

## 2. Mary and the Women in the Synodal Model of Church in Acts

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The Upper Room or the Cenacle, the place of the first assembly of the apostles together with Mary and the women after the Ascension of the Risen Christ, is considered the birthplace of the church. What happened there gives us a glimpse of the Holy Spirit's continuing action and influence in the life of the church from its infancy. It also presents a paradigm of church as the body of Christ giving us a renewed understanding of what it is to be the People of God in today's world, a synodal church.

In this chapter, I would like to explore the meaning of Cenacle as a symbolic place and theological space where the Holy Spirit's creative energy gave birth to Christ's body, the church. What was the assembly like? In what way was Acts 1:14–16 a synodal model of church? What was the role of Mary and the women in the first assembly in Acts, and what can they teach us in reclaiming our place in the synodal church? How can we redefine and live synodality as women theologians?

In exploring the answers to these questions, let us begin by unpacking the rich meanings of the place where it all began, the upper room (*cenaculum* in Latin) in Jerusalem. The term, Cenacle, will be explored as a symbolic place that leads us to a theological space, where we will look more closely into its ecclesiological meaning and the place of synodality in it. It is within this active and receptive faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, that the mystery of the Cenacle comes into being. It is

a mystery that is both an innovation and a foundation, placing the infant Christian community between what has been and what is to come.<sup>1</sup>

The Acts of the Apostles is an authoritative document of the early church, describing the life of the early Christian community, which was steadfast in prayer. There are two verses in Acts that are considered as a “summary statement” or “end of Luke’s introduction,” which prepares for further events of this book. These two verses will help us get started: “when they reached the city they went to the upper room where they were staying . . . With one heart, all these joined constantly in prayer, together with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:13–14).

## **The Cenacle as a Symbolic Place**

To enter more deeply into the meaning of a word, it is suggested that we look into the root word. According to Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, a source or root word is charged with meanings, “like a sea shell which all by itself brings back to us . . . the fury of the sea, as well as its mesmerizing murmur or its unceasing wash.”<sup>2</sup> In situating the meaning of the word “Cenacle,” it is interesting to note that for centuries, the single word has carried a certain symbolic richness in that it has signified a variety of spaces.<sup>3</sup> As a root word, it is more than a label for a specific reality. It contains intimations regarding the very core of this word, suggesting its inner dynamism and its inherent distinctiveness. It is therefore essential that we try to bring to the surface all the implications the name Cenacle bears.<sup>4</sup> The term is used to allude to its deeper symbolic meaning, referring to the first Cenacle as a paradigm for today, crystallized in Mary, the being and attitude of its ecclesial identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghislaine Cote, *The Cenacle: Its Christological Foundations and Spirituality* (Beauchesne Editeur, 1991), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 27–28.

<sup>3</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

To appreciate the rich meanings of this root word, let us look at how it is described both in Latin and in Greek. The Latin term, *cenaculum*, is first of all a room for eating, a room for the *cena*—the meal, the dinner. It refers to the gathering place of the disciples at key moments in their history with Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, as a place and a space, it is also understood in several ways: as *anagaion* in Greek, which means a section of a room above; or a type of place which is referred to in Greek as *kataluma* or a meeting place or guest room.<sup>6</sup> Luke also refers to it as a place where one stops during a voyage, or a place for resting, *diversorium* in Latin, while Mark adds another reference to it as a place of refreshment and repair, a place of recovery, *refectio* in Latin.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever meanings might be attached to this root word—as a dining room, a meeting room, an upper room, a room to rest—the Cenacle assumes the symbolism of a home, a dwelling place. It recalls the first Cenacle and the events which made it a meeting place of God with God’s people.<sup>8</sup>

At the center of this meeting place, is a table, a social furniture, which shows “a special relationship with a table, that piece of furniture used for meeting and that place that is eminently personal, that is both private and open.”<sup>9</sup> Theologian Ghislaine Cote adds this description about this social furniture which is an important piece of furniture in any dwelling place:<sup>10</sup>

A table is, par excellence, a social furniture . . . It is furniture for meeting: a table is made to be surrounded. It is a defined surface, but its borders do not cut off, rather they invite, indeed permanently provide, a recognized place for meeting . . . . Therefore “a table” is the furniture of dialogue, where all can express themselves, where purposes, projects, and

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<sup>5</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 34.

questions circulate freely, where the outlines of the future begin to emerge.<sup>11</sup>

Another notable meaning of a dwelling place is its connotation of a place of interiority.<sup>12</sup> It alludes to a feminine symbol, carrying with it a sense of a place of safety, as a mother would hold a child at her breast. As a root word, it can allude to that secret chamber whose passage is a required test in all rituals of initiation, for that chamber symbolizes the place of the death of the old being and the birth of the new person.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Cenacle as a Theological Space**

The word “space” has many meanings depending on what discipline or perspective is being used. It contains existential, symbolic, and metaphorical meanings. Theological reflections about space and place provide a deep challenge and an urgent necessity for theology to become aware not only of its embeddedness in the existential spatiality of life but also in the symbolic and spiritual realms of life. The Cenacle is both a symbolic place and a theological space as it refers to a conceptual or metaphorical space where individuals or groups engage in theological reflection, study, discussion, sharing of faith, exploration of religious beliefs, and critique of structures that diminish human life and dignity. Theological spaces can be both physical and metaphorical, providing a setting for spiritual growth, community building, and the deepening of religious understanding.

