

“JESUS, THE SAMARITAN WOMAN, AND THE WISDOM OF POPE FRANCIS”

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The story in the Gospel of John of the happy encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman has to be of prominent interest to those who love and promote the liturgy and the sacramental life of the Church. It is one of the great literary masterpieces in the Fourth Gospel, together with the story of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus. No wonder these stories play a key role in the catechumenal process.

These stories are full of drama and emotion, and as the narratives unfold we are held captive as the first hearers of this Gospel must have been. I learned long ago how helpful it is when I read the Gospels to see myself in the person of biblical personages.

So, in the case of the Samaritan woman, how can I engage myself; what is it in this story with which I can relate? I am not a catechumen, I am a believer. Yet I stand in need of constant

conversion and enlightenment. I often bring my empty bucket to the well of the waters of eternal life. And I want to experience over and over “the joy as I draw water at the fountain of salvation” (Is. 12:3).

We draw water from the riches offered in our sacramental life, especially in the Eucharist as well in the other sacraments. We approach the Eucharist, for example, with repentant hearts and with the desire to leave sin and embrace the grace that comes from Divine Love. We listen to the Word of Life as it gives us the constant enlightenment and the strength we so need to be disciple-missionaries, the name given to the baptized from the Latin American Bishops’ Conference in Aparecida and which Pope Francis often uses.

Catechumens and the elect readily identify with this woman. By the way, she was given a name of St. Photina by the Eastern Orthodox Church; her name means the “enlightened” or the “luminous” one. As catechumens and the elect proceed along the path to baptism, they are invited to reflect on her step-by-step

discovery of who Jesus Christ is. He is the gift of God and appears as the fountain of the living waters of salvation. They make the words of Psalm 42 their own: “As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?” (Ps. 42:1).

We join the catechumens, who later become neophytes, in professing our faith and the joy of our baptism once more fills our hearts. At the Easter Vigil we re-live the encounter of the Samaritan woman with Jesus. Together with her, we rejoice that we are among the elect, chosen to become enlightened with a deeper knowledge and love of the Messiah, the Christ sent by the Father. No wonder we hear the greatest song of joy in the Church year: The Easter Proclamation (Exsultet) at the Easter Vigil, “Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing choirs of angels! Exult, all creation around God’s throne! Jesus Christ, our King is risen! Sound the trumpet of salvation! Rejoice, O Mother Church! Exult in glory! The risen Savior shines upon you! Let this place resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God’s people!”

When the Samaritan woman came to the well, she was searching for plain water, but she probably did not know that her heart longed for the water of eternal life. She thirsted, but did not know what she thirsted for. This is true of the people of our age. People thirst, they search, they long for something beyond their imagination. Today, so clouded is the mind and the soul by the noise, the glamour and the empty promises of the world. How often we hear the refrain: “I don’t know what I want!”

There is, deep inside all of us who come into the world, that holy longing that Father Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., writes about, echoing the classic words of St. Augustine, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

The psalms express that same yearning. I already quoted Psalm 42 with its beautiful image of the deer that longs for living water. Then there is Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God – for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting” (v2).

In his writings, such as in his book, *The Holy Longing*,” Fr. Rolheiser says it this way: “There is a loneliness, a restlessness, an

aching, a yearning, a longing, an appetitiveness, a disquiet, a nostalgia...that never quite gives us easy rest....Each of us, beyond what we can name, has a dark memory of once having been touched and caressed by hands far gentler than our own.”

Then he shares an unforgettable image: “The old myths express it best when they tell that, before we were born, God kissed our souls and we go through life always remembering, in some dark way, that kiss and measuring everything else to its original purity, tenderness, and sweetness.”

It is our task as disciple-missionaries, as catechists or liturgists, as preachers and ministers of the mysteries of God, to help those perplexed by their inner-most yearnings to facilitate and lead them to drink from the well of light and truth.

In preparation for this presentation I interviewed Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso. He, as some of you know, is a fine liturgist. We conversed about the mystery into which we enter when we celebrate liturgy. We are not capable of “controlling” or fully understanding the Eucharist, it is neither a class nor a dramatic play. Rudolf Otto

writes that when we approach the mystery of the Mass we enter into presence of the “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans.*” We surrender and do homage to this awesome yet inviting mystery of God’s presence and ask God to come into our lives to act upon us as he wills.

