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# **Trials in Life's Pilgrimage**

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## **Trials in Life's Pilgrimage**

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## **Fourth Sunday of Lent**

Sunday Readings for March 18, 2012 for Cycle B:  
2 Chr 36:14-23; Ps 137; Eph 2:4-10; Jn 3:14-21, 30

### **TRIALS IN LIFE'S PILGRIMAGE**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

Quoting St. Augustine's City of God, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council explained the situation of the Church in the world.

The Church, 'like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God', announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes (see 1 Corinthians 11:26) (*The Church* #8).

The pattern of pilgrimage in a hostile world was already part of Israel's experience, especially during the periods of Egyptian slavery and the Babylonian Exile (586-538 B. C.). The Exodus under Moses was the profound experience of deliverance that became the model for understanding God's hand in all subsequent trials. The symbols of the Exodus-Sinai events were evoked to interpret the meaning of great acts of redemption for both Jews and Christians.

The salvation of the Church was foreshadowed mystically by the Chosen People's Exodus from the land of bondage (Vatican II, *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions* #4).

The Books of Chronicles were written sometime after the restoration of the exiled people to their land. So this narrative presents a sweep of history that goes beyond that of Second Kings. The passage for the Fourth Sunday of Lent constitutes the end of the Chronicler's work. He states that Israel's sins, especially of idolatry, caused the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and the Exile. What historian outside the biblical tradition ever blamed his own community for the disasters of war? More precisely, the author remarked that the Exile of seventy years (probably counting from 604 B. C., when Nebuchadnezzar first demanded tribute from Jerusalem) gave the land of Israel the sabbatical rest (see Lev 25:1-7) that it did not receive in the 490 years of the First Temple period. Perhaps this seems farfetched to us, but as we have entered the third century after the "Industrial Revolution" and the ecological disasters that human greed has brought, there may well be a lesson for our day.

"The Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia", who had conquered the Babylonian Empire, to order that a house be built for God in Jerusalem. The God of Israel is the Lord of history, so all is under his judgment. Undoubtedly divine inspiration and graces are offered to all leaders in our world, great or small, yet the primordial gift of free will can so easily be warped to false purposes! Like the Jewish community (see Jer 29:7), the Church encourages us to pray for our political leaders that they may acknowledge God and his gifts, respect all human beings and their rights.

The Gospel text for this Sunday is taken from the end of John's account about the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Baptism constitutes the beginning of a new life from above; each person is born of the Spirit and thereby enabled to enter the Kingdom of God (3:5-8). This sacrament also introduces the person into the Church, the community of those who accept the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Death-and-Resurrection. This mystery (unveiling of God's plan) is explained in terms of the Exodus. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert (see Num 21:4-9), so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). After Israel was rescued from oppression in Egypt they wandered for forty years through the desert, gradually learning the meaning of the Covenant and the life of faith to which they were called.

Moses suffered because of the human tendency to complain about the present and to recall only a rosy picture of the past. "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water?" (Num 21:5). When the people understood that an attack by poisonous snakes was a punishment for their complaints, Moses interceded for them and, at God's command, made the equivalent of the caduceus as a sign of divine mercy and healing.

At times we may not see the direction of our pilgrimage, afflicted perhaps by persecution from without or nagging doubts within. The consolations of God and the gift of faith flow from the crucified Lord, so we look to him, acknowledging that through his Death-and-Resurrection we already have the inestimable gift of healing and eternal life.