

## BIBLICAL ORIENTATIONS FOR SYNODALITY

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### **Abstract**

The present article discusses how the Sacred Scripture reflects a walking together of God and the Israelites, Jesus and the disciples, and the early Christians. It enquires whether a process of synodal decision-making, discussions, and deliberations and the principle of co-responsibility in decision-making existed in Judaism and in the early Church. The Bible strongly affirms that synodality is fundamental to the Church's nature. From the beginning, Jesus and his disciples functioned synodally and these principles were practiced in the early Church. Jesus as "the Way" guided the early Church which was filled with the Holy Spirit. Synodality represents a collective journey, with Jesus embracing all people of God regardless of status or gifts to fulfil their mission. New Testament writers depicted Jesus as a journeying, inclusive and dialogical figure. Today's Church is called to emulate Jesus' methods of encounter, listening, and discernment, embodying true synodality.

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Synodality, understood as a walking together of God and humans, has clear foundations in the Old Testament and the New Testament. God's journeying together with humanity during the period of Israel becomes more visible in the incarnation, which manifests divine-human communion and participation. The OT understanding of God as a trinitarian God and a God of relationship and communion is basic to understanding synodality. An understanding of the trinitarian presence of God, which is seen in the creation account, is more visible in the NT which depicts the three persons acting independently but with the same purpose and mission. The Sacred Scripture contains several passages that reflect the essence of synodality. As the Pope exhorts: "Let us be passionate about the Sacred Scripture, let us allow ourselves to be dug into by the Word, which reveals the newness of God and leads to loving others without tiring."<sup>1</sup> The present article discusses how the Sacred Scripture reflects a walking together of God and Israelites, Jesus and the disciples and the early Christians. It enquires whether a process of synodal decision making, discussions and deliberations and the principle of co-responsibility in decision making existed in Judaism and in the early Church.

## **I. Orientations for Synodality in the Old Testament**

According to Orientals, "the synodal institution of the Church has its theological basis in Sacred Scripture itself."<sup>2</sup> The heart of the Synodal journey can be seen in the walking with or journeying together of Yahweh and Israelites in the OT. God created man in his own image and likeness envisaging a synodal way of existence and a life of union and communion with the divine. He did not want man to be alone and he created a partner for him who was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (Gen 2:23). There are several narratives in the OT where God loves Israelites as children and walks with them guiding them through the patriarchs, prophets and kings. When Israel as a pilgrim people of God travelled towards the promised land Yahweh was in their midst walking with them. The word of God was their food and drink during their sojourning, which gave them force and strength. Though God expected a deep personal relationship with the

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<sup>1</sup> Pope France, *Homily on the Word of God Sunday, Jan 23, 2022.*

<sup>2</sup> P. Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam 1994) 41.

Israelites it was often disrupted by sin. In such circumstances the OT God who was a God of compassion, mercy and love tried to restore this relationship through the establishment of a covenant.

One of the most important terms that is often employed to denote the journeying together is 'walk'. Life as a walk can be seen in both OT and NT (Deut 30:16; Ps 101:2.6; Mk 10:32; 2 Cor 6:16). The communion with God was experienced by Israelites in their lives and expressed in a dynamic sense of "walking before God" (Gen 17:1; 24:20; 1 Kings 2:4; 8:23; 2 Chron 6:16), "walking after God" (Deut 13:4; 2 Kings 23:2; 2 Chron 34:31) and "walking with God" (Gen 5:22, 24; 6:9). At times this union with God is being expressed in terms of following the Lord (1 Kings 11:6; 2 Kings 17:21) and caring for the creation (Gen 2:15). The use of the above-mentioned terms and other expressions in the OT provide the rich biblical background to understand the nature and meaning of synodality. Life is a movement, a walking together to achieve a goal of communion, participation and mission. The term "walk" together gives different dimensions of the Divine-human relationship and man-man relationship.