The Cenacle as a theological space highlights three things that Scripture has foretold about the Messiah: his passion, his resurrection, and his mission of universal salvation. In the first assembly at the Cenacle, Jesus is recognized as the longed-for Messiah because he realizes all three, with the third sign of his messiahship not realized during his earthly life but is being

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<sup>11</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves* (José Corti, 1942), 18, referenced in Cote, *The Cenacle*, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Cote, *The Cenacle*, 38.

realized up to the present by and through the Body of Christ, the church. The realization of this third sign is not something static as it grows, adapts, and transforms its self-understanding of mission through the interaction of the body of Christ with history, culture, events, and the world.

The Catholic Church today, as the body of Christ, is experiencing a breakthrough into a fuller stage of self-understanding and of self-appropriation as the body of Christ, through a process known as “synodality.”<sup>14</sup> This is the context in which I would like to discuss what the Cenacle can contribute to our understanding of synodality as both a symbolic place and a theological space. The broader meaning of synodality contains three key metaphors or elements: journeying, creativity, and responsibility,<sup>15</sup> indicating the path along which the People of God walk together as followers of Jesus, who presents himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).<sup>16</sup> Synodality is not new, however its meaning and understanding must be aligned with the ongoing journey of the people of God. This renewal is always through the influence and action of the Holy Spirit, which God has gifted to the infant church in order to fulfill its universal mission of salvation, which the risen Lord had entrusted to his followers gathered at the Upper Room. According to the International Theological Commission, synodality is “an essential dimension of the Church” in the sense that “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the word ‘synod.’”<sup>17</sup>

While historical records from the early church are limited, Mary and the women in general were instrumental in the formation of a synodal church through their witness, support, active participation, leadership, and exemplary faith. Their influence contributed to the rich diversity and

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<sup>14</sup> Elissa Roper, “Synodality: A Process Committed to Transformation,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 95, no. 4 (2018): 412.

<sup>15</sup> Roper, “Synodality,” 412.

<sup>16</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, no. 3, [vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](http://vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html).

<sup>17</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 1.

inclusive nature of the early Christian community, fostering an environment where synodality could thrive. It was always understood as the way of being an assembly, gathered in prayer to discern the Spirit's leading to guide their words and actions. It was therefore a way of journeying together and realizing the mission of the risen Lord. However, "Since the first centuries, the word 'synod' has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal, or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical, and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by."<sup>18</sup>

Based on the Greek word, *synodos*, it simply means, an assembly, a gathering with purpose and intentionality. The first gathering in the first chapter of Acts happened as they remembered the last words of Jesus while at table. "He had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. 'It is,' he had said 'what you have heard me speak about: John baptized with water but, not many days from now, you are going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 1:4–5). Then they will become witnesses even to earth's remotest end.

## **Theological Insights from the Cenacle Experience**

Adapting the concept of "third space," a sociocultural term designating a communal space, as distinct from the home (first space) or work (second space), the Cenacle as a "third space" becomes a sphere or forum where individuals can experience a transformative sense of self, identity relationships, belongingness, and shared faith. For Mary and the women at the first assembly, the Cenacle became their "third space."<sup>19</sup>

We may recall the importance of the Cenacle in the event of the life of Jesus during his earthly life and before he enters into his passion. Jesus's

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<sup>18</sup> International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," no. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Third Space theory emerges from the sociocultural tradition in psychology identified with Lev Vygotsky. See Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (first published as *Thinking as Speech*), ed. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (MIT Press, 1962).

farewell meal with his disciples and the Pentecost event are two pivotal events in Christian theology, both of which took place in the same location—the Cenacle. By connecting these two events, we can re-imagine the church in several profound ways.

The Last Supper establishes the church as a Eucharistic community, united around the body and blood of Christ. Here, Jesus institutes the Eucharist, offering his disciples a way to remain in communion with him and each other. After his resurrection and ascension, the disciples return to the Cenacle to await the promised Advocate.

This promise is fulfilled at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends, signifying God’s enduring presence and guidance. The church becomes the Spirit-filled body of Christ, empowered for mission. Pentecost transforms the fearful disciples into courageous witnesses, uniting them in purpose and sending them both to proclaim the gospel.

