

The Acts of the Apostles as a Portrayal of the Synodal Church?

KRZYSZTOF MIELCAREK 

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, krzysztof.mielcarek@kul.pl

Abstract: This article explores the concept of synodality in the Acts of the Apostles. Although the term σύνοδος is absent from the New Testament, potentially leading to premature negative assumptions, an etymological analysis of its components (the preposition σύν and the noun ή ὁδός) yields more positive insights. Drawing on synodal documents and selected passages from Luke's second volume, the study establishes certain connections between the modern notion of synodality and the practices of the early Church, delineating essential criteria for the attitudes of members within today's synodal Church.

Keywords: synodality, etymology of σύνοδος, Acts of the Apostles, Lukan theology

The Synod on Synodality, convened by Pope Francis in 2021,¹ centered on his vision of synodality as a core principle of Church life. Its motto—communion, participation, and mission—highlighted three essential dimensions of the ecclesial community, while the process itself fostered an attitude of encounter, listening, and discernment. Pope Francis identified key sources of synodality: the *sensus fidei*, the Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology of the People of God, the Holy Spirit's bestowal of diverse charisms, and an anthropology rooted in relational participation. He framed evangelization as a vital context for synodality, enabling the Church to engage the world dynamically. Przemysław Sawa explores this theme in depth (Sawa 2023, 191–217). Among his conclusions on synodality in Francis's teaching, the Katowice dogmatic theologian emphasizes the role of Sacred Scripture, quoting the Pope: "Synodality is not a modern solution, as it has its roots in the Bible and the Tradition of the Church, as well as in the theology and experience of the various spaces of ecclesiastical life." (Sawa 2023, 211) Far from being Francis's invention alone, this perspective reflects a widely acknowledged truth,² evident throughout the synodal documents themselves.

¹ The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, widely referred to as the Synod on Synodality, convened from October 4, 2023, to October 27, 2024. Departing from the customary papal exhortation, Pope Francis approved the synod's official final document, published on October 26, 2024 (XVI Ordinary General Assembly 2024b).

² The bibliography of works reflecting on synodality is very abundant, but the vast majority includes studies that are texts in the field of systematic theology. In Poland, a particularly large number of studies on

Given that this study diverges from a conventional exegesis of biblical texts, its methodology requires adaptation. First, the lexical content and etymological roots of the Greek term σύνοδος will be examined. Next, relevant passages from the Acts of the Apostles—those linking the preposition σύν to ecclesiological contexts and the motif of the way—will be analyzed. This will lead to an exploration of the Synod on Synodality documents, identifying biblical motifs from Luke’s second volume that resonate with the promoted concept of synodality. Finally, the research will culminate in an analysis of key pericopes from Acts referenced in the synodal texts, followed by conclusions tied to the central research question.

1. Lexical Meaning and Etymology of σύνοδος

A Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell et al. 1996, 1720) outlines several meanings for the term σύνοδος. Primarily, it denotes a gathering or meeting, often involving reflection. In classical texts, it also refers to national assemblies (e.g., for cultic purposes or celebrations), as well as specific groups such as craft guilds or religious associations. Rarer senses include the clash of hostile armies or sexual union. A distinct category encompasses ideas of unification or compression: the conjunction of planets, contracted muscles, a sea strait, or the combination of matter and form. Finally,

this issue were published in the journal *Teologia w Polsce* [Theology in Poland] in the years 2021–2023. Articles by Jarosław Kupczak (“Dziesięć tez o teologii synodalności”), Andrzej Proniewski (“Teologia laikatu i synodalność jako droga realizacji powszechnego powołania do świętości”), Artur Kasprzak (“Synodalność w teologii Soboru Watykańskiego II”), Andrzej Dobrzyński (“Synodalność w nauczaniu i pontyfikacie Jana Pawła II”), Tomasz Samulnik (“Synodalność w myśl Josepha Ratzingera”), and Jacek Froniewski (“Synod w Kościele katolickim w Polsce jako fundament doświadczenia jedności wspólnoty”) do not exhaust the rich list of publications. More items can be found in the database of the theological bibliography of Polish theo-logos.pl. The only Polish article that touches on biblical motifs in the context of synodality is the text by Monika Włoszczyk (2023, 37–50), who proposed a symbolic interpretation of Mark 2:18–22. The foreign-language bibliography is many times richer, but there is little biblical reflection. Marta García Fernández published an article in the journal *Religions* in 2024 that discusses the biblical background of synodality based on a document from the International Biblical Commission: “Notes on the Biblical Foundation of the Document of the International Theological Commission, ‘Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.’” (García Fernández 2024, 1244) However, it contains only brief references to the texts of the Acts of the Apostles (pp. 2, 6, 8, 11), devoting a little more space to the question of the way in the paragraph entitled “Walking with: A Way of Being Church.” (p. 12) To some extent, an article by Peter J. McGregor (2024, 137–59) also contributes to biblical reflection on synodality. In the second part of his study, the Australian scholar analyzed the Church in the New Testament from the perspective of the terms *κοινωνία* and *όμοθυμαδόν*, seeing in them the motives of the synodal process, which can approach consensus through “listening” and “looking.” To these voices can be added an article by the Catalan theologian, Xavier Alegre Santamaría (2023, 37–61). The author searches for criteria for proper ecclesial discernment and concludes that such a fundamental criterion is the word of God itself, and especially the New Testament, read in the context of the Old Testament.

economic contexts evoke an influx of income. Early Christian usage diverges from these classical senses.³

Geoffrey Lampe's lexicon (Lampe 1969, 1334–35) prioritizes “travel companion,” aligning with the Greek συνοδοιπόρος, while secondarily noting meetings accompanied by reflection. It also introduces distinctly Christian connotations, such as cultic assemblies equivalent to ἐκκλησία. A third category addresses theological union, particularly hypostatic union.