### **1. Synodality as Walking with the Lord (Genesis 5:24; 6:9)**

In Gen 5:22, we read, "Enoch walked with God" and in Gen 5:24 and 6:9 we see notions like Noah walking with God. The expression implies that Enoch/Noah and God walked together and they were obedient and devoted to Him and were enjoying His favour. They relate themselves to God as their companion and friend. 'Walk with' is expressive of a life of communion and oneness with God and one another. The corresponding Hebrew verb for 'walk' (*halak*) used here in its intensive form with the additional idea of enjoying what one is doing. If a person 'walks' with someone as his friend, he unavoidably catches something of his spirit and his manners. Proverbs says: "whoever walks with the wise becomes wise" (13:20). The ideal form of synodal way of life for Israel was the people's covenantal relationship with God. It was a relationship that has to be achieved by "walking in the way of the Lord". According to Judges 2:20-23 the Lord decided not to drive out the remaining nations from the land of Canaan 'to test Israel whether or not they would take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their ancestors did (2:22). Isaiah expresses beautifully the nature and challenges of this covenantal relationship in 30:20-21: "Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher". And when you turn to the right or when

you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it". Walking with the Lord, Walking after the Lord, Walking before the Lord, following the Lord, etc. imply the idea of having collaboration and communion with him. By employing these and other terms to express the relationship between God and Israel, the OT prepares the way for understanding the nature of synodal journey.

## **2. Synodality in the Sinaitic Covenant (Exodus 19:4-8)**

This is one of the texts narrating the identity consciousness of Israel as a people of the covenant and the obedience expected of them.<sup>3</sup> When the Israelites reached Mount Sinai the Lord reminded them of the miraculous events that led to their liberation from Egypt and said to them through Moses: "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." Then God gives them ten commandments and establishes a law that guides Israelite society in the future. In God's establishment of the covenant with people of Israel at Mount Sinai, we see the divine initiative that calls for a synodal response from the part of the whole people of God. The response of the people to Moses's communication of divine will was a collective affirmation: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." This is a synodal response of the unanimous commitment of the people by which they were expressing their desire to be loyal to Yahweh and to obey his commandments.

At this pivotal moment in Israel's history, God and the people initiate a journey of walking together. Here begins the collective and participatory nature of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel as the people of God. Synodality has its essence and source in the collective and participatory nature of covenant. Israel through the covenant made a promise to march forward with a purpose and mission. The synodal decision making is evident in the divine initiative, mutual listening, profound dialogue and collective discernment. God speaks to Moses, Moses acts as a mediator and communicates it to the elders and they in turn convey the message to the people. The collective response of the people is then communicated to Moses and finally to God. As a result of the covenant, they decide to walk together, listen to one another and discern the will of God. The

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<sup>3</sup> J. Anaparambil, "From being Nomads to a Nation: Lessons for Synodality from Ancient Israel", in *Church in India on the Synodal Path*, ed. A. Lawrence et al. (Bengaluru: ATC Publishers 2022) 124.

Church which is established after the model of the covenant community of Israel has to get rid of its clericalist and juridical nature and walk forward as people of God.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Communal Preparation for the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3-5)**

The prophet Isaiah says: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and uneven ground shall become level, and rough places a plain" (40:4-5). The call to prepare the way of the Lord is a communication given to Israel as a whole and the response to the announcement has to be made collectively. It is an all-inclusive invitation directed not merely to certain individuals or groups but to the whole Israelites and to the NT people as well. All the Israelites are invited to make a communal effort for the powerful intervention of God to bring about peace and consolation. The imagery of valley being raised up and mountains being made low symbolizes a metanoia, change of mind, heart, will and conduct paving way for a total conversion. Every individual has to prepare himself to receive God's message of hope and salvation. The participation of all is essential in this synodal process as it ensures that the diverse voices within the community are heard and valued. The all-inclusive nature of God's promise is evident here as it mirrors the divine intention to embrace and welcome every individual. The preparation involves mutual listening, working together, and interpersonal dialogue. Inequalities are to be removed and divisions have to be overthrown and a just society has to be created.