Considering these two significant events in the life of the church, there are several theological insights related to the Cenacle experience of the first assembly that deserve some discussion. They are interwoven; the discussion of one cannot be separated from the discussion of the others. These are: 1) birthing; a beginning; 2) remembering as a way of being in solidarity; 3) being “with one heart”; 4) praying, listening, and discerning; and 5) being in communion and in mission.

### ***Birth: A Beginning***

It was at Pentecost that the new church was born—a church whose missionary journey was and continues to be firmly strengthened by the Holy Spirit. It was the beginning of a new life and a new dispensation ushered in by the “advocate” Jesus had promised during his farewell discourses in John’s gospel. The symbolism of giving birth must not be lost as it gives us deeper insight about this new body of Christ, the church.

Giving birth is one of the most profound experiences a woman can have, rich with theological meaning. It symbolizes new beginnings and reminds us that growth and transformation often involve pain, struggle, and even the shadow of death. Jesus evokes this in John 16:21, likening the

suffering of childbirth to the joy that follows new life. Mary and the women at Pentecost deeply understood this metaphor, having experienced childbirth themselves. Mary's presence in the Cenacle reflects a posture of active "response-ability," ready to bring forth both the possible and the impossible. Through the Spirit, a new body—the church—is born, and Mary is no longer alone but united with the community, embodying the church's identity and mission. As a space of waiting, listening, and shared discernment, the Cenacle becomes a "third space" of synodality, where Mary models a relational and participatory way of being church.

### ***Remembering: A Way of Being in Solidarity***

The importance of memory in faith's understanding and in Christian experience now becomes clear, as well as the importance of remembrance for entering the mystery of the Cenacle. To possess a memory is to have a place in which to be rooted, a place from which to heal and to grow, a grounding from which coherence and understanding come. The constructive nature of memory, whereby elements of a prior experience are woven back together during recollection, also supports imagination, whereby elements of disparate prior experiences are woven together in novel ways.<sup>20</sup>

A community requires for its existence and continuity a history, which is greatly aided in its consciousness by a memory.<sup>21</sup> It is through shared memory that history and tradition are created. However, there is a troubling human tendency to forget or simply to gloss over difficult parts of our experience, especially those memories that are painful, sorrowful,

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, Donna Rose Addis, Demis Hassabis, Victoria C. Martin, R. Nathan Spreng, Karl K. Szpunar, "The Future of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, and the Brain," *Neuron* 76, no. 4 (November 2012): 677–694, doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2012.11.001.

<sup>21</sup> John Markey, *Creating Communion: The Theology of the Constitution of the Church* (New City Press, 2003), 131. The author bases his discussion on the topic of communion using the insights of philosopher Josiah Royce who developed his mature philosophy around three central ideas: Spirit, community, and interpretation of signs.

disturbing, or traumatic. It requires courage and grace to face and accept them as part of our shared human experience and our historical reality.

Mary has a privileged role in the first church. The late esteemed Jesuit theologian Catalino Arevalo referred to Mary as the memory of the church because it was Mary who would constantly remind the infant church of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Arevalo emphasized that her privileged and unique position in the life of Jesus—the one who carried him in her womb, gave birth to him, and raised him, saw him and his mystery unfold as the years passed—gave her some kind of authority to be the memory regarding Jesus for the nascent church.<sup>23</sup> It is almost like she played “spiritual director” to the disciples in her prodding their memories of Jesus with them when they were so turned in on themselves.<sup>24</sup> This places Mary at the heart of the synodal church—one that walks together in listening, dialogue, and mutual discernment.

### ***Being “With One Heart”***

This expression “with one heart” refers to the bond of Christian love that united all those gathered as one community. In primitive human language, the heart designated the whole person, body, and soul, and signified its most intimate center. All human faculties find their harmony and unity in the heart.

The biblical heart is the center of one’s personality before God. It is the place of prayer where one enters into intimate relationship with God and exercises faith. As such, it is the place of discernment and human deliberation, where one makes Spirit-guided choices. It is in the “heart” where conscience awakens and grows, thus learning to distinguish right from wrong. Pondering thoughts and words in one’s heart, as Mary did (Luke 1:66; 2:19), means to value the experience deep within oneself or to consider it carefully with a profound awareness of the various movements of the heart that elicit a faith-filled response. The heart is not only related

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<sup>22</sup> Catalino Arevalo, “Triduum,” presented at the Cenacle Retreat House, Quezon City, May 23, 1997, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Arevalo, “Triduum,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> Arevalo, “Triduum,” 4.

to activities of the mind and the will, but also closely connected to our affective life, imagination, and memory.

Acts 1:14 tells us the disciples were “with one heart, constantly devoting themselves to prayer . . . with Mary the mother of Jesus.” This unity, as Luke describes, springs from prayer—the same kind of interior openness we see in Mary when, in the infancy narratives, she “treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Through profound moments like the annunciation and Jesus’s birth, Mary learned that prayer is the path to discerning God’s will through the Holy Spirit. Her reflective posture models the kind of discerning prayer that lies at the heart of synodality.

