

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD



Catholic Biblical Federation

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A dialogue that opens up paths of faith

Education in the faith as a culture of dialogue

Mk 7:24-30

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“Today’s societies are characterised by their multi-cultural and multi-religious composition”¹. In this context, says Pope Francis, education in the faith today faces two great challenges that are central to the future of peoples: that the proclamation of the faith enables harmonious coexistence between different cultural expressions and that dialogue between societies awakens peaceful relations, in which an “agapic” space for differences is built².

Is it possible to achieve this? Francis challenges us with three attitudes that we can recognise in the text presented to us by Marquise in chapter 7: the dialogue between Jesus and the Phoenician Syro.

The first of these attitudes is the duty of identity, without ambiguity, being faithful to what each one is, without compromises to benefit the other. Then he proposes the courage of otherness, avoiding considering the other as an enemy; being different, we can walk together as companions, recognising the good in the other. Finally, he stresses the importance of sincerity of intentions. Only a dialogue that does not look for ulterior motives, but proposes to walk a path based on truth, will transform our society into a space of peace and hope for all.

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1 “The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue”, n° 27.

2 *Ibidem*, n° 30. Pope Francis, addressing Jesuits who run schools, urged them “to seek new forms of non-conventional education according to the needs of places, times and people” (7.6.2013).

of intentions. Only a dialogue that does not look for ulterior motives, but sets out to walk a path of truth, will transform our society into a space of peace and hope for all.

In Marcian's work we read how Jesus carries out a process of teaching his disciples to whom he reveals the mystery of the kingdom of God given to them, not to outsiders (Mk 4:11-12). This teaching is not characterised by great discourses, but by small stories and gestures that are revealed along the path of discipleship³.

In the first part of the Gospel, up to the Passion announcements beginning in 8:31, this teaching is continually threatened by the incomprehension of "the twelve". In spite of this observation, we find a few characters who are outside this context and who seem to understand the teaching of Jesus. We would like to dwell on one of them in order to recognise how education in the faith can be based on a culture of dialogue in the style proposed by Francis.

In the section of the loaves of the Gospel of Mark (6:6b-8, 26) there are three texts in which it is evident that "the twelve" are incapable of understanding the proposal of the Kingdom⁴, expressed from Mk 1:1 in the identity of Jesus: the Messiah, the Son of God. The kingdom of God in this first part manifests itself as bread (messianic banquet), healing (there is room for the sick and disabled) and human fullness (deliverance from unclean spirits)⁵.

In Mk 6:52 the narrator tells us that the disciples are "closed-minded", they had not understood the loaves after the first multiplication in 6:30-44. For Mark, the disciples' fear and dismay after they witness the calm storm is an expression of their lack of understanding. Mark's reflection concludes with a sentence that clearly bases their fear on their lack of understanding and the hardening of their hearts. This lack of understanding refers to the miracle of the bread, so that it acquires a new link with the walking on the waters of the sea in Mk 8:17-21. Jesus' blunt reproach ultimately describes their unbelief.

Later, in Mk 7:18, Mark makes it clear that the twelve "do not understand" the last teaching that Jesus had just given them about pure and impure food. In this teaching process, the disciples ask Jesus to explain the parable which is confusing for them. Mark does not miss this opportunity to reprove them and reproaches them for the same lack of intelligence that they reproach the people for. The form of questioning, which is characteristic of Jesus' expressions, softens somewhat the rudeness of the reproach and becomes a provocation for them to try harder to understand.

Almost at the end of this section (8:17-18) he says openly that "they are unable to understand" the mystery of the kingdom. Jesus' questions to the disciples are not rhetorical in this passage, they are direct and concrete. Jesus, however, does not mean that they already have the "leaven" of the Pharisees in them, but warns them strongly against it⁶.

In the midst of this insistence on the incomprehension of "the twelve", the narrator introduces a woman in Mk 7:24-30, the Phoenician Syro, who seems to have understood that the

3 *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 13-16.

4 *Ibidem*, 91.

5 *Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos*, X. Pikaza, 227.