### **4. Inclusivity and Synodal Nature in the Prophets (Jerimiah 31:8-9; Jonah 4:3)**

The passage contains deeper layers of meaning relevant to the contemporary Church of walking together, communal discernment and active participation. It contains a sense of journeying together without neglecting anyone and including everyone.<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah speaks of a great crowd returning as part of restoration from all corners of the earth including the marginalised, vulnerable and those on the peripheries. He emphasises a gathering together of all the Israelites from the ends of the earth bestowing them hope and peace. Among them there will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers, women in labour, the vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed. God ensures that he will lead them beside

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<sup>4</sup> A. Dulles, *Models of the Church, Expanded Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury 1987) 39.

<sup>5</sup> N. Tanner, "Synod in History", *Vidyajyothi* 61 (1997) 18.

streams of water emphasising divine leadership and guidance. He will gather all the people from all corners of the earth as an inclusive community and enable them to walk together. Inclusivity upholds that the people of God have to listen to all voices regardless of their status, position, gender, age, etc. leaving behind none.

The book of Jonah exemplifies that Yahweh is a God of compassion who embraces the principle of inclusiveness. Jonah was asked to go to Nineveh, a wicked city and deliver God's message of compassionate love. Though initially he was reluctant to go and attempted to flee, later he delivered the message to the Ninevites. They heed Jonah's warning and repent, prompting God to show mercy and compassion. However, Jonah was not ready to accept the inclusive nature of God and expressed his anger, resentment and willingness to die at the extension of forgiveness to unworthy people. Human beings fail to embrace inclusiveness especially when it clashes with their personal biases, prejudices and preconceived notions. But God's mercy and compassion are infinite and they cannot be confined to human boundaries. His universalistic attitude transcends race, nationality, caste, creed, and even moral standing. God in the OT is a universal God who insists that his compassionate and merciful character is not for Israel only but extends even to the Ninevites.<sup>6</sup>

## **II. Orientations for Synodality in the New Testament**

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is a profound demonstration of God's desire for communion and walking together with human beings. In the person of Jesus, God took human form and lived among the people expressing His willingness to foster direct and personal relationship. The peoples' response to the incarnated Word of God was to abide in Him the true vine (Jn 15:1-11) and share in the trinitarian love of God thus making a synodal journey to the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Jesus the incarnated Word is Emmanuel (Mt 1:23), God with us, and he affirms that where two or three gather in his name, he will be present (Mt 18:20). In the gospels we see Jesus' travelling together with the disciples and the crowd to fulfil God's plan of salvation (Lk 9-19). He eats with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15-17), shows a liberative approach to women (Lk 8:1-3), accepts the pagans and gentiles (Mt

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<sup>6</sup> M.D. Stanly Kumar, "Including Every One and Leaving out No One: Struggles for an Inclusive Community in the Exilic and Post-Exilic Hebrew Prophets - A Model for Synod", in *Church in India on the Synodal Path*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> J. O'Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016) 9.

15:21-28) and shows a universalist approach to mission (Mt 28:19). The risen Lord sends the Holy Spirit and promises that he will be with his disciples till the end of the world (Mt 28:20).

## 5. Synodal Way of Life in the Gospels

The fundamental gospel teachings that urged the first Christians to live a life of communion, sharing, and *koinonia* are: “The promise of Christ to be present in the midst of two or three gathered in his name (Mt 18:20), the revelation of Christ’s mission as service and sacrifice of his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45), the Christian concept of authority as service (Mt 20:25-26; Mk 10:41-45) and the new commandment of love (Jn 13:34-35).”<sup>8</sup> We can see in the NT, passages related to the discussion on synodality that are practiced in the Church.

