

Transcript of:  
“The Struggle for a Place at the Table: Jesus  
and the Syrophenician Woman”

Presented on July 22, 2022 by  
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Meghan De Dios :

Thank you, Kara. Hello, everyone. Welcome to today's presentation, the Struggle for a Place at the Table-- Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman. It is my pleasure to introduce our speaker.

Maria Pascuzzi is a Sister of St. Joseph in Brentwood, New York. She's a member of the leadership team of her congregation and is also the current director of Spirit Alive, the CSJ Institute for Faith, Inquiry, and Education. Sister Pascuzzi earned a doctorate in biblical theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University and a licentiate in sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, Italy. She has taught biblical studies in both seminaries and universities. Sister Pascuzzi was a tenured professor at the University of San Diego and the inaugural director of UCSD's Center for Catholic Thought and Culture before heading back East to assume administrative roles most recently at Seton Hall University School of Theology.

She specializes in the letters of Paul and was part of the team tasked by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops to provide a fresh translation of Paul's letters. She has authored books and essays for both academic and popular publications. Sister Pascuzzi'

not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where he has gone, and I will go and get him.

already, that gives us information about her language, her culture, and her religion, a Greek, pagan, a Syrophenician by birth, someone who was born in the Syrian part of Phoenicia, an outsider, therefore, in terms of culture, religion, and nationality.

This woman intrudes on his privacy to ask him to cast out unclean spirits from her daughter. Though Jesus's encounter with this woman takes up all of six verses in the Gospel of Mark, much has been written about its historicity, its purpose and placement in the gospel, and especially about the significance of the verbal exchange between Jesus and the woman. The exchange we say more about this later is located right in the center of this passage, and it is the focal point of this story.

This story is repeated in the Gospel of Matthew (9:1-13) and the Gospel of Luke (11:14-23). It is also found in the Gospel of John (4:46-54). The story is repeated in the Gospel of Mark (7:24-31) and the Gospel of Luke (11:14-23). It is also found in the Gospel of John (4:46-54).

widow. Moreover, if her prostration at Jesus's feet even before she made the request is a mark of a believing response, as one scholar says, then why did Jesus need to test her? Didn't he recognize a faith response when he saw one?

What we know is that a desperate mother approached him with an ask on behalf of her child. As a non Israelite pagan, she may have come to him without any thought whatsoever of his messianic christological identity. She may have come simply because his fame as a miracle worker, which had already spread through Tyre and Sidon, if you go back and read chapter three, had given her reason to hope to trust that he could help her daughter.

Further, there is no hint that she became a follower of Jesus. Perhaps, interpreters who insist that this is a faith test were influenced by the earlier story in Mark 5 where a woman healed of a long blood flow is explicitly commended for her faith or by Matthew's version of this episode where, again, a woman is explicitly commended for her faith. The second argument ~~is~~ revolves around the word 'kunarion,' a diminutive form of the Greek word for dog.

In the biblical world and later, in Jewish tradition, dogs were generally looked upon as unclean mangy scavengers who roamed around outside the confines of the city feeding on carcasses, thus, to call someone a dog was an insult. And if you listened to Donald Trump for the last four years and heard him insulting every woman he's ever talked to and called her a dog, you realize that it's still an insult. A number of commentators argue that since Jesus used the diminutive 'kunarion' he was speaking playfully, referring to the woman and her child as puppies in order to convey affection for them.

This has led more than I'm telling you what the guys say. This has led more than one commentator to conclude that the woman would not have been offended at all. But this attempt to soften Jesus's reply and suggest that he was expressing affection for the pagan woman and her daughter is unpersuasive on a number of counts.

In the common Greek language of the day, diminutive forms did not necessarily carry diminutive force. And I was thinking about something that we would know today. I had a cousin. Her name was Mariette. I never really thought of her as little Mary. She was just Mariette.

People talk about going into the dinette area. It's not like you're sitting there expecting to be sitting at a mini table. It's just words we use with diminutives, same thing in Jesus's day.

Moreover, as TA Burkhill noted in his much cited comment about Jesus's remark to the woman ~~read~~ I'm quoting, so excuse the language. "To call a woman a little bitch is no less abusive than to call her a bitch without qualification."

[LAUGHTER]

In addition to these arguments, it has been suggested ~~and~~ this is one that I find funny and interesting at the same time. It was suggested that Jesus was really engaged in a conversation with himself about the scope of his mission and was only really ~~he~~ talking to the woman. Apart from the fact that this could be dismissed as pure speculation, it fails as a defense of Jesus because it suggests that he was not even paying attention to this desperate mother. But in thinking out loud about his mission, he kind of absentmindedly insults her. So to me,

settle for a single crumb. To summarize, in some scholarly and popular literature, as a consequence of this apology for Jesus, the woman is featured as worthy of praise because of her faith in humility for accepting crumbs and her inferior status. S s-0.6 (c)-9 intn]TJ 0.006 Tc -21a s.9t0011 ( s-.eqs-0.6 (c)(t)1.2.9 (c)/ (.91 (c)(t)1.d)4.9 ( eTd (c)(t)1. ( ))(y)-3

pagan. Of course, her identity cannot be reduced to this single dimension. The fact is she is a gutsy female pagan  
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More than one author has insisted that gender is not essential to this episode. Every time I read that I  
laugh because can you imagine a guy getting that we don't give dogs to you? Boom. Take out Jesus. I mean, it's  
just inconceivable to me.

