

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

“Whoever drinks the water I shall give him will never thirst; the water I shall give will become within him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”

John 4: 14

No intelligent, observant, and sensitive human being can fail to notice that something isn't quite right with the human race. Christian Doctrine calls that state of not being quite right “Original Sin”. Original Sin never meant the absolute corruption of human nature. Humanity remained strong in many ways. It was capable of great nobility, and often began grand new projects with tremendous energy. Yet, for all that, human nature was not reliable. Even after the guilt of Original Sin is removed, that unreliability remains. Humanity remains weak in many ways. From nobility it falls, seemingly inevitably, into selfishness. The projects it begins with such energy fall prey to entropy, and human affairs witness a weary pattern of decline and fall. All is not well with us.

The human body, that mere physical organism, is a splendid thing, yet fundamentally meaningless without a human soul to go with it. The human soul is even more splendid, yet without the conscious presence of God it lacks direction, meaning, and purpose. Lacking direction, meaning, and purpose, the human soul is radically inconsistent and unreliable, soaring into nobility one moment and falling back into crude selfishness the next, beginning great things proudly, and later on slinking away from ignominious failure. To be consistently noble, and to accomplish things of lasting value, the human soul needs conscious awareness of the presence of God. This is what the Lord Jesus means when He says to the Samaritan Woman at the well “Whoever drinks the water I shall give him will never thirst; the water I shall give will become within him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” The Water the Lord Jesus gives is His Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus Christ makes those who, by Faith, receive Him, consciously aware of the presence of God. From that conscious awareness of God's presence comes reliable nobility of soul, and the ability to do good works that carry over into Eternal Life.

Conscious awareness of the presence of God gives too many things to our human souls to be recounted in one homily, but I will mention two, namely, a good and confident conscience, as opposed to feelings of shame, and true contrition, as opposed to feelings of regret.

When, by the gift of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, received through Faith, we have a conscious awareness of God's presence, we have a good conscience and authentic confidence. We are ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing.

Ashamed of nothing! How is that possible? Don't we all have sins?

Indeed, we do all have sins. But there is a difference between admitting our sins, and feeling ashamed. Made aware of the presence of God by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we are necessarily aware of how Jesus Christ has put Himself between our sins and divine Judgment. Despite our

sins, therefore, we lift up our heads. We are not blind to our sins, but we see them in the light of Jesus Christ. We know we are sinners, but also know that Jesus Christ enables us to grow out of our sins and into God. Although we know we don't need to trumpet our sins to the world (a deeply annoying habit), we also know that we don't need to hide them anymore. They are what they are; and how little they matter, in light of the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ.

How to describe the confidence that comes from conscious awareness of the presence of God? It is not easy to describe. Some metaphors may be attempted. Have you noticed that the frightening and irritating thing about dreams is your complete helplessness? All sorts of things are going on, and you can't do a thing about them. Then you wake up, and are in charge of your life again. Conscious awareness of God's presence is like that. It is like waking up, and knowing that you are in control of yourself again. Do you remember what it is like to be unable to solve a math problem? You experience mounting frustration (in one case in my young life, enough frustration to break pencils and throw their pieces across the room at a better mathematician who was smirking annoyingly). Then you finally find the answer, and are relieved, calm, and a little triumphant. Conscious awareness of God's presence is like that. It is knowing that you have the answer to life's biggest questions. Who made me? Why am I here? God made me! I am here to know, love and serve Him, and ultimately to be happy with Him forever! The Lord Jesus promised to give a peace which this world does not give, and this is it. Conscious awareness of the presence of God is in itself adequate proof for ourselves of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. To those who have not yet drunk the Water of Life, this probably seems like no proof at all. All we can do is invite them to be open to Faith, offer some rational arguments for being open to Faith, pray for them to be touched by the Holy Spirit, and testify to the internal proof that we ourselves experience, the Water of Life, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, making us consciously aware of God's presence. This is what St. Paul means in chapter 8 of Romans when he writes "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God"

Along with a good, confident conscience, conscious awareness of God's presence gives us true contrition, as opposed to feelings of regret. True contrition is awareness of sin, mixed with consolation and peace. The Lord Jesus says in the Beatitudes "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be consoled". This is true particularly of those who mourn for their sins. They face and confess their sins in the light of Jesus Christ and in the presence of God, and instantly are consoled. Those sins are forgiven, and are revealed as meaningless, in comparison to the awesome presence of the God Who is Love.

