



FOUR REFLECTIONS ON THE MARY/MARTHA STORY

REFLECTION 1: Keeping a balance between the active and contemplative dimensions of life

This first reflection, which I wrote for our Small Christian Communities, helps to contextualize the story in Luke's Gospel.

Scholars like to point out the placement of this story in Luke's Gospel. It comes immediately on the heels of the Parable of the Good Samaritan which highlights the "action dimension" of the Christian life. This story aims to balance that by drawing attention to the "contemplative dimension." It is not intended to be a put-down on Martha and her attention to the practical details of hospitality. Without the Marthas of this world, Jesus may not have gotten something to eat and the dirty dishes would have all piled up in the kitchen. Having said that, Martha needed to learn that even more important than the practical details of hospitality, was the action of sitting at the feet of Jesus in order to listen to his words. The "better part" is to be devoted to Christ above all things and to be his faithful disciple, which in reality will involve both listening to Jesus and following his Word. In the Christian life, we are called to integrate the *active* and *contemplative* dimensions. We go from prayer to action and from action to prayer and hope that our action will also be a prayer. We need to keep integrating the Martha and Mary dimensions of our Christian life.

REFLECTION 2: A busy mother's attempt to pray

Carol Powell shares these thoughts on her attempts to build contemplation into her busy life. She writes:

A friend of mine once asked me how I could possibly find the time to pray having four children and a full-time job. My reply was in the words of Evelyn Newman who said, "I am too busy not to pray." My life is so hectic and frantic that if I didn't take time to be

with God at the center of myself, I would be swallowed up in confusion and chaos.

*You might say that I slipped into **Centering Prayer** accidentally. Once, as a young girl when I had to make a very difficult decision, I found myself inspired to let the answer well up from the center of myself. For nine days whenever anxieties would assail me regarding the decision, I would repeat inside myself, "Come, Holy Spirit." Then, during times of prayer, I would just present myself to God as I was without trying to say any particular prayers or think pious thoughts. At the end of those nine days, I experienced a peace that I had never known before and an appropriate decision did surface effortlessly.*

Later on in my life, after having three children in three and a half years, I was completely overwhelmed with duties and responsibilities. At first, I considered going away on vacation to regain my strength, but realized that at the end of that period I would still have to face the same situations. Instead, I took the money that I would have used for the trip and got a baby-sitter for two hours each day. During that time, I went to our local church and just sat in God's presence. Again, I didn't try to think profound thoughts or say particular prayers. I just let whatever thoughts or feelings that would well up within me come, all in God's presence.

When it was the time to be myself before God, amazing things happened. Not only did I discover a new peace, but I became aware that prayer was becoming simpler and deeper. My feelings were becoming much more integrated and I was able to see my life in greater perspective.

*Some of the things I discovered is that there are **innumerable opportunities to pray even in the busy life of the mother of a large family, once one gets one's priorities straight.** I realized that although there are two great commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole strength and your whole soul," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," I could not really practice that second commandment unless God is the center of my life. From experience, I knew that my human love was too limited and could too easily degenerate into selfishness and manipulation.*

*So, it is not a question of searching for God or straining our minds to think of Him or to pray to Him. **God is the very air that we breathe, the atmosphere that we live in.** Our quest is not to look up to find God; rather to look within, to look at our world and the*

people who live in it. As Teilhard de Chardin so beautifully expressed it, we are already living in the Divine Milieu. Prayer is merely the means for opening our awareness to a **reality which already exists!**

REFLECTION 3: Being active for God and being quiet with God

A priest from Tennessee, whose name eludes me, wrote the following:

In today's gospel we find Martha hustling around the kitchen getting dinner ready, very likely wanting to impress the special guest, Christ Jesus. But her sister, Mary, was taking it easy, not doing anything in the kitchen, just sitting in the parlor with the guest. And so Martha lost her cool, complaining even to the guest that her sister was dogging it.

So we have at first sight what appears to be an ordinary theme: how to get along in the household. But then Jesus himself enters the fray, innocuous as it was, to dissipate the ordinariness of the scene. He says, if we might invoke the modern idiom, "Chill out, Martha, because there is a deeper meaning in Mary's choice."

There is always deeper meaning when one chooses to be in the presence of God. And that obviously was what Mary was choosing to do, kitchen or no kitchen.

*So, a conspicuous tension arose in those Martha-Mary moments: between the necessity of **active time for God** and **quiet time with God**. Both are vital for promoting the life and mission of the Christ mystery. If we can have a little license with linguistics, we might call Martha's hustle and bustle in the kitchen the **active time for God**, and the reflective desire of Mary to be in the presence of the Lord, in a special manner, **quiet time with God**.*

Now, there is no challenge to the necessity of active time for God. But that is only one part of the mission of Christ. True, it is an important one for which the Church is truly grateful to all the generous people who make things happen, as it were, "in the kitchen." Without this "Martha hustling" to get things done, the Church wouldn't get very far. Nothing would happen.

