



What is a synod?

*Series of articles on the synod by Maria Caulfield
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The earliest example of a synodal assembly is the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15:1-31.

Council of Jerusalem (verses 1-12)

Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.” Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question. They were sent on their journey by the church, and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, as well as by the apostles and the presbyters, and they reported what God had done with them. But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law.” The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter. After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, “My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us. He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they.” The whole assembly fell silent, and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them.

James on dietary law (verses 13-19)

After they had fallen silent, James responded, “My brothers, listen to me. Symeon has described how God first concerned himself with acquiring from among the Gentiles a people for his name. The words of the prophets agree with this, as is written: ‘After this I shall return and rebuild the fallen hut of David; from its ruins



I shall rebuild it and raise it up again, so that the rest of humanity may seek out the Lord, even all the Gentiles on whom my name is invoked. Thus says the Lord who accomplishes these things, known from of old.' It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. For Moses, for generations now, has had those who proclaim him in every town, as he has been read in the synagogues every sabbath."

Letter of the Apostles (verses 22-29)

Then the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The ones chosen were Judas, who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers.

This is the letter delivered by them: "The apostles and the presbyters, your brothers, to the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin: greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number [who went out] without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind, we have with one accord decided to choose representatives and to send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message by word of mouth: 'It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell."

Delegates at Antioch (verses 30-31)

And so they were sent on their journey. Upon their arrival in Antioch they called the assembly together and delivered the letter. When the people read it, they were delighted with the exhortation.

"Synod" is an ancient word, derived from the Greek words for "path" and "with." It can be translated as "journeying together." Its literal meaning, then, reminds us of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6) and of Christians as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2). In early Christianity it was used to describe the assembly of the ecclesial community. Soon it became the proper term for an assembly specifically called to discern, in accordance with the Holy Spirit, answers to important questions for the Church. Synods generally deal with how we can best live out our faith in practice. They have been used at all levels of the Church, from local diocesan synods all the way up to the Synod of Bishops for the universal Church. Matters of doctrine are more properly the domain of councils, above all ecumenical councils, although the strict distinction between synods and councils only appeared in the Code of Canon Law after Vatican II.

continued



A synod can be thought of as a family meeting. The bishops have responsibility for the Church and authority to make decisions for her. In order to make the best possible decisions, they check in with the rest of the family and ask for our experiences and input. Then, taking everything into consideration, they make the decision. Bishop Persico, for example, is using this method for pastoral planning in our diocese.

As the International Theological Commission (ITC) points out, a synod is a process of decision making, a way to work things out. It is not democratic. It is not majority rule. It is a forum for listening to everyone, in an attempt to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us. Listening is invaluable. God is often found in unexpected places and making use of unexpected people, for He is drawn always to the poor and the little ones. Even on a practical human level, how will the bishop know the concerns of his people if he never talks with them? Yet the final decision always remains with the highest authority, the Pope and/or the bishops, who are responsible for the salvation of everyone. The ITC explains: "Working things out is a synodal task; decision is a ministerial responsibility." (*Synodality* 69)

See:

International Theological Commission. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018). At the Holy See, www.vatican.va.