No feelings are more purely miserable than feelings of regret. We feel that we have wasted time and opportunities. We feel that we have wasted life. True contrition feels quite different. Consciously aware of the presence of God, we know that time, though misused, has not been wasted. It can be redeemed. With God's help, good can be drawn from what otherwise might seem empty years. With that holy awareness we know that opportunities, though misused, have not been wasted. They can be redeemed. With God's help, we can find lessons and blessings in past events that otherwise seem pointless and useless. We know that life has not been wasted. Consciously aware of God's presence now, we look back and realize, perhaps

with a start, that He was never absent and, even in those days, was obscurely but insistently guiding us.

Conscious awareness of God's presence enables us to accept our history. We no longer want to rewrite our past. There were sins and stupidities in it, but we would no longer erase them, even if we could. Those very sins and stupidities give opportunity for the love of God to go to work, and for the providence of God to triumph. Feelings of regret close the heart, and make it feel deadly tired. True contrition opens the heart, and energizes it. Feelings of regret cause us to sink into the past. True contrition enables us to leap into the future.

Regrets and shame both kill us. Without consciousness of God's presence, we will not have authentic confidence and true contrition, only regrets and shame. Those two things are not of God. They imprison us in our own gloomy thoughts and memories. Shame keeps us from confessing to the world; and, indeed, if we did confess to the world, what would it, though guiltier than we, be able to say except "shame on you!", intensifying regret's stranglehold? The Water of Life Jesus offers is the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Counselor. The world is no paraclete. It cannot turn shame into confidence, or regret into energetic contrition. The world, though guiltier than we (I say again), can only tell us to sink into the swamp of our shame and regret, until we drown in that muck.

Shame and regret are the world's response to sins and stupidities. The world is a hypocrite that damns one person's sins and stupidities even as it ignores another's, and praises a third's. When the world does decide to notice anyone's sins and stupidities, all it has the imagination to do is send that person to prison, the most miserable prison of all, our own shame ridden thoughts and regret riddled memories. There is no worse torture. Isn't there a drug to distract the sufferer for a while? Often there is such a drug, of one sort or another; yet all it can do, at best, is distract. The shame and regret remain. Indeed, under the influence of the drug of choice, still more shame and regret may be accumulated.

Rather than a drug to make their prison bearable for a moment, people need a prison break. They need someone to help them escape from shame and regret. God has sent Someone. And that One says "whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life" This water is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, giving conscious awareness of God's presence. That awareness replaces shame with authentic confidence, and regrets with true contrition. That awareness reduces sin to insignificance, in comparison to the Divine Love poured out in Jesus Christ. Then we are confident! That awareness enables us to redeem our past rather than regret it, and energizes us for a future full of hope.

So many people live year after year in misery, trapped in useless shame and pointless regret. Yet, because there are reasons for that shame and regret, genuine sins and stupidities in their past, they cannot escape on their own. The sun is beating down, and they are slowly dying of thirst. There is Water though, not far away. They need only have Faith enough to drink. That is where the Church comes in. Our business is to disturb their misery, to interrupt their distractions

- indeed, to “interfere” in the secular order - and to shout out “All you who are thirsty, come to the Water!” (Isaiah 55:1).

Without that Water of Life, conscious awareness of God’s presence, given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, people remain cold deserts inside. Many live - and, God, help us, many die - in such cold dryness. Rich and poor - that doesn’t matter, for the Water of Life is not to be purchased. It can only be received, through Faith. Possessing a doctoral degree or never having graduated from high school - that doesn’t matter, for the Water is life is not to be analyzed. It can only be received, through Faith. The man with three 5 million dollar houses, and the man with no home at all, alike they drag through one weary day and one weary year after another, too burdened with shame and regret to live, and too full of fear to die. The man who, in an imperial capital city, regularly takes part in decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people, and the man to whom no one in the local grocery store says hello, alike they are dying inside. Now, we might suppose that the man with the 5 million dollar houses, and the man who has influence in the imperial capital, have more distractions from their killing dryness. That is likely enough; and yet the deadly dryness remains. Life rolls along. Investments fail, and politics change. The world spins some more, and friends die and health falls apart. What is there then to distract from the dryness of shame and regret?

Not a mere distraction but a true healing, the Water is still there. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is never far away. One only needs Faith enough to drink. With drinking comes conscious awareness of God’s presence, and that changes everything. Only God is changeless. Only God is Love, through and through. Only God is Truth. Only God is Life, and can share Life to the full. Only God can perfect us. Only God can satisfy us. Only God can give us peace. Only God can replace our secret shame with glorious confidence. Only God can replace our killing regrets with energizing contrition.

With joy, let us draw water at the Fountain of Salvation. This is the time and place to do so. Lord Jesus, increase our Faith, and enable us to drink Your Spirit! By the power of that Drink, we no longer fear even our sins, and no longer regret even our past. By the power of that Drink, we face the world with confidence, and march joyfully into the future. What, after all, is in our future except God, God in Whose Grace we stand? In our future there waits for us God Himself, Who has proven His love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.