

The Council of Jerusalem

Twelfth General Congregation of the Synod

SO: 'PARTICIPATION, GOVERNMENT and authority: What processes, structures and institutions are needed in a missionary synodal Church?'

Luke, whose feast we celebrate today, tells us in Acts 15 about the so-called Council of Jerusalem called to face the first great crisis of the Church after Pentecost. The Church is profoundly fractured. First, between the Jerusalem Church and Paul, with his gospel of freedom from the law; Within the Jerusalem Church the convert Pharisees are divided from the rest, and the apostles led by Peter are probably divided from the 'elders' who looked to James, the brother of the Lord. So the Church faced a crisis of identity which exceeds anything we can imagine today.

Pope Francis said at Lisbon this summer, 'a life without crisis is an aseptic life... a life without crisis is like stagnant water, it's not good for anything, it doesn't taste of anything.'

We mature through crises, from the crisis of our birth to the crisis of death. If we embrace crises in hope, we shall

flourish. If we try to avoid them, we never grow up. My American brethren gave me a T shirt which said, 'Have a good crisis!'

We read that:

'the apostles and the elders gathered together to consider this matter'
(Acts 15.6)

The Church is always being gathered, as we are today in Synod. In the Third Eucharistic prayer, we say,

'You never cease to gather a people to yourself so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a perfect sacrifice may be offered to your name.'

The Greek word for the Church, *ekkle-sia*, means 'gathering'. Are we willing to be gathered together, not just physically, but our hearts and minds too? Gazing at Jerusalem before his death, Jesus said,

'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing, but you were not willing' (Luke 13.24)

Are we willing to be drawn beyond mutual incomprehension and suspicion? Or shall we be like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son who stands on the edge, refusing to be gathered into the joy of his brother's return?

The disciples gathered in Jerusalem so as to be sent out to Antioch and the whole world. We are gathered in the Eucharist so as to be sent out. This is the breathing of the Holy Spirit in our

lungs, gathering us in and sending us out, oxygenating the life blood of the Church. We are gathered in to discover peace with each other and sent out to proclaim it to our poor world, crucified by ever more violence, in Ukraine, the Holy Land, Myanmar, Sudan, and so many other places. How can we be a sign of peace if we are divided among ourselves?

The Council of Jerusalem gathered 'in the name of Jesus', as we are too. In the Synod we pray every day:

'We stand before you, Holy Spirit, as we gather in your name.'

To be gathered in the name of the Lord means in the sure confidence that God's grace is powerfully at work within us. Peter said to the lame man by the Temple gate:

'I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, [rise and] walk.'
(Acts 3.6)

Often people have told me: 'This Synod will not change anything.' Some with hope and some with fear. That is a lack of faith in the name of the Lord, 'the name which is above every name' (Philippians 2.9). An ancient hymn begins

'I bind unto myself today,
the strong name of the Trinity.'

If we are gathered in the strong name of the Trinity, the Church will be renewed, though maybe in ways that are not immediately obvious. This is not optimism but our Apostolic faith.

My first great teacher was a Sri Lankan Dominican, Cornelius Ernst. He wrote of the power of God's grace to make new. I quote:

'It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love...it is the power to transform and renew all things: "Behold I make all things new."
(Apoc. 21.5)²

The Church is always new, like God, the Ancient of Days and the new born child.

The disciples gather because they saw that God was already doing something new. God had gone before them. They had to catch up with the Holy Spirit. Peter proclaims that

'God, who knows the human heart, testified to [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us,' (Acts 15. 8).

This was surely hardest for St James, the brother of the Lord, to accept. His identity was founded a blood relationship with the Lord. It is marvellous that he is the one who proclaims this new identity.

'It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.'

What courage and faith it must have taken to say 'us', an identity which gathers in all of the divided Church.

He still calls Peter by his old family name, 'Symeon.' He is awakening only slowly to this new identity, a Church of Jews and Gentiles. It took time as it does for us.

During the civil war in Burundi, I toured the country with two of my brothers, a Hutu and a Tutsi. At night the three of us celebrated the Eucharist together. One Englishman and two Africans, a Hutu and a Tutsi: a new sense of 'we'. We received in it the Eucharist before we grasped it in our minds and hearts.

Today our God is already bringing into existence a Church which is no longer primarily Western: a Church which is Eastern Catholic, and Asian and African and Latin American. It is a Church in which already women are assuming responsibility and are renewing our theology and spirituality. Already young people all over the world, as we saw at Lisbon, are taking us in new directions, into the Digital Continent. In the *Preface* for Holy Men and Women, we thank God because

'you renew the Church in every age by raising up men and women outstanding in holiness.'

They are already among us. We rightly ask: What shall we do? An even more fundamental question is: What is God doing? Do we accept God's gracious

newness? Can you believe it, some Dominicans even opposed St Ignatius of Loyola! *Nostra culpa*.

Fascinatingly, James can only understand the new as a rebuilding of the old. He quotes Amos:

'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, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.'

The new is always an unexpected renewal of the old. This is why any opposition between tradition and progress is utterly alien to Catholicism.

Now we shall consider what new processes, institutions and structures are needed. These will not be solutions to management problems but fuller expressions of who we are. The history of the Church is of endless institutional creativity.

After Christianity became a recognised religion of the Roman Empire, new forms of Christian life emerged in the desert fathers and mothers, to counter-balance the new dangers of wealth. In the thirteenth century, new Universities emerged to sustain a new vision of what it is to be human. During the Industrial Revolution, hundreds of new forms of religious life sprang into being, to express who we are as brothers and sisters of the new urban poor.

What institutions do we need to express who we are as men and women of peace in an age of violence, inhabitants of the Digital Continent? Every baptised person is a prophet. How do we recognise and embrace the role of prophecy in the Church today?³ What about the prophetic voice of women, still often seen as ‘guests in their own house’?⁴

Finally, the Council of Jerusalem lifted unnecessary burdens from the Gentiles.

‘For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.’
(verse 28)

They are freed from an identity given by the old Law.

How shall we lift burdens from the weary shoulders of our brothers and sisters today who often feel ill at ease in the Church? It will not be through anything as dramatic as abolishing the Law. Nor will it be through such a fundamental shift in our identity as the admission of the Gentiles.

But we are called to embrace a deeper sense of who we are as the improbable friends of the Lord, whose scandalous friendship reaches across every boundary. Many of us wept when we heard of that young woman who committed suicide because she was bisexual and did not feel welcomed. I hope it changed us. The Holy Father reminded us that all are welcomed: *todos, todos, todos*.

A man was lost in Ireland. He asked a farmer, ‘How do I get to Dublin?’ The farmer replied, ‘If I wanted to go to Dublin, I would not start here.’ But wherever people are, that is where the journey home starts, the home of the Church and the home of the Kingdom.

[1] Responding to questions of young people, World Youth Day,

[2] *The Theology of Grace*, Dublin 1974 p. 74f

[3] Massimo Faggioli ‘Notes on Prophecy and Ecclesiology and Synodality from the Second Vatican Council to Today.’ *Irish Theological Quarterly* 2023, pp. 1-15.

[4] Carmel McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II*, Crossroad, New York, 2011