

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
2008 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering
The Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill, Washington
Sunday, February 24, 2008
Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch, Bishop of St. Petersburg
Celebrant and Homilist

Those of you who are regular watchers of NBC's hit show, **THE OFFICE**, are quite aware of the importance of the water cooler to the story line. Around the cooler the at work and away from work exploits of the major characters are revealed and in this office, the water cooler substitutes in a manner of speaking for the confessional in Church.

We Irish long ago learned the importance of and need for a "favorite watering hole" which we called "PUBS" where politics, sports, private lives and public faces, and even the local "pp's" homily were fair game for analysis, opinion and even "dissing."

We should not be surprised then that apart from the passion account, the longest narrative in John's Gospel takes place at what was in that time and culture, the local "watering hole." Here the townsfolk gathered, drew water as well as information, and shared the news of life and times. But in the time and culture of the Gospel the women went to the well in the morning and evening and the men in the afternoon.

So at the very outset something is amiss in this famous Gospel story. The Samaritan woman arrives at noon, after the women had finished. One might ask why? Was she unpopular with the others? Could she have been a biblical type of "illegal"? Was she to be shunned? Is she perhaps an outcast, a nobody, a pariah? All this eventually matters little as she arrives when she does and meets Jesus who not only speaks with her but also for her.

They speak to each other seven times each. That could be one interchange for each day of creation. Could Jesus' intention be to lead this woman from darkness into light?

She grows in her awareness of who he really is rather quickly, calling him first a "Jew" and then a "prophet" and finally telling the townsfolk that he just might be the "Christ."

At this "watering hole" there was precious little attention to be paid to gossip or idle chat or "news" for this was a conversion moment opportunity for Jesus -an opportunity to invite one more person, albeit a very unlikely Samaritan woman who has had multiple husbands to amend her ways and spread the good news. This most unlikely of persons becomes the first disciple of Jesus in John's Gospel when she follows his instructions, fetches her husband, and brings the townsfolk to see Jesus.

For his part, rejected by his own people, Jesus finds welcome and acceptance in "hated" Samaria. He might have been forgiven for just drawing water and then moving on, but being someone never particularly disposed to let a teaching moment like this pass by, (after all, he thirsts for followers) he is willing to bypass social, cultural and religious boundaries to give life giving water to those thirsty enough to seek it. Even the Irish might admit it was quite a day at "Jacob's Pub!"

The interaction between this woman and Jesus is something of a template for Catholic Social Ministry, is it not? Do you not pursue your ministry within an envelope of respect and openness to all, regardless of sex, religion, race or color? Is not the heart of your ministry to accept people where they are in life and then with compassion and creativity to seek solutions to their human problems? Do you not speak for and work for the "nobodies" who are often seen as the pariah of our society? This woman in the Gospel today has no name she is "every-woman" who thirsts for truth, justice, compassion, care, concern and help. It mattered not to the Lord that she was either a Samaritan or a woman or a person with way too many husbands -she was thirsty and he gave her drink and in that water he gave her new life. She became a new creation and her townspeople would be among the first to acknowledge Jesus as "the savior of the world." Just a little time and a little love can accomplish so much. All this came to pass because Jesus accepted her as she was.

I am acutely aware that you gather this year in a time of great uncertainty. Externally it is an election year and as usual we do not hear the needs of the poor, the vulnerable elderly, children born and unborn raised up in political promises.

In your ministries you are often the first at the well: the faces of compassion that the poor, the elderly, the vulnerable, the unborn, the homeless, the frightened immigrant may encounter. The needs always seem to increase while the resources seem to decrease. Then many of us who have been around a while remember what seemed to have

been better days, headier days, when compassionate programs were *de rigueur* -days of an activist Church facing poverty and issues of war and peace with courage and honesty. Many of you were attracted to the "well" by both the possibilities and the ecclesial commitment, which our outreach provided.

Today everything is harder, inside and outside the Church. Resources are more limited at precisely the time when needs are greater. We must be careful in these moments not to become like the Israelites of the first reading: tired, worn-out, discouraged, struggling, thirsty for justice. We can sometimes feel caught between a rock and a hard place - "Horeb" in our time and in our places. When the cries of humanity escalate, we can easily forget the good that we do. In my diocese this year, we have shown the politicians and the people that the homeless can be sheltered with safety and security, given water to drink and bathe and food to nourish and strengthen. In the county in which I live whole parish communities have joined a community action organization assisted significantly by CCHD and with other Churches and groups to accomplish attainable goals that benefit the most at-risk in our population and our parishioners are mostly proud of what they are doing. Sometimes I look around me at my collaborators and brothers and sisters who are leading these efforts and I think the days of Monsignor John Egan, Saul Alinski and even Dorothy Day are returning and I thank God for this.

Make no mistake. It is a long journey through an uncertain political and ecclesial desert to find that oasis where our thirst can be quenched and we can find strength for the journey. If I were to pick a single text for what might be described as the quintessential text for Catholic Social Ministry, I would be hard pressed to find a better one than this Gospel. You regularly, if not daily, meet the strangers in our midst and set aside all barriers to discover God in the stranger. And the price paid for speaking for the nobodies who society sometimes regards as pariahs can be the same cold shoulder and the same indifference that the apostles offered Jesus in this Gospel passage. I find more comfort and happiness in what we as Church due for others than sometimes the inordinate amount of time we spend on far less serious matters of polity.

In approaching that well, first for refreshment for him, and then for a moment of evangelization, Jesus once again gives us the example of someone who truly came to serve and not to be served. In a moment we shall approach his altar to be gathered, nourished and sent. It is our wellspring from which we derive our spiritual energy

to do his work in our time and places. You are and remain the kind face of Christ to many in the world and as the Gospel shows so clearly, it is amazing what a little kindness can accomplish. We are called to be Christ, to act like Christ, even when everyone else turns a cold shoulder to those in need. It is precisely to salute you and thank you that I have made this journey to celebrate this Eucharist tonight and with you now to ask the Christ at the well to let us drink of the life-giving bread, wine and water.