The New Testament does not use the term σύνοδος⁴ explicitly. However, Luke's writings include two related terms. In the Infancy Narrative, ἡ συνοδία refers to pilgrims returning home after Passover (Luke 2:44). In Acts, the Evangelist describes Saul's companions on the road to Damascus as οἱ συνοδεύοντες (Acts 9:7). Despite their etymological link to σύνοδος, these terms do not directly align with its Christian usage, though the worship context in Luke's Gospel offers a potential connection.

Etymologically, σύνοδος combines the preposition σύν (“with”) and the noun ὁδός (“way”).⁵ While this etymology does not fully resolve the search for synodality in the Acts of the Apostles, it provides a foundation. Notably, Pope Francis and the Synod on Synodality (2021–2024) do not frame σύνοδος as a historically fixed term for solemn gatherings of Church leaders addressing doctrinal or liturgical matters. Instead, they emphasize a dynamic process of communal discernment, rooted in the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel credibly (Sawa 2023, 192, 195). As explored in the next section, the Synod's documents further draw on these etymological associations to articulate synodality.

The preposition σύν appears frequently in the New Testament, precluding an exhaustive analysis here.⁶ Notably, it conveys a sense of community, indirectly evoking ecclesiality (McGavin 2023, 324). Luke emphasizes this theme in key passages of the Acts of the Apostles, drawing the reader's attention to communal dynamics.

The Acts of the Apostles frequently employs the preposition σύν to underscore the communal nature of early Christian gatherings. In the Upper Room, the community includes the apostles, disciples, women, Mary, and Jesus' brothers (σὺν γυναιξὶν καὶ Μαριὰμ … καὶ τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς αὐτοῦ) (Acts 1:14). The apostle chosen to replace Judas is called to be a witness to the resurrection alongside others (μάρτυρα

³ The Greek-Polish Dictionary edited by Zofia Abramowiczówna (1958, 4:226) lists almost all of these meanings within one list, without dividing them into separate parts.

⁴ The Septuagint contains a few uses of σύνοδος: Deut 33:14; 1 Kgs 15:13; Neh 7:5, 64; Jer 9:1. Meanings range from meetings of various gatherings to a group of repatriates returning from exile. On the other hand, the author of Wis 6:23 uses the verb form σύνοδεύω, which metaphorically expresses the common path of the author seeking wisdom with envy (οὕτε μήν φθόνῳ τετηκότι σύνοδεύσω).

⁵ Theological associations lead to the fourth Gospel: “I am the Way (ἡ ὁδός), the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6), but this phrase has no direct equivalent in Luke's theology.

⁶ Luke's work contains a total of 74 instances of its use.

τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ σὺν ἡμῖν γενέσθαι) (Acts 1:22). Peter, though speaking alone at Pentecost, represents the community, particularly the apostles (Σταθεὶς δὲ ὁ Πέτρος σὺν τοῖς ἔνδεκα) (Acts 2:14), and collaborates with John in evangelistic efforts, where σύν is often paralleled by καί (Acts 3:1–4,⁷ 11; 8:14). The Sanhedrin recognizes Peter and John as those who were with Jesus (σὺν τῷ Ἰησοῦ ἦσαν) (Acts 4:13). Early house churches also reflect this communal theme, as seen with Cornelius and his household (σὺν παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ) (Acts 10:2), the Philippian jailer's household (σὺν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ) (Acts 16:32), and Crispus, the synagogue leader in Corinth (σὺν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ) (Acts 18:8). After their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas remain in community with the Antioch church (σὺν τοῖς μαθηταῖς) (Acts 14:28). The Jerusalem Council's decision is made in unity with the entire church (σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ) (Acts 15:22), and Paul prays communally with the Ephesian elders (σὺν πᾶσιν αὐτοῖς προσηκύνατο) (Acts 20:36). These examples, among others, highlight the centrality of communal bonds in Luke's ecclesiology.

The noun ὁδός (“way”) plays a significant role in Luke's writings, as explored by numerous scholars. In the Gospel, the motif of the “way” is most evident in Jesus' itinerary to Jerusalem, spanning over a third of the narrative (Luke 9:51–19:28).⁸ Luke notes that even Jesus' opponents acknowledge he teaches “the way of God” (τὴν ὁδὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) (Luke 20:21). Paul Borgman argues that the “way” serves as a structural and thematic thread⁹ unifying Luke's Gospel and Acts (Borgman 2006, x). Similarly, Joseph Ratzinger observes that Jesus' public life is depicted as a journey toward Jerusalem, with the evangelist highlighting its ultimate purpose (Luke 9:31, 51).¹⁰

The Acts of the Apostles continues Luke's emphasis on the motif of the “way” (ὁδός). From the opening scene of Jesus' ascension, a geographical framework emerges (Acts 1:8), with the promise of his return “in the same way” he departed (ἔλευσεται ὃν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον) (Acts 1:11). Deok Hee Jung (2023, 533–35) argues that this reflects not conventional, two-dimensional cartography but a hodological space distinctive to ancient perspectives,¹¹ positioning Acts as “itinerary-based literature.” (Jung 2023, 533) While specific travel narratives

⁷ Preposition “with” appears only in Acts 3:4 (“and Peter looked at him with John and said”).

⁸ See Moessner 1983, 575–605; Matera 1993, 57–77. For an extensive bibliography, see the commentaries on the third Gospel: Fitzmyer 2008b, 830–832; Nolland 1993, 532; Mickiewicz 2011, 524.

