

Fr. Tom Hymes was a priest whose devotion to people had no limits. He served at St. Regis several years in the early 1970's. Through many parishes Fr. Hymes showed he had much to give. About three weeks ago he quite suddenly collapsed in his rectory in Montrose, Missouri, from a cerebral hemorrhage. He died at age 43. His death was a personal loss for his family, friends, and the people he served. His devotion had no limits, but his body did.

Tom's dying was mercifully brief. Some terminal patients face their limits day after day. They cannot live the way they'd like, and many cannot die as soon as they'd like.

We meet in the Gospel today a woman with limits. It's not she herself who is sick, but her daughter who has a demon. The sickness of her daughter has caused the woman stress. Mindful of her own limits, she goes to Jesus for a cure.

Matthew carefully points out that this woman is a Canaanite. She is not a Jew. The apostles try to drive her away; "We don't deal with your people." And when finally she lays her request at the feet of Jesus he gives her the same response. "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I cure Jews, not Canaanites." He reminds her she has limits. She belongs to the wrong family and he cannot help.

She pleads again and Jesus delivers some of the harshest words we hear in the Bible. He says, "It's not right to take children's food and throw it to dogs. It's not right to take the mercy which I give to Jewish children and throw it to Canaanite dogs like you."

Here she gets a great insight. She doesn't argue this point. She accepts her limits. She accepts in humility that compared to others she is a dog, but she reminds Jesus with a sense of humor that even dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters' tables. Jesus relents and cures her daughter.

When we lay our prayers at the feet of Jesus we do so as people with limits. Some are limited by poor health, some by an unfulfilling job. Some are limited by an unhappy marriage or by their narrow circle of friends. Some are limited by lack of intelligence or skills. Like Father Hymes, the work we can do has no limits, but we have limits. Like the Canaanite woman we bring our limits with us when we pray.

Please note, it was not necessary for her to overcome her limits. She did not deny she was a Canaanite; she did not ask to become a Jew. She says to Jesus, "You call me a dog and a dog I am." And Jesus, who loves the outcast, who loves the oppressed; Jesus who loves the unborn, the helpless, the criminal, the addict, the terminally ill, and the mentally retarded; Jesus also loves Canaanite dogs. We need not overcome our limits for Jesus to hear us. We simply need to accept them.