

Homily - Third Sunday in Lent (First Scrutiny / Year A)

“Hydrate or die!”

We must have yelled that dozens of times throughout the week of our first high school vocations camp in Richmond.

I was about two years into my seminary formation, and the diocese had just started our Quo Vadis retreat, an event that gave high school men the opportunity to pray and share in fellowship with each other and all of us who were preparing to enter into our vocations to the priesthood.

But at some point, someone had decided that the best time to host this event would be mid-July, and what we really needed at that camp was a lot - and I mean a *lot* - of sports.

Ultimate frisbee, flag football, soccer, you name it.

All in the blazing fury of the summer sunshine - not ideal weather when you're in a profession where your work uniform has you dress like a human solar panel.

And we realized something very important early on in the week: a lot of high school guys aren't that great at keeping themselves alive.

That's how we found ourselves reminding them (and each other), hour after hour: Hydrate. Drink water. Pace yourself.

Seek the nourishment you need to stay alive.

Jesus Christ's beautiful encounter with the Samaritan woman takes place at exactly this sort of moment of inhospitable exposure, in the burning heat of the noonday sun.

We hear this Gospel, which would normally only be used in the first of the three years of our lectionary, because this encounter reveals something significant about the special prayers that the Church gives us for our catechumens - what we call the First Scrutiny.

In the RCIA process, several scrutinies are celebrated during Lent as a way of preparing our candidates for baptism, and interceding for them as the Lord purifies their hearts to receive his grace in the sacraments at Easter.

In fact, as part of this rite, we will even pray a prayer of exorcism over our catechumens, which is intended to help strengthen them to resist the effects and power of sin in their life.

Exorcisms, in popular culture, are of course best known for the category of what the Church refers to as 'major' exorcisms, the radical intercession against possession by evil spirits that we associate with horror movies and many of the most dramatic Gospel healings.

Exorcistic prayer, however, in its broader sense, prepares the hearts of catechumens so that when they are finally baptized, marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, and receive Our Lord's Body and Blood in the Easter Vigil, they will be as prepared as they can be to

And this brings us back to the story of the Samaritan woman.

Our Lord tells her something that mystifies her in the moment:

"If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink, ' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

One of the greatest obstacles in our life of faith is that we simply do not realize how much Christ has to offer us.

Maybe we understand this to a greater or lesser extent on an intellectual level, but we don't realize the degree to which our hearts long for his presence and the peace only he can give.

It's a powerful question to ask: Do you thirst for God?

Do you recognize the ways in which your soul suffers without his constant life-giving nourishment?

At our own baptism, we were filled with the rejuvenating presence of the Holy Spirit, which rushed through us, joined us to the Body of Christ and wiped away our sins.

To use the words of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, in that moment, love was poured out in us, anchoring us in hope and filling us with the gifts of the Spirit's presence.

But sin so easily creeps back in. It leaves us desiccated and dry, hopeless and confused, suffering in the exposure of the world's afflictions.

We are thirsting, and so often we do not realize it.

And often, we resist returning to the source of grace because it will require confronting uncomfortable or ugly parts of our lives or our pasts.

Like the woman who met Christ at the well, we may have preferred to live a life marked with a spiritual isolation, ashamed to seek renewal and reconciliation.

But we forget that he already knows our pain. As he did on that day in Samaria, he has the power to speak to every wound in our hearts.

And he loves us despite all of it.

He offers us renewal - a new chance at life, the living water of faith given to us through the gifts of his Church.

The graces of prayer, of the sacraments, of reconciliation - freedom through the power of his word.

If your soul is thirsty, give him another chance. Seek the living water that he offers.

Get to know him again, in a new way - as who he truly is, the Christ, the Messiah.

“Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”