⁹ According to the German exegete, the phrase “God's way” is Luke's kind of concluding phrase with which he reinterprets the Scriptures in relation to Jesus. “The way of God” is synonymous with “the way of salvation,” “the kingdom of God” and “the way of peace.” (Borgman 2006, x)

¹⁰ “In Luke's Gospel all of Jesus' public life is described in terms of an ascent toward Jerusalem; thus Jesus' whole life appears as the exodus in which He is at once both Moses and Israel.” (Ratzinger 1990, 75)

¹¹ In the first part of his study, Jung (2023, 528–33) included an interesting panorama of the hodological concept based on Greco-Roman literature. The very concept of hodological space (spazio odologico) was written by the Italian historian Pietro Janni (1984, 82). See also an article by Sylvie Vilatte (1991, 209–34).

abound, the motif of the journey shapes the theological and structural fabric of the entire work.

Luke portrays the witnesses of the resurrection as dynamic travelers, their journeys forming the narrative “skeleton” upon which individual scenes are built. Two central figures in Acts, Peter¹² and Paul, are particularly mobile, with Paul covering vast distances through his evangelizing paths. Luke consistently emphasizes the motif of the “way” (όδός) in Paul’s actions, framing his movements as both literal and metaphorical.

From his first appearance, Saul (later Paul) is linked to the “way.” He initially persecutes the “followers of the way” (Acts 9:2), a term for Jesus’ disciples that recurs throughout Acts (19:8, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Jesus himself appears to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:17). After Barnabas brings him from Tarsus (Acts 11:26), the Holy Spirit sets Paul on a missionary path (Acts 13:2), initiating a series of expeditions across biblical lands, from Palestine to Achaia and ultimately Rome. Luke’s narrative draws readers into this journey, encouraging them to adopt the model of the disciple-pilgrim through a mental map of Paul’s movements (Alexander 1995, 18). Rather than a conventional two-dimensional map, this is a network of trails—a hодological space that unfolds linearly, guiding Paul ever forward (Jung 2023, 534). Luke provides minimal geographical detail, focusing instead on Paul’s οδός, with timestamps marking the apostolic journey’s progression (e.g., Acts 14:20; 16:11; 17:10; 18:11, 18, 23; 19:10; 20:3; 21:1, 8, 15; 22:30; 24:1, 24; 27:19; 28:11).

The term οδός carries both literal and metaphorical meanings in Acts, often tied to the church (McGavin 2023, 318). It first appears in Peter’s sermon, quoting Ps 15:11 (LXX), where “the ways of life” (όδοὺς ζωῆς) (Acts 2:28) reflects an Old Testament metaphor for a righteous, dynamic life. Similarly, Paul in Iconium speaks of peoples who “went their own ways” in past generations (Acts 14:16), and a seer in Philippi proclaims Paul and Silas as preaching “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17).

Literally, οδός describes physical travel, as when Philip’s convert, the Ethiopian official, “went his way with joy” after baptism (Acts 8:39). It also underscores perilous journeys, such as the plot to kill Paul on the road from Caesarea to Jerusalem (Acts 25:3) or his transformative encounter with divine light en route to Damascus (Acts 26:13). Metaphorically, οδός defines the Christian movement. Saul’s mission to arrest “those of the way” in Damascus (Acts 9:2) introduces this usage, echoed when Priscilla and Aquila teach Apollos “the way of God” (Acts 18:26). The “way” sparks conflict in Corinth (Acts 19:9) and Ephesus (Acts 19:23), and Paul defends his adherence to it before the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:4) and Felix, who knows “the way” well (Acts 24:14, 22).

¹² The Apostle Peter, even disappearing from the narrative, sets out on his way (ἐπορεύθη εἰς ἔτερον τόπον) (Acts 12:17).

While Luke's use of ὁδός carries ecclesial significance, it stops short of John's explicit declaration that Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). Nonetheless, Luke's nuanced application of ὁδός invites readers to see the Christian life as a dynamic journey, both physical and spiritual, woven into the narrative of Acts.

2. Synod Documents on Synodality

This study examines all official Synod on Synodality documents,¹³ for references to the Acts of the Apostles. While many documents do not directly engage with Luke's second volume, several include references, with some explicitly quoting and analyzing specific passages from Acts in detail.

2.1. Pre-Synodal Documents

The official documents of the Synod on Synodality serve as the primary source for analyzing the use of Luke's traditions in relation to synodality. However, preparatory theological works published shortly before the Synod's inauguration, frequently referenced in the Synod documents, are also significant. A key text is the International Theological Commission's *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (March 2, 2018), which extensively engages with the Acts of the Apostles (International Theological Commission 2018).

In para. 19, the document highlights pivotal moments in the apostolic Church when the community discerns the will of the Risen Christ together, emphasizing the Holy Spirit's role in guiding this process (cf. Acts 2:2–3; 5:19–21; 8:26, 29, 39; 12:6–17; 13:1–3; 16:6–7, 9–10; 20:22). It cites specific examples, such as the election of deacons (Acts 6:1–6) and the mission to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Paragraph 20 describes the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) as a "synodal event," embodying the Church's vocation in the presence of the Risen One, a theme revisited in para. 42, where synodality is framed as a dynamic expression of the Church's life and mission, beyond mere procedure.

Further, para. 44 interprets the Pentecost assembly (Acts 2:11) as a prefiguration of the universal gathering of God's people. Paragraph 45 illustrates the Church's apostolicity through the Apostles' teaching and the governance of their successors

¹³ The list of official documents includes a total of 28 texts of a very different nature published between 2021 and 2025 (in English they are also available in chronological order, see <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-chronological-order.html>). Some of them are of a working/instructive nature, some of them are pastoral, and some are official synodal statements. The texts in Polish have been made available on a separate page www.synod.pl.

(Acts 20:19). The pilgrim nature of the Church is discussed in para. 49, referencing Pentecost (Acts 2:1–9) and the Jerusalem meeting (Acts 15:14).

