



**His Excellency,
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Diocese of Belleville**

August 20, 2023
St. Theresa Parish, Belleville
Sermon:

“O Woman, O Man, Great is Your Faith!”

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene:* This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

“The Exorcist” is one of Hollywood’s most famous movies. When William Friedkin, the movie’s director, died on August 7 at the age of 87, The New York Times proclaimed his 1973 film “the best film ever made about the Roman Catholic Church.” You may or may not agree with The Times. But, this ever-popular film, based on William Peter Batley’s novel about a girl possessed by a demon, whose mother asks two Catholic priests to save her, certainly takes the Catholic faith very seriously.

Mr. Friedkin, who was a Jewish agnostic, said his film was based on the premise that the claims of the Roman Catholic Church about God and the devil, and heaven and hell, are literally true. The young girl in the story does not have psychological problems. She really is possessed by a demon. Her entire being has been taken over by Satan. In an interview, the director said it was strange to him that many contemporary Catholics seem to doubt the existence of the devil and see his movie simply as a “horror movie,” when it is actually about the spiritual power of the Catholic faith.

In “The Exorcist,” when the desperate mother of the possessed girl asks a young liberal Jesuit priest, Father Damien Karras, how to have an exorcism performed on her daughter, the priest sarcastically replies, “You would have to take her back to the 16th century, since no one believes in demons, possessions, and exorcisms today.”

By contrast, an older priest, Father Merrin, a scholarly expert in ancient Near Eastern cultures, accepts the reality of demonic possession and, armed with his faith, does battle with Satan and performs the exorcisms.

This morning’s gospel, Matthew 15: 21-28 presents a story of a woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon.

Jesus and His disciples travel to the region of Tyre and Sidon, two Mediterranean seaside villages northwest of the Sea of Galilee. *Sidon* was founded by Canaanites and the people who lived there were known to have a pagan culture. Ordinarily, Jewish people did not enter these towns because the people were unclean idol worshippers, enemies of Israel.

From a distance, a Canaanite woman called out to Jesus, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.” (The story does not tell us how a Canaanite woman could know about Jesus or how she knew He was the Son of David (the Jewish Messiah), or why a pagan Canaanite would believe in the Jewish prophet).

Jesus ignores the woman and has no interest in helping her, saying He was sent into the world to tend only to the lost sheep of Israel. (Yet, He might wonder how this unclean outsider, a Canaanite, and a woman, could have a better grasp of His identity than His personally selected disciples, who are only gradually realizing who He is).

The woman is persistent. She kneels before Jesus and pleads in desperation, “Lord, help me!” Jesus’ reply is harsh, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus seems to be using a slur by referring to the Canaanites as “dogs.” Still, the courageous Canaanite

woman does not let this insult stop her. "Please, Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their master's table."

Amazed, Jesus says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And the woman's daughter was healed at that very hour. Does this story suggest that Jesus initially thought that His mission was only to the Jewish people and that He gradually realized that the Good News was for ALL people everywhere?

Dear Sisters and brothers in Christ:

On this warm summer day, you probably have not been thinking about demonic possession and the miracles of Jesus. Of all the things you and your family might talk about over dinner tonight, it is unlikely that you will discuss exorcism of demons, or any other biblical miracles like Jesus' walking on water and calming the raging sea in last Sunday's gospel. But, if you were to have such discussions, the conversations would very likely be different in every home. A member of one family might ask, "Did Jesus really perform miracles? Do miracles happen today? Do demons really exist? Is Satan real and can he take possession of a human person, and can he be cast out by Catholic prayers? Do priests perform exorcisms today?" Someone might even bring up "The Pope's Exorcist," the dreadful and completely inaccurate movie currently showing on Netflix.

In another family, someone might say, "Well, Jesus probably really did heal the sick, but I doubt He could literally walk on water or control the weather by calming storms." But someone else might argue that Jesus must have done these things to convince His disciples and the crowds who followed Him that He truly was the Messiah. Then they might realize that Jesus performed these miracles only AFTER people expressed deep faith in Him. He tells the Canaanite woman, "You have great faith." Only then does the demon leave her daughter.

The faithful church-going father of another family says, "If Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead and, if He Himself rose from the dead, these smaller miracles were certainly possible." The man's daughter, who has not gone to church for many years says, "Neither I nor my friends believe that

Jesus raised Lazarus or anyone from the dead, nor did He rise from the dead. All of these are made-up stories that no intelligent person can believe today.” The father retorts, “If the Bible and church say that Jesus worked miracles, cast out devils, and raised the dead, that’s enough for me. If He is the Son of God, everything is within His power.” The neighbors across the street ask, “What about miracles in our own time? What about reports of miracles at Lourdes, Fatima, and even Medjugorje? What about the man we know who said he prayed to St. Peregrine Laziosi and his daughter was cured of leukemia? And what about that woman in Maui, who couldn’t swim but jumped into the ocean to escape the fire, who said that Jesus miraculously saved her? And crucifixes that bleed? Statues of Mary that weep? Images of Jesus that appear on people’s garage door? Are these the same as the miracles in the Bible?”

A grandfather says, “I don’t know if I believe these are miracles or not. But I woke up this morning and I saw the splendor of the sunrise, and I went to the hospital and looked with wonder on the face of my new granddaughter. These are miracles enough for me!”

You might be surprised to know that the word “miracle” is not mentioned even once in the four gospels. Jesus NEVER says, “I am going to perform a miracle.” The gospels speak of Jesus performing “signs and wonders,” not miracles. The English word “miracle” comes from the Latin term *miraculum*, which simply means something that evokes wonder and awe.

Thomas Jefferson believed that all of the miracles in the gospels, including the resurrection, are legends that were added to the story of Jesus by the gospel writers. Jefferson believed that Jesus was a great person, a great teacher, but did not believe that He performed miracles. He compiled “The Jefferson Bible” and left out ALL supernatural events including the resurrection. Few Christians were interested in The Jefferson Bible. They thought Jesus without His “signs and wonders” could not be the Christ, could not be the “Son of David” acclaimed by the Canaanite woman.

Of course, the Catholic Church has consistently affirmed that the signs and wonders performed by Jesus in the Bible really did happen, even if some of the details were added later.

I realize that my reflections on the seven brief, difficult verses from Matthew's gospel about the mysterious faith of the Canaanite woman are probably not going to prompt any of you to discuss seriously your views about demons, possessions, exorcisms, and the miracles of Jesus over dinner tonight. Even though such a conversation might be more substantial and more spiritually nourishing than a discussion of the weather or the Cardinals' game.

In a few moments, you will receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The Church does not teach or believe that the “real presence” of Christ is a miracle performed by Jesus or by the priest. The presence is sacramental, brought about by grace, faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit. As you return to your pew, enriched by the Bread of Life, I invite you to enter into a dialogue with Jesus in your soul. As you give thanks for the gift of the Holy Eucharist, ponder what the story of the Canaanite woman's faith means to you. Do you believe Jesus actually performed great signs and wonders? Would it matter to you if he did not? In your heart of hearts, discern if you have ever prayed for a miracle. Were your prayers answered? If they were, what does this experience mean to you? If they were not, what does that mean to you? In this silent prayer, Christ may say to you, “O Woman, O Man, how great is your faith!” *“O Woman, O Man, how great is your faith!”* (And perhaps you will be healed at that very Hour!)

**Praise be Jesus Christ.
Both now and forever. AMEN!**