

FRIENDSHIP HUMAN AND DIVINE

The Gospel for this Sunday tells us of a visit Christ had with a family he knew quite well. Whenever he was near their home during his many travels throughout Israel, he would stop in and visit them. We know them by their first names, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. How they came to know Christ has not been recorded. That they were close friends was shown by the fact that when Lazarus died Jesus made a special trip to see the two remaining sisters and then raised Lazarus from the dead, a miracle which was unheard of. It happened only days before Christ would be arrested and condemned, but this miracle certainly lent credence to the fact that Jesus' prediction of his own resurrection would come true. From the Jewish leaders' point of view, this miracle was just another reason why they simply had to do away with Jesus. He was simply getting too powerful and an increasing threat to their authority.

On this particular day, Jesus and his Apostles were once again close to his friends and he could not just simply pass by without stopping in to see them. Martha and Mary were delighted and as was customary in the Middle East tradition of hospitality, they simply had to invite them to stay for dinner. Martha, the older of the two sisters, was always the perfect hostess and she set about immediately preparing the best she could to feed their visitors. Now one must remember it was not just Jesus, but his twelve special disciples, his Apostles, must be included. Fixing a meal at the spur of the moment for thirteen hungry men is certainly a challenge. Martha and Mary were not affluent people like the Pharisees who had servants and attendants to help feed and entertain guests. The bulk of the work fell squarely on the shoulders of Martha, and she set about it with genuine enthusiasm and joy. This was Jesus, the great prophet, the outstanding teacher, the Messiah, their best friend who was now in her house. Only the best she had and could do was worthy of such a guest.

But then Martha noticed that Mary was not there to help her as she usually was when guests, expected or unexpected, would come to their home. Where could she be? Martha looked in the great room of her house and there she was, at the feet of Jesus, completely absorbed in listening to every word he was saying. Totally oblivious of everything else, her whole being was focused on Jesus. No doubt Martha gently and softly called her name, but to no avail. Mary was totally mesmerized by Jesus, hanging on every word, every syllable, lost in a true and real love for Jesus, her Lord and Master!

The only way that Martha could see to get Mary to help her would be for Jesus to come to her aid, that he himself would have to say something to Mary. And so knowing no real polite way to get Jesus to notice her difficulty, she interrupts him and almost raising her voice bluntly says: "Lord! Do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me!" One can almost hear the anguish in her voice. Why did she now suddenly seem to be blaming Jesus for what Mary should have been aware of in the first place? Why was she suddenly so blunt with her dearest friend? No doubt she began to blush a bit realizing how she must have sounded, not just asking for help but in fact blaming Jesus for the problem in the first place.

There was a moment of utter silence. The Apostles who were most likely there listening to Jesus along with Mary, were a bit stunned, or perhaps shocked at Martha's bluntness. And no doubt they realized that they were also a part of the problem being with Christ and adding to the number of invited guests. But Jesus reacts in a totally unexpected way. He slowly raises his head to look squarely at Martha and in a most gentle and loving voice says: "Martha! Martha! You are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

The look on Martha's face at that moment was a mixture of disbelief, questioning, puzzlement, and almost shock. How could Jesus not understand her problem? What do I do now? What should I say, if anything? But then slowly, Martha begins to realize just what was really contained in Jesus' words. He was in no way admonishing her; he understood the problem! But he also saw how his words were affecting Mary and how she was in so many ways drawing ever closer to him as a person she could love and trust totally. He did not want to lose her at this moment as she was growing in her belief and trust in him, and more importantly, her love for him. And so in effect he simply is saying to Martha, "Let her stay. It is more important for her than having everything perfect for a meal."

But we cannot forget Martha completely. Christ's words to her are not just his last words. Jesus knows the love she has for him and the total trust she has in him. Without this love and trust there was no way she could have spoken to Jesus as she did. In a very real sense, given her anxiety about getting everything done just right, she overstates her case and in a very real sense bawls out Jesus for not seeing the problem from her point of view. The fact that she could in good conscience speak as she did to Jesus shows the really great love she has for him as well as her complete trust in him. In no way, she knew in her heart, would her words of frustration be misunderstood. In fact, it was because she loved him so much that she could take liberties in the way she spoke to him, knowing with full confidence he would understand it all completely. This was her love for him and even more her absolute trust in him. Jesus did not blame her; rather, he simply showed her there was more to Mary's presence than she realized and that he very much cared for her, loved her, and wanted her to continue to learn from him. At the same time, he was showing Martha how much he loved and trusted her, knowing she would in love and trust, carry on the best she could by herself in fixing the food for everyone.

The questions each one of us must ask ourselves is: "Just what is our relationship with the Lord? How much do we really trust him? Under similar conditions, would we be able to address the Lord just as Martha did?" This is not just a game to test our relationship with the Lord; it is necessary for each of us to honestly ask these questions of ourselves, to honestly face the fact of just what our relationship with the Lord is. Every believer has at some time or other prayed very earnestly and hard for some urgent request, only to find that seemingly it has not been answered, or worse one believes it has been ignored. At this point most give up and simply say, God's answer was a "NO" and that ends it. Why not then renew one's prayer and argue with the Lord? We would do this with our best friend. If we do argue with the Lord, that could very well be one of the best prayers we have ever said! It shows our trust, our love, our confidence in the Lord and in this process grow deeper in love and trust, to say nothing about how one's faith will grow. Then faith becomes a deeper reality in one's life and God becomes ever more present. He is a living reality,

not just someone one seeks in emergencies, but rather one who is present at all our activities, at home, work or play. Martha's faith grew; so can ours! Learn to truly experience God!

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