

Third Sunday of Lent
March 12, 2023
Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

“The Devil deceives sinners, and makes them imagine that, by indulging their sensual appetites; they shall lead a life of happiness, and shall enjoy peace. But there is no peace for those who offend God.” (Saint Alphonsus Liguori, Sermon for Sexagesima Sunday)

May I begin with a point of interest concerning the Gospel passage for today, John 4:5-42, it is only found in Saint John’s Gospel. None of the other Gospel writers record this exchange, commonly referred to as “Jesus’ Discourse with the Woman at the Well.” Furthermore, this Gospel passage was, historically, not read on Sunday in the Church’s Liturgical Year. Rather, this selection of Saint John’s Gospel would have been proclaimed by the priest on Friday during the Third Week of Lent. I do not know why this exchange was not included in the other Gospels, nor why it was not read on a Sunday in earlier times. However, reflecting upon this scene and the two persons involved, coupled with its being proclaimed by the Church so close to Holy Week, one could say it offers us the opportunity to re-examine the 3 degrees of suffering (also understood as evil, but for our reflection we will use suffering) as understood through the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Saint Thomas taught there were 3 degrees to suffering: exterior (physical), interior (emotional), and spiritual (sin). In the passage, we are told that the time is noon. It is the hottest part of the day. People, naturally, would not have ventured out at this time for water for either their flocks or themselves. Water would have been gathered either in the morning or later in the afternoon. Jesus, we are told, is there undergoing physical suffering. He is tired, thirsty, and hungry. The woman, we can judge by her coming to the well at this time, must be enduring emotional suffering. The embarrassment of her marital situation has forced her to arrive at the well when no other person would normally be there. Jesus, in speaking with her, would acknowledge her sin which was actually the base of this pyramid of her suffering. Let us continue further, examining how the spiritual suffering of sin has affected the sufferings experienced by this woman, and, how our own misunderstanding of sin has led to our own suffering.

We begin by stating that physical suffering is the weakest of the three forms of suffering. You may want to disagree with this, especially when you are enduring a physical pain. A toothache can be very disabling. The pain can be so intense that we are incapacitated. Yet, once the tooth is extracted, we no longer feel the pain. We return to our daily functions forgetting, over a period of time, just how painful was our toothache. The second of these, interior or emotional suffering, we know to be more acutely hurtful than physical suffering. The emotional suffering, for example, depression present within an individual can cause physical suffering, for example, people harming themselves. Yet, this form of suffering can also be addressed through the assistance of proper medications provided by physicians and psychiatrists or supportive

counseling offered by professional therapists. Over time, there are many individuals who have, through these treatments, regained enough strength to daily live their lives, showing little effects of their interior struggles. Yes, these first two forms of suffering are very painful to endure, but the worst, by far, is the spiritual suffering associated with sin. Oddly though, we may not think of sin as the root cause for many of the struggles individuals are currently suffering with and through. The results of particular sinful acts are found in the shame, despair, anger and questions they leave behind. Consider the lifetime effects of a sin committed against the young by a predator. Society may try to convince us to think differently using compassionate language (mercy killing) or empowering statements (My Body, My Choice), yet rarely, are we shown, maybe years later, the effects of sin in the lives of those affected by one of these choices.

My dear people, our Blessed Lord came to die for us to save us from the effects of sin. He knew, full well, how sin had and continues to affect you, His dear children. The sin of Adam exposed all of us to a life of suffering. I believe we all wish no one had to suffer any pain, emotional or physical, but we know that is not the case. In this life, we will suffer. However, we are not destined for this life. Our destiny is found present with God in the next. Do not allow sin, especially mortal sin, to rob you of your destiny with Him. As Easter is quickly approaching allowing us to celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death, first, let us humble ourselves walking with Him the way toward that victory found in His Way of the Cross. Let us humble ourselves, carry our own crosses and fulfill our need to go to confession.