

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - One Church

August 16, 2026

Today's readings are challenging. They are about inclusion, the call to One Church, to One Kingdom, a kingdom that refuses to exclude those seeking God. The readings apply to the Jews and the Gentiles in Isaiah's time (Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7), in Jesus' time (Matt 15: 21-28), in St. Paul's time (Rom 11: 13-15, 29-32), and to us, people of the 21st century. God's plan for the world comes through human beings in particular times and places in our salvation history which unfolds gradually through all the clumsiness of human faith seeking understanding. We know God's chosen people are the Jews when He made the covenant with them. But clearly God wants to include the "foreigners" as well in His saving plan when they abide by the essentials of the covenant. Paul shows us in his letter to the Romans that everything is governed by the divine will. If it appears that some are disobedient, this must be God's clever way of preparing them for greater mercy and love, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." The disobedience of the gentiles was transformed by the mercy of God to eternal happiness. This led to the Jews taking a step back from their disobedience to accepting the new way of life, the Christian way of life. It would take time, but the Church came to a deeper understanding that there is no right side or left side of the Church, nor are there people who are more worthy of the promise of Christ than others. The Church realized that it was universal, it was Catholic which means universal.

The Canaanite woman wins healing for her daughter by showing Jesus her faith in Him. She even humbles herself when He said that the gifts of the Messiah, the food of the Jewish people, should not be shared with the dogs, the Gentiles. She responds that even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table, a common practice in meals, where there are no utensils, just pieces of bread that are dipped into the stew pot, then dropped onto the floor rather than be re-dipped into the pot. The woman's prayer of faith wins through. Her trust-filled wisdom "touches the Master's heart," causing Jesus to openly admire her and grant her request immediately and in the end she gets what she so desperately needs for the love of her daughter. It is clear from the Gospel that the faith of the gentiles, their openness to the wonders of God, has earned them a place at His table, the Banquet of Life. We too are encouraged to present our own difficult, messy stories to God "as we are, without make-up," knowing that God does not resist persistent, humble prayers.

The interaction between Christ and the Canaanite woman indicates that God has no favourites and nobody is excluded from his company. Jesus' whole mission is to break down barriers and to remove walls of division and prejudice between Jews and Gentiles. By praising and granting the request of a pagan Canaanite woman, Jesus demonstrated to his disciples that the Kingdom of God was officially being opened to the Gentiles and that the mercy of God has no boundaries. The Church is made up of people from various backgrounds, but all are part of One Church. In our faith community everyone should be made welcome no matter how they may be dressed, young or old, physically able or disabled, whether they have high or low esteem in society. The Catholic Church is not just European, nor is it just American. The Catholic Church is also Asian, South American, African, Australian, etc. All are part of the one Church called to accept the spiritual, called to eternal life. Think of the Church as a tapestry with various colours of threads all forming one picture, or as a mosaic with various different tiles all forming a great work of art. Just as the Gentiles and the Jews became blessings for each other, all the people of the Catholic Church are a blessing for each other.

I remember so clearly a long time ago watching on Youtube the universality of the Church when the Pentecost Mass was celebrated by St. John Paul II. The Pope confirmed people from all over the world, and did so in 22 different languages. After Mass, St. Peter's Square was filled with thousands of people from all over the world gathered for the Pope's Sunday blessing. Hearing all these different languages, seeing all these people from every continent, I was overwhelmed to realize that this is who we are and I am part of this universal Church. This is what it means to be Catholic. We are Asian. We are American. We are Australian. We are African. We are European. We are Catholic. According to Pope Leo XIV, unity is "more than simply an ideal," but a "divine mandate at the core of our Christian identity. It represents the essence of the Church's calling – a call to reflect the harmonious oneness of our life in Christ amidst our diversity... This divine unity is central to our mission and is sustained by the profound love of Jesus Christ, who has set before us a unified purpose."

The world needs us to be Catholic. Our country needs us to be Catholic. In the First Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs, entitled The Church on the Path of Unity, we have the petition: "In a world torn by strife may your people shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and love". Recent events in our world are calling us more than ever to be this prophetic sign of unity amid our diversity. The world needs to see one body of people with diverse backgrounds all forming that tapestry, that mosaic, that is the People of God. The world needs to experience in the Catholic Church the prophetic sign that diverse people can become one unified person. We have to be a sign that our strength comes from the bond of love that does not accept any form of exclusion of any peoples. The world needs to witness our living out what we proclaim with our Creed: We are One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic. Who belongs here? Who belongs in the Church? All people belong here. All people are called to form Church. May all nations see in the unity of the Catholic Church a prophetic sign that diverse people can unite in love.