The document also connects synodality to the term “way” (όδός). In para. 3, it notes that Christ’s disciples were called “supporters of the way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22),¹⁴ linking the etymology of “synod” (σύνοδος: “common way”)¹⁵ to this motif. Paragraphs 50–51 elaborate, describing Christians as the “People of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9) and emphasizing the missionary mandate to bear witness “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In para. 62, the role of the Holy Spirit and the Apostles (Acts 2:42) and their successors (Acts 20:28) is underscored in the context of apostolic tradition.

The document concludes by highlighting Luke’s concept of παρησία¹⁶ (Acts 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 9:28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 26:26; 28:31),¹⁷ symbolizing bold proclamation of salvation (para. 121), and noting Mary’s presence among the disciples awaiting Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

In 2014, the International Theological Commission published *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, which explores the biblical roots of synodality (International Theological Commission 2014). In the paragraph addressing biblical teaching and faith, it highlights the Gospel of God’s grace (Acts 20:24) and the apostolic mission (Acts 2:38–42) as responses to the Word, alongside prayer as a cornerstone of Christian life (Acts 2:42) (paras. 9, 12, 16). Paragraph 15 examines the universal gift of the Spirit, referencing key texts from Acts (2:11, 17; 1:8). Paragraph 17 discusses communal decision-making, citing the election of deacons (Acts 6:1–6) and the inclusion of Gentiles in the community (Acts 15). Finally, para. 45 underscores the universal exercise of Christ’s prophetic office through all the faithful, supported by Acts 2:17–18.

¹⁴ The Vademedecum for the Synod on Synodality (Synod of Bishops 2021b) again returns to the definition of “way” in relation to Christian practices, invoking the same sigla (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), but this is a reference to the above-mentioned document of the International Theological Commission on Synodality. Access on the Polish-language website of the Synod: <https://synod.org.pl/docs/materialy-dotyczace-synodu/broszury-dokumenty-prezentacje-dotyczace-synodu-ogolnie-po-polsku/vademecum-synodu-o-synodalnosci>. Accessed October 15, 2025.

¹⁵ The full field of meaning of this term, which refers to both assembly/meeting and astronomical conjunction, can be found in the entry: “σύνοδος.” (Liddell et al. 1996, 1720)

¹⁶ The dictionary meaning of this term ranges from freedom of expression or promiscuity in speech (negatively), through freedom in action, to an attitude of generosity and sumptuousness; see παρησία (Liddell et al. 1996, 1344).

¹⁷ Several of the texts listed here contain the verb form: παρησιάζομαι.

2.2. Synodal Documents

2.2.1. Preparatory Document of the Synod

The synodal preparatory document entitled *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission* (Synod of Bishops 2021a) serves as the primary official source for synodal materials, dedicating two paragraphs to Acts 10 as an example of evangelization and the dual dynamics of conversion.¹⁸ It also defines Christians as “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), describing this as “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and realizes its communion through collective journeying, gathering, and active participation in its evangelizing mission.” (Synod of Bishops 2021a, para. 10) For Luke, Jesus exemplifies this impartial action (Acts 10:34), guided by the Father’s will and the Holy Spirit’s inspiration (para. 17).

2.2.2. Biblical Sources on Synodality

On April 2, 2022, the Synod Secretariat’s Commission for Spirituality published *Biblical Resources on Synodality* (BRS)¹⁹, offering commentary on three key pericopes from the Acts of the Apostles: Acts 1:13–14; 10:1–11:18; and 15:1–35.

- 1) **Church of the Upper Room (Acts 1:13–14) (BRS, pp. 53–59)**—Luke’s summary depicts the early Christian community’s perseverance in prayer. The document highlights the Church’s apostolic nature, its bond of love, prayerful zeal, desire for the Holy Spirit’s gift, and Mary’s active presence. In the section “Implications for Synodality” (BRS, pp. 56–57), five points are outlined, though not strictly biblical:
 - “Ecclesial Spirit”: Emphasizes the community’s inclusive character, noting Mary’s maternal mediation, though not directly supported by Acts 1:13–14.
 - “Mary’s intimate relation with the Holy Spirit”: Highlights Mary’s intimate relationship with the Spirit, drawing on Lukan Mariology from the Gospel.²⁰
 - “Mary, the Listener of the Word”: presents Mary’s attentiveness to the Word as a paradigm for discernment.
 - “Mary, Queen of the Apostles”: references Acts 1:13–14 but requires broader doctrinal context.
 - “Mary is walking with us in our Synodal process”: pictures Mary as Mother of the Church and links Acts 1:14 with John 19:25–27.

¹⁸ It is about the beginning of the third part (Listening to the Holy Scriptures) covering points 16 to 24 from the paragraphs entitled, respectively: “Jesus, the Crowd and the Apostles” and “The Double Dynamics of Conversion: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10).”

¹⁹ On that day (April 2, 2022), the same commission published another document entitled *Towards a Spirituality for Synodality* prepared by a subgroup of the Commission on Spirituality in 2022. However, this text contains only one reference to Acts 20:28, where Paul applies the important title of “Church of God” (ἡ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ) to the local community of the Ephesian church (TSS, p. 22).

²⁰ For more on the Mariology of the evangelist Luke, see Mielcarek 2020, 599–614.

- 2) **The Gentiles' Way to the Church (Acts 10:1–11:18) (BRS, pp. 61–73)**²¹—The reflection underscores Peter's transformation through openness to the Holy Spirit, moving from ministry among Jewish disciples (e.g., healing Aeneas, Acts 9:33–34; raising Tabitha, Acts 9:36–41) to evangelizing Gentiles (Acts 10), as affirmed at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:7–11). This process involved reshaping Peter's decision-making criteria, bridging the divide between Peter (a Jew) and Cornelius (a Roman) and their respective communities.
- 3) **Gentiles in the Church (Acts 15:1–35) (BRS, pp. 75–79)**—The Council of Jerusalem, as a continuation of the Peter-Cornelius narrative, is presented as a key example of synodality, illustrating communal discernment and decision-making.

