

Let's Hear It for Martha!

Or, Let's Not Be Too Contemptuous Of Good-Hearted, Middle-Class Catholics



First of Two Parts

By William J. O'Malley, SJ

In the struggle for the Kingdom of God, Martha seems to have had two strikes against her from the start. In the first place, she was apparently a woman of means in a Kingdom which belongs, by definition, to the outcasts.

In the second, she seemed overly concerned about walloping pots rather than sitting at the feet of the Lord. She says, with what homilists tend to describe as a petulant tone, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to come and help me." And Jesus gives her a rebuke — mild, but a rebuke nonetheless: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled over many things." Mary, he says, has chosen "the better part." And right there, with a certain understandable trepidation, I find myself saying, "Uh, er, excuse me, but . . ."

For 30 years of religious life, I have seen homilists, retreat givers, and ascetical authors use this story to launch jeremiads against those who concerned themselves over-much with earthly affairs — whether it be the amassment of large fortunes or merely cutting short the time of one's prayers to get papers corrected. The lilies of the field are used as whips in the same righteous endeavor. All those homilies notwithstanding, whenever I read that story, I still find myself mumbling to Martha between my teeth, "I'm with you, kid."

Of course, one must admit that — except for the Trappists, Poor Clares and Discalced Carmelites — none of us prays frequently or fervently enough. We are "anxious and troubled over many things." But when a mild rebuke from the Lord generates a sterile guilt trip, then the gospel of liberation has turned into a gospel of bondage.

To be sure, prayer is "the better part" compared with work: who could deny it when it comes from the lips of God? But the Lord's use of "better" assures us Marthas that concrete service is still very good. Indeed, His whole public life is evidence of that: there is more scriptural space given to Jesus' healing and preaching than to His prayer, even though His prayer was "the better part."

To be sure, humankind does not live by bread alone; who could deny it when it comes from the lips of God? But just try living without it. Barring the fortuitous

advent of angelic messengers bearing manna and quail, somebody's got to get down there into the marketplace and haggle, or the Lord will go hungry. And if the mice, cockroaches and bacteria are not to overrun the Lazarus family kitchen, somebody better get out there and scrape the herbs and spices off the earthenware.

We homilize at times, I think, on one statement of the scripture in isolation from all the rest and with one lobe of the brain blocked from contact with the other. The right lobe doesn't know what the left lobe is doing. One side — the intuitive power — rhapsodizes about the higher calling (and I don't deny that) of the self-immolating contemplative and, somewhat paradoxically, the self-immolating servants of the exploited. The other side — the inferential power — extols the virtues of thrift, generosity with alms, balanced parish budgets, and sanctuary carpeting befitting its Host. (One notices no jeremiads against amassment of large fortunes when there is a capital fund drive on.) In between the two homilies are caught the good-hearted middle-class Catholics who, on both counts, are shackled to their shekels.

Very few ordinary Catholics would deny first and second places in the race for the Kingdom to the hardier souls who forswear the world and its goods, either to pray in solitude or to toil for the destitute. But I wonder if at times they don't need an assurance that they themselves are indeed in the race, too, and in fact an integral part of it. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you;" the contemplative and missionary cannot say to the banker, "I don't need you." The pope has a private swimming pool, as a matter of service to the Kingdom; it is, he says, less expensive than calling a new conclave to elect a new pope.

Middle-class Catholics try their best, given their particular talents and charisms, to fulfill the needs of the Body of Christ, and it is unfair of the more privileged in the Kingdom even silently to belittle them as "somewhat less able to be generous than we have been." Finishing third in any race — even the one we share with Martha's sister and St. Paul — is not at all dishonorable.

Don't get me wrong. I stand in awe of my brothers and sisters who work face-to-face and hand-to-hand with the destitute. It's just that I am no longer secretly ashamed that I am not one of them. I am an articulate and persuasive clown, and I serve as their recruiter

among the affluent. Courtney Murray and Thomas Merton could have worked in the missions and slums (and they each did for a while), but how impoverished we all would have been had they stayed here. Moreover, I stand in awe as well of the perit who scavenge the outer edges of humankind's knowledge of God. Yet I wonder, too, how many of those contemplatives and theologians — as well as those servants of the poor — came through middle-class schools. I speak here, perhaps, for a large segment of the American Church which is not extraordinarily intellectual, or gifted in prayer, or black or Chicano or oriental. I speak not to defend them, since that would imply a need for defense, but I speak perhaps to explain them to themselves and to absolve them of the pseudo-shame of being materially successful.

Again, don't get me wrong. My most seething desire is to undermine in my students the deflection of competition as a validation of their success as human beings. One of my most frequent targets is the advertising which keeps building the economy (and inflation) and subverting the spine of our nation. But I find a dualism in the Church today which is too easily simplified into the haves and the have-nots, with the haves being made to feel guilty for not being have-nots. The Baptist did not say, "If you have no coat, share it with your brother." He spoke only to those who had more coats than they needed.

On that score, men and women whom I truly admire have argued strongly with me that the well-to-do young must be forced to realize that neither of the gospels nor a century of papal pronouncements allows us to content ourselves with giving only of our excess; we must give, they maintain, beyond the point where giving is only a discomfort. I argue in return that they do not realize the adamant resistance to such a message, brainwashed into my audience by 18 years of televised sermons extolling the virtues of greed.

I wonder, as well, if they expect — contrary to the beatitudes — that the materially comfortable are blessed with the inner peace and freedom one needs to commit oneself totally to the Kingdom. It seems to deny that, even in the race for the unearthly crown, one must crawl before he or she runs. I would be content if I could convince even some of my students to go through their closets and give away just anything they haven't worn in a year. Of course, I would rejoice if someone gave it all away and vowed himself to serving the Kingdom of God totally, but I'm not expecting it. Nor, I suspect, did Jesus.

As far as we know, only 12 men and that Jesus loved the Rich Young Man even though he was not able to accept the same invitation. Joseph of Arimathea did not sell all and give it to the poor; if he had, Jesus would not have had a burial place. The Good Samaritan was able to help only because he had the funds. Jesus did not criticize Zacchaeus for giving only half his goods to the poor and, presumably, keeping the other half for himself and his family.

Next week, Father O'Malley writes that "the point is not being rich or poor, the point is being ready . . ."

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