integrity of individual lives but for the good of the whole community because, for him, the good of the person is inseparable from the good of the community.

The community is not only a witness to Christ; it is also the offer of a new hope of a reconciled humanity. Even when it exists only in a small group within the diversity of the Empire, it is the already the beginning of a new reality, a new human community, which will far exceed that of any worldly kingdom. As such, the community exists as a paradox or contradiction, for it appears so insignificant and yet it holds the mystery of Christ who will redeem and unite all things, 'things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph. 1:1-14).

¹⁵ The question of authorship is debated among New Testament scholars. Whatever conclusion we may reach, the letter clearly reflects key themes of Paul's thought which we know from other writings.

The life of the community itself has an apostolic purpose, for it is a witness, a test and proof of the truth of the Gospel and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. If the life of the community is a 'light' in the world, it is also a hope of a healed humanity, which is more than a future possibility but already present, concrete, and real. It is a community which is open and invites all to share in the new life of the Gospel of Christ. At the same time, the community is a grace to the world because it is differentiated from it.¹⁶

There is a dynamism in Paul's thought and teaching because there is a dynamism in the unfolding of God's salvific work for humanity. Here, Paul is also giving us a good model for the apostolic reality of the whole Christian community 'in via.'¹⁷

¹⁶ One of the constant concerns of all Paul's letters is attempts to be open to all levels of society and ethnicities on the one hand, while also defining the 'boundaries' between the Church and the surrounding culture. This becomes especially intense with Gentile Christians – should they also be bound by the same distinguishing and separating regulations as Jews, especially those Jewish converts who would still feel bound by Jewish law?

¹⁷ The verb used in v1 is περιπατησαι (aor. active. infin. *peripatesai*), which means that the action of walking carries with it the sense of an action that is continuously performed. It is clearly a unity which rejoices in the diversity of gifts, for it recognises that these, too, are evidence of the Spirit's vitality and 'seal'. Unity in diversity is the very possibility of love.



Some key aspects: points for reflection

1. Dynamic unity. Unity is paramount in Paul's concerns. If the community is also the Body of Christ, then any division is a division of Christ. It can only be the work of the Holy Spirit who gathers the community, confirms, and sustains it and drives its mission to announce Christ to all nations. Unity, therefore, is not the product of structures. It differs from other forms of social unity: it is the work of grace lived in mission. Everyone has a responsibility to maintain this unity. It is the product of the members' genuine Spirit-led desire to be 'one in Christ'. This harmony is the fruit of the Spirit and the transformed relationality of the community.

However, this also imposes a responsibility, both each for the other and especially to Christ for the gift of community itself.

2. The common life and the quality of relationships. The way in which Paul speaks of qualities that characterise the relationships between members should not be reduced to a list of aspirational virtues or of ethical qualities. They are evidence of the life of grace and witness to the new healed and regenerated humanity given in baptism. 'Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another, bonds of peace...': these, too, are all Christological. Yet they are also specifically those relational gifts which keep things open for one other; they do not break or close possibilities of restoration and life. They are the hallmarks of a creative love that is willing to carry the burden and pain of the other. Here, Paul shows us that the 'walking together' of the Church's life is a 'walking in love' (4:15; 5:1).

3. Discerning the truth. Paul is acutely aware that the Christian community of Ephesus—indeed all Christian communities—has a precarious existence, not only due to persecutions and hostilities which the Gospel itself can provoke, but also as a result of the fragility in the internal life of the Church. This stems partly from the way in which divisions and conflict arise, but also from 'false' teaching and inadequate understandings (4:14, 25). Paul is certainly aware that every member of the Church is on a journey of understanding as we grow into 'the fullness of Christ'

(4:14). Baptism is baptism into Christ. For Paul, this is a whole new way of understanding and of being, hence Christ is also a 'renewing of your minds' and the Ephesians are urged 'to put on a new self'. The Christian journey is a journey of conversion at every level. The 'imitatio Christi' is never just an external conformity; it is the life of the Spirit within us which shapes a new life and another way of knowing. In this movement, we are also becoming. Paul's insistence on 'truth' is, therefore, about much more than doctrinal conformity. It is about the very nature of our lives and the way in which they manifest Christ as this living truth. In 'walking together,' the community always takes its orientation from this and can test itself and the path it is on in terms of the way in which its life expresses this truth. Although Paul does not use Johannine language, he surely expresses the same meaning here of Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Paul identifies the key gifts which the Spirit bestows upon the community to preserve it in the truth: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (4:11-13). The variety of offices and gifts is important. All are necessary and part of the community and each has an important service to perform in guiding the community and bringing it to maturity. The Spirit provides the community with the charisms whose special functions are ordered to the service of unity in truth. These structures or charisms not only provide structures for internal coherence of faith and life, but also the means of public acts which manifest Christian identity and the mission of the whole community.

4. Journeying in hope. Running throughout this whole section is the eschatological vision of fullness that is life in Christ and the plenitude of the Father's glory and love, which restores and perfects all things.¹⁸ The vision is not only a future hope; it is a present reality which is unfolding in the life of the community. The very existence of the Church is a source of consolation and hope. Thus, the community is one that can live in the contingencies, the trials and the difficulties of a world that is itself passing away with thanksgiving, with a joyous song of gratitude and praise that rises up from the Spirit-inspired heart (5:19-20).