6 "The words 'not perceiving', 'not understanding' should remind readers of the passage in the chapter on parables in which Jesus had described in similar words the position of 'outsiders' (4:12)" (*El evangelio según san Marcos*, R. Schnackenburg, 211).

banquet proposed by the kingdom is unrestrictedly open to all, to the extent that pagans can sit and eat at the messianic banquet. This realisation comes in the midst of a dialogue between her and Jesus. The woman is unnamed so that the first reader, and all of us who read the text throughout history as empirical readers, can take up this dialogue as our own and embody the challenge she proposes to us.

The woman knows how to wait and proposes a dialogue that respects the identity of each one, Jesus is a Jew and she is a pagan. Jesus and the Phoenician Syro do not present themselves as enemies, but as possible companions in the kingdom. In this encounter, every gesture and word will allow the girl to be healed (as in 6:53-56... all are healed) and to participate in the table of the kingdom.

The dialogue between them is built on the same tension that we underlined earlier: the incomprehension of “the twelve”. It seems that Jesus in this pericope assumes the role of the disciples, showing the closed-mindedness in which they live: they do not understand, closed-minded, incapable of understanding, thus giving narrative tension to the pericope.

As for the literary form, we can consider the pericope not as a miracle story but as a special dialogue or didactic conversation. In this discussion, it is the Phoenician Syro woman who “defeats” Jesus. The teaching that Jesus wants to put forward, and that readers should draw from this dialogue, is the openness of the mission to the pagans, alongside the upholding of Israel’s privileges.

Likewise, Mark alludes to the willingness of the heathen to believe, a willingness that is emphasised throughout the work alongside the recognition that God’s salvation is always a free gift to all. According to Gnllka “the pericope was always an account in which the miracle was subordinate to the dialogue. The miracle is at the service of the dialogue, and the dialogue cannot exist independently of the story that frames it”⁷.

In the section on the loaves of bread there is a change in the teaching and mission of “the twelve”. Until Mk 6:30 the disciples had lived the “first” mission (Mk 6:6-13): preaching repentance, exorcisms, anointing and healing the sick. Surely they expected to meet the Master and tell him all they had experienced, but Jesus invites them to a new mission: “to give food” (Mk 6:37).

We could say that these are not two different missions because the “bread” that Jesus gives out is not only bread that satisfies hunger (a material bread) but the bread of the kingdom, that is, liberation from evil and healing, expressed concretely in the daughter of the Phoenician Syro. Bread and health are the gifts of the mystery of the kingdom offered to all.

As Marquise’s work does, he places the teaching of the Master before any powerful action of Jesus. The miracle of the daughter of the Phoenician Syro has its proper place in the gospel, which comprises the whole of Jesus’ journey. We see this teaching embodied in the dialogue that brings about the transformation of the two and the healing of the girl.

Where the disciples had failed to understand, Mark places this woman in dialogue with Jesus, underlining her identity and otherness. The Phoenician Syro must overcome two barriers: being a woman and a pagan. The text strongly emphasises these two traits of Jesus’ new inter-

⁷ *Evangelio según san Marcos*, J. Gnllka, 321.

locutor. In the social and cultural context of the first century there was a solidly insurmountable division between men and women and between Jews and pagans⁸.

The reader is left in no doubt that this is a pagan, a non-Jewish woman. Moreover, the story emphasises that it is talking about women, sick women, pagan women.

When Jesus and the woman enter into dialogue, they overcome these distances. She recognises him in his dignity, she prostrates herself, just like the other woman in Mk 5:33 (the haemorrhoid). At the same time she recognises her inability to achieve what she needed, because she cannot cure her daughter with her own strength, and she asks Jesus to intervene.

In this didactic conversation, the Master does not act quickly by immediately granting the Phoenician Syro what she asks for, but proposes a dialogue from which not only she but the community behind the text will be able to understand the mystery of the kingdom. One would expect Jesus to set out and accompany the woman to her child tormented by an unclean spirit and to heal her. But, on the contrary, he proposes a dialogue.

The first thing that comes up in the conversation is the refusal of the woman's request. The reason for this is because she was a pagan: "It is not right to take the children's bread and give it to little dogs". This v. 27 is a clear refusal that gives no reason to expect her to change her position later on. It would be unjust to deprive the children of bread and give it to the dogs. The image leads us to the common table at which they eat and where only the sons (the Jews) are gathered⁹.

The words of Jesus are a manifestation of the law and theology of his people.

