

SYNODALITY IN THE CHURCH FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Synodality has solid roots in the Bible. Both creation and history, the medium of Biblical revelation documented in the Bible can be analyzed to understand aspects of Synodality in the Church. One such important aspect is journeying together of God and human beings. The Exodus, the Covenant, the Christ Event, the Jerusalem Council, etc., are important moments of this journeying together. When Synodality expected of covenant community is a mess, prophets intervened to restore it. In the New Testament, this divine-human journeying together becomes a more tangible reality in the person of Jesus Christ and his mission. The early Christian community drew inspiration from the inclusive and compassionate approach of Jesus to lay the foundational principles of ecclesial journeying together basically as inclusive and non-partisan. Thus, a study of the Biblical vision of Synodality is important for implementing Synodality in the Church.

Keywords: Synodality; Ecclesia; Covenant Community; Jesus; Kingdom of God; Jerusalem Council.

Introduction

The Christian revelation of God in the Bible is a history of God's journeying with humanity, initiated at creation and continued

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through history. Hence, a search for the Biblical foundation of Synodality based on the theme, 'Synodality as God's journeying together with humanity' is worth an attempt. Other than the Biblical passages and episodes usually identified as referring to Synodality in the Church, like the disciples walking with the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, the Jerusalem Council, etc., we can trace the antecedents of Synodality as the journeying together of God and human beings with a single-minded purpose as the common thread of Biblical revelation, both in the OT and the NT.

In this article, I focus on the patterns of journeying together of God and the people documented in the Bible to understand Synodality. It is a journey of divine participation in human affairs and the human responses to them.

Basic to the understanding of Synodality is participation based on the model of the Holy Trinity. The Trinitarian economy of salvation comprises an economy of participation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, showing a single-minded purpose, even when they act independently. In Trinitarian relationality, we see dialogical reciprocity, which is basic to understanding Synodality. This reciprocity and mutuality have "implications for right relations within the Church, "right relations of equality and mutuality." Though the economy of Trinitarian relationality and synodality becomes more conspicuous in the NT, we have traces of it in the OT as well.

In the very creation of the universe and humankind, we see the involvement of God, the Creator, his *dabar*, and *ruah* (Gen 1:1-28). The original intent of the creation of human beings was synodal. As the Paradise story reveals, there existed harmony of participatory co-existence among the Creator, human beings, and the rest of creation. This harmonious co-existence results in *shalom*, and well-being, resulting from the harmony of relationships. People walked with God and had a friendly and caring relationship with Nature. But sin disrupted this shalom, and hence the history of salvation was set in motion with the call of Abraham, in view of restoration and reconciliation among God, Nature, and human beings.¹

¹ See, Carmelo Sant, "Natural Environment: The Biblical Perspective," *Melita Theologica* 71.2 (2021): 313-323.

The very word Synodality has Biblical foundations.² It basically means "journeying together" (syn = with, *hodos* = way) and, as Pope Francis indicated at the beginning of his papacy, it is the path "which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."³

The key features of this journeying together are, listening to one another and learning through listening, giving due dignity to every member of the *ecclesia*, which, in turn, makes the Church a model of men and women traveling together, sharing the travails of history and thus becoming a trailblazer for "a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations."⁴

1. The Synodal Way in the Old Testament

1.1 The Creation of human being: God's intent of journeying together

The participatory character of the creation of human beings is evident in the two creation accounts in Genesis (Gen 1:26-28; 2: 4-18). The decision to create humankind in God's image and likeness was intended to make them participate in taking care of His creation according to His design. Human beings are expected to collaborate with the Creator in a participatory way, as highlighted in the second creation account. God asking Man to name the species, and the freedom of communication between God, Man, and the rest of creation, all show the symbiosis that existed between them. This symbiotic participatory relationship is called Paradise. It is the place of shalom, namely, well-being resulting from the harmony of relationships.