Just as Mary received Christ in prayer, now she supports the disciples in giving birth to the church through communal prayer. In both events—the Incarnation and the church’s beginning—Mary plays a unique and vital role, embodying the heart of a praying and discerning community.

***Praying, Listening and Discerning: “All These Joined Constantly in Prayer”***

We recall the gospel passage which says, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst” (Matthew 18:20). Earlier, we saw that the place of prayer is the heart, where each person is one’s most authentic self. It is from the heart that we enter into an honest and open relationship with our self, with God, with others, and with the whole of God’s creation. It is in the heart that this relationship grows, deepens, and matures. It is also in the heart where we hold the tension between God’s perspective and plan and our human sin-tainted willfulness. Through prayer and contemplation, and the sharing of faith with one another, the Spirit of God enables us to feel with God and to share God’s attitudes, values, feelings, and emotions. Our capacity to see from God’s perspective enables us to see the events of our time as God sees them and to feel the same way about these events as God feels.

It is the Spirit who teaches us all things and leads us to the truth. There is therefore no discernment possible without prayer, without listening to the Spirit’s motions, in order to direct our will and our actions accordingly.

To discern individually or as a body, prayer awakens in us the capacity to identify the spirits that inhabit us at a given moment in our life or history. In spiritual discernment these various movements of the heart are sifted in order to know its origins and directions—is it from God and leading to God or from the opposing spirit leading away from God? The “heart” then, which is the seat of courage, wisdom, emotions, and will, is where we discern God’s will in all our options. It is where we are schooled in God’s love, and where we experience the joy of living the Gospel and passion to serve God and God’s people.

To be engaged in God’s mission, we must engage in critical thinking and discernment, allowing ourselves, as a fruit of contemplation, to be personally transformed. Why do we need to discern? As humans we can easily lose hope in the midst of death-dealing realities in the world we live in. Even the church is not immune from these realities. The process of hoping is bound up in the essence of what it means to be human, and all the capacities God endowed us in our humanity. We have the ability to choose to live with a sense of meaning sustained by hope. Theological reflection must be well-equipped to uncover narratives that advance our critical powers, our capacity to use our knowledge, imagination, intuition to distinguish what leads to death and destruction or to life and wholeness.<sup>25</sup> Such reflection offers hope in the midst of fear. Hope invites us to develop the discipline of critical thinking that leads to a discerned action-oriented response to despair and negativism. Critical thinking is essential in discernment. It spurs us to speak and act against the system of worldly domination that tends to destroy by interpreting the term domination as human appetite for power and wealth, rather than as the providential care God displays in creation and in salvation history.

Living our life in accordance with our Christian vocation calls for a discerning heart. We are confronted with choices between what promotes life and what leads to death every moment of our life as individuals and as

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<sup>25</sup> Forrest Clingerman, “Theologians as Interpreters—Not Prophets—in a Changing Climate,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2015): 346.

a Christian community. The contemporary French artist popularly known as Arcabas depicts Mary—in many of his paintings on the Pentecost scene—with an open book, either holding it or having it placed beside her or at her foot.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on tradition, Arcabas uses the open book to symbolize Jesus as the Word of God and Mary constantly connected with “the Book.” This explanation underlines for me the presence of Mary in both birthings: the first one—of Jesus in Bethlehem—and the second—the body of Christ in the Cenacle. Arcabas also made sure that in his Pentecost paintings there were women and people from different races present to symbolize the inclusivity and universality of the church. This vision resonates deeply with the theme of this conference: “Women on the Synodal Journey: Towards a More Authentic Catholic Church and World”—a call to recognize the vital role of women and the diverse people of God in shaping a church that truly reflects the breadth and richness of the body of Christ.

### ***Being in Communion and in Mission***

The concept of communion (*koinonia*) expresses the core mystery of the church.<sup>27</sup> It gives witness to a community that lives through the sharing of gifts and charisms inspired by the Spirit as an expression of God’s saving plan for the universal community.<sup>28</sup> The first assembly gathered at the Cenacle was convened by the Spirit for the sake of mission. Being in communion and in mission complete each other in our missionary journey. The apostles along with Mary and the other women received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the universal mission to proclaim the risen Christ to all the people (cf. Acts 2:1–40).

A community exists for a particular purpose. For the first community and for the church up to the present, it is the universal mission that the

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<sup>26</sup> Arcabas’ real name is Jean-Marie Pirot (December 26, 1926–August 23, 2018). Arcabas was a name given to him by his pupils. One of his paintings is installed in 2005 at the Cenacle in Lyon, France.

