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March 23, 2014

Life-giving Waters of Baptism

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Life-giving Waters of Baptism

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This article was previously published in *The Catholic Advocate*.

Third Sunday of Lent

Sunday Readings for March 23, 2014 for Cycle A:

Ex 17:3-7; Ps 95:1-9; Rom 5:1-2, 5-8; Jn 4:5-42

LIFE-GIVING WATERS OF BAPTISM

Lawrence E. Frizzell

During the season of Lent the Church teaches us to appreciate the marvel of divine mercy in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Death-and-Resurrection. God's loving kindness (*hesed* in Hebrew) is a gift intimately associated with the Covenant; the specific note stressed by "mercy" (*eleos* in Greek often translated *hesed* in the Bible used by the early Church) is the acknowledgment of human sinfulness and need of forgiveness. "It is important to impress on the minds of the faithful not only the social consequences of sin but also the fact that the real essence of the virtue of penance is hatred of sin as an offense against God" (Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #109, regarding Lent).

We began Lent with the penitential symbol of ashes; on the First Sunday we recalled the contrast between our disobedient first parents and the Son who was obedient to the Father, even unto death. The theme of the Third Sunday is the bestowal of life-giving water upon God's people, who are also in desperate need of the cleansing power of divine mercy. These readings can lead us to reflect upon the sacraments of Baptism and Penance as we intensify our preparation for Holy Week.

To penetrate into the meaning of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, we must refresh our memory concerning the Exodus from Egypt and the wandering of the Israelites in the Sinai desert.

The New Testament writers teach that the "hour" of Jesus (when he passes through death to the Father) should be understood within the framework of the Passover, the annual Jewish celebration of the Exodus.

When the Israelites lacked the precious water necessary for themselves and their flocks they forgot the miseries of slavery and the wonders of God's work of deliverance. They complained against Moses so vociferously that he feared for his life. Only he knew enough to turn to God in prayer during the hour of need. To overcome the sin of doubting God's presence with us in times of distress or crisis, we should cultivate a greater knowledge of God's ways. This can be accomplished through prayerful study of the Scriptures and the history of the Church.

Over the centuries people in the Middle East saved water from the winter rains to sustain them throughout the dry, hot summer. However, they naturally preferred "living water" from a flowing stream or fountain to the stale contents of a cistern. Women came to the well of Jacob in the early morning or evening and there exchanged the news of the day as they filled their jugs with cold, fresh water. Who would come to draw water at noon? Only a woman who was ostracized because of sin! Jesus challenged her to acknowledge the irregularity of her marital relationships so that he can bestow upon her, and the community where she lives, the gift of water that manifests the new

life of the Spirit.

Those who share in this life must overcome the sins of division that so often pit one group against another. Today Jews and Samaritans live in relative harmony, but the deep divisions between Israeli and Arab, between Jew and Muslim, Muslim and Christian must be exposed to the healing, cleansing water of divine teaching. Then will each person be able to embrace the true vocation of being human. "My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to finish his work" (Jn 4:34).