CATHO

### **IMENTARY**

## Martha was as much a disciple as Mary

By Father Richard P. McBrien Syndicated columnist

Not much is known about St. Martha (her feast day is July 29). Along with her sister Mary, she received Christ into her home in Bethany and witnessed the raising of their brother Lazarus from the dead.

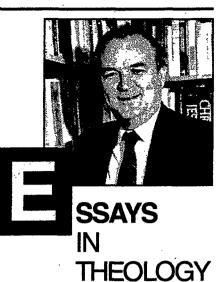
By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. When Martha heard that Iesus was on the way, she went out to meet him. Her manner was, to say the least, straightforward.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," she began. "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." (John 11:21-29).

When Jesus assured Martha that her brother would rise again, she replied: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Then Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" he asked her.

Martha answered, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:24-27).

Later, after her weeping sister Mary also went out to meet the Lord, Jesus was himself moved to tears and ordered the bystanders to take away the



stone at Lazarus's tomb.

The ever practical Martha warned that "already there is a stench because he has been dead four days" (11:39). But Jesus reminded her of what he had said earlier, that whoever believes in him will "see the glory of God" (11:40).

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, many Jews believed in him, but some others were troubled and reported what he had done to the Pharisees. A meeting of the council was called, and "from that day on they planned to put him to death" (11:53). So Jesus quietly slipped out of town with his dis-

He returned to Bethany six days before Passover to the home of Lazarus,

Martha, and Mary, who gave a dinner for him. "Martha served," the Gospel reports, while Mary anointed Jesus' feet with "costly perfume" (12:2, 3).

In Luke's account, Jesus enters Bethany on his way to Jerusalem (9:51). It is Martha who welcomes Jesus into their home, where her sister Mary takes a position at his feet in order to listen to his words.

Luke observes that Martha was "distracted by her many tasks" and that she wasn't a bit happy about the fact that her sister had left her "to do all the work" by herself. Martha asked Jesus bluntly if he cared about that inequity. But she didn't wait for an answer. "Tell her then to help me," she said (10:40).

But Jesus refused to side with Martha over Mary. "Martha, Martha," he replied, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (10:42).

The "one thing" at the heart of the lesson Jesus would have Martha learn is not, as one biblical scholar lightly remarked, that one should prepare a casserole rather than a seven-course meal. Rather, the "one thing" is the word of Jesus, and Marthas and Marys need to listen to it.

In the course of church history, this brief episode has been the object of much commentary, especially by those who would insist on the primacy of contemplation over the active life, as if the two were mutually opposed.

But contemplation-versus-action isn't really the central issue here. After all, the church's truly great spiritual guides - St. Benedict, about whom we wrote last week, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Ignatius of Loyola - have had no difficulty in keeping the two in proper balance.

What is striking, because it is so obviously countercultural, about the incident reported in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus was alone with two women who were not his relatives; he allowed a woman (Martha) to serve him; he taught a woman (Mary) in her own house; and he accepted women as disciples on an equal basis with men.

A superficial reading of the Martha/Mary story over the centuries has led many to view Martha merely as a kind of spiritual foil for Mary. But that misses the story's most significant point about the meaning of discipleship and the equal capacity of women for it.

To confine Martha to the kitchen, therefore, is to forget that when Jesus proclaimed to her that he is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), she immediately confessed her belief in him as the Messiah and the Son of God

By that confession of faith, Martha was as much a disciple as Mary. Both had heard the Lord's word and responded to it.

Both these women.

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