To these words of Jesus the Phoenician Syro responds with great respect and creativity. She simply expresses what Jesus had been teaching and announcing to "the twelve": it is possible that not only the Jews can eat, be healed and receive the mystery of the kingdom, but all those who need it.

The woman says it clearly: "even the little dogs under the table eat of the crumbs that the children drop". Following the image used by Jesus, the pagan woman understood what the disciples had failed to understand after the multiplication of the loaves¹⁰.

The leftovers collected in the baskets in Mk 6:43 could be distributed to others: "the little dogs under the table receive the children's crumbs".

The Greek term ψυχίων points to the small size of bread that can fall from the table. The unthinkable response of the Phoenician Syro contains a theological statement: the heathen (πρῶτον χορτασθῆναι τὰ τέκνα without detriment to the privileges of Israel) attain salvation¹¹.

The request is not for the future (when the children are satisfied...), but for the present, for this very moment in the urgency of his daughter's healing.

The Master is convinced by the woman's words and confesses: "By this word you have spoken, go! Your daughter is healed" (7:29). Jesus learns from the woman that he is "a uni-

8 Paul presents these differences in his letters (Gal 3:28 and Rom 10:12).

9 *Evangelio según san Marcos*, J. Gnllka, 325.

10 *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 93; *Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos*, X. Picaza, 282.

11 *El evangelio según san Marcos*, R. Schnackenburg, 193; *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 92.

versal Κύριος”: the banquet of shared bread is now open to all. Thus he overcomes the wall between Jews and pagans thanks to the faith of a pagan mother in anguish for her daughter.

In granting the woman’s request, Jesus advances the teaching of “the twelve” as well as that of the community to which Mark speaks: the bread is not only for them but for all those who want to be open to the proposal of the kingdom of God. “The woman becomes the prototype of the believing pagans who, after Passover, receive the gospel, as opposed to the Jews who reject it. The woman who never doubted in her trust sees her healing confirmed when she comes to her house”¹².

This pericope opens the way to the multiplication of the loaves in pagan territory (Mk 8:1-9). Not only can the leftovers be kingdom food for the pagans, but they themselves can sit at the table and eat of the blessed bread. It is very significant that from a dialogue in which the identities and differences of a Jew and a pagan were respected, the understanding of the latter made this openness possible. A dialogue that sought the good of the most vulnerable at the time, the health of her daughter beset by an unclean spirit, brought about this transformation.

The number of the baskets that collected the bread left over after the meal of the 5000 men was twelve (Mk 6:43), one for each apostle, as if to teach that Jesus’ banquet was reserved for the twelve tribes of Israel. In Mk 8:8 there are seven baskets, σπυρίδας, which collect the bread left over after the 4000 men had eaten¹³. We can conclude that this number manifests humanity, referred to by the seven days of God’s creation in Gen 1, or by the seven “deacons” serving tables in the Jerusalem Church in Acts 6. The number 7 is best understood by the statement that some came from afar (μακρόθεν) in Mk 8:3¹⁴.

Finally, I would like to dwell on the word Mark uses to highlight the girl’s health. The text says that when the mother returns home she finds the daughter τὸ παιδίον βεβλημένον ἐπὶ τὴν κλίνην. Our bibles usually translate, “he found that the girl was lying on the bed and that the demon was gone”. Τὴν κλίνην can be considered not only “a bed” but also a “dining couch”, something very characteristic of Mediterranean culture, where people used to eat reclining. The girl, the daughter of a pagan woman, has received the gifts of the kingdom: liberation, healing and becomes a diner at the banquet of the kingdom.

We have started from Pope Francis’ proposal that education in the faith from a culture of dialogue is central to build “agapic” spaces for differences. I believe that the dialogue between Jesus and the pagan woman brings a fundamental element to the teaching process in the understanding of the kingdom that the disciples were living: the universality of salvation.

This teaching would not have been possible without those attitudes that characterised the dialogue between the two: faithfulness to each other’s identity, the woman’s courage and honesty in the search for truth, convinced of what was most urgent at that moment, the health of a pagan girl, without looking for double intentions.

¹² *Evangelio según san Marcos*, J. Gnllka, 326.

¹³ Interestingly, it is not specified whether these 4000 are male or female as opposed to the 5000 men of Mk 6:44.

¹⁴ *Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos*, X. Picaza, 293; *El evangelio según san Marcos*, R. Schnackenburg, 202-203; *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 91.



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