THREE REFLECTIONS ON THE MARY/MARTHA STORY

Reflection for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Today we listened to the well known visit of Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha. In his column I will share with you three reflections on this story.

Reflection One: Keeping a balance between the active and contemplative dimension 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 highlighted the "action-dimension" of the Christian life. This story is intended to balance that by highlighting the "contemplative-dimension." The story is not intended to be a put-down on Martha and her attention to the practical details of hospitality. Without the Martha's 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 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 balance and 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 in balance the Martha and Mary dimensions of our Christian life.

Reflection Two. Being active for God and being quiet with God.

A priest from Tennessee whose names eludes me writes:

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 ordinariess of the scene. He ways, 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.