2.2.3. *Instrumentum Laboris: How to Be a Missionary Synodal Church*

The working document prepared for the second session of the Synod, *How to Be a Missionary Synodal Church* (July 9, 2024) (XVI Ordinary General Assembly 2024a), includes several references to Acts. In discussing formation for a missionary Church in collaboration with the Holy Spirit, it cites the Risen Christ's call to apostolic witness “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) (para. 55). The principles of ecclesial discernment toward mission highlight Mary as a model of synodal spirituality, referencing her prayerful presence in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14) alongside her attentiveness to the Word in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:26–38; 2:19, 51) (para. 59). Communal discernment is further explored through the Apostolic Assembly in Jerusalem, where decisions were made “with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 15:28) (para. 62). The theme of communal responsibility is illustrated by the Jerusalem community's response to Peter's baptism of Gentiles after his return from Caesarea (Acts 11:2–3).

The Synod's documents primarily draw on three passages from the Acts of the Apostles to illustrate aspects of synodality: Acts 1:13–14; 10:1–11:18; and 15:1–35. Additionally, the International Theological Commission references the election of deacons (Acts 6:1–6), expanding this list. From the perspective of Luke's narrative in Acts, are these the only relevant texts? At least two further examples appear to demonstrate communal decision-making and conflict resolution, resonating with the spirit of synodality:

- 1) The Selection of Judas' Successor (Acts 1:15–26): This passage depicts the early Christian community's collaborative process in choosing Matthias to replace Judas, reflecting synodal discernment.
- 2) Paul's Ministry and the Church in Antioch (Acts 13:1–3): The commissioning of Paul and Barnabas by the Antioch community, guided by the Holy Spirit, exemplifies collective mission-oriented decision-making.

²¹ A reference to Acts 15 is also contained in the Letter to the Priests about Synodal Journey of March 19, 2022 written by Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, and Lazzaro You Heung-sik, Archbishop Emeritus of Daejeon and Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy (Grech 2022, 2).

Although the term “synodality” is absent from these texts, their content embodies its spirit, as will be elaborated in paragraph three.

3. Key Texts of the Acts of the Apostles

3.1. Mother Church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:13–14)

The account of the Apostolic Church gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14) is brief but rich in detail. In addition to listing the apostles, it mentions the women, Jesus’ brothers, and specifically names His Mother, Mary. Verse 14 introduces two key terms that resonate with Pope Francis’ concept of synodality: ὁμοθυμαδόν²² often translated as “unanimity,” and προσευχή i.e. “prayer.”²³

The term ὁμοθυμαδόν is a favorite of Luke. Of its eleven occurrences in the New Testament, ten appear in the Acts of the Apostles.²⁴ Typically translated as “unanimously,”²⁵ “together,” or “in agreement,” the word derives from the Greek θυμός,²⁶ meaning “passion” or “strong emotion.” Beyond mere intellectual consensus, ὁμοθυμαδόν suggests an emotional harmony, reflecting a community united in both heart and purpose. This aligns with Luke’s depiction of the early Church as having “one heart and soul” (καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία) (Acts 4:32), emphasizing not only shared thought but also a profound emotional unity.

Of Luke’s uses of ὁμοθυμαδόν, four specifically describe the bonds among Christ’s disciples (Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12). The first three instances portray a community united in prayer: in the Upper Room, in the Temple, and in an unspecified household. Luke’s emphasis on prayer in the context of ὁμοθυμαδόν underscores a unity that extends beyond interpersonal relationships to a deep communion with God (McGregor 2024, 155). This prayerful unity reflects obedience to the Risen Christ’s command to await the Father’s promise—the Holy Spirit—who will empower the disciples to witness “to the ends of the earth” (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–8).

In the second instance, ὁμοθυμαδόν describes the disciples’ shared life in the Temple, marked by the Eucharist, joy, simplicity of heart, communal sharing of goods, and praise of God (Acts 2:46–47). In the third instance, it signifies their collective resolve to fulfill the Risen Christ’s will despite the Sanhedrin’s prohibitions

²² As McGregor (2024, 154) argues, this term allows us to look at relationships in the church and with God from the perspective of reaching a consensus. It is therefore essential for the exercise of authentic synodality.

²³ In addition to the meaning of prayer practice, this noun can also mean a place of prayer (cf. Acts 16:3).

²⁴ Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29.

²⁵ The dictionary edited by Abramowiczówna (1958, 3:279) gives only the first meaning.

²⁶ Hans Wolfgang Heidland (*TDNT* 5:185–86) lists texts where, in addition to anger, other emotions such as fear (Jdt 15:2) or gratitude (Wis 10:20) are also possible.

(Acts 4:24). In this prayer, the disciples acknowledge God's sovereignty, grounding their faith in His power to enable bold proclamation of the Gospel, regardless of opposition (Acts 4:29).

3.2. Discerning the Place of the Gentiles in God's Salvific Plan (Acts 10)

Chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles, as highlighted in the synodal biblical materials, vividly illustrates the Holy Spirit's guidance of Peter and Cornelius. Both are depicted as individuals in constant, attentive communion with God, yet their encounter is not driven by a deliberate motive to meet or discern God's will together through prayer. Instead, the Holy Spirit orchestrates their actions in an expansive, sovereign manner, transcending their circumstances and preconceptions (Acts 10:5–6, 19–20).²⁷ This divine initiative culminates in the outpouring of the Spirit upon a Gentile community, previously outside the Mosaic covenant (Acts 10:44).²⁸ Peter's evangelistic declaration (Acts 10:34) reflects his recognition of God's will to include Gentiles in the community of believers, a realization shaped by a series of divinely coordinated events (Keener 2020, 308).