It's very similar to the way the airlines accomplish their mission. What most of us see and hear as we fly from one city to another is an active execution of ticket details, meals in the air, pilots messing with lights and

gadgets, and a cabin attendant demonstrating an oxygen mask. That's the active part of the mission. What we don't see is the quiet time the pilots and others put in behind the scenes.

If the pilot, for example, expends two hours flying us to our destination, you might be surprised to learn that he put in more than two hours preparing, behind the scenes, to do the flight. That was his "quiet" time, his reflective moments about the flight. Such moments may

*not be exactly with God but definitely with God's elements: air, weather, time, heat, energy, and the like. And if an emergency develops, the pilot will really be looking for moments **with** God!*

*Now after all that analogical wandering, we embrace our theme: For the Christ mystery, we need quiet time **with** God, as well as active time **for** God or any other purpose in this life. We need "Mary moments" as well as "Martha moments."*

We need specific time in the quiet presence of Our Lord, as well as in all the hustle and bustle of our work and leisure.

REFLECTION 4: Priorities

Our sympathy is with Martha, it might seem then, that Jesus was unfair to her. After all, the Gospel places great emphasis on deeds. Yet here he praises, not the doer, but the one who sits and listens. It wasn't that Jesus didn't appreciate what Martha was doing. Nor was he scolding her. What comes across is his concern for her.

He was making a point for the benefit of people like Martha, who are essentially generous people but over-anxious about getting things done. It's not simply that she was busy, but that she was too busy. Always anxious and worried, she was the slave of her duties.

Our daily lives are made up of a round of chores and duties which fall into two categories: the urgent, and the essential. Many of the things we do could be said to be urgent, but only a few are truly essential. We have to distinguish between the two. Like Martha, we tend to give priority to the urgent. The essential, the one thing necessary, gets postponed until later, when, if it is done at all, it is done hurriedly and badly.

How can we tell what our priorities are? The best way to recognize our actual priorities is to reflect on our normal behavior. What do we give most time to?

...We need quiet time with God, as well as active time for God... We need "Mary moments" as well as "Martha moments."

What gets most of our energy? These are our priorities in fact. It may take a tragedy or an emergency to put things into perspective for us, and to remind us of what really matters.

It's the easiest thing in the world to get one's priorities wrong. When Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, late Archbishop of Chicago, learned that he had terminal cancer, he said: "I came to realize how much of what consumes our daily life is trivial and insignificant."

Mary got her priorities right—she dropped everything and listened to the words of Jesus. Many people would be able to identify more with Martha—busy about many things, yet constantly short of time. They are workaholics. We need to look beyond the daily chores and urgencies. We need to devote time to ourselves. Above all, we need time for reflection. The American psychotherapist and writer, Thomas Moore, says: "There is no doubt but that some people could spare themselves the expense and trouble of psychotherapy simply by giving themselves a few minutes each day for quiet reflection. This simple act would provide what is missing in their lives—a period of non-doing that is essential nourishment to the soul."

If we could spend some quiet time with God, our lives would be calmer, less driven by anxiety and worry, and deeper and richer. In fact, everything would benefit our spiritual life, our relationships, even our work.

Action and contemplation are not meant to be contrasted. Both are necessary, and have to be integrated into life.

With all the world competing for our attention, how do we do this? It isn't easy. But just as Mary got in her time with Christ, we too can gain some precious moments with him.

Reflection from Henri Nouwen

If you are often distracted during prayer, you will probably be consoled by these words of Henri Nouwen, regarded as one of the great spiritual authors of our time.

My time apart is not a time ... of deep prayer, nor a time in which I experience a special closeness to God; it is not a period of serious attentiveness to the divine mysteries. I wish it were! On the contrary, it is full of distractions, inner restlessness, sleepiness, confusion, and boredom. It seldom, if ever, pleases my senses. But the simple fact of being for one hour in the presence of

the Lord and of showing him all that I feel, think, sense, and experience, without trying to hide anything, must please him. Somehow, somewhere, I know that he loves me, even though I do not feel that love as I can feel a human embrace, even though I do not hear a voice as I hear human words of consolation, even though I do not see a smile, as I can see in a human face. Still God speaks to me, looks at me, and embraces me there, where I am still unable to notice it.

When Feeling Spiritually Dry

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand.

My mind is not able to concentrate on you; my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone.

But in faith I cling to you.

I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort.

I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair; let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen.

- Fr. Henri Nouwen

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran

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