

Pagan Religion
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 15:21-28)

In many cases where the Church is asked to perform an exorcism, the family who makes the request is not Catholic, or even Christian. But exorcism does not exist on its own, it is connected with the graces of Baptism and the other Sacraments, it is connected to Christ himself. It is not “magic,” but faith.

Pagan religions typically involve “magic” or superstition, the attempt to gain control (spiritual power) through rituals, and at some great sacrificial cost. That sacrificial cost can be a monetary offering, some demeaning practice, the sacrifice of an animal, even the sacrifice of a human being. The “gods” are impersonal, and the religion is manipulative: I do this, the god will do that; the superstitious ritual is expected to effect a desired outcome. This type of religion, far from protecting people from demons, opens the door to demonic possession and worship.

Faithful Jews despised such false religion and kept themselves far away from these idolatrous practices, which are so at odds with the religion of Abraham that is based on a real covenant of trust between God and man: God as loving Father, Israel His son.

The way the pagan Canaanite woman approaches Jesus to demand an exorcism is repulsive to the apostles: it is her very lifestyle and religion that has caused her daughter to be possessed in the first place. We are shocked to see the severity of Jesus in this Gospel: he seems far from the “compassionate, welcoming, non-judgmental” savior so often preached by politically correct semi-Christians.

Three times (i.e., solemnly) Jesus rebuffs her request, in progressively harsher terms. First he ignores her, then he declines her request because she is not a Jew, then he relegates her to the status of a “dog” in relation to the children of Israel. This is the pejorative term used by Jews to refer to the pagans.

But Jesus is not rejecting her. He is giving her the medicine *she needs* in order that her daughter might be healed. He is confronting the pagan superstitiousness that is so insulting to God because it seeks to manipulate. By forcing her to recognize and acknowledge that the power of Jewish religion is found in a *personal relationship* – a covenant with God, that of children with a father and not that of dog with owner – Jesus is highlighting the inadequacy of her own religion. She is forced to see and acknowledge the truth: paganism is demeaning, Judaism is ennobling. It is not Jesus who makes her a “dog,” it is her pagan culture that does so. What good she does receive from God as a Canaanite pagan comes not from her baals, but only from the God of Abraham, the true God.

And thus it is that Jesus introduces this woman to the love of the true God through himself, something she has never known from her paganism. He opens up for her the pathway out of her paganism, by showing not only its uselessness, but the demeaning harm it causes. And the healing of her daughter is the sign, the fruit of that new grace she has found in Jesus Christ.

This is very important. The healing of her daughter did not cause her faith. Nor did her actions and petitions with Jesus effect the cure of her daughter in a superstitious or magical way. The healing of her daughter came to her as a grace, a gift, a generous response of love from God to a woman of faith in great need. Her faith, a sincere and humble surrender of the creature before God, preceded the cure of her daughter, *and did not cause it*. She acknowledged to Jesus that she had no special right to what she requested. She acknowledged that like the dog at the table, she was a beggar before God.

True faith does not manipulate God. True faith may persevere stubbornly in a request, but in the end the person trusts, submits, surrenders, accepts. God is a loving Father who cares for and does not abandon His children, and while this may be severely tested in a time of trial and tragedy, no earthly difficulty changes this truth.

In the end, Jesus granted her request. But not as she asked it in the beginning.