But more than one male scholar has said that gender has nothing to do with this. But her gender and her  
ethnicity are indispensable parts of her identity, and they do accentuate the tensions in this story. So they cannot be

pagan, has a more profound understanding than even Jesus of the universal implications of the inbreaking of God's kingdom. The word she speaks helps him to see that neither he nor his people lose anything if she and the Gentiles are given the crumbs, a share in God's blessing.

Now, as one author put it, her word, her logos, is more than an interesting and clever rejoinder. It is a





These, and other women and men with similar experiences, do not uncritically accept subordination. Even for people who are empowered at p p eb1e :.3 (r)0.7 ob1ey ite 18.2 (u)8A(i)-7 T-9 (c)42 -0 0 32 73.o .(u)-4.23TT1 -3,3 (r)0.7

the working of this congregation. After all, the pope did refer to the several women theologians he appointed to the theological commission as strawberries on the cake, nothing as bad as dogs, but nonetheless, a very cringe worthy remark.

Yet despite the Holy Father's faux pas, there seems to be no reason to doubt that Francis, who has been advocating for more meaningful and essential roles for women in the administration of the church, is just appointing them as decorations. I don't think he is. These are intelligent women. And the assets that they will bring to the table are well known and public.

But as one of the recent appointees, the lay woman, Maria Zervino noted in a recent interview for America magazine, there is still a long way to go before women's voices are satisfactorily integrated into the central leadership of the church. And she y ( o)9-3.2 (d)- ( )Wo ves y/41 (u)4.8489 ( ve)-11 (sTe)-11 7.2u5-6.9 ( y/41 (u)4 7.2u5-6.9 (

Audience member :

All of the houses that women headed, all of the missions they went out and did.

Sr. Pascuzzi :

OK, but you know how selective reading goes. In 1 Corinthians 14, women should be quiet and not speak. And they should go home. So yes, there's much in Paul, which is really the field that I usually work in, not Mark. There's much in Paul that is very much

gospel and at the end of this gospel, why do you seek the living among the dead?

For a lot of people, the church is dead. For a lot of young people, the church is the most boring dead place. Every other Sunday, I think the same thing. But it's the way it is.

So you have to think of ways. If that's not going to be the way to do it, then you have to bring another way to do this. And I'll let you in on this: My dream is to become the ~~a~~ Mother Angelica.

[LAUGHTER]

I want Spirit Alive and programs like ~~it~~ which I think is your program. I want us to have a voice in educating people about what possibilities there are in scripture, in theology, in art, in all of the things that you mentioned. We have an enormous ~~pa~~trony, matrimony, whatever you want to call it, of wonderful ~~life~~ things that have allowed the world to flourish because of Catholic tradition and because of a vision that is there in the eyes and the mind of our founders and people like you who wan

has to become educated is at the liturgy, the little bit of scripture that they hear, maybe every Sunday or whenever they're there. And do you hear anything at all about a revision of the lectionary?

I mean, a couple of weeks ago we got Jezebel. I mean, there's a great big Bible there, and the church gives us Jezebel to listen to. It just perpetuates the oppression of women.

Sr. Pascuzzi :

Not Phoebe, the deacon. I was on the committee appointed by the USCCB to do the revised letters of Paul for the new lectionary. And I worked with five people. It was a very interesting group of people.

And we sent our revised text up the pipeline. And I haven't heard positive things about what the people at the top of the pipeline did with what we did. So I don't know. That's supposed to be the basis of the new lectionary.

If you read Saint Paul, he's like a German. He has long Greek sentences that are lines eight long. And so we tried to break it down and make it readable for lectors and understandable for people. But I understand that there are people in the committee ~~and~~ above me that like Greek kai.

Kai means 'and.' And Jesus did this, and Jesus did that, and Jesus did this. And so we're going to get a lot of kai, kai, kai in the lectionary.

But I don't know. It's out of my hands right now. I did my part. And that's it. I've kept the translations that we did in committee, and I use them when I'm called on to do something. So anybody else?

[INAUDIBLE]

I don't know because it has to go through the American Bishops, then it has to go to Rome, then it comes back. It'll be a while. You'll still be here, but don't hold your breath. Yes, sir.

Audience member :

Hello. Thank you so much for this. I /P <</Mlw toel(m)4.6 ()10.6 (n)8.8 (d)2.n>>BDC 0 f o9 (o)3.9 ( al -2.9 ( y)-3.6 (

Audience member :

