

**Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent - Cycle A
March 23, 2014**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, IL**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this past Wednesday, on the Solemnity of St. Joseph, the Church marked the one year anniversary of the inauguration of the Petrine ministry of Pope Francis as the Bishop of Rome. As you well know, people throughout the world, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, have been very interested in many of the things that the Holy Father has said and done during his first year. A sign of that interest is in the number of people that are flocking to St. Peter's Square every Wednesday to hear his weekly general audiences.

In many of these audiences, the Holy Father has demonstrated a laid-back, yet engaging and energetic approach toward the people. On several occasions, he has even asked a question of the crowd, inviting them to respond by words or actions. At his first Wednesday audience of 2014, the Holy Father did this when he asked for a show of hands from those who knew the date of their baptism. The Holy Father followed up this question with the following words:

To know the date of our Baptism is to know a blessed day. The danger of not knowing is that we can lose awareness of what the Lord has done in us, the memory of the gift we have received. Thus, we end up considering it only as an event that took place in the past – and not by our own will but by that of our parents – and that it has no impact on the present. We must reawaken the memory of our Baptism. We are called to live out our Baptism every day as the present reality of our lives.¹

As he indicates in his words, it is easy for us to see our Baptism as simply an event from the past, due in large part to the fact that most of us were baptized as an infant and we have no memory of that life-changing experience. In keeping with the Holy Father's suggestion, I plan to make it a point each year to remember the anniversary of my baptism, August 24th, just nineteen days after my birthday, August 5th.

The season of Lent is a special time for us to reflect more deeply on this gift and to make it more of a daily reality in our lives. In an address on Ash Wednesday to the faithful in St. Peter's Square a few years ago, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted this opportunity when he told the crowd:

The Sundays of Lent, in this liturgical year of Cycle A in a quite

particular way, introduce us to the experience of a baptismal journey, almost as if we were retracing the path of the catechumens, of those who are preparing to receive Baptism, in order to rekindle this gift within us and to ensure that our life may recover a sense of the demands and commitments of this sacrament which is at the root of our Christian life.²

It can be helpful, then, to approach Lent from this perspective, to see it as an opportunity to renew this awareness of the significance of our Baptism, something which we will call to mind in a very special way on Easter Sunday when we will renew our baptismal promises and be sprinkled with holy water.

The Gospel for today presents to us the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. This story is full of baptismal themes and imagery. The first and obvious image is that of water. Throughout the conversation, this theme of water gradually unfolds in meaning. The woman begins by considering water on a purely natural level. She had come to the well to draw water so as to satisfy her need for it. The woman is very interested in the words of Jesus when He tells her: "whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst" (John 4:14). She responded by saying: "Sir, give me

this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (John 4:15).

The Lord is guiding her to a deeper understanding of the gift of life-giving water that He has come to bring through the gift of Baptism. He is inviting her to see that the gift of God's grace which is poured into the soul at Baptism brings with it a satisfaction that earthly desires could never fulfill. This satisfaction is not just a temporary one, as with regular water, but one which has the ability to last for eternal life.

Connected to this notion of satisfaction and fulfillment is another image that is far less prevalent in this story, but very important to its deeper meaning. The image that I am referring to is that of the water jar that the woman brought to the well. This was a normal thing for people who came to the well. The well was deep and therefore required a way of drawing the water up to the surface. The water jar was a daily necessity because one would have to go back to the well every day to get the needed water for each day.

Several commentators of this passage have recognized a spiritual significance to this image which they see in the brief, often overlooked passage which says that, after having come to the deeper understanding of

the gift Jesus had to offer, she “left her water jar and went into the town” (John 4:28).

St. Thomas Aquinas makes the following insightful observation regarding this seemingly minor point:

The water jar is a symbol of worldly desires, by which men draw out pleasures from the depths of darkness – symbolized by the well – i.e., from a worldly manner of life. Accordingly, those who abandon worldly desires for the sake of God leave their water jars.³

The fact that she brought the water jar to the well each and every day signifies that she had been living her life totally guided by worldly desires. We understand this very well when we consider some of our natural functions, such as food, water, and sleep. We may, for a time, find fulfillment in these areas, but it does not take long before we need to have those needs and desires met again. It is, of course, not wrong for us to eat, drink, and sleep. The need that we have for these things, as well as so many other desires, can easily become disordered to where we become like slaves to them. They control our lives to where we feel like we cannot live without them, so we keep going back to the well to satisfy our thirst for the desires they fulfill.

Lent is a time that we are encouraged to be particularly mindful of any area of undue attachment in our life. It can be more than just with food and drink. Other examples might include attachments to the use of the Internet and various types of social media, an overly self-centered focus on what we wear or how we look, and unhealthy or inappropriate relationships with others, just to name a few. There are many ways in which we can become enslaved to those things, sometimes without even realizing it.

The practices of Lent help us to deny ourselves with regards to these desires and to redirect our attention toward Christ. The energy that we lost in being overly attached to those things can be redirected to loving Him and our neighbor, and in doing so, we allow the graces of our Baptism to become more operative and dominant in our lives. By living our life according to those graces, we experience the freedom of detaching from those worldly desires so as to be wholly dedicated to the Lord and what He asks of us in our lives. When we live in this way, we find the true satisfaction that the things of this world cannot offer and which cause us to thirst more and more for the source of the living water, which is union with Christ in Heaven.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist today, let us pray that this season of Lent may be a time for us to reflect on the great gift of Baptism that has been given to us. May we seek to live by those graces in our daily lives, leaving behind those attachments which have held us bound, trusting that what God will give us will never leave us disappointed or unfulfilled, but will bring us true peace and fulfillment in this life, but more importantly, in the life to come in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 8 January 2014.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *General Address*, 9 March 2011.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, no. 625.