

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Martha Mary and Discipleship”

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As a priest, and now as a bishop, whenever I want to throw a dinner party at my place I either try to get a friend to help with hosting the gathering or I get someone to work the kitchen for me. The reason is simple. It is extremely hard to simultaneously get dinner ready and welcome people at the door, providing the necessary chit chat, while the pot is boiling over on the stove. You need someone in the kitchen, and you need someone in the living room sitting at their guest’s feet, so to speak. Both tasks are necessary for the dinner to go well, but there is no question, in my mind anyway, which task is both more enjoyable and more important for the success of the evening. Even if the dinner is subpar, so long as the conversation is good, the dinner is a success. I have accomplished what I set out to do, I have built up relationships, I have made better friendships, and I have celebrated life with other human beings, even if, before going to bed, I must first sip from the chalice of Pepto Bismol. I am not a great cook.

And so, there is Mary at the feet of Jesus, a model disciple, gratefully taking in every word from her master’s mouth. There is Martha, who is the model hostess, making sure everything is perfect, the linens, the food and drink, the proper candlelight. Martha, beginning to feel overwhelmed, wonders why Mary is just sitting there and not helping her get dinner ready. Of course, if the Son of God is visiting you, it is probably better to take as much time as you can to visit with him. And so, Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things...Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

Of course, in my house growing up, Martha might have lost it, thrown a head of lettuce in Jesus’ lap, “How about you fix dinner while I will choose the better part here with Mary!” Martha of course is a saint, and so is my mother. Her birthday is on the feast of St. Martha, very appropriate. The truth is this Gospel hits on the very important theme of hospitality and the role of hospitality in the life of the Church. We see this in our first reading of the famous encounter of Abraham and Sarah with three travelers. Abraham graciously offers his three guests hospitality. They, of course, turn out to be messengers of the Almighty, angels essentially. Abraham provides his guests with gracious company while Sarah quickly gets the dinner ready. Abraham is at the feet of his guests, so to speak, while Sarah busily prepares the food and table. Both Abraham and Sarah provide the necessary hospitality, but there is no question of who had the better part of the deal. Nevertheless, both are blessed by the three visitors with the joyful news that Sarah will have a miraculous birth within a year’s time. Christians, of course, see in the three angels an Old Testament suggestion of what we understand as the Holy Trinity. There is an old and yet popular icon by Rublev that depicts this interpretation.

Now, St. Augustine, suggested that the Church seems to be filled by disciples who are Marys and disciples who are Marthas (Sermon 54, Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament). For St. Augustine, the Marys represent the contemplative side of the Church, the praying side of the Church, the ones who sit at the feet of the Lord, learning from him, developing a deeper relationship with Him, they are at adoration praying before the Blessed Sacrament, they are in the Bible Study, they are in the church thirty minutes before mass with their rosary. The Marthas, on the other hand, represent the active side of the Church, the ones

who make sure the buildings look nice, the vestments are worthy, the sacristy is properly prepared, the liturgy is elegant, and the music is beautiful. The active side of the Church is also out there working for the welfare of the poor and outcast, stuffing bags with canned goods, etc.

St. Augustine seems to suggest that, for the Church to be healthy, the Church needs both the Marys and the Marthas. The Church needs both the contemplative side of the Church and the active side of the Church. Further, the Marys and the Marthas both need each other. Mary can't pray in the Church unless a Martha opened the Church. Mary can't grow closer to the Lord through the Liturgy unless there are a fleet of Marthas preparing every detail with care.

Now, in my mind, it would do well for the Marys of our Church to lend a hand to the Marthas from time to time, while staying rooted in their relationship with the Lord. On the other hand, it is important for the Marthas of a parish to remember they are first called to be Marys, because it is difficult, if not futile, to be active ministers in a church if that active ministry isn't originating from the heart of a disciple, a disciple who spends significant time attentively at the feet of the Lord. If you read about the lives of saintly Catholics who were very active in their ministries, like Saint Teresa of Calcutta or Dorothy Day, you may be surprised at how much time they spent in a chapel each day, praying at the feet of the Lord, before engaging in their ministries of service.

For this reason, I believe every one of us needs to have both a Mary and a Martha in us. To be a healthy Catholic is to unite in the soul the contemplative life and the active life. That mix will be different for every one of us. For those who work all week on the job and at home, this can be a challenging message indeed. My friends, can we devise strategies to help ourselves, every member of our family, circle of friends, and fellow parishioners to be rooted in the Mary side of our relationship with God and neighbor? Do we care enough to voluntarily give the Marthas in our lives a break every so often, so she too can be rooted in the better part?

For we know the task of running a healthy parish takes the combined effort of an army of Marthas, everyone doing their part. On the other hand, if we are not first Marys in our daily lives, our efforts are in vain. The Gospel challenges our parish, and in truth the Gospel requires all of us at home and outside of home, to root all our activities in our prayerful discipleship of the Lord. This is very important because, as imperative as all the things we have to do each day, if these activities are not rooted in a relationship with Jesus Christ, at some point we have to ask ourselves, why does it matter?