However, the human infringement upon the creative design destroyed the synodality of Paradise and the participatory and communicative structure of creation. As a result, the nature of the

² <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/news/synodality-in-the-life-and-mission-of-the-church--by-the-interna.html>, 01.12.2021.

³ Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis Ceremony Commemorating The 50th Anniversary of The Institution of The Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015," https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html, 12.11.2021.

⁴ Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis."

relationship between the Creator and humankind underwent an unexpected twist. From the status of being the Creator's viceroy on earth, they became fallen creatures to be saved by the Creator's mercy. The nature of synodality, i.e., traveling together, changes from creation and participation to reparation and redemption, and God's dealing with human history became salvation history.⁵ The call of Abraham marks the beginning of this long salvific journey, exemplified in the history of the people of Israel in the OT and the Church in the NT.

1.2 Synodality and Salvation History: The Synodal Way of the Covenant

The call of Abraham is understood in the Bible as the beginning of God's decision to journey together with a people chosen to represent humanity. God's command to Abraham to leave his land and people (Gen 12:1), relying and believing on the reliability of God's promises, set in motion the salvation history which reaches its climax in the Christ event. The seminal journey of Abraham slowly grows to the journey of Israel, the chosen people, through the vicissitudes of history epitomized by the Exodus experience and the Exile.

We learn from the OT that it is the narrative of the steadfast engagement of Yahweh in human history and Israel's responses to it. Israel understood this engagement as the history of Yahweh's accompaniment of them through covenant and remembrance. It is the covenant with Abraham that prompted Israel to cry to Yahweh during the oppression of Egyptian slavery. It elicited in Yahweh the remembrance of the covenant and the ensuing intervention in Israel's history (Ex 2:23-24). The freedom to approach the covenant partner with a cry for help or complaint, the readiness to listen to it with patience and generosity, and to take initiatives to settle the issues through pro-active initiatives are important aspects of synodality.⁶ Based on the covenant with Abraham, Israel became a

⁵ Dominique Barthelemy, *God, and His Image: An Outline of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1966), 172.

⁶ Angelo Card. De Donatis, "La sinodalita come 'stile di pensiero,'" *Alpha Omega* 24.4 (2021): 196-197. The author highlights the importance of listening in the synodal process. According to him, we need to speak of a synodal thought process, which has the capacity to welcome, encourage and sustain the participation of different members, especially those who are pushed to the margins by history and the mal-intent of dominant groups in

qahal (community) ratified at the Sinai Covenant.⁷ It is based on the threshold of the covenant; Israel evaluated their commitment both as individuals and as a *qahal*. The Covenant was the identity card of the community of Israel, just as Baptism is the identity card of all Christians.⁸ The members of the community continued their journey in history through their shared experiences and through the guidance of specially appointed leaders like Moses, Aaron, the Levites, Judges, kings, and prophets.

As the covenant guarantees reciprocal participation and communion, the remembrance of it would remind the partners of its rights and privileges (Ex 6:7; Lev 26:45.) That is why Yahweh utters through the prophet Amos, "You only have I have known of all the peoples of the earth... (Am 3:2; cf. Hos 13:4-6)." In liturgical texts like Psalms 105, 106, and 107, Israel recollected its history in prayer: the deeds, events, blessings, and sins that have shaped its history. The refrain in Ps 107, "Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love (*hesed*), his astounding deeds (*niplaot*) for the whole human race" (v.8, 15, 21, 31) presents God as one who has accompanied his people and the whole humanity with care in all vicissitudes of life, rescuing them in the face of and from death. They thankfully acknowledged in prayer how God had taken care of them during the Exodus journey through the desert. The liturgical remembrance of the wonderful deeds of God's caring accompaniment in difficult moments would elicit in the people a sense of mission of helping those in dire need of basic amenities of life like food and shelter.⁹ Thus, the three aspects of synodality envisaged by Pope Francis "communion, participation and mission" are traceable in the Exodus event and its remembrance.

