



From A Bishop's Journal (737)

**Family- and Parish-Based Catechesis on Peace (3)
A Fountain Welling Up to Provide Eternal Life**

The story of the Samaritan woman and the living water elicits our reflection and inspires our commitment to peace. At the heart of this story with baptismal undertones are the many elements required for a just and lasting peace.

Land of Happiness

A few years ago Father Jean-Claude Filteau, professor at Laval University in Québec City, published a book titled *La Terre sainte, cet heureux pays* (“The Holy Land, the Happy Country”), to describe the Promised Land of milk and honey. For some, the land is still Palestine, while for others it is the State of Israel. However, through the years it has been a Middle East fraught with endless and inhuman wars. Never had such bloody wars taken place before in the Holy Land, even if most of the biblical books report the many wars that were waged in this territory. Even in Jesus’ time, there were murderous rivalries. Jews wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans but the Gospels relate the friendship and respect Jesus had for them. The “Good Samaritan” has become one of the most popular characters on earth, because of his generosity and kindness. Even among the Apostles there was a Zealot named Simon, who could not tolerate the Roman presence in his country. Then there were the traditions that hamper harmony between man and woman: “How can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?” The disciples themselves were surprised to see Jesus speak to a woman.

Unusual Request

It is not easy to “beg” for one’s basic needs from someone. We only have to talk to people on social assistance to hear about unimaginable situations, when all they are doing is expressing their most basic needs, the rights that are granted to every human being. Jesus, tired from his journey, became a beggar. He dared ask a stranger who was considered a potential enemy to give him to drink. Having nothing with which to draw water, he calls on the kindness that is in the heart of every person. “If only you recognised God’s gift, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him instead, and he would have given you living water... Whoever drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty; the water I give him shall become a fountain within him, leaping up to provide eternal life.”

Unexpected Resources

At certain times when false paternalism seemed to direct all help to foreign nations, donors presented themselves as superior beings to people and nations they were helping, as if they expected nothing good from them, as if those benefiting from their largesse were their inferiors in every way. The idea of “partnership”

isn't very old. This new social phenomenon helps us better understand that every person has a specific potential for enriching humankind, even one's most generous benefactor. This is one of the riches of the North-South exchanges. Intrigued by Jesus' words about the living water – the story does not say whether Jesus finally got the water he wanted, to quench his thirst – the Samaritan woman questions him on his identity as a prophet and on the true place of worship. With much affection and very honestly, Jesus engages in enriching dialogue with her. “You are right in saying you have no husband! The fact is, you have had five, and the man you are living with now is not your husband. What you said is true.” Far from breaking off the dialogue, the woman recognises that Jesus is a prophet, and she hastens to bring up the subject of the Jewish belief that Jerusalem is the place where God ought to be worshipped.

In Spirit and in Truth

The dialogue is deeper than what one usually hears around a cup of coffee, however freshly-brewed it may be. Jesus says, “The hour is coming and is already here, when authentic worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Indeed, it is just such worshippers the Father seeks.” These words may not seem revolutionary, today, but they were in Jesus' time because it was the Temple in Jerusalem that was the centre of religion. These words of Jesus would shortly cost him his life, and the life of several of his disciples, later, especially Saint Stephen and Saint Paul, when they held a similar discourse. Jesus does not condemn the way of going to temple, to pray – he only insisted that it be a true house of prayer – Jesus does not condemn every place of worship. What he asks is that it be true worship, in Spirit and in truth. Wherever we are, through prayer and worship we can reach the God whom Jesus revealed to us as a Father full of lovingkindness and compassion, even for someone with “five husbands.”

Unprecedented Testimony

Contrary to certain disciples who believed that Jesus had come to renew the entire social and political order of Israel, the Samaritan woman showed that her belief of the Messiah is the Christ who is to make all things known to her. Before such an expression of faith, Jesus shows himself as the Messiah. Such messianic revelations are rare in the Gospels: Jesus confirmed Peter's faith which declared him (Jesus) Messiah and Son of God. Jesus did likewise in the case of Martha, at the time of the resurrection of her brother Lazarus. After the acknowledgement made to her, the Samaritan went off into the town to tell the news to the people who themselves became witnesses of the deeds and words of Jesus: “No longer does our faith depend on your story. We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this really is the Saviour of the world.”

Unusual Event

What could have been only a simple stop at the well, the restaurant or one of our fast food outlets turned out to be the most outstanding “pit stop” in the world. The Prophet Isaiah had once said: “With joy you will draw water from the spring of salvation.” And Jesus would say (John 7:37): “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me; let him drink, he who believes in me.” It seems to me that at the heart of this simplest of acts we find all of the constitutive elements of peace. The rights of God and of humans are always respected: justice, truth, love, and freedom are always present.

Reminder of a Basic Mission

To the disciples who were astonished to see their Master enter into dialogue with a Samaritan woman and who were urging him to eat, Jesus replied: “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me.” May this Gospel story help us unite ourselves even further to the great mission of Jesus. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me:

therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favour from the Lord.” It is in this way that we are collaborators in bringing about peace, God’s gift to humankind.

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