<sup>27</sup> Markey, *Creating Communion*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Markey, *Creating Communion*, 24.

risen Christ entrusted his followers that is the *raison d'être* of their existence. What distinguishes them from other communities? It is love that Jesus showed them through his words and deeds, which culminated in his paschal sacrifice, which set them apart from other groups. The strength of their bonds must continue to evolve in time and space as they deepen their relationship with God and with one another. Christian history attests that as the followers of the way spread to “earth’s remotest ends” (Acts 1:8b), to proclaim the good news, they strengthen as they cope together, taking risks, exploring new paths, and collaborating with each other to fulfill the mission Jesus gave them, always bonded together by God’s love.

Theologian John Markey turns to philosopher Josiah Royce, who remarks that: “The ability to ‘see one’s life in terms of a greater communal and, finally, cosmological whole, gives individuals the ability to widen and expand their own lives by consciously and freely participating in a community of memory and hope greater than the physical and biological limits that life naturally imposes on us.’”<sup>29</sup> The whole community must share a way of communicating with one another on basic values and beliefs, and a method and tradition of communal discourse that has emerged over time and remains both shared and open-ended.<sup>30</sup> Genuine community must have a common space where members can share and discern between “views of life” and “ways of life.”<sup>31</sup> Sharing and discerning together help a community establish solidarity with one another and with those to whom they are sent to proclaim the good news.

Synodality must therefore be interpreted more fully in terms of communion, as a way of journeying together as a community of faith along the missionary path. “This understanding of ecclesial life is a key metaphor for the paradigm of synodality and provides the many aspects of journeying as appropriate to Christian corporate living: planning,

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<sup>29</sup> Markey, *Creating Communion*, 133.

<sup>30</sup> Markey, *Creating Communion*, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Markey, *Creating Communion*, 133. Here the author agrees with Royce on this particular element of a genuine community.

dreaming, packing, worrying, walking, conversing, listening, observing.”<sup>32</sup> For the ecclesial life to undergo a transformation, preparation and formation must be taken seriously by all.

## **Mary in the Acts of the Apostles**

Before we look more closely at Mary in the Acts of the Apostles, it would be beneficial for us to recall Mary’s intimate encounters with the Holy Spirit in the gospels. In our synodal journey, Mary models for us how to listen and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit who guided her in her vocation as mother and disciple of Christ. We recall the Annunciation where she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:28) that she conceived Jesus in her womb and was later led by the same Holy Spirit to visit her cousin Elizabeth and proclaimed the Magnificat, the Presentation of Jesus in the temple and other events in the life of her son.

Mary appears only once in Acts, to be there at Pentecost, the culmination of all the events where she and the first assembly awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. She needed to be there as she is the one who knows and recognizes the Holy Spirit; therefore, in some way she is a touchstone for discernment, and she is certainly there as the guide for discipleship. Her role, like the role of other women in Acts, is limited as a result of Luke’s emphasis on the ministries of Peter and especially Paul, which for him embody the movement of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, and on the symbolic importance of the “twelve” apostles representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Mary’s role in Acts is a parallel of her role in the Lukan infancy narrative. Although it establishes Luke’s particular emphasis on the limited role of women in the accomplishment of his purposes in Acts, the image and role of Mary nonetheless manage to assert themselves even through the limited texts given us by the evangelist.

The opening verse of Acts (1:12) connects the event of Jesus’ ascension as witnessed by his disciples after his last instructions to them (1:6–11) and

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<sup>32</sup> Roper, “Synodality,” 416.

situates them at the upper room in Jerusalem where they were staying.<sup>33</sup> Although tradition locates the events of the Last Supper and Pentecost in the same upper room, there is no solid evidence that the Cenacle (upper room) in Acts is the same Cenacle in the Last Supper event. Nevertheless, it is at an “upper room” in Jerusalem where men and women disciples gathered together in prayer after witnessing the ascension of Jesus in heaven. But only the men, especially the remaining eleven of the Twelve apostles (1:13), are named. Of the women who are gathered with them, only Mary is identified by name. She is “Mary the mother of Jesus” (1:14). The anonymity of the remaining women suggests that they do not have equal standing with men in this gathering.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps we can ask, why is Mary, of all the women present in the assembly, the only one identified? And why is it significant for Luke to mention her by name? Does this mean that she has an equal standing with the men disciples in this gathering? What picture of Mary does the author portray in this scene? Again, we can only begin to answer these questions within the context of Luke’s theological intention and the literary structure of the beginning of his first and second books, the gospel and Acts.

This pericope does not give us further descriptions of Mary nor her role in the assembly. From the statement in Acts 1:14—“All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers”—no specific role is given her, as all of them are engaged in the same activity, that of prayer. After this event describing her in prayer with the gathering of believers, she remains silent and invisible in the preaching of the apostles and disciples. Even Paul is surprisingly silent about her except for an

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<sup>33</sup> For many, it was natural to assume that the upper room referred to in this verse of Acts is the same one in which Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples (Mark 14:15), but this is an unreliable tradition. Biblical archaeologists assert that the location of the upper room where the Last Supper was held is not clear. Most probably, the supper was held somewhere within the city walls.

