

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Gn 18:1-10; Col 1:24-28; Lk 10:38-42

Our natural sympathies are probably with Martha in today's Gospel reading. After all, she was doing all the work. Why did the Holy Spirit inspire Luke to remember and record this incident for the Church? What do Martha and Mary represent for us?

Traditionally, Martha and Mary have been taken to represent two dimensions of institutional life in the Church, the active and the contemplative life. The Church needs both. We need those who work in the world to spread the Gospel and Christian values and who work for fairness and for peace. We also need those who support them in prayer. We need work and prayer. They are not rivals, but allies, partners in the work of the Gospel.

One level of understanding Martha and Mary is as two vocations in the Church, active and contemplative, which the Church deeply needs.

On another level, Martha and Mary also stand for two dimensions inside each one of us. One is the desire to achieve, to work, to raise a family, to make a difference and to accomplish something. That is the Martha dimension. The other need we all have, which is unique to human beings, is the need to pause, to look at where our life is going, to listen to the Lord. This is the Mary dimension that is unique to us. Prayer and reflection give us the rudder to guide our life. Otherwise we are like a leaf that the wind pushes anywhere.

We recognize a level where Martha and Mary touch home with us in the need to work and the need to pause and pray. We human beings need both.

We also see a level that has to do with our prayer. Martha and Mary represent two kinds of prayer in our life.

We can so easily limit prayer to "*saying prayers*, the Martha part, that we forget the prayer of silent listening to God that is represented by Mary in this Gospel.

The prayer of silent listening, "*being with the Lord*," is necessary for a mature and strong spiritual life. Being in the quiet presence of Jesus gives us a chance to pull all the separate strands of our life together. It is like stopping and looking at a road map to compare where we are with our final (eternal) destination.

Through this prayer of listening, we begin to recognize the presence of God who comes to us in all kinds of unexpected ways as God does to Abraham in today's first reading, in the disguise

of three visitors. God enters our life in all kinds of ways through good times and bad times. Everything that happens to us is seeded with grace. Quiet prayer, listening to God, helps those seeds grow.

This kind of prayer is also where spiritual wisdom is born, where we take the word of God and make it truly our own. Such a time of prayer, listening to God, enables us to discover the particular way we follow Jesus as spouse, parent, government worker, teacher, mechanic, student, religious brother or sister, priest.

It gives us the kind of wisdom that doesn't come prepackaged out of books, but is born in the presence of God.

Listening to God, is different from "saying prayers" where we so often don't take time to listen to God because we are so busy speaking to him.

Some people say that our culture is more into "doing things" than in taking time to reflect. This work ethic can infiltrate our prayer life so that we think that the only kind of prayer worth doing is "saying prayers", (reciting, working prayers) so we feel (where) we are doing something.

But the "*prayer of listening*" takes its own kind of discipline and strength. The prayer of listening to God takes work, but it makes our time with Jesus a source of energy, power and vision. It is also open to everyone.

The "*prayer of listening*" has nothing to do with age, income level, IQ, family size, whether someone is male or female, single or married, religious sister, brother or layperson. It has to do only with taking the time to listen. God will touch us where we are.

God communicating with us has little to do with visions and voices. It is more like illumination of the mind and strengthening of the will to do what God wants that becomes clear to us in prayer. In this prayer, prayer in the presence of Jesus, we come to see, as Paul writes in his Letter to the Colossians, "the mystery of Christ, that is, the Holy Spirit, at work not just out there, but within us as we take time to listen and experience the movements of Jesus in our mind, heart and life.

Martha and Mary represent two states of life in the Church, active and contemplative, both the Church needs to do its mission. They also represent the need we all have to work and to pray in order to follow the Gospel fully. At the deepest level, they stand for two kinds of prayer, the prayers we say and the prayer of listening, being in the presence of God and taking the time to listen. We need both to live a spiritual life fully.

For a Christian, taking the time to pray is the most energizing (invigorating) thing we can do for our soul. When the world pulls us in a thousand different directions, our prayer draws us back to Jesus to listen to him. Time with God is our rudder in any storm. Like a rudder, prayer helps us use the winds that come at us from whatever direction, to bring us closer to Jesus, closer to our home.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner. O.S.B.