

## TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

August 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6–7 • Romans 11:13–15, 29–32 • Matthew 15:21–28

### I.

A year-and-a-half-long quest came to an end this week, as I finished reading *Moby Dick*.

I had read it almost 30 years ago in high school, and I had set out to read it again.

Reading the text can be as arduous as Captain Ahab's battle with the whale, since Herman Melville's has many tedious chapters about whales and whaling.

Still, the novel was worth reading again.

Over and over again, there is a word that the narrator, Ishmael, uses to describe Ahab, who is named after the evil Israelite king of the Old Testament: "monomaniacal."

It's a strong word that encapsulates the captain of the *Pequod*: Ahab is obsessed with one thing—destroying Moby Dick, the gigantic sperm whale that destroyed his leg.

Ahab is persistent in hunting the leviathan: The first question he asks other ship captains whom he meets on the seas is this: "Has thou seen the white whale?"

*Moby Dick* is not really an adventure story about a man hunting a colossal sea creature.

It's really a story about a person's obsession, anger, and revenge, and the ultimate destruction those attitudes unleash.

It's a cautionary tale about trying to take back what is no longer one's own.

Of course, Ahab is a character and a caricature, but that vivid portrayal helps us to identify similar traits in ourselves.

Ahab is a man who perseveres—but in the wrong way.

Because he is selfish, he brings destruction upon himself and the crew of his ship (except for the narrator, who lives to tell the tale).

An excerpt from *Moby Dick*—among the final words of the novel:

“Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her... Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.”

## II.

Perseverance is not, in and of itself, a virtue.

By contrast, today’s Gospel features the Caananite woman, whom Jesus does commend for her perseverance:

“O woman, great is your faith!”

This unnamed woman—a foreigner and a pagan—is dogged.

The key point is that she is motivated by a profound love for her daughter:

“Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!  
My daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Perseverance is one aspect of faith.

(Last week we saw another aspect of faith—trust—as when St. Peter walked on the water toward Jesus.)

Perseverance is necessary because of the “incompleteness” of Jesus’ mission: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

The gentile mission—the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection, for the forgiveness of sins to non-Jews—will be the work of the Church, not of Christ directly.

Jesus anticipates that work in his remarkable encounter with the Canaanite woman.

And there’s still another sense in which Jesus’ work is incomplete.

Christ has accomplished his suffering, death, and resurrection, but this grace must still come to fruition in our lives, we who live 2,000 years afterward.

This was the great insight of St. John Eudes (1601–1680), a French priest who lived during the 1600s, whose feast day is this coming week.

St. John Eudes says that “mysteries” or works of Christ,

“Are complete, indeed, in the person of Jesus,  
but not in us, who are his members,  
nor in the Church, which is his mystical body.  
The Son of God wills to give us a share in his mysteries  
and somehow to extend them to us.”

That is the motivation for Christian perseverance:  
to love God so much that we desire to share fully in Christ’s life, death,  
and resurrection, so that his life becomes our life.

It’s not perseverance for the sake of overcoming something;  
it’s perseverance for the sake of becoming someone:  
a Christian, a living image of Jesus—a saint!

That way of life is a path to flourishing and fulfillment,  
but it’s not just for us.

As St. John Eudes explains, it’s for the sake of the Church,  
so that others may find their way to God by our help and example.

We don’t know what the coming months will bring,  
as the pandemic rolls on.

We don't know what will happen to the school semester—  
elementary, middle school, high school, or college.

Things are not the way we would like for them to be,  
but they don't have to be.

Christians have never required perfect circumstances in order to become saints.

So, an encouragement:  
let's persevere for the right reason, in pursuit of the right thing.

In that quest, the sacraments of the Church will sustain us.

In the words of St. John Eudes,

“[Jesus] desires us to perfect the mystery of his incarnation and birth  
by forming himself in us and being reborn in our souls  
through the blessed sacraments of baptism and the eucharist.”

So, let's not just come to Mass;  
let's pray the Mass, placing our entire lives on the altar.

And, with confidence and trust in God,  
let's confess our sins in the Sacrament of Penance,  
uprooting all selfishness so that we can better serve others at this difficult time.

That perseverance, out of love, marks the fullness of Christian faith.

Then Christ will have completed his work in us.