<sup>34</sup> Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, expanded ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 307. Acts 1:21–26 makes the inequality between men and women even clearer: only a man can be elected to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle.

allusion to her in Galatians 4:4 in mentioning that Christ was born of a woman.

This silence and invisibility seem to reveal that she had no direct place in the community after the Pentecost event, that she did not impose herself nor claim any rights or favors as the mother of Jesus, that she did not carry out any teaching or preaching office, and that she did not even appear as a privileged source of revelation about the intimate life of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, this silence reveals that “to be the mother of Jesus was not a special title of honor nor an essential element of Christological faith for the first witnesses to the faith.”<sup>36</sup>

In mentioning her name in the midst of the infant church in Acts, Luke therefore proposes her as a model for all believers. As she made possible the birth of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, so also, she takes part in the parallel birth of the church through the Holy Spirit. But these two births were not without pain and struggle. She did not breeze through life as if she were not a human being. Her faith, like our own, had to be tested in time through many difficult and anxiety-laden events. As a human being, she was subject to the same doubts and obscurities as many of us are. Because of the person that she was and is, we continue to identify with her in our own continuing struggles of faith. In the Cenacle scene, we finally have an image of her as one who has weathered through life, as one who can look back at her life and experiences without any regrets or despair but with gratitude and peace, of one who can willingly share her rich memory of her son’s life and of her relationship with him to a young still fragile church. Fading into the background, we are left with an image of a woman who has finally come to her own and has found peace and joy in the fulfillment of her role, a woman who perhaps remained active in the church without drawing attention to herself but instead finds peace and happiness in the attention to Christ and his body, the new community of believers.

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<sup>35</sup> Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, *Mary and the Reign of God: A Synthesis of Mariology* (Claretian Publications, 1990), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Paredes, *Mary and the Reign of God*, 18.

In reflecting on the significance of Mary in the church from its beginnings, chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium* discusses her role in the mystery of Christ and the church, presenting her as an integral part of the church's identity, mission, and future. The document underscores Mary's unique participation in the history of salvation. She is seen as the one who brought Christ into the world and, by her cooperation in the divine plan, continues to play a vital role in the salvation of humanity. This makes her a model for the church's mission to bring Christ to the world. Thus, she is both a model and a mother to the church, embodying its faith, hope, and unity. Just as Mary is the mother of Christ, she is also the mother of all Christians, symbolizing the nurturing and protective nature of the church towards its members. The church venerates Mary not only because of her unique role in the history of salvation but also because she represents what the church itself is called to be.<sup>37</sup>

From the perspective of today's women who experience exclusion and marginalization in church and society, reading Mary's role in Acts and how the church regards her in *Lumen Gentium* gives them a sense of hope that through their faithfulness, vigilance, and efforts in raising the consciousness of other women and men in the church, women may be recognized as equal partners in the service of the church. The scant information about Mary's life, the silence about her in significant events of her son's life, and her invisibility from the church after its inauguration in Acts connect her with most women from our biblical past until the present whose stories or contributions to the spreading and proclamation of the gospels have not been preserved or may not be recognized.

The call of Pope Francis for the church to become more synodal through the leading and action of the Holy Spirit, the way the infant church in Acts was, is a welcome development for the twenty-first century church. Just as the Second Vatican Council called for an updating of the church in order to be relevant to the modern world, we need to harness the original intention of the Holy Spirit that as God's people. We need to listen

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 62–64.

to one another in our journey together as a community of faith in mission. Referring to the synodal process, Pope Francis understands it as “not just a momentary event but a continuous journey, one in which the church learns to better understand herself and discern the most effective ways to carry out her mission.” He described the synodal Assembly as “a ‘plural subject,’ where bishops, laypeople, priests, and consecrated men and women work together in service to God’s mercy.”<sup>38</sup>

## **Mary and Women in the Synodal Model of Church**

We have much to hope as we retrieve the memory of the early church in her experience of synodality as the people of God and as the body of Christ in our world today. Based on our rereading of Acts 1:13–14, it is important to note that Luke intentionally mentions the presence of Mary and the women amid the brethren to mark their significant role in the life of the early church. Synodality of the church has a deep root in the Cenacle event, where all present—women and men of the early church—gathered, shared, prayed, waited, and missioned. This gathering is the context from which we understand synodality, a way of journeying together as a community of faith with a mission. From that first gathering, synodality has become a form of governance where decision-making involves active participation and consultation among all—bishops, clergy, laity, women and men, young and old, from different life backgrounds and contexts. The goal is to promote collaboration, communion, consensus-building, and the collective discernment of important issues within the church. Synods are gatherings or assemblies where representatives discuss matters of faith, doctrine, and pastoral concerns in an atmosphere of listening and prayer, to address the needs of the faithful and guide the church’s direction.