The Exodus event marks the break away from hegemonic patterns of slavery, exclusivism, and triumphalism to an acceptable pattern of the covenantal values of solidarity, mutuality, inclusion, and

the joint venture. What we need is to develop a synodal thought (*pensiero sinodale*), which is participative, dialogical, and non-exclusive, but at the same time, not indifferent regarding the truth.

⁷ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in The Life and Mission of The Church*, #13.

⁸<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>, 10.11.2021.

⁹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 107, 111-112.

sharing. The strategy of the covenant is synodal, implying walking together. Yahweh guarantees an I-Thou relationship of reciprocity and fidelity with rights and obligations through the covenant formula, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Ex 6:7). However, as many OT passages point out, the people, namely, Israel, failed to reciprocate the covenant fidelity and steadfastness of Yahweh. As Jeremiah laments, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer 2:13).

Walter Brueggemann delineates the dynamics of this covenant relationship as rooted in Yahweh's inescapable, original commitment to Israel. It came to exist because of the decisive, initial action of Yahweh. Israel, as a covenant partner, is expected to order its life in ways that are appropriate to this relationship. Thus, Covenant demands self-giving love and loving obedience.¹⁰ The loving obedience expected of Israel is to be expressed and witnessed in cult and ethics (Mic 6:8). When Israel's response to the self-giving love of Yahweh (*hesed*) was amiss, prophets evaluated the covenant community based on the covenant obligations.

2.3 Prophetic Criticism of Lack of Synodality

The prophetic criticism of the lack of synodality expected of the covenant is significant for understanding Synodality in the Bible. As we have seen, the covenant expects reciprocity in the journeying together of the partners. The primary intention of the Sinai Covenant was to establish the closest possible intimacy between the people and their God. Yahweh and Israel made an appointment to walk together (Am 3:3). The jealousy of God towards His people comes from His passionate love for His people. This love suffers when Israel becomes unfaithful through apostasy and syncretism. They criticized also the complacency that crept into the faith-living of the covenant community. The prophets indicate that this lethargy crept into the covenant community by seeking the Lord merely through cult practices and pilgrimages without proper ethical connectivity to justice and righteousness. It implies a concern for the marginalized of the society because Biblical justice is more restorative than merely retributive in nature. Prophetic criticism was

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 414-415.

an evaluation of Israel's faith living in specific historical contexts, and whenever and wherever they found discrepancies, they demanded interruption and renewal. This goes in line with the synodal process Pope Francis envisages when he writes:

Let us keep going back to God's own "style," which is closeness, compassion, and tender love. God has always operated that way. If we do not become this Church of closeness with attitudes of compassion and tender love, we will not be the Lord's Church. Not only with words, but by a presence that can weave greater bonds of friendship with society and the world. A Church that does not stand aloof from life, but immerses herself in today's problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God. Let us not forget God's style, which must help us: closeness, compassion, and tender love.¹¹

When the synodal way envisaged in the community of faithful (*qahal*) failed, the prophets visualized the possibility of a new beginning. Because only by interrupting the aberrations that had crept into the covenant living of the *qahal* through a radical renewal would its journey in history make sense. Since the vision of Exodus to form a community based on principles of justice, solidarity, and fidelity (Micah 6:8) did not materialize as expected and led to Exile, Second Isaiah predicted a new Exodus (Isa 43:17-21), qualitatively better than the first, leading to a restored covenant community with enlarged theological horizons. Prophet Jeremiah too envisioned this transition through the vision of the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). The newness is not in the teaching as such, but in how the teaching would be communicated and received. The gulf between promulgation and reception of the teaching will be abolished by engraving it on the hearts of the people of God. Prophet Ezekiel promises the replacement of the hardened heart with a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 11:10).

