

Spirituality Conference Eucharistic Liturgy—July 21, 2019
Martha and Mary Reflection
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While doing campus ministry at Western Illinois University, a graduate student passed my office, looked in, and said, “Martha, Martha thou art busy about many things.” I was disturbed by the comment since I was doing the work I needed to do. But is this Martha/Mary story really about work? If not, what is the issue?

Let’s 1) look briefly at Luke 10 which is divided into three parts, and 2) zero in on the Martha/Mary story which is the third part.

1. Luke 10 starts with a ministry theme. This first part has Jesus sending out of the 72 disciples and they return with success.
2. The second section leads us to the ministry question: to whom do we go? Here the text has the Good Samaritan story, i.e. we go to the vulnerable—to those whose life might be in the societal ditch.
3. The third part—the Martha Mary section—implies the question: how do we minister? This is more subtle because we have two good women both trying to do the right thing.

Let’s consider four ministerial flaws that Martha exhibits. I think we can relate to them at one time or another.

1. Presumed need vs. real need: Martha assumed Jesus would be hungry for food but he was more hungry for a listener and she was not there.

It is like having a student missing from an important class because that student is in the art room designing a thank-you card for you as teacher of the year.

It is like getting a handshake of peace by someone who is not looking at you but at all the people they want to get to—a sign of anxiety, not peace.

It is like the conversation I was having with my Dad at the kitchen table. I noticed dishes on the counter and thought I could still talk while I worked. Dad said, “Leave those dishes there. Sit and talk to me. They are not going anywhere.” I took on an assumed need and missed the real need.

2. Self-pity: Martha single-handedly took on multi-tasking and lapsed into the ministerial meaning for PMS: “Poor Me Syndrome.”

3. Authority by proxy: Martha tried to manipulate Jesus’ authority to further her agenda. Jesus did not allow her to get away with that ploy.

It is like the principal with a list of regulations supposedly wanted by the pastor and everyone knows he is unaware of this.

It is like the student who tries to make a point by using a condemnatory statement by Pope John Paul II. Then one finds out that the Pope had made the statement but to refute it, not defend it.

4. Self-righteous: Martha, in her judgment, thought that others should copy her generosity and work ethic. However, Jesus always defended people against the self-righteous. He did this for Mary Magdalene, the woman taken in adultery, and now Mary of Bethany.

Martha was a good woman who greeted Jesus initially but lapsed into questionable behavior. The story is really about being unaware. Martha did not see the flaws of: assumed needs, self-pity, authority by proxy, and self-righteousness. In response, Jesus’ assessment was limited to behavior and not persons. Jesus points to Mary’s choice and all Martha’s complaining was not going to change it; she had to grow into an awareness.

When I think back to the graduate student calling me Martha, Martha, I did assume a defensive, self-righteous position and may have been unaware of the real issue. She could have been saying: “You look so busy that I don’t want to bother you.” I should have invited her in and listened to find out. I could have been more like Mary.

It takes courage to face flaws, compassion for knowing we are not perfect, and contemplation to teach us hope and humility. James Martin, S.J. says that his spiritual director reminded him that there is good news and great news in ministry.

The good news is: We have a messiah. The great news is: It is not you.