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<sup>38</sup> “Pope Calls for Humble and Synodal Church, Led by the Holy Spirit,” *Vatican News*, October 2, 2024, [vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-10/pope-francis-address-synod-2-october-2024-second-session.html](https://vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-10/pope-francis-address-synod-2-october-2024-second-session.html).

The first assembly at the Cenacle serves as a model or paradigm that needs to be adapted to best serve the universal mission Christ has entrusted to his followers. As a model or paradigm, we can learn from Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, where he refers to the notion of “paradigm” as an accepted model of interpretation or model of understanding.<sup>39</sup> The interpretation of an accepted model shifts (giving rise to the term “paradigm-shift”) as it undergoes a longer process of understanding and adapting to changing consciousness. This theory enables us to comprehend more the challenges brought about by growth in knowledge and human consciousness, development, progress, and the emergence of new approaches with reference to theology and spirituality.

When we use the term “paradigm shift” based on Kuhn’s original meaning of paradigms as models of interpretation centered on an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques shared by members of a shared community, there is never a question of total break or discontinuity, but rather a fundamental continuity.<sup>40</sup> We continue to look at the same world but from different perspectives and based on our renewed understanding of the original model. In synodality, the divine perspective born out of prayer and contemplation is essential in following the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The synodal model of the assembly at the Cenacle is one that must undergo a renewed understanding. In the formation of a synodal church, Mary and the women played significant roles in various ways. However, their roles were limited to conform with the pervading understanding of the status and the role of women in the culture of that time. Yes, the potentials were there of what we now know as “synodality”—where all members, no matter what their gender or positions are in the church—journey together in discerning the direction and the leading of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling the mission Jesus has entrusted to the members of the first assembly. However, these gifts and potentials the Spirit poured down

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18–19.

<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 94.

upon the first assembly need to be reclaimed and developed to their maturity and fullness according to the designs and intentions of the Holy Spirit in the service of Christ's mission. In reclaiming these potential points and developing them, we need to apply a paradigm-shift in adapting a model that provides a guide for our continuing journey as a people of God. This is precisely what the synodal model of the first assembly in Acts is presenting us for further development.

In the Cenacle, the roles of Mary and the women in the synodal space of the infant church can be gleaned in the following:

- As witnesses to Christ's teachings: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and other women who followed Jesus during his ministry were witnesses to his teachings, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection. Their first-hand experiences and deep understanding of Jesus's message were invaluable in shaping the early Christian community's beliefs and values. All those gathered listened to and shared with one another, their experiences of Jesus, their understanding of the teachings of Jesus, their faith in the person of Jesus. Together they built a community of one heart.
- As in the culture at that time, the women also played a supportive role during synodal gatherings: providing hospitality, logistical support, and contributing to the overall well-being of the community members during these gatherings.
- They were not passive observers, but active participants in the church: Mary and some women disciples were active participants in the early Christian community. They were part of the wider group that came together to pray and discern the church's direction, especially after Jesus's ascension.
- They became symbols of discipleship and devotion: Mary's unwavering faith and commitment to Christ served as a symbol of

discipleship and devotion for the early Christians. Her example inspired many to deepen their faith and actively participate in the life of the church.

- They gave witness as examples of leadership and faith: Some women in the early church, like Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia,<sup>41</sup> were recognized for their leadership and contributions to the Christian community. They played important roles, often alongside their husbands as in the case of Priscilla and Junia, in teaching, mentoring, and supporting others in their faith journey.

It is clear that synodality was the form and style of the early church. However, we are urged to “return to the sources”—*ressourcement*<sup>42</sup>—to recover the original model of the church, without renouncing any of the great advances of the church in the second millennium.<sup>43</sup> We are standing at the crossroads, an evolutionary point of “what has been” and “what is to come,” which keeps the dream of being truly church alive. For women and those in the margins, this is indeed a source of hope. Pope Francis at the conclusion of the first session of the Synod of Bishops commented on his dream of a synodal church: “This is the Church we are called to ‘dream’: a Church that is the servant of all, the servant of the least of our brothers and sisters; a Church that . . . welcomes, serves, loves, forgives; a

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<sup>41</sup> In Romans 16:7, Paul sends greetings to Andronicus and Junia(s). Historically, there has been much discussion regarding the gender of Junia/Junias as well as the meaning of the phrase regarding apostleship. John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, noted Junia as named among the apostles. Many of Chrysostom’s contemporaries interpreted Junias as a man’s name, a matter that biblical scholars still debate to some extent today, although the feminine identification is more common.

