<u>Third Sunday of Lent, 2023</u>—

Amid all the recent videos and images, I viewed last week, one really stands out.
The video was posted two years ago online in the middle of the pandemic, and it showed deserted streets in beautiful Siena…Italy. Siena was home to one of our greatest saints, a doctor of the Church, which is one of our highest distinctions for saints. Her name is Catherine of…Siena.

At the time the video was made, Italy was undergoing a strict COVID quarantine. Millions of people were in lockdown.
Now, the video itself shows nothing particularly remarkable. But what is remarkable is what you hear: voices rising in song. Men, women, grandmothers, young, old. Some stand at their open windows. Others lean out on their balconies.

Suddenly, a few start to chant to empty streets and alleyways below. They sing: "*Canto Della Verbena*," which translates as: "And While Siena Sleeps." It's a popular folk song there. And once the singing begins, nobody can stay silent. Even the dogs start barking. The song says: *And while Siena sleeps, everything is silent, and the moon lights up the night. So, feel together in the dark, together in the peace…long live our Siena, long live our Siena!*

With these words, the people of Siena share their courage and their confidence, their friendship, and their hope. It is their way of saying: "We are still one. We may be separated by current conditions. But we are still united."

After seeing the video, I read some Twitter follow-up comments. One person said: "This video recording is a reminder that the human spirit keeps us all going in hope. We shine our best in the darkness."

Now, there's a phrase, right? *"We shine our best in the darkness."* Can we remember these words? At this hour, in 2023, they remain our call as Catholics as well. Many people you and I know are facing the days ahead with anxiety, uncertainty, and even fear. We might say that's understandable. It's easy to imagine that what lies ahead for us is scary.

But my mind keeps going back to the words from last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus' words to his terrified disciples at the Transfiguration. They were experiencing something they couldn't know or understand. And what does Jesus say then? Remember? He says: "Rise, and do not be afraid." These are words for us to live by. They have been so for two thousand years.

Many of our religious ancestors have held fast to these words, standing before emperors and executioners—confronting plagues and war and pestilence—worshipping in secret undergrounds or declaring in public before firing squads: "Viva, Cristo Rey!"

Through it all, they prayed together—they hoped together—they worshipped together—and they sang together.

These simple words— "Be not afraid"— even give a title to one of our most popular and cherished hymns in the Church today.

Now, historians will tell you we have faced far worse than what we are facing currently. Many, if not most, crises we are seeing now will pass—and hopefully soon. But we need to remind ourselves of who we are and what we believe—and carry our faith proudly in our hearts—a faith that stands in defiance of fear and anxiety—a faith that rests on: "Rise, and do not be afraid." We carry within us the light of Christ. And, yes: we shine our best in the darkness.

For confirmation of that, all we need to do is read the first few lines of today's Gospel where we encounter not only the Woman at the Well, but also Jesus who is very tried and very thirsty from his journey. And we're reminded here—and later when he asks for a drink of water—of Jesus' undeniable humanity—his immersion with our conditions of discomfort and OUR physical needs.

As St. Paul puts it: "He was a man like us in all things, but sin." Our God is not detached or distant or aloof. He understands us better than we may realize. He knows our weariness, our fears,

our temptations to doubt or to despair. And he knows how we thirst. How we thirst for understanding and for consolation and for relationships. How we thirst for justice and for peace. How we thirst in our hearts for God's mercy. How we thirst for hope. And he reminds us again and again: He is with us.

For example, he reassures Moses in our first reading today when he says: "I will be standing there in front of you. Strike the rock, and water will flow from it." Our God does not abandon us. "Rise and do not be afraid." He is here.

Lent is a time when we are called to prayer, to holiness, to generosity, to courage. It is a time we have been made for. It is our moment to lift our voices—to lift them in prayer and, like the people of Siena, Italy, to lift them in song.

When I think of the singing of those people of Siena, I wonder if there is something in their character that helped make Catherine of Siena the amazing saint she became. She was nothing if not courageous—and she asked that of others. She once wrote:

"*Start being brave about everything. Drive out darkness and spread light. Don't look at your weaknesses. Realize instead that in Jesus crucified you can do much you can't imagine right now.*"

"Spread light." We can do no less, right? As we prepare to receive Jesus in the Eucharist today, we remember what we received at our baptism—the light of Jesus—and we pray to make it burn brighter. We pray for Jesus to strengthen us—to uplift us—to embolden us—and to reassure us. This is who we are. and what we have been made for. We are Catholics—Catholic Christians. We carry within us the light of Christ. And…we shine best—and we can be seen best—in whatever darkness may be around us.

Please give it some thought….