The talk of newness was necessitated due to the failure of previous covenants, especially, the Sinai. However, whether this means a covenant totally new or a renewal of the Sinai covenant is a subject of debate. One thing is clear, as Walter Kasper notes: the various covenants mentioned in the Bible "do not stand in isolation, without

¹¹ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>, 05.11.2021

any connection to one another. Each new covenant that is concluded refers back to the preceding one and restates it in current terms. Thus, tradition and interpretation are in each instance interconnected.”¹² By articulating the divine resolve to renew and restore the languishing covenant, the prophets wanted to indicate that, “Yahweh refuses to be governed by circumstances,” and “urges Israel to refuse to succumb to circumstances, even when the circumstance is generated by Israel’s ethical failure.”¹³ By presenting the ability of God to start anew by restoring the ruptured covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel through the notion of the new covenant, the exilic and post-exilic theology reiterated that God’s initial commitment is not withdrawn despite Israel’s failures but envisaged a new form of its actualization. As Childs notes, “The divine purpose remained that of reconciliation with his people and the restoration of his whole creation.”¹⁴ It implies that it is part of journeying together in history to be open to being renewed and corrected. As the covenant renewal in Joshua 24 indicates, the renewal of the covenant was an invitation to recommit to the mission of journeying together to the Promised Land. From the perspective of synodality, we can say, every renewal is an attempt to take stock of the situation, evaluate together the ups and downs of the journey until now, and ponder together how to move forward. The New Testament understands the fulfillment of the promise of the New Covenant in the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

2. The Synodal Way of Jesus

In understanding the synodal way of Jesus, as the preparatory document on the Synod on Synodality suggests, we need to pay attention to three actors: Jesus, the crowd, and the apostles. The reciprocal, mutually enriching, and intertwined relationship among these three players made the proclamation of the Kingdom of God effective and significant.

The participatory reciprocity of the covenant community had its ups and downs in the history of Israel. However, the vision of God initiated in the creation and later continued throughout history,

¹² Kasper_Cambridge_6Dec04.htm, 05.11.2021

¹³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 647.

¹⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 355.

reaching a more tangible stage in the incarnation. Jesus Christ is the revelation of Truth that is God in person. The Christ Event is the result of Trinitarian communion and participation. The role of Trinitarian communion and participation is very much central to the New Testament revelation. "Word becoming Flesh" and the second person of the Trinity coming down to dwell among humanity was the plan of the Father, the first person of the Trinity. While Luke testifies to the role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Jesus and in the birth of the Church, John highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in continuing the mission of Jesus as the Paraclete. The believers' response to this tripersonal participatory self-communication is "to 'abide' lovingly in Jesus, 'the true vine' (15:1-11) and so share in the trinitarian life of God."¹⁵ Jesus fulfilled the plan of His father in total obedience and love to bring salvation to the world through his kenotic love and 'substitutionary atonement,' which "liberates us for a new life and makes us a new creation."¹⁶ As the Last Supper passages indicate, it means, Jesus, dying "for us." "The *pro nobis* ["for us"] is the meaning of his existence and his surrender unto death. As such it is the indispensable core of all New Testament Theology."¹⁷ This trinitarian model is foundational to ecclesial synodality to be evidenced in sharing of ministries, which must be mutually exclusive, but totally inclusive.

The early Church's kerygmatic conviction that Jesus Christ 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death,' has become the basic teaching of all relationalities in the Church.¹⁸ It is another way of expressing Jesus' vision of authority as *diakonia*: "I have come not be served, but to serve" (Mk 10:45). By washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:4-20), Jesus clarified further, the nature of relationships that should exist among the members of the Church, especially among the leaders. Through this symbolic action, Jesus shows the nature of intense love which goes to the extreme of washing the feet of another in humility, for and to the

¹⁵ J. O'Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

¹⁶ Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 76.

¹⁷ Kasper, *Mercy*, 73.