<sup>42</sup> Theologians Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar inspired a renaissance in the twentieth-century Catholic theology and initiated a movement for renewal that made a decisive contribution to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

<sup>43</sup> Andrea Tournelli, “Interview with Cardinal Grech, the Secretary of the Synod of Bishops: ‘Synodality is the Form that Realizes the Participation of All the People of God in Mission,’” *Vatican News*, July 21, 2021, [vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-07/cardinal-grech-synod-synodality-interview-communion.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-07/cardinal-grech-synod-synodality-interview-communion.html).

Church with open doors that is a haven of mercy.”<sup>44</sup> With the full fruit of the process not yet seen, he is encouraging everyone to look to the horizon opening up for the church and added: “The Lord will guide us and help us to be a more synodal and missionary Church, a Church that adores God and serves the women and men of our time, going forth to bring to everyone the consoling joy of the Gospel.”<sup>45</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Mary and the women at the first assembly surely never imagined that after two millennia, women will be standing alongside men in doing theology and contributing their personal charisms to the ongoing missionary journey of the church. We know that there is still much to be done to realize more fully the dream of a synodal church according to the plan of the Holy Spirit. Dreams are realized in time even with unexpected twists and turns of events in human history. However, we must not cease dreaming—trying and making things happen, albeit unsuccessful at times—to find our equal place in the Cenacle assembly of today. Synodality is giving us hope that as we reclaim the important counter-cultural contribution of Mary and the women in the early church, we can do our part in our own places and spaces of mission.

We are challenged to recreate the Cenacle symbolic place and theological space as a “third space” especially for women and those in the margins of church and society. Like the Cenacle experience of the early church, where women disciples found themselves belonging to the body of Christ, we need to recreate and develop further this new beginning, like a new “Pentecost” according to the calls and demands of today’s world. The communique approved by Pope Francis states, “The fullness of the synodal process can only truly exist if the local Churches are involved [in

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<sup>44</sup> Carol Glatz, “Pope Francis Closes Synod With ‘Dream’ of a Church With Open Doors,” *NCR Online*, October 29, 2023, [ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/pope-francis-closes-synod-dream-Church-open-doors](https://ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/pope-francis-closes-synod-dream-Church-open-doors).

<sup>45</sup> Glatz, “Pope Francis Closes Synod.”

that process.”<sup>46</sup> The “third space” is realized whenever spaces are opened up in the church and other church-related institutions. Whenever and wherever possible, these “third spaces” allow and encourage women to gather, and together share life experiences and memories, understanding them from the perspective of faith and spirituality, and to build a community of love and acceptance. From this space of solidarity and communion, we can continue to journey together in realizing the dream of a more synodal and missionary church.

The Synod on Synodality is just the beginning of a new “Pentecost” where a “third space” is opened for all to participate in having their voices heard and in proclaiming the good news to all! The journey toward a synodal church needs to continue to allow the Holy Spirit to recreate the church anew for today. Synodality has given fresh hope for the people of God, especially for women. Announced earlier before the conclusion of the October 2023 synodal assembly, Pope Francis gave voting rights to seventy lay people and consecrated religious, with women comprising 50 percent of those appointed. This is the first time in history when women were included as voting members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Even if women’s role in general would still be supportive, this first session of the Synod showed that women’s voices were heard in the different tables and in the plenary. To continue journeying together, women need to adapt the “third space” theory, where women and marginalized groups are given a space to express in their own way how they experienced the complexities of social exclusion and inclusion and to introduce initiatives in church and society that will effectively ameliorate exclusion of those on the margins.

Luke may have limited the role of women in the early church in accordance with the culture of the period. But the Holy Spirit continues to encourage, inspire, and bring about renewal and transformation despite opposition and centuries-old established systems and mindsets. Today we are challenged not to allow these limits to hinder our rights as women to

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<sup>46</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, no. 4.2, [synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html](https://synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html).

have our voices heard, albeit in a unique way, showing our self-understanding as women with equal dignity and created in God's image and likeness.

As we continue to evolve as church in the twenty-first century, we put ourselves at the crossroads of "what has been" and "what is to come" and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us forward. We are called to contribute to the building up of the church in our own unique way as women, discovering and using our God-given gifts as an integral part of church and not simply a caricature of the masculine way of living our Christian vocation. The Cenacle as a synodal space during the founding of the first Christian community can be likened to the "third space" of today, where there is opportunity to listen to the voices of each other to grow in understanding the different perspectives brought into focus by a community of faith. It is a space of birthing, of listening, of prayer and discernment. It is a space of communion and mission as in the first Cenacle.

The twenty-first century Cenacle is a church which is also the school of the heart that allows the Christian community to experience their hearts being transformed more and more into the heart of Christ so that as pilgrim people we become as Christ is to the world: Christ with a listening and welcoming heart, Christ in communion and in solidarity with the poor and the vulnerable, and Christ constantly journeying with us. As church, we are invited to conform to the heart of Jesus Christ as Mary did, so that with Saint Paul we can truly proclaim, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

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