As noted in the synodal biblical materials, "Peter's transformation was a shift in his decision-making criteria regarding the Gentiles, as he recognized and overcame his own cultural and historical prejudices. Consequently, his understanding of God's work in the world changed profoundly." (BRS, p. 67) Notably, the materials do not explicitly address the requirements of Judaism in this context. Religious obligations, however, are distinct from cultural or historical influences. Judaism traditionally excluded from the community those who did not observe the Law's fundamental precepts. By proclaiming God's will, discovered through personal experience, Peter effectively challenges a core tenet of Judaism: the separation of believers from non-observers.

The pivotal term in Peter's declaration is the Greek verb καταλαμβάνομαι (Acts 10:34), translated in some versions as "I am convinced" but literally meaning "I grasp" or "I apprehend." This term does not suggest individualism or presumption. Rather, Peter, guided by the Holy Spirit, reflects on recent events and discerns that they are God's initiative (Fitzmyer 2008a, 470). Yielding to divine inspiration, he cooperates with God's plan, confronting and abandoning his prior assumptions about God's purposes.

The synodal biblical materials rightly emphasize that Acts 10 serves as a prelude to a broader ecclesial assembly and collective discernment of God's will (BRS, p. 69).

²⁷ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer's comment: "The story of Cornelius's conversion and that of Peter's justification of his missionary activity both stress the heavenly direction now being given to this spread." (Fitzmyer 2008a, 448)

²⁸ A broader background of the role of the Holy Spirit in the context of the work of evangelization was dealt with in his time by Włodzimierz Cyran (1993–94, 21–22, 15–36).

Thus, this chapter highlights the individual qualities of Peter and Cornelius that enable them to fulfill God's plans. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, each follows a converging path, leading to their divinely appointed encounter. While both undergo significant transformation, Peter's change is more pronounced, as he must overcome the barriers Judaism imposed against the uncircumcised. In both figures, we see a readiness to heed God's promptings and a humility to relinquish personal assumptions about divine will. This openness and transformation are key to their shared journey toward fulfilling God's purpose (BRS, pp. 69–70).

3.3. Determination of the Presence of Pagans in the Church (Acts 15:1–35)

Luke prepares the theme of Gentile inclusion in the Church through two distinct narratives (Pervo 2009, 368). The first is the “Pentecost of the Gentiles” (Acts 10, discussed previously) (Keener 2020, 294), and the second involves Paul's evangelistic successes and the controversies surrounding the mixed communities of Acts 13–14. These missionary efforts were preceded by the community's prayerful discernment and the Holy Spirit's confirmation through the laying on of hands (Acts 13:3). The “Council of Jerusalem” (Acts 15) represents both a continuation and a culmination of this issue, as the early Church shapes its identity, rooted in the Jewish heritage of its members, Jesus' teachings, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The tension arising from the Church's emergence as a mixed community prompts a discernment process that offers a model for resolving such conflicts.

The apostolic assembly is neither a rabbinical debate, a sociological analysis, nor an arbitrary decision. Its participants are driven by a shared commitment to discern God's will for the Church.²⁹ While it is unclear whether the meeting had a formal chair or how it began, Luke provides key details about its composition and purpose. The gathering included apostles and elders (οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι) (Acts 15:6), who convened to “examine the matter” (ἰδεῖν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τούτου) (Acts 15:6). The verb ὄράω carries a metaphorical sense of thoroughly investigating or discerning the issue. This is reinforced by Luke's note that the meeting began with “much discussion” (πολλῆς ζητήσεως) (Acts 15:7; lit. “many inquiries”), highlighting the rigorous exploration of critical issues. The noun ζήτησις is significant, appearing earlier in the Antioch controversy (Acts 15:2) and later in Festus' description of the Pharisees' dispute with Paul (Acts 25:20).

Following this introduction, Luke gives the floor to Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, who share their experiences in Gentile missions. Rather than recounting these events in detail—already familiar to the reader—Luke focuses on the core issue:

²⁹ For more on this context, see Nolland 1991, 30–34.

the conditions for admitting non-Jews into the community.³⁰ The next stage of discernment features James, who interprets these events in light of Old Testament prophecies (Acts 15:13–18), a common Jewish practice of contextualizing contemporary events within God’s salvific history. James then proposes four minimal obligations³¹ for Gentile Christians to maintain unity with the Judeo-Christian community (Acts 15:19–21).

The entire community (σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ) (Acts 15:22), not just the apostles and elders, participates in the final action: selecting and sending emissaries to communicate the discernment’s outcome to local churches. This collective decision, expressed through the verbs δοκέω (decide), ἐκλέγω (choose), and πέμπω (send), reflects the broader Church’s involvement. The letter’s preamble further underscores this discernment’s alignment with God’s will: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (ἔδοξεν³² γὰρ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἀγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν³³) (Acts 15:28), where “us” represents the Church through its apostles and elders.³⁴

Luke’s use of ὁμοθυμαδόν (Acts 15:25) highlights the transformation from initial discord to unity, a process driven not only by human effort but by the Holy Spirit’s guidance, as seen in Acts 10 and 13–14. The Spirit’s outpouring on Gentiles, akin to that on Jewish believers, led Peter and the assembly to recognize that salvation comes to all “by the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). The decision-making process—rooted in the testimonies of witnesses, scriptural reflection, and attentiveness to God’s will—makes Acts 15 a profound illustration of communal discernment in the early Church.³⁵

³⁰ According to Fitzmyer (2008a, 552): “Luke presents the event, the ‘Council’ dealt with two issues: (1) circumcision of Gentiles and their obligation to observe the Mosaic law; and (2) dietary and other restrictions for Gentile Christians living among Jewish Christians.”