¹⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 358.

benefit of others.¹⁹ It is the ultimate sign of Jesus' love in action (Jn 13:15), which "grants the disciples a part in him and obliges them to be signs of the same loving action for the other."²⁰ As J. P. Sanders, observes, "The point would be then that no one is too good, too proud, in too high a position to do whatever is needful for the welfare of his fellow Christians."²¹ Humble service coming from genuine love and concern for fellow Christians becomes the distinguishing mark of Jesus' discipleship. Thus, the washing of the feet becomes a key to understanding authority in the Church. Rejecting social hierarchy based on designations and roles, Jesus puts forward new patterns of relationships based on the kenotic path of love. These relationships are defined by love and expressed in service. This path of love, as Tomáš Halík writes, "is the courage to die to one's selfishness, to forget oneself because of others, and to step out of oneself."²² Hence a realignment of power structures in the church based on this basic teaching is a sine-qua-non for evolving synodality. Those who are entrusted with leading positions, power, and money ought to accept them as tasks and services of love.

The prophetic mediatory role of Jesus becomes instrumental in establishing the New Covenant community. Jesus, by calling the Twelve, and through His proclamation of the Kingdom of God through His words and deeds, laid the foundation of this New Covenant Community, the *ecclesia*.²³ The prophetic mediatory role primarily consisted in granting salvation to the whole world with the power and authority given to Him by the Father. This power and authority primarily manifested in His loving obedience to His father's will expressed in Jn 3:16, "For God so loved the world that

¹⁹ Jan van der Watt, "The Meaning of Jesus Washing the Feet of His Disciples (John 13)," *Neotestamentica* 51,1 (2017): 36

²⁰ Bincy Mathew, *The Johannine Foot washing as the Sign of Perfect Love*, WUNT 2 2Reihe464 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 417. In this well-researched work, Bincy Mathew demonstrates the multi-dimensional meaning of the episode.

²¹ J.T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1986), 97.

²² Tomáš Halík, *I Want You to Be* (Notre dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 9.

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 60-62.

he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

2.1 The Inclusive Approach of Jesus

A salient feature of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God is that he had an impartial attitude in sowing the words and signs of the coming of the kingdom.²⁴

Jesus had a participatory and inclusive approach in his ministry. To ensure that his programme would be correctly understood, he chose twelve close associates and made them participate in all his activities. They learned the way of Jesus, not by his theoretical discourses, but rather by seeing him doing the ministry. The invitations of Jesus to the disciples, "come and see" and "follow me," are invitations to accompany him and participate in his mission of proclamation. The synodal approach of Jesus is very visible in his decision to take three of his apostles to witness both his moment of glory at the transfiguration and his agony at Gethsemane. His accountability to his close associates was evident in his disposition to clarify the doubt of the disciples at the well in Samaria (Jn 4). He responded proactively to the request of the disciple "to teach them to pray" (Lk 11:1).

However, he did correct his close associates when they failed to grasp his strategy or when they tried to detract him from his mission of accomplishing his Father's will. Jesus corrected any attempt to bypass this kenotic path of love. For example, critically evaluating the request of the sons of Zebedee, he clarified his vision of authority: "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:44-45). When Peter wished to hinder the programme of Jesus, Jesus reprimanded him strongly saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mt 16:23).

The synodal way of Jesus also includes encouraging and helping his disciples in their difficulties. At Gethsemane, even when his close associates failed to keep up to the expectations of Jesus in the most critical situation, he tried to fortify them asking them to be more

²⁴ "For a Synodal Church: The Preparatory Document," #16, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>.

watchful. In the post-resurrection appearances, the Risen Lord accompanied the disillusioned disciples by helping them to understand the fulfillment of the Scriptures in His life and mission, and assured them of his constant accompaniment, in and through the Eucharistic presence and His Spirit.