### 5.1 Journeying with Jesus the Way

Synodality indicates the path along which the people of God walk together encountering each other and listening to one another.<sup>9</sup> It refers to the journey the apostles and disciples made together with Jesus who presents himself as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). He is not one of the ways but the true Way (*hodos*) to attain eternal life. He proclaimed the Way of God, pointed out the Way and he is the Way. In Jesus people of all faith gather together as the pilgrim people of God, and march towards heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus announces the Path of God and traces its direction through a journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:28). In the Acts those who followed Jesus were originally called “the disciples of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). They were known as the followers of the Way right from the beginning (Acts 9:1-2) and were called Christians by 64 A.D. from Antioch (Acts 11:26). Later, the followers of the Way became the Church (*ecclesia*) with their motto “together-on-a-way”. The Greek word *ecclesia* comes from two Greek words *ek kaleo* which means to call together. Church is a community summoned together or called together to follow Jesus as an assembly. Matthew alone uses the word church in his gospel (16:18; 18:17) and his gospel is called the Church’s gospel. St Chrysostom writes that Church is “a name that stands for a journey together”.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Stan, “Sinodalità”, *Orientalia Christiana* 2 (1970) 84-85; P. Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, n 3.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, “Address on the Occasion of the Commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops”, AAS 107 (2015) 1142.

Hebrew word *qahal* has the meaning of synod, the assembly convened by the Lord. Synod and ecclesial community are synonymous.<sup>11</sup>

## **5.2 Synodal Way of Decision Making in Matthew (18:15-17)**

Mt 18:15-17 presents a process for addressing sin with the Christian community reflecting the synodal principles of communal correction and reconciliation. The passage deals with the exclusion from the community of an erring Christian by the juridical pronouncement of “the Church”<sup>12</sup> There is a three-step process involved here. The first step is to correct and reprove the offender based on Lev 19:17 to bring him back. Lev 19:17 says: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin of him.” The second step is to take one or two witnesses in case of unwillingness to repent and is based on Dt 19:15: “only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained.” The last step is to tell the Church which means to tell the gathering of the local community. The procedure by which the community reached its decision to exclude is not spelled out. But the authorities and the whole community are involved in making the decision. Was it the authorities’ decision made in the name of all, or was the decision reached on the basis of community consensus is not clear. The Church may condemn him or forgive him, which is not stated. However, we can see an instance of co-responsibility in decision-making, a decision concerning an offending Christian. Here, the offender has judgement passed on him by the community and the expulsion of the sinner from the community is seen as the proper work of the community.<sup>13</sup> Decision making might have been done through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and cooperation.

## **5.3 Emmaus Story: A Synodal Journey (Lk 24:13-35)**

The passage contains several elements that align with the concept of Synodality in the Church. The two disciples going to Emmaus were thinking that Jesus was a political Messiah, a triumphant and glorious figure who is to redeem Israel. But the death of Jesus on the cross dashed all their hopes, made them sad, and forced some of them to live a secluded life as they feared the Jews. It is in such a context that the risen Lord is appearing to them. As a first step, Jesus was just walking with Cleophas and the other unnamed disciple, a journeying together,

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<sup>11</sup> G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968) 1334-1335.

<sup>12</sup> M.M. Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament”, *Jurist* 31 (1971) 8.

<sup>13</sup> M.M. Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament”, 6.



on “their way”. Walking together according to Pope Francis is the constitutive way of the Church. He says: “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”.<sup>14</sup> The second step is hearing these men who were narrating the episodes that took place in Jerusalem. Hearing each other is the central element of synodality, which unites the speaker and the listener. The disciples freely narrated the episodes that happened those days and shared their apprehensions and misunderstandings about the Messiah while Jesus was listening. A synodal Church is a Church which listens and realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is a mutual encountering and listening in which everyone has something to learn.<sup>15</sup> In *Fratelli Tutti* we see that “life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter, capable of transcending our differences and divisions” (FT 215).

The third step is discussing with them and interpreting the scripture to them. Jesus explains the Word of God, asks them, was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? Jesus is not merely walking with them but listens to them and advances on the journey. Pope Francis says, synodality is not about encountering and listening. Ultimately, it is about journeying with, to be the Church and we are called to be, to move a way forward. These two disciples encounter Jesus, dialogue with him, and discern the way forward. The next step is reclining at the table with them for the breaking of the bread. When they insisted, he accompanied them to dinner, took bread, blessed, broke and gave them and revealed himself in the breaking of the bread. They recognised Jesus in the ritual gestures of the community fellowship meal and decided to return to Jerusalem. Later, they realized that their hearts were burning within them while he was talking to them on the road and was opening the scriptures to them (Lk 24:32) by the dynamism of the Holy Spirit providing them a synodal synergy. Having returned to Jerusalem they related what had happened on the road and how they recognized Jesus. Those who were in Jerusalem also shared that the Lord has truly been risen and appeared to Simon. The synodal process results in narrating and interpreting diverse experiences and begins to create a new community and a new life. The scattered fragments that have whirled in different directions, the women, Peter, those who had run

