



**THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL
(Third Sunday of Lent, Year A)**

You may not have heard that the Samaritan woman whom Jesus encountered at Jacob's well is venerated as a saint in the Christian East by both Catholics and Orthodox. She is called St. Photina by the Greeks and Svetlana by the Russians. So I will refer to this famous woman of Samaria as Photina. Why Photina? Because *phos* in Greek means "light", and Photina was one whom Christ enlightened and to whom he promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. Remember that one of the names of baptism is *enlightenment* or *illumination* because in the baptismal water we have received Christ who is the Light of the World (Jn 8.12) and who said, "he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8.12). And so St. Paul says to the Ephesians, "once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light" (Eph. 5.8). Photina at the well is an icon of each of us, thirsting for the living water and finding it at last in Christ.

But then, what precisely is this *living water* that we receive in baptism? The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that

the Holy Spirit is the *living water* "welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4.14) in the heart that prays. It is he who teaches us to accept it [the living water] at its source: Christ. Indeed, in the Christian life, there are several wellsprings where Christ awaits us to enable us to drink of the Holy Spirit (CCC 2652).

But Photina, as of yet, knows nothing of this. She goes to the well in the heat of the day, seeking ordinary water for drinking and washing. Her timing is unusual: the women would generally have gone to fetch water in the cool of the morning or the evening, so as to avoid the heat. From what our Lord tells of Photina's life, perhaps her company would not have been welcomed among respectable Samaritan women, so she went at a time when she would be unlikely to have any awkward encounters. Little did she know!

When she went there to draw water from Jacob's well, Jesus was sitting there; his disciples had gone to the city to buy food. Jesus asked her for a drink of water. The Catechism says that this exchange is a living icon of mystery of divine grace, for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,

is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. "You would have asked him, and he would have given you living water (Jn 4.10) (CCC 2560)... Prayer is the response of faith to the free promise of salvation and also a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God (CCC 2561).



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Photina initially misunderstands the distinction that Jesus has made between the well-water and the *living* water that he offers her: she supposes that Jesus means the running water of some stream. Her Samaritan pride is roused by the claim on the part of an unknown Jew that he could produce flowing water when even the patriarch Jacob had been obliged to dig a deep well to provide water for his family. And yet, one senses a thaw in her attitude toward Jesus: instead of calling him merely “you, a Jew,” she recalls that she and Jesus are alike descended from Jacob, and she addresses him respectfully as “sir”—in Greek, *kurios*, the word that when addressed to God we translate as “Lord.”

Now for a thirsty man to ask a drink of water seems ordinary enough to us, but it was not so to Jesus or to Photina. Jews and Samaritans regarded exchanges of this sort as ritually unclean and as a breach of communal taboos. And yet, the Jews and the Samaritans were related: the Samaritans were a mixed race, descended from both northern Israelites and Assyrian colonists (2 Kings 17). The Jews consequently regarded the Samaritans as half-breeds and heretics. When the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon, they rebuilt their Temple; the Samaritans had offered to help rebuild it, and had been rebuffed (Ezra 4.1-6). So the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim. The schism between Jew and Samaritan had all the bitterness of a family quarrel.

Jesus deliberately ignores this separation because there is a deeper issue at the root of the estrangement between Jew and Samaritan: for then, as now, there can only be social and structural sin because there is first personal sin. The separation that matters is the separation between the all-holy God and sinful humanity, reflected in the encounter between Jesus and this woman in particular. Jesus then lays bare the disorder of her personal life and her need for redemption. Photina is awestruck that Jesus knows things that he could not possibly have known by any merely human means. Notice that she has gone from calling Jesus “you, a Jew,” to addressing him as “Sir,” and now to honoring him as a prophet of God. The direction of the conversation begins to un-nerve her, and she tries to change the subject to the religious controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans.

And what does Jesus say? He minces no words in rejecting the error of the Samaritans and says that “you worship what you do not know, for salvation is from the Jews” (Jn 4.22): our Savior’s love is universal and yet his love inevitably excludes and condemns error, for there is salvation *only in the truth*; error impedes grace and therefore impedes salvation. Right doctrine, right worship, and right relations with our neighbor are ultimately inseparable. Photina has actually come to the heart of the matter. In the face of our need for redemption from the captivity of sin and error, we *really do* need to know how God is rightly to be worshiped and glorified; for in Christ Jesus, the glorification of the Father and our own salvation are ultimately one and the same thing. As St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Photina then expresses her hope in the Messiah, who will put all the pieces together. Jesus replies to her, “I who speak to you am he” (Jn 4.27). This is the crucial moment, the breakthrough. Christ reveals himself as the



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



one in whom the worship of the Father in spirit and truth is accomplished: for Christ *is* the Truth, and he *gives* the Spirit. The early Church Father St. Basil explains it this way:

By truth, Christ clearly meant himself. If we say that worship offered *in* the Son (the Truth) is worship *in* the Father's image, we can say the same about worship offered *in* the Spirit since the Spirit in himself reveals the divinity of the Lord... Light cannot be separated from what it makes visible, and it is impossible for you to recognize Christ, the image of the invisible God unless the Holy Spirit enlightens you... It is fitting that when we see Christ, the brightness of God's glory, it is always through the illumination of the Spirit (St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 97).

Already, amid the bitter religious and political antagonism between Jew and Samaritan, there is the beginning of reconciliation through Christ's mediation. Photina spreads the news of Jesus to her countrymen; and many of them come to believe in Jesus and welcome him, the Jewish messiah, into their homes: no longer an enemy and a stranger but a Savior.

According to a pious tradition, St. Photina continued her missionary work after the Lord's death and resurrection and was said to have died a martyr's death in Rome: and this seems eminently fitting and likely. Once she had known the gift of God and who it was that spoke to her at the well, how could she be content to leave others to worship in error what they did not know, or to languish in the darkness of sin, as she had once done? How could she not want all people to receive the living water? That also should be our own attitude—we who by baptism have received the grace to worship in Spirit and in Truth in this Eucharistic Sacrifice. Hear, then, the Savior's words: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt 10.8): the missionary spirit flows out of our adoration of the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.

In the Byzantine liturgy, the faithful pray in these words that express the gift of God that St. Photina and all of us have received:

We have seen the true light;
We have received the heavenly Spirit;
We have found the true faith,
worshiping the undivided Trinity,
for the Trinity has saved us.