

“Learning Valuable Lessons from Our Two Sisters Martha and Mary”
Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent, Year “A”
March 29, 2020
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption

Most Rev. Salvatore J. Cordileone

Introduction

As we progress through this season of Lent, we continue to participate in Holy Mass in these unprecedented circumstances that are, in a sense, unnatural to us. Our Sundays are meant as a time for us to gather together for worship as the people of God, but instead, in order for us all to do our part to contain the spread of the coronavirus, we must participate in this remote way, following the celebration of Mass at home.

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, the last Sunday before we begin Holy Week when we will commemorate the saving Passion, death and Resurrection of our Lord, the Church gives to us for our contemplation this Gospel reading of St. John about Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Clearly, this miracle that our Lord works is meant as an anticipation of his own Resurrection from the dead, when the stone would be rolled back from the tomb, and he would rise triumphant over death – unlike Lazarus, who had to die again. In our present circumstances though, we can learn a lot from Lazarus’ two sisters, Martha and Mary.

Two Sisters Different and United

First, let us consider Martha. She is the one who is always attentive to the details of hospitality, making sure that everyone is well taken care of. She exhibits self-possession, she is steady, reliable and considerate of others. In the other episode when Jesus encounters the two sisters, Martha is the one busy about making sure Jesus is shown hospitality and has his every need attended to, while Mary sits at his feet. In today’s story, notice how it is Martha who goes out to meet Jesus when the sisters receive the news that he is coming to their home. There are the leaders of her people gathered there in their town who have intentions to kill him. Martha is the one who thinks to go out and meet our Lord before he gets to the town. She is always thinking of others.

Mary, on the other hand, is more like a poet, or an artist. She is very emotional, and feels things deeply. She is even impulsive and extravagant. St. John tells us in this story that she was the one who anointed Jesus’ feet. This was a great extravagance, for the large quantity of oil was worth a great deal of money. Notice how in this story Mary is the one who stays at home when Martha goes out to meet the Lord. She is feeling the loss of her brother very deeply; she is too grieved to leave the home.

It may seem that Martha can sometimes be resentful of Mary, who might seem to us to be lazy. And while she may sometimes become frustrated with her, she loves her as a sister. Notice how, after encountering our Lord, she goes to tell her sister that the Lord is asking for her. We do not actually hear him say that; Martha knows that Mary would want to see him. And we can

even get a sense of the difference between the two in their encounter with Jesus. Mary is the one who is weeping, while Martha affirms the steadfastness of her faith in him, exclaiming, "...even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Mary feels emotions very deeply; Martha, while grieving, is steadfast.

The Virtue of Trust

But while there are differences between the two, they converge at one point, and this is the valuable lesson for us. Notice how they both greet the Lord initially with the same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They both trust. Each in her own way expresses trust that the Lord has power even over death. And neither one tells him what to do, they just simply express their trust in him.

We heard a very valuable lesson about trust from our Holy Father, Pope Francis, last Friday, in the homily he gave at the extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. Extraordinary because this blessing is normally given "to the city of Rome and to the world" only on Christmas and Easter. But he gave a special, extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing last Friday, during the season of Lent, to which he attached an indulgence for the sake of pleading for God's mercy to spare us from this current pandemic. And in that homily he spoke about the lack of trust of the disciples when the storm blew up at sea and our Lord was sleeping in the boat. He said:

In what does the lack of the disciples' faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus' trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (v. 38). *Do you not care*: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: 'Do you not care about me?' It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts.

The Holy Father tells us that we can react in the same way, that in the storm of this current pandemic we can think that Jesus does not care. So how do we build up trust in him, and express our trust in him? This is where we can learn valuable lessons from Martha and Mary.

The Virtues of Charity and Contemplation

The virtues of both of the sisters are necessary for us to have trust. That, again, is where they converge. Martha is the symbol of charity and confidence: thinking of others first, going out of one's way to be considerate, making sure others are taken care of before oneself, showing through concrete acts of kindness the attitude: "yes, you are important to me." Mary is the one who is the symbol of contemplation and love expressed as complete physical and mental presence, openness to the other, and learning from the other.

We have ample opportunities to be both Martha and Mary at this time that we are confined to our homes. We have new opportunities to live the virtue of charity for the other members of our household: going out of your way to be considerate to your family members, anticipating their needs and being there to fulfill them. Doing more than your fair share of the

chores around the house. Bearing misunderstandings patiently, and not holding a grudge if someone offends you. There are myriad opportunities to show the charity and steady self-possession of Martha in the current circumstance of the stay-at-home order.

And does this also not give us a unique opportunity to grow in our prayer life? How can we fail to trust Jesus, when he is giving us this opportunity precisely during Lent to set aside the video games and digital devices, and instead pay attention to him just like Mary: spending time in prayer, especially prayer in the family; reading the Bible and meditating on it; reflecting on the readings for Mass, and following the Mass at home in the same way one would in church, that is, with active participation – standing, sitting and kneeling at the proper times, being properly dressed, participating in the prayers, observing silence, keeping food and drink out of sight, and, especially, making a spiritual Communion at the moment that you cannot partake of sacramental Communion.

Conclusion

Charity and contemplation will lead us to the trust we need in our Lord right now. Let us be attentive to him, listening to him with open mind and open heart through a deeper life of prayer, and express our love for him in our attentiveness to others. He is not asleep, and he will rescue us from this storm. Let us take advantage of this trial we are going through as an opportunity to show our steadfast trust and loving devotion to him. We will know him better because of it.