

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2025

Martha and Mary were the sisters of Lazarus, whom the Lord Jesus would later raise from the dead. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus lived together. It seems from the Gospel we just heard (Luke 10: 38-42) that Martha was in charge. I can't help but wonder if that means she was the oldest sister. In any case, Martha was the one who welcomed the Lord Jesus into their common house. As the effective head of the household (was Lazarus, perhaps, chronically sick?), Martha had a genuine duty to make sure that all of the details of ordinary life and extraordinary hospitality were taken care of. "Martha was burdened with much serving." Mary, probably the youngest and accustomed to letting her older sister take charge of things, was content to let Martha handle the details of the Lord Jesus' visit, while she just sat and listened to Him. One is not surprised that, after Lazarus' death, Martha was the one who went out to meet Jesus as He entered their village, while Mary stayed at home. One is not surprised that, after Lazarus was restored to life, Martha prepared and served a dinner, while Mary anointed the Lord's feet with costly ointment and wiped His feet with her hair. In all of these passages, from chapters 10, 11, and 12 of St. John's Gospel, Martha is the one who takes charge and gets things done, while Mary is one who says almost nothing, mostly just listens to Jesus, and then acts to worship Him beautifully and powerfully.

Martha does well, and does things that need to be done. Jesus, however, says that Mary has chosen "the better part."

There are two good ways of serving the Lord Jesus Christ, active business and religious worship. Not everyone who is actively busy truly serves the Lord, of course. There are those who have choked themselves spiritually with the cares of this world and with the ways this world usually does business. Similarly, not all of those who aren't working are engaged in religious worship. There are those who are simply lazy. Nonetheless, thanks be to God, there are still those whose hard work really is for the greater glory of God, and there are those whose lives somewhat apart from the world really are about worshipping God in and through Jesus Christ.

Now, no Christian is ever called only to do work in the world, and never worship the Lord. No Christian is ever called only to worship and never work. Famously, St. Gregory the Great summed up the way of life that St. Benedict left to his monks as a twofold command, "Ora et Labora - Work and Pray."

That said, there are two basic Christian vocations, two basic ways of giving glory to God, work and worship. Some Christians are called basically to do good work in this world, enriching, sustaining and strengthening their work with times of worship. Other Christians are called basically to worship God in and through Jesus Christ, enriching, sustaining and strengthening their worship with times of work. One group mostly labors, but does some worship, while the other mostly worships, but does some work. Both, when they work, work for the Lord's sake. Both, when they worship, worship from love of the Lord.

Some Christians, then, are called mainly to work in this world, as God's Angels work in this world. Other Christians, then, are called mainly to worship God, as God's holy Cherubim and Seraphim constantly worship God. God calls certain Christians to each of these fundamental vocations. Those who enter into marriage and raise families are certainly called to work in this world, since families take a lot of work. Those who have talents and skills that the world urgently needs are called to work in this world. Those who have inherited wealth or rank

are also called to work in this world, since wealth and rank that are not used for work become millstones around the neck, dragging people down morally and spiritually. Most Christians are called to be Martha most of the time. Some are called to be Mary most of the time. This calling is less obvious, but it is my calling as a Christian “Elder”, or “Priest”.

If I had to pick a Psalm verse for the vocation of Christian “Elder”, or “Priest”, it would be this. “Blessed is he whom You chose and bring near, to dwell in your courts” (Psalm 65:4). As I read the New Testament, I find that the “Overseers”, or “Bishops”, were ordained to be the Church’s governors, in matters both worldly and spiritual. The “Servants”, or “Deacons”, were ordained to work directly with them in handling the Church’s necessary worldly business. The “Elders”, or “Priests”, were ordained to be the local ministers, embedded into local Christian communities to teach, to preach, and, above all, to lead the community’s offering of the Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving. They were not to become too busy with or troubled by worldly business. Down through 2000 years, the ministries of Deacon, Priest, and Bishop have changed, but I think it would be wise, with the Lord’s help, to try and move in the direction of this Apostolic model. The parish priest today cannot be only the community’s “Elder”. As the Bishop’s representative, he has a bit of “Overseer” to him, and cannot be uninvolved in the Church’s necessary worldly business. That said, the Parish Priest is still the successor to the New Testament Elder, embedded in the local community to teach, to preach, and to lead worship, above all the perfect Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving, the Holy Eucharist. He has work to do in the world, but the parish priest should be a “Mary”, oriented primarily to worship and adoration. This is why the Church, following St. Paul’s advice, has always had a preference (though often not a requirement) for the embedded “Elders” or “Priests” to be unmarried, for “the unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 7:32). The unmarried man can be a Mary. The married man almost has to be a Martha. The parish priest is to serve God in the temple of the local Christian community’s worship, and, as far as possible, to rest in the Lord.

All Christians, however, are called to spend some time in the Lord’s Temple and to rest in the Lord, especially on the weekly Lord’s Day, the Day of Resurrection, our day of rest and holiness. This is their share of Mary’s portion, what the Lord Jesus called “the better part.”

Our age has no respect for the Lord’s Day and cannot comprehend a day of rest and holiness. It is offended when the Lord Jesus says that Mary has chosen “the better part.” To prefer the Lord’s Word and Presence to the world’s business and troubles seems somehow strange and disturbing. How can “mere” listening and worship be the better part?

But they are! Faith, Hope, and Charity make for happiness, and listening and worship build Faith, Hope, and Charity. If you can spend a few minutes of the day in prayer, Jesus considers that the better part of your day. You have your duties, and the Lord wants you to fulfill them; but spending a few minutes every day with the Lord who died and rose for you enlightens and strengthens the whole day, just as good observance of the Lord’s Day enlightens and strengthens the entire week.

Being Martha is obvious. For the rest of this Mass, consider how you can be Mary sometimes. Consider how you can spend more time sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening to His word. Consider, even, how you can better anoint His sacred feet with the ointment of your worship.