2.2 Jesus and the Crowd

Listening to the voice of the less heard and excluded people is given as an important component of Synodality in the Church. Here too, Jesus showed us the way. The public ministry of Jesus was a journey through Galilee, Samaria, and Judea meeting the crowd and proclaiming to them the Kingdom of God and inviting them to “repent and believe” (Mk 1:15). He was not selective, but rather open and all-inclusive in his approach to the crowd. Of course, he paid special attention to the vulnerable and marginalized of society. He did not wait for the people to come to him, he went in search of them, because “they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). He did not refrain from making himself available to those who came in search of him, to those who were in need of them. To give a few examples, he listened to the cry of the blind man on the road and intervened in his life (Mk 10:46-52); he brought back to life the only son of the widow of Naaïm (Lk 7:11-15); he cured the paralytic brought to him by others and appreciated their humanitarian initiative (Mt 9:1-8; Mk 1:1-12; Lk 5:17-26); he made sure that the crowd who came to hear him would not go hungry and taught the disciples the lesson of the need to take care of the basic needs of people (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:30-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-14); He had always the time to address their cry and the space for every voice. His dialogical and inclusive way of listening to voices from backgrounds and experiences completely different from his own is exemplified in his conversations with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-27), the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30) and the Centurion (Mt 8: 5-13). He never pretended to be busy, rather, he stopped his journey to listen to them, as in the case of the blind Bartimaeus at Jericho (Mk 10:46-52) and Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) and respond to them leading to healing, reconciliation, and restoration. This point is highlighted in the Preparatory Document:

The proclamation of the Gospel is not addressed only to an enlightened or chosen few. Jesus’ interlocutor is the “people” of ordinary life, the “every one” of the human condition, whom he

puts directly in contact with God's gift and the call to salvation. In a way that surprises and sometimes scandalizes the witnesses, Jesus accepts as interlocutors all those who emerge from the crowd: he listens to the impassioned remonstrances of the Canaanite woman (cf. Mt 15:21-28), who cannot accept being excluded from the blessing he brings; he allows himself to dialogue with the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:1-42), despite her condition as a socially and religiously compromised woman; he solicits the free and grateful act of faith of the man born blind (cf. Jn 9), whom official religion had dismissed as outside the perimeter of grace.²⁵

He did not tolerate the legalism of the Pharisees which made the life of the people burdensome. He placed human needs ahead of strict observance of man's laws and traditions like the Sabbath observance, laws of purity, etc. He interpreted laws in such a way as to give people the possibility of a new beginning, rectifying their mistakes. Jesus interpreted laws and customs not with legalism, but with mercy and a sense of equity (*epieikeia*).²⁶ This is very visible in his attitude towards the case of the woman brought to him caught in adultery by a group of legalists (Jn 8:1-12) and the Sabbath controversy (Mt 12:1-8; Mk 2:18-22; Lk 6:1-5). By saying to them, "The one without sin may cast the first stone," and to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again," (Jn 8:11)" Jesus interpreted the law with mercy and equity, helping the woman to start anew.²⁷ Jesus did not nullify the law, but interpreted it holistically, 'tempering' the rigorousness of justice with the touch of mercy."²⁸ In a synodal Church, Jesus' interpretative style of laws and tradition should be practiced. In other words, human laws, whether canonical or civil, "must always be measured by God's righteousness

²⁵ "Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 07.09.2021," #18. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html>.

²⁶On the application of equity (*epieikeia*) and charity (*oikonomia*) in the interpretation of canon law, see Varghese Koluthara cmi, "Equity and Charity in the Administration of the Church," *Studi sul diritto del governo e dell'organizzazione della Chiesa: in onore di Mons. Juan Ignacio Arrietta*, edited by Jesús Miñambres et al. (Venezia: Marcianum Press, 2021), 913-935.

²⁷ Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 4 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 260-264.

²⁸ Koluthara, cmi, "Equity and Charity," 935.

that may occur as his mercy and generosity. Against this backdrop, a Christian perspective on the law will always be a critical one, for it will evaluate human law against the standard of God's righteousness and compassion. This perspective must be communicated in different cultural and religious contexts as a distinct view based on the Biblical concept of law and justice even into the present time."²⁹