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, “Address for the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”, 17 October 2015, AAS 107 (2015) 1138-1144.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *The Bishops’ Synod of October 2015*.

to the tomb, and the two disciples on the road are being gathered together in one place with one shared story.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Synodality in the Acts of the Apostles

Synodal thinking can be seen throughout the history of the early Church recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts provides a model of the Church that we are called to imitate in our synodal process.<sup>17</sup> The early Christian community journeyed in a synodal way and the critical questions they decided after listening to the Holy Spirit. The gatherings believed in the presence of the Lord in their midst as they gathered and had as its core the idea of communion or *koinonia*. They came together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and make decisions. Mary, Mother of Jesus and of the Church gathered the disciples and prepared them to receive the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. She was the accompanying presence in the synodal pilgrimage of the people of God.<sup>18</sup> The four most important areas of the inner life of the community included the following: (i) the apostles' teaching, (ii) fellowship (*koinónia*), (ii) the breaking of bread, and (iv) prayers. The community gathers together whenever important decisions are to be taken. We find synodal models of decision making in the Acts of the Apostles in the following episodes: (i) Election of Mathias (Acts 1:15-26). (ii) Election of the Seven Disciples (Acts 6:1-6); and (iii) Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

### 6.1 A Synodal Way of Election (Acts 1:15-26)

In the early Church, the principle of Synodality was actively applied during the election of Mathias as one of the twelve apostles.<sup>19</sup> The Church was from the beginning synodal in its essence.<sup>20</sup> Taking inspiration from the life and mission of Jesus, the seed of synodal thinking began to sprout in the activities of the Church. In the replacement of Judas, we have an example of thinking together for a better communion, participation, which is culminates in a fruitful mission. About 120 people gathered with Peter and other apostles to discuss and discern the replacement for Judas. With the consent of the community, they begin the proceedings for the election of Matthias.

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<sup>16</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 1991) 399.

<sup>17</sup> J. Schröter, "God's Righteousness and Human Law: A New Testament Perspective on Law and Theology", *Journal of Law and Religion*, 32.1 (2017) 16.

<sup>18</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 284, AAS 105 (2013) 1134.

<sup>19</sup> P. Duprey, "The Synodal Structure of the Church in Eastern Theology", *One in Christ* 7 (1971) 152-153; P. Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> A. Spadro, "The Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, October 2018.

Peter stands out as spokesman and leader, and is playing a leading role in the early Church. The whole Christian group gathered and the community as a whole put forward two candidates for the vacant position, Joseph and Matthias who were presented as worthy of ministry and apostleship. Now the Lord Jesus is asked to show which of the two men he has chosen. The choice is to be of Jesus and not that of the eleven and hence the use of the lot.<sup>21</sup> After praying over both of them laying their hands, they took a lot, and it fell on Matthias and he was numbered with the twelve.

In the election of Mathias, the people of God are called to the communal exercise of discernment of the will of the risen Lord, and the Holy Spirit is guiding them to take decision playing a significant role. They listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and discern the way they have to follow (Acts 5:19-21; 8:26, 29, 39; 12:16-17; 13:1-3; 16:6-7, 9-10; 20:22). The method of selecting by lot was widespread among both Greeks and Romans for both religious and social purposes. The Jews practiced it for determining the will of God (Lev 8:8; Josh 18:6) and is mentioned frequently in the OT, for example in the appointment of priests for service in the Temple (1 Chron 2:8ff; 26:13ff) and also in the story of Jonah (1:7). It is continued in the NT and casting lots for the election of Mathias is the last recorded case in the bible for making a choice.

