



Let's Hear It for Martha!

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

Last in a series.
By Father William J. O'Malley, SJ

Admittedly, we can kid ourselves. We can give away what is really a pittance, relative to our total goods and income, and rest content that we are righteous. One can honestly admire the wholeheartedness of the widow who threw her entire paltry savings into the Temple treasury. But a person more of the mind of Martha might question what the widow would use to feed her children that night. Would she be forced to go to some other poor friend who had been less generous and more prudent? We cannot say automatically that the one who gave some but not all was merely "shrewd" or "stingy" or "self-centered." The pope has a private swimming pool.

It is, I believe, a question of call, of vocation. The Rich Young Man could not give all; the widow could. Jesus still loved them both. Zaccheus and the man with two coats gave "only" half, which is surely generosity most of us cannot muster. No Christian can be a dog in the manger, and yet not all Christians are called to be Mother Teresa of Calcutta. If they were, who would send Mother Teresa the money to keep going? Somewhere in the spectrum of generousities between those two extremes — the tight-fisted and the open-handed, we each find ourselves. We want sincerely to do what the gospel asks of us, each with his or her own other commitments, with funds which are by definition finite. The difficulty arises when we ask for a "line." (Ten percent in tithes? 20 percent? 50 percent? 100 percent?)

When are my family's rights, expectations, and hopes overridden by the needs of others? But the gospel offers no line, no touchstone, no formula. It says, "Give what you can," and since each situation is unique, only the individual can determine what that honestly is — what his or her own unique call is. It would be unjust, on the other hand, for an outside onlooker to cavil at someone else's degree of generosity, and it would be equally unjust on yet another hand if each of us did not at least periodically reassess his or her own situation — to be sure, we are not kidding ourselves and becoming complacent with what is, objectively, a self-serving set of priorities. That is at least one reason why the poor are blessed: they

automatically know the essentials from the desirables, and the desirables from the luxuries. The rest of us have to decipher with our consciences.

St. Paul says, "I know how to be poor, and I know how to be rich, too. I have been through my initiation and now I am ready for anything, anywhere: full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength." (Phil. 4:11-12) The point is not being rich or poor; the point is being ready — ready to share, ready for the call, wherever and whenever it might unexpectedly sound.

Like the question of being well-to-do, the question of prayer and meditation in the Martha-Mary story is more complex than most homilists I have heard seem to think. We are, indeed, too busy to pause and reflect, to open our spirits to the movement of God's urgings, to put our priorities back into perspective, to open up an eye of peace in our weekly hurricane. Whenever housewives confess (inevitably) being irritable with their children, I give them the same penance: a half-hour before the kids are due home, make a cup of tea, take the phone off the hook, kick off your shoes, and entertain Christ in your kitchen.

But for the harried and hurried, those whose whole lives seem consumed in the service of others — children, spouses, clients, customers — I offer "Le Jongleur de Dieu." When all the townfolk gave their gifts to God, the little juggler had nothing. The little money he carried had to keep his family; he did not know how to pray. So that night he crept into the dark church and, kneeling before the high altar, he offered God the only gift he had: he juggled for Him.

Some of the early monks suffered an excess quite opposite to our own: they stole time from work for prayer. And their Martha superiors — who had to keep the prayers fed and housed and clothed — reminded them that *laborare est orare*, to work is to pray; work is love, made visible. Endless hours of research in a library are a prayer to truth, and God is the Truth. If a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name to the least of His brethren is a gift to the Lord Himself, a pan of lasagna — though perhaps less poetic — is nonetheless a gift to the same Lord. Hours at the

lathe or phone or wheel are too easily labeled a service to greed. If you stopped most workers and asked why they work, the answer would, immediately and invariably be: for my family. And whether we pause to reflect on it or not, that family is wider than just one's blood kin: when the telethons roll round, when Sally Struthers asks for Third World children, when the mite box is passed, when tuition in Catholic schools (invariably) goes up. Taxes, however grudgingly surrendered, are a gift to the Family of Man. We are perhaps confused; our priorities may be at times skewed. But we are not a selfish people.

This essay will be misread by some as a sop to the consciences of the wealthy, by others as a condescension to their intelligence and generosity. But at least to some few it may be a release from the burden of false guilt, the low-level infection which so many good people host, which says, "I am a second-rate Christian compared to..."

Let the last word go to the Empress Helena, who was — despite her wealth and learning and embroilment in the world's affairs — a saint, like Martha. In Evelyn Waugh's novel, "Helena," she addresses a prayer to the Magi, who also — despite their wealth and learning — were privileged to witness the newborn Lord along with their poor, illiterate shepherd brothers.

"Like me, you were late in coming... How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculations. How odd you looked on the road, laden with such preposterous gifts. Yet you came, and were not turned away. Your gifts were not needed, but they were accepted and put carefully away. For they were brought with love."

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