



## Journeying Together: Learning and Praying through Acts

Pope Francis has called the entire People of God to journey together as we live out the mission of the Gospel today. The word “synod” comes from Greek words *syn* (with) and *hodos* (way), meaning “together on the way” or “walking together on the same path.” The imagery of this etymology suggests that the Church is a pilgrim journeying towards the Kingdom of God, and that we do not take this path alone, but together.

So today we gather to listen to each other and to pray so that we can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. We open ourselves to where the Spirit is calling the Church today, seeking to follow the Spirit down this path as pilgrims journeying towards God. The goal of the synod is to be present with each other, to listen and learn, and to grow closer to God. As we undertake this journey, we become a more truly “synodal” church.

But what does a synodal church look like and where does this synodal vision of the church come from? The Acts of the Apostles offers us a Scriptural image of the synodal Church, in the meeting that has come to be called the Council of Jerusalem. The author of Acts places this gathering at the heart of Acts, as the early Jesus Movement seeks to discern its mission and to decide who will be included in this movement. While historians tell us that it is unlikely that all these decisions were made in this one meeting, the author of Acts brings the people together into one setting to provide an image of how the church is to be and act.

Confronted with the question of how to include Gentiles in this church and whether they ought to be required to be circumcised like the Jews, the community decides to gather and discern. This gathering offers a synodal vision of church, one in which all the people are consulted, where the community gathers to listen and dialogue. Listening to the Holy Spirit, the community decides not to require circumcision for Gentiles, making a pathway for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the early Jesus movement. Listening to each other and to the Spirit, these early followers recognize and honor the differences between each other, while finding unity in the desire to be followers of Christ.

Let us prayerfully listen to Acts 15: 1-21:

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”<sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.<sup>3</sup> So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.<sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles

and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup> and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

<sup>12</sup> The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

<sup>16</sup> ‘After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;  
from its ruins I will rebuild it,  
and I will set it up,

<sup>17</sup> so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—  
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things <sup>18</sup> known from long ago.’

<sup>19</sup> Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup> but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled<sup>[e]</sup> and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

Before we begin our discussion today, let us take X minutes to reflect on this passage. Like each of those communities consulted along the road in Phoenicia or Samaria, our community has had an experience of being Church that is unique to our context, which brings specific challenges and wisdom. And like those disciples who gathered in Jerusalem, we each carry our experiences of local community into our wider Church. Spend some time reflecting on these experiences. Let us each pray to open ourselves to hearing the Spirit not only in our own experiences and stories, but also in what is shared by others gathered here today, all pilgrims on the journey to closer relationship with God.