³¹ For more on the Jacob clauses, see Fitzmyer 2008a, 556–58; Pervo 2009, 376–79; Barrett 2004a, 730–736; Keener 2020, 369–71.

³² *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell et al. 1996, 441–42) gives a number of meanings of this verb. In the first place, it means the act of waiting, expecting or supposing. It can refer to the expression of a specific intention, judgment or impression (I think so...), and in the passive voice it means the object/or matter being taken into account. In the second sense, it refers to the judicial sphere in which someone turns out to be guilty of a crime, for example, or to the sphere of making an impression on others, as well as to public decisions/decisions, in the sense of considering something right or decided. Similarly, the dictionary edited by Abramowiczówna (1958, 1:592–93). On the other hand, Gerhard Kittel (TDNT, 2:232–33) emphasizes above all the meaning: “to believe,” “to have conviction/think,” “to appear.” However, he also points out other possible uses, such as “to hope for something,” “to have a good reputation.”

³³ Fitzmyer (2008a, 566) juxtaposes this ecclesial formula with the decree of Caesar Augustus quoted by Josephus: “I and my advisors have decided under oath....” (A.J. 16.6.2 §163)

³⁴ Interestingly, Barrett (2004a, 744) seems to emphasize the secondariness of the Holy Spirit’s action towards the apostles and elders, which does not fit at all with the story: “The apostles and elders are now joined in their decision by the Holy Spirit.” Paraphrasing his words, one could rather say that it was the apostles and elders who joined the decision of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Fitzmyer 2008a, 566.

³⁵ For more on the early Church decision-making process, see Luke Timothy Johnson (1996, 78, 89–106).

This discernment is deeply prayerful, echoing the early Church's practice before Pentecost, when the Risen Jesus instructed the disciples to await the Father's promise in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–8). Empowered by the Spirit, they became witnesses "to the ends of the earth." The Council of Jerusalem mirrors this prayerful waiting, ensuring the fulfillment of God's plans.

Although the term *σύνοδος* is absent, Acts 15 embodies synodality through the participants' shared commitment to prayerful reflection on God's current initiatives and His Word. This process involves both a select group of leaders and the wider community, with its outcomes shared to resolve tensions in other churches. The ultimate goal is God's peace and unity, grounded in a pilgrimage aligned with the Holy Spirit's salvific plan (McGregor 2024, 156–57).

3.4. Seven Chosen to Serve (Acts 6:1–6)

The controversy over the care of widows in the early Jerusalem church, as described in Acts 6,³⁶ exemplifies prayerful reflection and spiritual discernment. Luke highlights the tension through the term *γογγυσμός* (Acts 6:1), which evokes the Israelites' grumbling against God in the wilderness (Exod 16:7–12; Num 17:20–25).³⁷ This term frames the issue as not only a social challenge but also a spiritual crisis requiring resolution to maintain the community's unity and apostolic witness. The existing system for meeting the needs of the most vulnerable proved inadequate (Acts 6:1),³⁸ necessitating corrective measures that addressed both material needs and the spiritual cohesion essential to the Church's credibility.

The apostles initiated the response but did not decide in isolation. Instead, they invited the "entire multitude of disciples" (*τὸ πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν*) (Acts 6:2) to participate in the discernment process. The Greek term *πλῆθος* indicates a broad group, though the exact number is unspecified. The apostles delegated responsibility, instructing the community to "select" (*ἐπισκέψασθε*³⁹) (Acts 6:3; lit. "consider" or "choose") candidates while they focused on prayer and preaching (Acts 6:2, 4). This delegation is not rooted in apathy or superiority but in their conviction that God called them to prioritize proclaiming the Word. The community responded

³⁶ Polish libraries will find many biblical studies of this passage, although the aspect of the decision-making process is usually not particularly emphasized. Cf. the article by Roman Pindel (1995, 263–82).

³⁷ The wise men of Israel also warned against the attitude of murmuring (see Sir 46:7; Wis 1:10–11).

³⁸ Craig S. Keener (2020, 219) points out that ancient sources often mention the imperfections of charitable service in antiquity.

³⁹ Barrett (2004b, 312) points out that *ἐπισκέπτομαι* is a typically Luke term, although the Evangelist uses it in different senses: in Acts 15:14 (cf. Luke 1:68, 78) to refer to God who salutarily visits his people, in 15:36 in the sense of checking (someone), or as in the passage under study in the sense of seeking someone for a specific function. In a similar sense, the Old Testament uses the related term *ἐπισκοπεῖν*; cf. in LXX: Num 27:1, 16–18; and especially in Exod 18:21.

by choosing candidates and presenting them to the apostles for approval (Acts 6:6) (Fitzmyer 2008a, 349).

In the initial stage, the apostles' role was limited to proposing the initiative and defining selection criteria: candidates should be of "good repute," "full of the Spirit," and "wise" (Acts 6:3). After the community selected the candidates, the apostles confirmed the choice through prayer and the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6). This process exemplifies communal discernment, involving both the apostles and the wider community in a collaborative decision-making effort that balanced practical and spiritual priorities (Pervo 2009, 160–161).⁴⁰

3.5. Choosing the Successor of Judas (Acts 1:15–26)

In the opening of Acts Luke describes the first crisis resolved through communal prayer and reflection. Following the Risen Christ's command, about 120 disciples gathered in the Upper Room to await the Father's promise—the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke notes the presence of the apostles, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Jesus' brothers, and, as was his custom, women, though he does not name them individually.