3. Synodality in the Acts

As the document "Biblical Resources for Synodality" rightly notes, "The 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."³⁰ Acts 1:13-14 is considered the transition text from the historical Jesus to the formation of the Church guided by the power of the Risen Lord, the Holy Spirit. This text, which narrates the immediate preparation for the Pentecost, helps us to understand some important components needed for a successful synodal process. After the Ascension, implementing the mandate of the Risen Lord to remain in Jerusalem in prayer until they receive the Holy Spirit, the Apostles together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and certain other women remained in prayer until Pentecost (Acts 1:2-8). Luke emphasizes the participation of representatives gathering both men and women together with the apostles in the formation of the first Christian community. It is the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that made them courageous enough to proclaim the Christ-event. It is with the Pentecost, that the apostolate of the kerygma of Jesus Christ was initiated. Through a synodal process of thinking and discerning together, the early Church, as witnessed by Paul and Luke in the Acts, slowly broadened "the trajectory that decisively based the Christian apostolate on the visual encounter with Jesus Christ and his call to mission and that related the world-wide preaching to the all-important Christ-event of history" as a continuity of "Jesus' commission to the twelve apostles as the ones who legitimately secured the continuity with Jesus of

²⁹ Jens Schröter, God's Righteousness and Human Law: A New Testament Perspective on Law and Theology, *Journal of Law and Religion* 32.1 (2017): 16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2017.21>

³⁰ Synod of Bishops, "Biblical Resources for Synodality," 56.

history."³¹ This broadening process, which culminated in the Jerusalem council, is foundational to the idea of synodality in the Church because the Acts of the Apostles narrates how the disciples listened to the voice of the Spirit and discerned the way to go through a process including conversion, the modification of previously held convictions, the appointment of deacons, participation of women, dialogue, confrontations, etc. This process eventually led to the official gathering of the leaders in Jerusalem to decide on the future course of the church.

3.1 Synodality of the Jerusalem Council

The Jerusalem Council was a watershed moment in the growth of the Church because it engaged in a process of discernment and critical appraisal of its nature and mission. The proclamation started at Jerusalem with the Pentecost and took a new turn with the Christ experience and conversion of Paul as he was entrusted with the mission of preaching the word of God to Gentiles. Of course, as visualized in the narrative of the Pentecost and Peter's inaugural speech in Acts 2:1-36, the newly born Church would be inclusive and universal in character with an intent to proclaim the good news "that will have a centrifugal effect, moving outward from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).³² The Stephen episode and the story of the widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6) brought to light a deep crisis in the community due to cultural differences as well as a sectarian understanding of the religious movement that inaugurated Jesus of Nazareth. Stephen became a controversial figure as he tried to establish the identity of a new movement independent of Judaism, safeguarding the truth and integrity of the gospel against all sectarian thinking.³³

As more and more gentiles joined the community of believers, disputes and tensions started to develop in the Church regarding

³¹ Samuel Byrskog, "The Apostolate in the Early Church: From Luke-Acts to the Pauline Tradition," in *Institutions of the Emerging Church*, edited by Sven-Olav Back and Erkki Koskenniemi (London: t&t Clark, 2019), 16.

³² Văn Thanh Nguyễn, "Acts," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by John J. Collins et al (London: t&t Clark, 2021), 1461.

³³ Joseph Pathrapankal, *Enlarging the Horizons: Studies in Bible and Theology* (Tiruvalla: Christiva Sahitya Samithi & Vazhoor: Sopianam Publications, 2007), 184-185.

questions related to continuity and discontinuity in following the Mosaic Law and other Jewish customs as evidenced in Acts 9:31-11:18. With the initiatives of Peter, the leader, the tensions were kept under control as he tried to play a non-partisan approach with openness to the promptings of the power of the Risen Lord. In Peter, we notice the power of discernment of a leader, who even did not hesitate to “undergo a radical conversion in his whole evaluative system before he could convert Cornelius.... Once and for all, Peter was convinced that God’s gifts are not the exclusive privilege of a certain section of people and that God can extend His saving grace to all those whom He wants.”³⁴ Because of St. Peter’s readiness in abandoning his own religious conviction regarding the relationship between the Jews and gentiles when illumined by the Holy Spirit and the Gospel message in a vision, his encounter with Cornelius became the threshold of a new journeying together, which set the enlarged horizon of the Church tending towards the inclusion of all people. Peter’s attitude of openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit coupled with a mentality of conversion enabled him to facilitate the conversion of Cornelius gives us a clue to the discernment process of communion and conversion envisaged as part of the synodal journeying together.³⁵