## **6.2 Synodal Principles in the Appointment of Seven Deacons (Acts 6:1-7)**

The appointment of seven deacons serves as a significant example of synodal principles in action within the early Church. A dispute arose in the early Church because the Hellenistic Jews felt that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The apostles proposed a solution that involved the delegation of responsibilities to the seven elders. Hence, the twelve summoned the community of disciples to counsel action, and to determine criteria for those to be selected. The chosen seven must be men of good repute (cf. 16:2; 22:12), must also be men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. There should be complete division of labour between the Twelve and the Seven. The seven had to attend to the work of charity while the Twelve would continue prayer and the service of the Word, the work of preaching and teaching. What the apostles said pleased the whole multitude. They recognized that it was in agreement with God's will (cf. Acts 6:2) not simply because it came with the authority of the apostles.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> C.K. Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1994) 103.

<sup>22</sup> G. Stählin, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: 1962) 98; C.K. Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314.

In the decision process, the main task of the whole believers was to seek out seven men suitable for the purpose in order that the twelve might appoint them. They sought out seven men who were filled with faith and the Holy Spirit and put them before the apostles and the Twelve prayed over them. The appointment was not merely the task of the Twelve. The whole group not the apostles alone laid their hands on the seven men.<sup>23</sup> Having discerned the will of the Spirit the apostles gave the seven men of good reputation the task of serving at tables (6:1-6). Thus, the apostles and disciples realized the communion among God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit and they are a travelling God and a synodal presence.

### **6.3 A Synodal Model in the Apostolic Council (Acts 15; Gal 2:1-10)**

Acts 15 provides a significant example of synodal principle in action in the Jerusalem Council emphasizing collective discernment, consultation and consensus building within the Church. The crucial question of gentile admittance to Christianity without circumcision and the application of Jewish laws and customs on gentile converts were dealt with in this council. There were real challenges and turbulences during the missionary activities and hence the community of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas and some others to the Church of Jerusalem, to the Apostles and Elders to discuss the question (15:2). The Jerusalem community meet to study the matter when Paul and Barnabas report the issue, a lively and open discussion and debate follow (15:7), Peter bears testimony to what happened and asserts that God gave the Holy Spirit to gentiles too, just as he did to Jews. He recalls the circumstances of the conversion of Cornelius, which was accepted by the Jerusalem Church (Cf. Acts 11:18).

The community listens particularly to Peter's authoritative witness and explanations. James then quotes from Amos 9:11-12, the Septuagint version rather than the Hebrew text, which speaks of the conversion of the gentiles and supports Peter and interprets the events in the light of the prophetic words (Amos 9:11-12) and presents the matter in favour of the gentile converts. A discussion and deliberation follow regarding the expansion of the Church beyond the restricted boundaries. Thus, the Apostles and presbyters, "in agreement with the whole Church" decide on the gentile acceptance into the Church without undergoing circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic

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<sup>23</sup> C.K. Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 315.

Law.<sup>24</sup> Paul had been given complete freedom by the Jerusalem apostles in his dealings with the gentiles (Gal 2:1-10). Later, James, the leader of the Jewish Christian party in the Jerusalem Church makes concessions to the gentile Christians and at the same time offers some rules of behaviour for them (19-21). He then sends Barsabbas and Silas with Paul and Barnabas with a letter which states the “vision of Church’s mission”. The community at Antioch rejoices at the decision and the letter. The decision was taken in agreement with the whole Church and applying the synodal principle.<sup>25</sup> The procedure was accepted by the Church in Antioch.