Peter initiates the need to replace Judas to restore the Twelve (Acts 1:15), citing Pss 68:26 and 108:8 (LXX) to support his proposal. He emphasizes that the chosen individual must be a witness to Christ's resurrection alongside the Eleven (Acts 1:22). The phrase "they put forward" (*ἔστησαν*, v. 23)⁴¹ is ambiguous, as verse 15 implies the involvement of all present,⁴² not just the apostles.⁴³ Luke, however, does not clarify this point.

The decision-making process unfolds as follows: the disciples gather, Peter proposes the action, they seek God's guidance through Scripture, select candidates, pray (*προσευξάμενοι*) (Acts 1:24), and cast lots (*ἔδωκαν κλήρους*) (Acts 1:26) to choose Matthias. This communal approach to discernment and selection likely involved broad participation, reflecting a collective reliance on prayer and divine guidance.

⁴⁰ The American exegete emphasizes that within this procedure "the church [is] taking action as a totality and exhibits an ecclesial orientation."

⁴¹ Western tradition (the Codex Beza – D and some Latin manuscripts) attempts to limit the choice of the twelfth apostle to the decision of Peter himself, retaining the singular form of the verb: *ἔστησεν* = he (Peter) placed (see Nestle and Nestle 2012, 380). Richard I. Pervo (2009, 55) comments on the tendency of the author of the Western text to present Peter as a *μονεπίσκοπος*.

⁴² Barrett (2004b, 102): "The community as a whole put forward (*ἔστησαν*) two candidates for the vacant position."

⁴³ Keener (2012, 770) speculates that those gathered in the upper room should be identified with the larger group of disciples that Luke has already presented in the Gospel (Luke 10:1).

3.6. Paul's Ministry and the Church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3)

The final example unfolds in the vibrant, diverse Christian community of Antioch, comprising believers of Jewish and Gentile origins. From this dynamic church, Paul and Barnabas embark on their missionary journey, commissioned and sent by the local community. According to Luke, this mission was not the apostles' independent decision but stemmed from a profound spiritual connection with God⁴⁴ through fasting and prayer.⁴⁵ As seen in the encounter between Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10), the Holy Spirit initiates⁴⁶ the missionary endeavor, revealing His will during a liturgical assembly. The community responds with further fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands—a gesture of blessing and commissioning⁴⁷—before sending Paul and Barnabas on their mission (Acts 13:3). While verse 3 does not specify who performed the sending, the immediate context of verse 1 highlights the prophets and teachers of the Antioch church, likely indicating a group of leaders, though broader community involvement remains plausible.⁴⁸

Unlike the collective decision-making in Acts 6 or 15, this scene emphasizes the Antioch church leaders' openness and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit's guidance, representing the entire community. The process underscores active communal participation, rooted in prayerful preparation, attentiveness to divine inspiration, and obedience to God's discerned will—principles central to the concept of synodality.

⁴⁴ Fitzmyer (2008a, 497) emphasizes that the term κύριος used by Luke (v. 2) refers to the God of Israel, not to the Risen One.

⁴⁵ Fasting and prayer are essential elements of spiritual discernment in the early Church. The Old Testament does not contain much mention of fasting. The custom of fasting in mourning was known (2 Sam 1:12; 3:35); or as part of the military operations of the Holy War (1 Sam 14:24). The Jewish liturgy commanded fasting on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29).

⁴⁶ The mission of the Holy Spirit is an obvious continuation of the work of Jesus, see Keener 2020, 330; Fitzmyer 2008a, 497. Pervo (2009, 322) reduces the role of the Holy Spirit to "some sense of revealed approval." Barrett (2004b, 605), on the other hand, guesses the charismatic ministry of a prophet, but stipulates that the second volume of Luke's work knows examples of the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit in the actions of the apostles (Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:2; 19:1).

⁴⁷ Many decades ago, Eduard Lohse (1951, 73, n. 1) pointed out that the laying on of hands on Paul and Barnabas could not be interpreted as a kind of Jewish ordination. The correct interpretation of this scene is certainly a kind of mission giving: "a Spirit-guided commission" (Fitzmyer 2008a, 497).

⁴⁸ Regardless of the identification, the group of those responsible who sent Barnabas and Paul represents the entire Church of Antioch. Hence, Fitzmyer can write that "the Antiochene community acts in the name of the Spirit and designates two individuals for a specific task in the Christian church." (Fitzmyer 2008a, 497)

Conclusion

An etymological analysis of the term “synodality,” coupled with an examination of its constituent elements in the second volume of Luke’s corpus (the Acts of the Apostles), reveals several key insights into its ecclesial dimensions. The primary objective—to unearth the biblical foundations of synodality as championed by Pope Francis—was first addressed by surveying the contexts in which the Third Evangelist employs the preposition *σύν* (“with”) and the noun *ἡ ὁδός* (“way”). This was followed by pinpointing passages from Acts that synodal documents cite as exemplars of synodality. These passages feature pivotal Greek terms that align with modern understandings of synodality, including *ὁμοθυμαδόν* (“unanimity”), *προσευχή* (“prayer”), *καταλαμβάνομαι* (“to be seized or compelled”), *ζήτησις* (“inquiry”), *δοκέω* (“to seem or decide”), *ἐκλέγω* (“to choose”), and *ἐπισκέπτομαι* (“to oversee or visit”). A broader review of Lukan texts further demonstrates that, while the noun *σύνοδος* itself is absent, the thematic content resonates deeply with synodality. The selected pericopes portray ecclesial unity alongside participatory and missionary dynamics. Indeed, the early Church’s practices in Acts mirror contemporary synodality through processes of discernment and decision-making that involve not only leaders but also rank-and-file members, all illuminated by the Holy Spirit’s guidance. This convergence highlights essential criteria for participants in today’s synodal Church, foremost among them the pursuit of God’s will. These findings, however, do not foreclose ongoing theological debate on whether “synodality” aptly encapsulates these biblical attitudes.

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