



The Journey of the Synodal Community, Ephesians 4:1-16 to 5:2.



Introduction: 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.¹ 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

¹ The question of authorship is debated among New Testament scholars. Whatever conclusion we come to, the letter clearly reflects key themes of Paul’s thought that we know from other writings.

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).

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.²



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’.³



Some key aspects: points for reflections

1. Dynamic unity. Unity is paramount in the 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 the nations. Unity, therefore, is not the product of structures. It differs from other forms of social

² 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 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?

³ 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.

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.

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.



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 the 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.⁴ 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). 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 continuous to unfold.

⁴ '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.

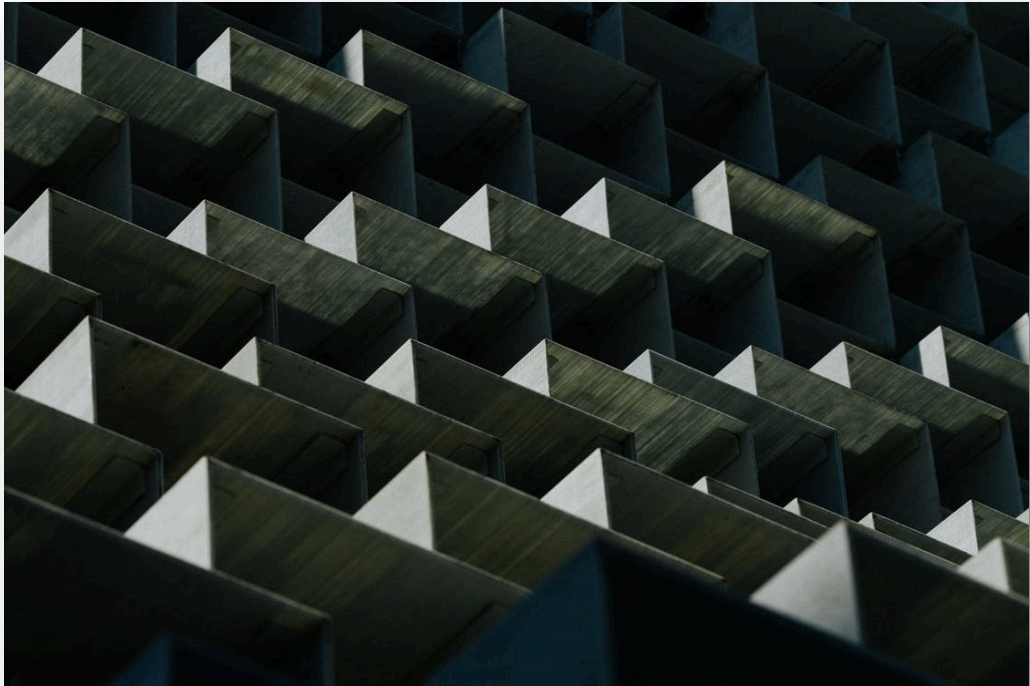


Implication for Synodality

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 ask 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”?