When we embrace this unfolding Mystery and allow God to work in us, we are transformed. Bishop Seitz said it this way, “...we enter the Mystery as separate individuals – little gods of our own universes – we depart as a united, humbled, reconciled people, the People of God. God transforms our “I’s” into “We’s.” God “restores our vision, from the cloud of sin to seeing one another, especially the ones in need, as our brothers and sisters.”

We must help create modern Nicodemuses who come in the darkness of the night of unbelief to ask the questions that lead to the ultimate truth that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son” (Jn. 3:16).

When we come to Mass, we are like the woman coming thirsty to drink at the well and Nicodemus coming at night. If, like the

woman and Nicodemus, we truly encounter the Lord, we will never be the same again. Nicodemus was faithful to Jesus until the end; he provided a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes for the burial; the Samaritan woman became the first evangelizer, and according to legend, suffered martyrdom for her faith.

Those who experience the power of the encounter with Jesus Christ, whether in the liturgy, in the witness of a believer, or in a critical moment in one's life, will want to share that experience with others. When we become true disciples, we cannot help but also become missionaries. This is a recurrent theme in the teachings of Pope Francis and is the gift found in the *Final Document of Aparecida*, fruit of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops. As is well known, Francis was the editor-in-chief of that document, so it is not surprising that he quotes it often. He also goes to the riches of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* written by Pope Paul VI, the greatest and most comprehensive teaching on evangelization.

One is not really convinced of the gospel if one is not provoked to share it with others. The disciple of necessity has to be a missionary as well. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis says, “every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus.” The disciple feels compelled to point to Jesus, “Look at him, look at the one who loves me unconditionally! Look at him who has forgiven and restored me! Look at him who is with me always and who never abandons me! Look at him!” And we point to the cross.

The challenge of good and authentic worship, for it to be in “spirit and in truth” is what happens after worship. It is altogether right to promote liturgies that are beautiful, done correctly and in an orderly way, but how we judge the authenticity and effectiveness of the liturgy has to be what our faith communities do when they leave Mass.

Pope Francis is strong on issues of justice and peace. As my friend, John Carr of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and

Public Life at Georgetown University, said recently, the Pope's emphasis on Jesus' mission of the bringing "good news to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and to set the downtrodden free" can guide people today. "That is our mission today. It is not new. However, Pope Francis has brought new urgency, new passion, and I would suggest, new authenticity to this mission."

It is not surprising that Pope Francis has this passion for the poor, the immigrant, the forgotten, and the "throw-aways." He is the first Pope from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first from Latin America; these are the areas of the world where poverty is so great.

The celebration of the Eucharist cannot be oblivious to the suffering of people in our midst and around the world. As so much of the world suffers, we cannot celebrate as if all is well. All is not well. We may have the impression that things are getting better. They are not. The number of poor people in the world is growing, not shrinking, and inequality between rich and poor continues to

widen instead of narrowing. The number of immigrants and refugees around the world has risen to 230 million.

Our preaching, our prayers, our singing should remind us that love which includes mercy is what makes our worship in Spirit and in truth. Something has to be lacking in our worship if our churchgoers leave the Eucharist without concern for those in need.

Because of the transformation that should happen to us at Eucharist, says Bishop Seitz, “it is impossible to conceive of a separation between the worship of God and the self-sacrificing service to our brothers and sisters. We begin to love both God and neighbor in truth. We become God’s holy people. We can no longer stand by when our “other self” is suffering. We become, therefore, God’s instruments in the quest for justice.”

Many do not like second collections, yet when we take up donations for Catholic Relief Services, for the Church in Latin America, or for the Church in Africa, or for the Church of Eastern Europe, or for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, we are making the necessary connection between our worship and the

world. The Mass may be longer, but the appeal for one of these second collections is integral, not an adjunct, to the Mass.

My favorite Eucharistic Prayer is the one for Various Needs IV, precisely because it joins our prayer to the real world.

The preface has these words: “You sent Jesus Christ your Son among us as redeemer and Lord. He was moved with compassion for the poor and the powerless, for the sick and the sinner; he made himself neighbor to the oppressed. By his words and actions he proclaimed to the world that you care for us as a father cares for his children.”

