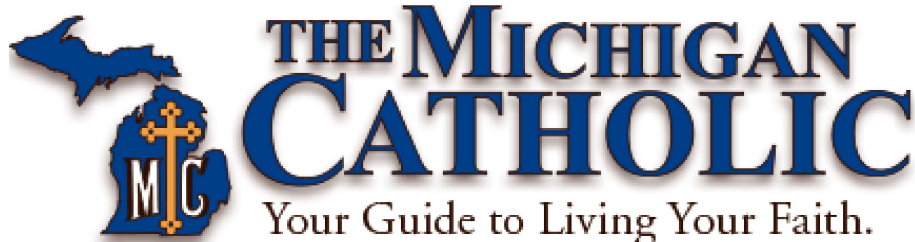


On Aug. 1, Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron announced the closure of The Michigan Catholic and the creation of a new, digital news site, Detroit Catholic, which will launch in November. Until then, further developments and news will be posted here and on The Michigan Catholic's Facebook page.

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## Who were the Samaritan woman's five husbands?

by Gary Michuta • April 28, 2016

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Angelica Kauffman's 18th-century painting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus' conversation with the woman about her "five husbands" has a deeper meaning beyond just the woman's own checkered marital history.

CNS Photo

When Jesus was traveling from Judea to Galilee, he took an unusual route. He went through Samaria. Samaritans and Jews were not on friendly terms and most Jews tried to avoid that route. Instead, our Lord made his way through Samaria, resting at a place called Jacob's well, where he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink.

We're all pretty familiar with this meeting in John 4, but have you ever noticed how their conversation takes a strange turn at the end?

Let's quickly outline the path of their conversation: Jesus asks for a drink. The Samaritan woman is surprised at his request because Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans. Jesus responds that if she knew who he was she'd ask him for "living water." When she said she would like this "living water," Jesus asks her to get her husband.

Stop. OK, that's the first odd turn in this conversation. What makes Jesus ask for her husband now after she expressed a desire to receive the "living water" that satisfies every thirst? The woman responds, "I don't have a husband" and Jesus replies, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband" (John 4:17-18).

Her response takes another odd turn. First, she says, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet." That makes sense. How else would Jesus know about her checkered past? But then she says something very odd: "...Our ancestors worshiped on this

mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Where did that come from? Why would the Samaritan woman suddenly change subjects from marriage to the nature of true worship? Why did this conversation make these strange twists and turns?

A little digging reveals one possible answer.

A feature of John's Gospels is that conversations often take place on two levels. For example, when Nicodemus visited Jesus at night, Jesus told him, “... no one can see the kingdom of heaven unless he is born from above” or “born again.” Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus to be speaking about physical birth, when Jesus is actually talking about supernatural rebirth in baptism (John 3:1-12). The same might be true here.

On the earthly level, Jesus and the Samaritan woman are discussing her current matrimonial history, but there seems to be more going on here. The Samaritan's personal history seems to have run parallel to the religious history of Samaria.

Samaria was once part of the northern kingdom of Israel, which had broken off from the Davidic Kingdom. It had set up its own monarchy and form of worship until Assyria invaded and sent most of its inhabitants into exile. The king of Assyria brought pagans into Samaria to settle there (1 Kings 17:24).

Interestingly enough, 1 Kings 17:30-31 tells us there were five groups that settled there, each worshipping their own pagan gods: The Babylonians worshipped Marduk; the men of Cuth worshipped Nergal; the men of Avva worshipped Nibhaz and Tartak; the men of Sepharvaim worshipped their city gods; and King Hadad worshipped Anath.

Even though the Israelites were joined in covenant to the one true God, they intermarried with these foreigners and adopted their worship and practices. This is why the Jews wouldn't have anything in common with Samaritans — because their assimilation with these pagans had defiled them. Samaria, like the woman at the well, had five husbands and was estranged from her true husband.

If this is true, the transition from talking about “five husbands” to “true worship” naturally follows. Samaria's checkered past had distorted its worship, insisting that true worship must take place on Mount Gerizim, not in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus' message to the woman and Samaria is that he fulfills all that the temple signified and will unite Samaritans, Jews, and all peoples together to worship God in spirit and truth.

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