But with the more active missionary engagements of the Church at Antioch, and the tension with the Jerusalem church, Paul and Barnabas as representatives of the Antiochene community, decided to approach “the Apostles and Elders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:2) for getting clarity on the question of the application of the Mosaic law for the gentile converts. The leaders of the Jerusalem church promptly responded to the request of Paul and Barnabas to discuss and deliberate on the point of contention regarding circumcision and some other customs. The steps taken to resolve the issue are well depicted in the narrative and are a lesson in the practice of synodality in the Church, especially in resolving disputes and crises.

Firstly, Paul accepted the supremacy of the Jerusalem church, its elders, and the apostles. He took the initiative to consult them and listen to them in resolving the contentious issue and he was

³⁴ Pathrapankal, *Enlarging the Horizons*, 188.

³⁵ See, International Theological Commission, *Synodality in The Life and Mission of The Church*, #19.

welcomed by them (Acts 15:4). An important facet of Synodality as highlighted by Pope Francis is, giving the minority voice space to express itself and the readiness of the majority to listen to them. At the Jerusalem Council, this step was well taken care of. Paul and Barnabas were given sufficient space and time to present the situation in the church at Antioch (Acts 15:4) and to express their view on the disputed question of the application of Jewish laws and customs to Gentile converts. Secondly, freedom was given to the members of the gathering to express their opinions on the issue. Naturally, the discussions would have been very argumentative, justifying and arguing for and against, insisting on adherence to Mosaic laws. Thirdly, after listening to diverse voices, and deliberating on the matter in the core group of the apostles and elders and, through proper discernment, Peter took the leadership role in announcing the policy decision, which would determine the future of the life and mission of the church. James, who presided over the Council proceedings, supported Peter by quoting a text from the Prophets. The various references from the Old Testament in the Acts of the Apostles show their fulfilment in the mission of Jesus and the Church presents the process of discernment in the whole history of salvation.

Discernment in the sense of openness to hear what is addressed to you from beyond your own borders to those of the community becomes crucial in reconciling and resolving crises developed at the liminal space of divergent views on mission, namely the extent of adherence to circumcision and other Jewish laws, in the early Church. Thus, the Jerusalem Council becomes a paradigm for resolving crises in the Church through communal discernment.

Conclusion

The Bible is rich with perspectives on Synodality. Hence any discussion on Synodality in the Church should pay serious attention to the patterns of Synodality traceable from the Biblical narratives. As we have discussed, the very act of creation manifests divine-human Synodality in the sense of mutually enriching participation, which got disturbed due to sin. But God continued to engage with humanity in a synodal way by walking along with them in their history that culminated in the Christ event. Since this engagement with humanity is recorded in the Bible through the representations of Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament, the Church has the mission to implement the Biblical vision of Synodality to make its

presence trustworthy and convincing as an alternative to the world's power structures. The hallmark of the Biblical vision of Synodality, as we have seen, is the participatory reciprocity of the people of God, be it the Covenant community or the *ecclesia*. This envisages inclusive and non-partisan approaches in ecclesial thinking and praxis, especially toward the people on the margins of ecclesial living. It may necessitate a tempering of law enforcement with compassion. Biblically speaking, the kenotic love of God manifested vividly in the Incarnation, should become the guiding principle of Synodality in the Church because the Synodal way of Jesus was *kenotic*, namely, self-emptying for uplifting and saving the downtrodden other. It is this kenotic path that was set as a paradigm for the Church to follow in the Jerusalem Council: a kenosis that would entail abandoning the obstinacy of presupposed claims and convictions, to move towards a broadening of horizons of Christian living in order to make it the kenotic form of Christian witness.