Later, in the body of the Eucharistic Prayer, we continue: “Open our eyes to the needs of all; inspire us with words and deeds to comfort those who labor and are burdened; keep our service of others faithful to the example and command of Christ.”

“Let your Church be a living witness to truth and freedom, to justice and peace, that all people may be lifted up by the hope of a world made new.”

It goes without saying that the homily is also a most appropriate place to connect liturgy with life, and not just to relate us individually with our God, but to remind us of our responsibilities to one another and especially to those for whom Jesus had a preferential option, that is, the poor and those who suffer injustice. The cause of human life extends from cradle to the grave, as we rightly say; and this includes concern for children, young people, adults and the elderly in every circumstance.

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, devotes the most attention I have seen in any papal document to the homily. He writes some beautiful things about preaching at Mass.

1. “The homily joins the living hearts of the Lord and his people.

The people are silent and listen as God speaks.”

2. “The preacher is called to recognize in the people the living water of their faith and culture; where the desire for God is ardent and alive, as well as where the dialogue with God has broken down.”

3. **“The Church preaches as a mother. There is trust in children when their mother speaks. Both mother and child listen to each other. Their conversation can lead to learning and correction.”**
4. **“Our preaching is to be maternal: close to the people, with a warm tone of voice, unpretentious and joyful.”**
5. **“When Jesus preached he looked beyond the weaknesses and failings of the people. He preached with mercy and kindness. He was filled with the joy of the spirit. He preached the truth with the beauty of images.”**
6. **“Our challenge as preachers is to communicate the truth of God’s love and to encourage the joyful living of good lives.”**
7. **“Our task is to help our people desire the joy of God’s embrace.”**

But Pope Francis is hard on those who do not prepare their preaching. “A preacher who does not prepare is not ‘spiritual’; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.”

He also insists that we preachers devote time to pray with the word, lest we become “false prophets, frauds and shallow imposters (!)”

Three years ago I spoke at this conference and said basically the same thing. I used an image for the Eucharist that continues to fill me with fascination. It’s the image of the cosmic spiral. Allow me to repeat some of what I said at our Dallas conference.

It is most interesting to see how often the spiral appears in nature and in ancient and indigenous folklore. Spirals show up in Celtic art, Native American petroglyphs, Nazca earthworks, Arabic architecture, Japanese rock gardens, Hindu spiritual texts, Australian aboriginal paintings and African art. We see it in the labyrinth. Look at the shape of hurricanes and tornados, in the growth of ferns, in the pattern of leaves growing on certain plants, the nautilus shell and the helix shape of the DNA molecule. How can we forget that our tiny planet is whirling around space among millions of stars that make up our Milky Way galaxy, and the movement is that of a colossal spiral?

To me the Eucharist, like the spiral, has two forces of energy: one that summons us to the center and the other which sends us forth, like the symbol of the spiral. The shape of the spiral reminds me of the Eucharist which brings us together to the center of our Christian selves, and that is of course, the Person of Jesus Christ himself. At the same time the Eucharist, at the moment of dismissal, sends us forth the ends of the earth, similar to the way the Apostles were sent on the mission to set the world ablaze with the Word of the Gospel and the powerful Spirit of the Resurrection.

We are all called to come to the center, the source, the fountain of life, the living waters from whence we came. As St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Romans, “Deep within me I hear the murmur of living water that summons me and says, “Come to the Father.” This is the call to come to Eucharist, to the table of the sacred meal, inviting you and me to eat and drink and enjoy the hospitality of God himself.

But once fed and allowed to drink of the fountain of grace, I am sent forth to proclaim the invitation and announce the Good

News, the gospel, the victory of the King and say, “It doesn’t matter - your sin, your past, what you think of yourself, what you’ve done or haven’t done - someone died for you, come and receive the embrace of his love.”

In his last Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI suggested strongly that new wording be added to the dismissal rite of the Eucharist. They now appear in the Roman Missal. In English two new options are offered: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

Pope Benedict suggested these texts to emphasize the connection between the Eucharist and how we go about living our lives.

At Eucharist we Christians return again and again to the source and fount of the saving waters of baptism and like the Samaritan woman our flame of faith is rekindled that we might set the world ablaze with divine love...and become what we are called to be: channels of God’s love, of his life, of his grace, of his joy!