

XVI ORDINARY TIME – July 21st , 2013

MARTHA WELCOMED HIM. MARIA HAS CHOSEN THE GOOD PORTION - Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 10.38-42

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.

And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

When we read Gospels we must avoid – as happened in the past – to interpret its passages according to our Western mentality. We are about to comment the passage known as Martha and Mary, which is always been thought to be a praise for Mary, the contemplative life, at the expense of poor Martha as representing active life.

As if it were an elite of people who can choose a contemplative life, while most people in a life of daily chores. No way. Let's see this passage, then; Luke's Gospel, chapt. 10, verse 28. "As *they went on their way*", they're going to Jerusalem where Jesus will be in great trouble; "*Jesus entered a village*". The evangelist here highlights the contrast: while he and his disciples they were on their way, only Jesus enters the village. Why disciples are left out?

Because disciples still have such a mentality not letting them understand the news brought by Jesus, the one that Jesus just wants to bring in the village. When in Gospels we find the term "village", it is always in a negative sense, for village is the place of tradition, it is the past, a place where the news is seen with suspicion. Thus, every time we find the word "village" it is always a hostile place, where the message of Jesus is not received.

“And a woman named Martha”, this name Martha in Aramaic has a very amazing meaning, *“lady/mistress of the house”, “welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet”,* well the fact of sitting at the Lord’s feet is not to be considered as a sign of contemplation, adoration as it is in Western culture.

Not at all; in a Middle-Eastern house, a Palestinian house, there are no chairs; you sit on the floor. Therefore being seated at someone’s feet means “listening, accepting”. For example, St. Paul says he was educated *“at the feet of Gamaliel”,* or we find in Talmud *“be your house a place of meeting for the learned; get dusty by the dust of their feet and drink their words with thirst”.*

Here the attitude of Mary is neither worship nor contemplation. She welcomes Jesus and listens to his teachings. This is the attitude of a disciple to the master, *“and listened to his teaching”.* This “teaching” should be translated with “word”, from the Greek term “logos”, which not only means an occasional teaching, but the whole message of Jesus.

“Martha was distracted with much serving”. It is usual in Hebraic tradition that a woman is confined to the kitchen, for only a man is allowed to welcome guests. A woman shall not. She’s invisible and makes many services. Mary was able to break the taboo of religion and morality, gaining the role of males, and Martha doesn’t stand this.

“And she went up to him and said, «Lord, do you not care ...»”, then Martha rebukes Jesus because of the freedom her sister has shown. And here we see how everything is centered on Martha herself. *“«My sister has left Me to serve alone? Tell her then to help Me»”,* it’s imperative, not a request.

My sister, left Me ... Help Me ... all centered on herself. She represents the perfect observant, the perfect obedient to the rules, always ready to judge others. In fact she blames Jesus for her sister’s absence.

But Jesus in turn rebukes Martha. *“But the Lord answered her, «Martha, Martha...»”,* when a doubling of a name is present it always has a sense of reproach, as when Jesus said *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem and wept over Jerusalem. «... you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.»”.* Which is this one thing needed?

Jesus tells us this, *“«Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her»”.* What cannot be taken away from a person and why has Mary chosen it? Mary chose to listen to the message of Jesus, well then the outcome of this message is a growing fullness of freedom, but not one given, for it can always be taken away, but a one being the result of an inner conquest.

Even in spite of – as we have seen here – rebuke and misunderstanding of others. When freedom is the result of an inner conquest, no one can ever take it away. This is the good portion that Jesus is praising in Mary’s attitude and exhorting everyone to welcome.