

MARCH 8, 2026 MSGR. ROBERT NUSCA

In this Sunday's gospel, St. John relates for us this encounter between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman, normally referred to as the woman at the well. In Greek Orthodox tradition, she's remembered as St. Photini — literally the enlightened or illuminated one. Venerated as a great missionary as a result of her encounter with Jesus, she would eventually go on to suffer martyrdom during the reign of the Emperor Nero.

And I think that several things emerge for our reflection. First of all, through her conversation with Jesus, for the record, the longest private conversation between Jesus and any individual in all four gospels, she has come to symbolize the spiritual seeker, the person who is searching for something much more in their life. It's important to note that as a result of this encounter, not only does she leave behind her old way of life and become His follower, but she goes on to bring many others to the Lord.

In his comments on today's gospel, St. John Chrysostom invites us at the same time to observe how it is that as she converses with Jesus, this woman at the well moves to a much deeper understanding of who He is, but does so gradually. Her illumination, her spiritual awakening, unfolds, can we say, in stages.

Chrysostom observes that at first she sees Jesus as a stranger who's simply asking for water. As she converses with Him, she realizes that it is Jesus now who can provide her with spiritual nourishment, symbolized in these living waters of the Holy Spirit about which He speaks. Then she goes on to call Jesus a prophet. When Jesus tells her that He is truly the Messiah, she is moved to leave behind her water jar

and to go and tell the entire village about her encounter with Jesus. And in so doing, as we've heard, many people come to the Lord as a result of this personal encounter with Jesus.

Second, I think we should remember that our own growth in the spiritual life is a process - a lifelong process to which we need to pay careful attention. It must be cultivated and protected in order for it to continue to grow and to flourish. And this is done through our own encounters with Jesus through the life of prayer, the life of contemplation, the sacraments, our interactions with others, especially the poor and the suffering.

For St. Augustine basically cautions that the waters of the well are really a symbol of the pleasures of this world - a symbol of the waters to which people return again and again seeking things that don't last. He observes that when people give themselves up to the waters of this well, they will inevitably thirst again for more of the waters that never satisfy our spiritual thirst.

Pope Benedict XVI was speaking in different terms when he spoke of the existential dissatisfaction of the person who does not find what they are seeking, symbolized here in the Samaritan woman. He comments as well upon the repetitiveness - the repetitiveness of her going to and from the well without ever finding these waters that Jesus alone can give us.

But as today's gospel shows us, Jesus wants to give us a share in these living waters that flow from the Holy Spirit, the life-giving spiritual springs that have the power to renew and nourish our souls on our journey to the everlasting kingdom of God.

So it is that the story of the woman at the well invites us to look within, to ask ourselves: What are the wells to which we are drawn over and over again? Material things? Power? Personal ambition? The fleeting

distractions of this world? Or are we striving after things that don't last like the Samaritan woman? Here now, are we, as a result of her encounter, searching for something greater, for a share in this spiritual life or these life-giving waters that Jesus alone can give us again, through the life of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit?

Today's gospel also invites us to reflect on the ways that we might seek to engage now in dialogue with others who do not know Jesus. Back in the 1960s, there was an Italian priest and professor of theology, Msgr. Luigi Giussani. He founded an international Catholic movement called Communion and Liberation. In his writings, he speaks of our faith as something more than just a doctrine, as a set of teachings. He, Msgr. Giussani, whose cause for canonization actually was opened in 2012, helps us to see how our faith is in the first instance the result of an encounter - an encounter with God and Jesus Christ.

For ultimately, ours is a personal God: the God of love, the God of mercy, the God who calls each of us by name to the very heights of human transformation through the life of grace. So it is that Msgr. Giussani speaks of the importance of creating a culture of encounter, urging the rediscovery of the Church's ability from the earliest times to communicate Christianity in its original elements, with its great attractiveness, its beauty, its sense of wonder, its profound message for the human heart. The radical call to love, to serve the poor against the political and social elitism of the time.

As we draw closer to Jesus and to a life of faith, we too are invited to foster this culture of encounter in our world today. And so, inspired by the woman at the well, how might we communicate the message of the gospel to others today in our time - we call post-modern, post-truth, global technocracy? How can we do so in a way that is, again, in the

words of Msgr. Giussani, more personal, more accessible, radiant, more profound?

Here, a number of the Church Fathers and saints - Origen, Ephrem of Syria, St. Ephrem, St. Bernard of Clairvaux - all observe that yes, Jesus is described as thirsting for water, but it is God who ultimately thirsts for the return of all who are seeking something more than what can be offered by the stagnant waters of so many wells in our passing world.

So, as we continue to celebrate this Mass, let us pray that like the Samaritan woman, we may be renewed by the spiritual fountain of the waters of life that Jesus offers us in this Eucharist. Let us pray that as a result of our encounters with Him, we may be able to draw others to God. As Pope Benedict again observes, our greatest need today is people who can make God credible by means of the enlightened faith that they live.

Finally, we pray for a profound spiritual renewal in our own lives beginning in the Mass that we are now celebrating.