

**December 12, 2010**

Sunday of the Forefathers

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Although Jesus sometimes spoke reproachfully to His disciples (cf. Mark 8:17-21, 33), He was reluctant, it seems, to let others do so. Thus, we find Him, on occasion, defending these disciples against their critics and enemies (Luke 5:33-35; 6:1-5). The most notable instance, surely, involved Jesus' concern for their safety at the moment of His arrest: "If you seek Me, let these go their way" (John 18:8).

Jesus' instinct to protect His loved ones extended in a special way to the women. The gospels give no example of someone criticizing a woman in Jesus' presence and getting away with it.

The gospels are emphatic of this point. For instance, on the occasion when Jesus restored a crippled woman in the synagogue, He became incensed and shouted "Hypocrite!" to the synagogue leader who embarrassed the woman and blamed *her* for being healed on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-16). Likewise, Jesus was quick to defend a sinful woman against the self-righteous sneers of a Pharisee named Simon (7:36-50). Most memorable, perhaps, was the occasion when He put to shame the accusers of an adulteress (John 8:2-11).

We know of two instances when Jesus came to the defense of Mary of Bethany, one of those three siblings of whom we are told, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5).

The first these stories---recorded by Luke (10:38-42)---describes the time when Jesus came to "a certain village, and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house." This last detail is important: Jesus came to *Martha's* house. Martha was in charge, and, to make Jesus feel welcomed, she went to great pains, "distracted by all the preparations that had to be made" (10:40 NIV).

As the day wore on, and the finishing times for the various dishes started to converge---the bread to come out of the oven, the salad to be mixed, the roasted corn to be stirred, the cups to be filled, the table to be set, and so on---Martha's dedicated industry began to assume a note of impatience. One of the reasons she was so busy---or at least Martha thought so---was that this younger sister of hers was not helping with the chores: "Mary, seated at the feet of Jesus, was listening to His word."

When Martha felt she could endure it no more, she mentioned this concern to

their Guest: "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her, then, to give me a hand." That is to say, Martha accused her sister of wasting time when there was work to be done. It must have seemed to her a perfectly reasonable observation.

Perhaps to her consternation, however, Jesus' response not only defended Martha's sister, but went on to assert the superiority of Mary's peaceful occupation: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better portion, which will not be taken away from her."

In order to understand how Mary's occupation represented the "better portion," it is useful to consider her activity---sitting and listening to Jesus' word---within the context of Luke's larger story. For starts, this description supports a comparison of Mary of Bethany with Jesus' own mother, who "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (2: 19, 51).

In addition, both Jesus' mother and Mary of Bethany are portrayed as true contemplatives, who embody the model described in the parable of the sower. In Luke's version of that parable, the seeds "that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good [*agathe*] heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (8: 15). For Luke, that is to say, true contemplation involves the hearing of God's word in purity of heart. In Luke's view, both Jesus' mother and Mary of Bethany are occupied with the "one thing necessary."

The second story of Jesus' defense of Mary of Bethany is narrated by John (12: 1-8). It was she, John tells us, who, just six days before the Passover, "took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair."

Whereas in the former story, Mary was reprimanded for wasting time, in the present instance she is accused of wasting money. Her critic now is none other than Judas Iscariot, that famous apostolic book-keeper, who knew a thing or two about finances: "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred silver pieces and given to the poor?"

John, the narrator, aware that Judas is about to sell Jesus out for a fraction of that amount, lets his readers in on a dirty little secret. Judas, he explains, "said this, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it."

The reader is struck by Jesus' restraint in this story. He says very little here to Judas Iscariot, even though He knew "it was he who would betray Him, being

one of the twelve" (6:71). Jesus does, however, defend Mary of Bethany by placing her action in the context of that murder to which Judas's betrayal will lead: "Let her be, that she may preserve it for the day of my burial."

Whereas the first story contrasts Mary's "better portion" with the good activities of her sister, this second story opposes her loving generosity with the evil being plotted by Judas.

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