



The First Council: Acts 15:1-35.



Background to the text:

The 'Council of Jerusalem' is the continuation and conclusion of the issues raised by the conversion of Cornelius and the apostle Peter's openness to a gentile convert to the

Christian faith (Cf. Acts 10-11). It is a critical moment for the new Christian community: is the message of the Gospel and the grace of Christ given only for 'the lost sheep of the House of Israel' or is it for the whole world, "go and make disciples of all the nations." (Matt.28.19.)?



If the Council is about the nature of the Church's mission, it is also about identity and commitments. Clearly, it does not want to reject or deny its Jewish origin and inheritance. Jesus does not know or refer to any other God than the God of Israel; he does understand himself and his mission in terms of the covenant that God makes with the people of Israel and, indeed, understands himself and his

community as fulfilling the promise of that covenant. Therefore the question of what should be expected of gentiles for through their faith in Christ they have gained access to the God of Israel and the promise of the covenant and law (Torah). Should gentiles Christians, therefore, also be bound by the same practices and law as the Jewish people? Should they be circumcised or is faith alone sufficient, and to what extent do they need to observe the commandments of the Law as would any Jew? All the apostles, remember, were themselves circumcised and observant Jews. So, the question is central, and on it hangs the whole future of the Church. As we can expect, people are divided, and the unity of the community is also threatened.

For all these reasons, the Council of Jerusalem, is central to the future of the Church and it also offers us important insights into synodality. In a sense, we can regard it as the 1st 'synod'. It is a watershed moment in the life and history of the Church.



Some key aspects: points for reflection

- The apostles and other key leaders of the Church are present to 'discern' and decide. Especially we can see the importance of Peter and Paul who both have had a mission to the gentile world.
- The narrative of the Council in Acts invites us to attend to the dynamics of decision making (discernment) in the Church, especially when it is called to resolve a dispute which threatens the unity and mission of the 'ecclesia'.
- It is important to observe how the author of Acts (Luke) establishes the elements of discernment:

- It is James who presides. Peter is not presented as the judge but as the witness to the work of the Holy Spirit. The same is true for Paul and Barnabas who are also witnesses to the wonders the Spirit had produced for them among the Gentiles. The key insight is that it is the Holy Spirit who is leading the way and God can open unexpected paths.

- There is clearly a lot of debate and divided views but the text presents this as part of the process necessary for discernment. But the witness of Peter is decisive.



- Scripture plays a key role in their discernment and is reinterpreted in the light of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Cf. the way in which James cites Jewish scripture and the recognition that this 'agrees with the Prophets' (15:15).

- Peter not only gives testimony to his own experience of the Holy Spirit leading him beyond his own Jewish practices (Acts. 15:7-11).

- James also offers a text from the prophets. Throughout Acts we see many references to the Jewish scripture (the Old Testament). This important for it locates the discernment of the community within the history of God's revelation and covenantal promise (tradition).

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



- Notice how the Council understands itself to be discerning God's initiative; it wants to be obedient to the Divine plan for the Church. Discernment, then, is a real search to come into alignment with the way in God is working and presenting new possibilities.
- The final decision about the minimum requirements for Gentile Christians is not just a pragmatic one. They are about fidelity to the one God of Jesus Christ. They seem more designed to secure a real unity within Christian communities for they would allow table-fellowship and full communion between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

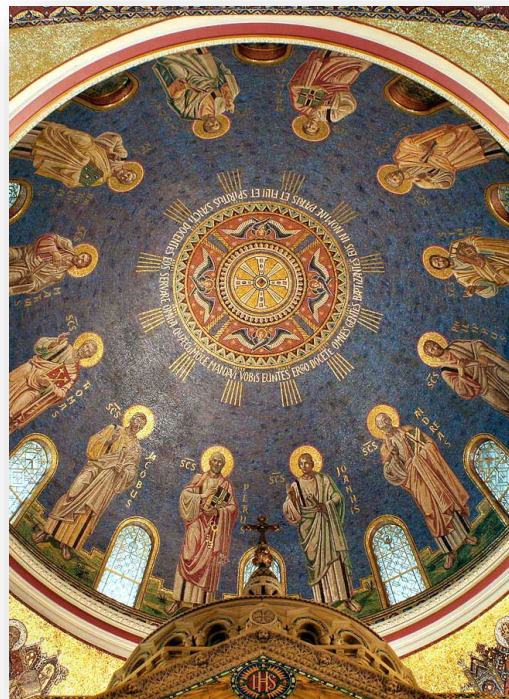
- They are also designed to stop those of strict Jewish observance harassing Gentile Christian converts.
- Notice the language ‘The Holy Spirit and we...’ It is not as if the Council believes itself to be on an equal footing with God! Rather, that the Church’s decision confirms the direction in which God is leading. The Church is God’s work and not a purely human construction.



Implication for Synodality

- The whole narrative presents us with a community that is developing in a dynamic way. It recognises that there will be tensions and conflicts, but it is primarily concerned to follow the path that God is marking out for it, even when that has some unexpected turns.

- It is community capable of resolving complex and divisive questions of membership and mission. Under the leadership of the apostles and the ‘elders’ it gathers in Council to seek God’s will and confirm it. It hears witnesses and testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit, it interprets scripture, it presents its decision in terms of its faith, it sends out delegations to inform and include the whole Church about its discerned decision, confirming it, and it aims to establish peace between communities.



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



Questions for prayerful reflection



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

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

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

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

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