The council shows how decisions have to be taken in the Church giving specific role and place to each one (Cf 1 Cor 12:12-17; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4:4). We also see some kind of a “synodal letter” to the faithful of Antioch, by which the apostles and elders communicated their decision (Acts 15:22-35). “Across the centuries, this event has been interpreted as the paradigm for Synods celebrated by the Church.”<sup>26</sup> Here we see a synodal form of consensus and understanding rather than dominion, imposition or command of one or some over others. Of course, the term “synod” was not used at that time of the Jerusalem Council. However, we can see indications of the collegial life of the Church right from the apostolic period.<sup>27</sup> Luke’s account leaves no doubt as the Jerusalem council is one in which the entire community plays a part. The narrative (Acts 15) is of major theological importance in the discussion on co-responsibility, for it represents Luke’s understanding of how the Church should arrive at its decisions. Acts 15 gives a model for the procedure of the later Church in arriving at decisions. It can be taken as a norm whereby the Church’s decision-making is to be guided in the future.<sup>28</sup> Thus the Jerusalem Council shows the method and norm of a synod where the Apostles together with the community discern and decide on the issues in the Church in communion with the Lord and the Holy Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> P. Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 43.

<sup>25</sup> P. Duprey, “The Synodal Structure of the Church in Eastern Theology”, 152-153.

<sup>26</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, n 20.

<sup>27</sup> P. Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> M.M. Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament”, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Benedict XVI, “Homily in the Holy Mass for the Inauguration of the V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops”, Aparecida, 13 May 2008, AAS 99 (2007) 435.

## 7. Paul on Synodality: Dealing with a Case of Incest (1 Cor 5:1-8, 13)

The passage presents a challenging situation in the early Christian community of Corinth and provides insights into a Synodal journey of addressing moral and ethical issues within the Church. "It has been brought to the attention of the apostle that there is in the church of Corinth an example of immorality such as cannot be found even among the pagans: a man is living with his stepmother."<sup>30</sup> It is an issue which gives a punishment like an excommunication as we now understand it. The offender is to be "handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that the (his) spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord" (5:5). Separated from the community, the sinner will become the prey of Satan and will die. Here what concerns us is the procedure followed in the passing of the sentence. Paul orders "to cast out the evil one from your midst" (5:13), a question from Deuteronomy (Dt 17:7; 22:21). He demands that the community should gather together to pass a sentence on the man. Though the apostle has already decided the punishment, he wants it to be pronounced by the entire community. By doing so Paul shows a concern for the collegial exercise of authority and wants the community members to make his decision their own, so that the verdict will be that of the entire Church.<sup>31</sup>

There are biblical scholars who argue that here we can see an example of co-responsibility in making the decision. C.K. Barret writes: "Paul then knows his own mind quite clearly and does not hesitate to declare it. This does not mean however, that he intends to impose it on the Church".<sup>32</sup> Paul's mode of action in this case is that he wished to have the whole community join him in his judgement on the incestuous man. Paul explicitly wishes to have the sentence pronounced by the Church in the assembly and the verdict be that of the entire Church. Acts 15 states that the "whole Church" has to be given a part in the making of decisions, particularly those that pertain to faith and to important matters of discipline. It should not be an arbitrary decision of the authorities or hierarchy. Any Church assembly that excludes the common people from an active role does not meet the standards set by the NT.

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<sup>30</sup> M.M. Bourke, "Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament", 3.

<sup>31</sup> M.M. Bourke, "Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament", 6.

<sup>32</sup> C.K. Barret, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row 1968) 124. However, J.C. Hurd makes a different estimation: Paul was not persuasive but dictatorial", *The Origin of I Corinthians* (New York: Seabury Press 1965) 78.

## **Conclusion**

Synod or synodality has its roots and foundations in the OT, in the gospel traditions, and in the history of the early Church. Biblical books emphatically assert that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church. The community of Jesus and the disciples were synodal right from its inception and the synodal principles were actively practiced from the time of the early Church. Jesus was the Way and it was on this Way that the early Church travelled being filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus, Synodality manifests itself as a journey or walking together with the earthly Jesus and the risen Lord. It is a journey of the walking together of all the people of God irrespective of their difference in status and charism in order to fulfil the mission. In Jesus the NT writers saw a journeying God, inclusive in his attitude, dialogical in his encounters and synodal in his approach. The Church today is also bound to follow the method used by Jesus, which is that of encounter, listening and discernment, which characterise the spirit of true synodality. The Church becomes significant in the modern era only when it becomes synodal and updates itself.