

**Of Dogs and Demons**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**  
**(Is 56:6-7; Rm 11; Mt 15:21-28)**

Only believing and practicing Catholics may receive Holy Communion. This strict requirement is something the Church has enforced since the beginning. For instance, St. Paul says, *“Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the Body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died”* (1 Cor 11:27-30).

The *Didache* (“Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”) is another document from apostolic times, one of the most important writings from the early Church after the New Testament itself. It also states, *“Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs’”* (Didache 9:5).

The *Didache* quoted Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Do not give what is holy to the dogs”* (Mt 7:6). In the Gospel today he used this same expression when the Syro-Phoenician woman asked him to cast out her daughter’s demon: *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”* (Mt 15:26).

“Dog” was a pejorative term used to describe the pagans, especially the Canaanites, who were unclean before God. The Jews belong to the covenant of Abraham and are children of God. The woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon on the other hand, is a Canaanite who practices false religion.

There was a huge difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews were governed by the Law of Moses and its code that expressed their dignity as sons of God. Beginning with morality of the Ten Commandments, the Law articulated requirements of good hygiene, healthy food, and purity in sexual relationships and the behavior of men and women. Family life and marriages were carefully arranged and supervised by the community. Jews tithed their income to the Temple, emphasized education and literacy, and practiced courtesy when speaking and entering into agreements and contracts. They had a sophisticated, fair, and honest legal system, but they were severe in punishing murderers, adulterers, thieves, and sorcerers. Above all, they put God first, were highly religious, keeping the Sabbath and incorporating prayer into their daily lives.

On the other hand, pagans such as the Canaanites (also Romans and Greeks) ate whatever food they could find, had tyrannical and arbitrary justice systems, extorted money, were highly superstitious, lied, cheated, gambled, and gave

themselves over to extreme vices, indulgence, and orgies. Their entertainment was violent and pornographic, and their religions were filled with disgusting rituals, superstitious nonsense, and prostitution. Polygamy, homosexuality, and immorality were rampant, and pagans cast off unwanted children.

In other words, pagans lived like pigs which wallow in the mud; like the dogs outside the village which scavenge in the garbage dumps! It is no surprise that this woman's daughter suffered from a demon, the pagan lifestyle literally invites and worships them.

Today's Gospel shows the beginning of the Church's outreach to the pagans, and it shows what will be required if they are to be saved by Jesus. The Canaanite woman is the Gospel symbol of the Gentiles: i.e., you and me, who have by the grace of God been saved, yet not because we were Jews.

The "Jews" (more accurately, the Israelite nation), were God's Chosen People, personally formed by Him among the nations of the world to be His instrument. Their lifestyle reflects the superior wisdom and love of God, a culture worthy of God and man's true dignity as His children, a lifestyle which enables man to have covenant communion with God, sitting at His table as His children.

From the beginning of history, when evil corrupted the entire human race, God desired to save all mankind, and thus established this Chosen Nation to serve His purpose for the world's salvation. It is from the Jews that the Messiah comes, and it is through the Law of Moses that a pre-Christian culture is established.

In the first reading, Isaiah prophesied that one day the foreigners would indeed join themselves to the Lord and become His servants, coming to His house of prayer where they would be able to offer pure sacrifice just like the Israelites. And in the second reading St. Paul explained how this was being fulfilled in his day, because most of the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, while many of the pagan Gentiles were opening their hearts to the Gospel.

St. Paul called himself the "Apostle to the Gentiles," and said he was glad to make his own (Jewish) race jealous through the conversion of so many Gentiles. Many pagans, like the woman in today's Gospel, were converting and demonstrating a pure and sincere faith. St. Paul says that whereas in the past the Jews were the ones obedient to God through the Law of Moses while all the Gentiles were living in the disobedience of pagan religions, now through the disobedience of the Jews who refused to accept Jesus, there was mercy for the Gentiles, a window of opportunity for them to enter the Church while God waited for the Jews to finally accept Jesus as the Messiah. In the end, God wants to show His mercy to both Jews and Gentiles, saving the whole world.

Jesus is very severe with the Canaanite woman, not because he is uncaring, but because he is testing her faith: do you really have faith, or do you just want me to say some magical prayer over your daughter? Do you really have humility and fear of the Lord, or are you trying to treat me like one of the witchdoctors from your own superstitious Canaanite religion?

The woman showed Jesus she had faith, and acknowledged him as Lord. She acknowledged that Jews were superior to the pagans, the Israelites had the truth whereas her people did not. She accepted that she was a beggar, a pagan “dog” who had no right to His gifts, because her people’s lifestyle was not according to the Law of Moses.

For us who came into the Church from the Gentiles, we need this humility. We are “latecomers” who never had to go through the long centuries of living under the strict discipline of the Law of Moses. Even though Christianity does not require us to observe the precepts of the Law of Moses, we are nevertheless required to observe the self-respect which they engendered. If we are to belong to the covenant, we must live according to our dignity as children of God.

As the woman acknowledged, Christ (and Christianity) doesn’t conquer evil just by sprinkling holy water on someone who is possessed, like magic. Christ, and Christianity, requires true faith.

People today sometimes get offended when the Church says you can’t do something, such as practice contraception (like the pagans). Or you can’t receive the sacraments such as the Eucharist if you are living with someone outside of lawful sacramental marriage (committing fornication, adultery, divorce, serial polygamy, like the pagans). We get offended because we feel like we have some innate right to make demands, or that we can tell the church what it needs to do. The Syro-Phoenician woman did not get offended. She responded with humility and homage: “*Yes Lord, but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from their masters’ tables.*”

In all cases, with the Lord it will take true humility and purified faith to come to the table. Jesus could deal with the worst sinners if they were humble and truthful. But he rebuked any who were self-righteous or thought they had a right to the Gifts of God, whether Jew or Gentile. It is a good lesson for us today. We may be children of God now through baptism, but before that we were pagan dogs. We may be anointed with the Holy Spirit now through confirmation, but before that our ancestors used to be subject to demons. And if we are not careful, the way we are going, within a generation or two our descendants will be right back to where our ancestors were: pagan dogs, living in darkness. May God keep us always in His light, humbly living the truth of the Gospel, always grateful for Him.