¹⁸ 'Eschaton' is the New Testament Greek word for 'the end'. It refers to the end of history when the fullness of Christ will be revealed.

This, too, is hope for the world. As Paul describes it, it is the 'lex orandi' (the order of prayer or liturgy) of the community and it reminds us that it is in the liturgy that the community already lays hold of the future for which it longs.

5. The Holy Spirit. Although Ephesians opens with its superb Christological hymn, it is intensely aware of the work and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is the Spirit that impels the Church in mission and empowers it through the gifts which it bestows to nourish the community of the new life of the Kingdom. The Holy Spirit gathers and sustains the community and is the 'pledge' or 'down-payment' that hope in Christ is not empty. In some sense, the Spirit's indwelling in the believer and in the Church is already the beginning of eternal life and future glory. If knowledge and understanding are among the principal gifts which the Spirit bestows upon the apostles, it is a profoundly experiential 'wisdom' and it is given in virtue of the apostolic service to the whole community, to preserve it in the truth of Christ. Ephesians is a great testimony that Pentecost was not simply the event through which the Church comes into being; it is a reality which continues to unfold.



Implications for Synodality

The Apostle's care. These reflections would be incomplete if we did not draw attention to the care that Paul gives to his communities. This is, indeed, an exercise of love for Christ made real and practical in his service of the Church. In a sense, in Paul, we see all the charisms of the Spirit gathered and at work. His power is actually the power of the love for the Church that the Spirit has placed in his heart, and his service is a service of Christ in his kenosis for those who have Christ as their Lord. Paul, too, is not over them but with them on the journey (5:1-2). It is a model of apostolic leadership for the synodal way.

In this short passage from Ephesians, we can begin to see how there is already something akin to synodality within the very nature of the Church's life. Paul helps us to establish the criteria by which we can discern the synodal form of the Church. Clearly, for the apostle, it is an expression of the new life of the Spirit, which already enters the world as hope for all nations. Like the Spirit itself, it is already the guarantee of the Kingdom: a new way of being, a new way for a reconciled humanity in Christ.

Paul understands that there will be disagreements and divisions in the community. However, because he also sees that unity of the Body of Christ is more than just peaceful co-existence but a real gift that we must all seek for the sake of Christ and also as part of the Christian witness to the world, it is a central grace. The grace of unity requires that the community comes to better understand itself and its differences: do they really stem from a deep concern for the truth of Christ and the wellbeing of the community or are they simply the product of different camps and agendas which lead to divisions and power struggles? In appealing to unity as grounded in the reality of Christ, he gives us a major criterion for discerning the source of disagreements and divisions and also of resolving them. The resolution will often go beyond compromise but, in earnest searching and conversation, it can lead to a deeper understanding of the truth that we are all called to live and seek. As we can see from Paul's appeal to the Ephesians, discerning and seeking will require us to be patient, generous, open and humble – some of the qualities that Paul has already identified as marks of Love (Cf. I Cor. 13.).



Questions for Reflection

What are the qualities that Paul identifies as important for guiding discernment? 'Striving to preserve the unity.' Unity is presented as dynamic and not as a 'once and for always' gift. How can a division harm the community? How can a division harm a member of the community? How is the separation of a member of the community felt by it? Can a lack of unity also be an intergenerational phenomenon?

Can certain charisms within a community be seen as a sign of superiority? How can this risk be overcome?

How is unity different from uniformity? Is it important for the community to see the difference?

Apostolic leaderships are models for the community. Do all members of a community need to learn to be leaders in some way or another? Or is leadership something just for a 'few'?

Appendix: Texts from *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*

"The word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality" (*Verbum Domini*, 86).

"The word of God has bestowed upon us the divine life which transfigures the face of the earth, making all things new (cf. *Rev* 21:5)." (*Verbum Domini*, 91).

"The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body" (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

"Saint Augustine puts it: "Your prayer is the word you speak to God. When you read the Bible, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God"." (*Verbum Domini*, 86).

"Each of us is enabled by God to *hear and respond* to his word. We were created in the word and we live in the word; we cannot understand ourselves unless we are open to this dialogue. The word of God discloses the filial and relational nature of human existence." (*Verbum Domini*, 22).

"The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him." (*Verbum Domini*, 24).

"For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life." (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

"With Jesus Christ the Church stands before the definitive word of God: he is "the first and the last" (*Rev* 1:17)." (*Verbum Domini*, 14).

"Jerome's counsel to the priest Nepotian can also be applied to us: "Read the divine Scriptures frequently; indeed, the sacred book should never be out of your hands. Learn there what you must teach"." (*Verbum Domini*, 72).

"One must avoid the risk of an individualistic approach, and remember that God's word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church. Consequently, *the sacred text must always be approached in the communion of the Church.*" (*Verbum Domini*, 86).

"The greater our openness to God's word, the more will we be able to recognize that today too the mystery of Pentecost is taking place in God's Church." (*Verbum Domini*, 123).







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