

The Texts of the Convivium

MARTHA, A WOMAN, A SYMBOL

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing” (Lk 10, 41-42) What is Martha up to? Nothing wrong, she feels... quite to the contrary. A very important person has come to Bethany, and she feels bound to welcome him the best she can. It is no small thing, if we believe what Luke tells us: Jesus has come to the village “as they went on their way” (v. 38). In the plural. “A woman named Martha welcomed him into her home” (v. 38). Is it Jesus alone or Jesus with his followers? In any case that meant quite a job for Martha, and it is understandable that she be “distracted by her many tasks” (v. 40).

Martha has a sister, Mary who is younger and subdued, and we have seen that it is Martha who welcomes Jesus. Martha is a practical, efficient kind of person, whereas one can tell that Mary has a contemplative mind. She is fascinated by the Lord and his teachings, she listens to him avidly, as she sits next to him, or rather, as Luke points out, “at the Lord’s feet” (v. 39).

What was the purpose of Jesus’ visit to Bethany? To have food and drinks? Maybe that was also on his mind to get some sustenance. But the real purpose of every action and journey that he made was to bring the Good News. He must have been far more gratified by Mary’s undivided attention than Martha’s fretting, going about her business banging crockery. In terms of board and lodging a piece of bread and a bed would have been more than enough for the great ascetic who “has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8, 20; Lk 9, 58).

At this stage, Martha, annoyed as she felt that her contemplative sister was being lazy, “finally said” two words which clearly indicate that she could not check her annoyance. And what did she say? “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me”.

Now if I try to put myself in Jesus’ position and mind I feel he did not appreciate Martha’s interrupting him. When she asked “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” what has come spontaneously to his mind must have been: “You said it yourself: nothing. I came here to serve, not to be served and my service here is the Good News which I am telling your sister about. Why are you interrupting us? Leave those things alone, take a seat next to us and let us talk about heavenly matters”. Instead he said something else, the words we have quoted above, which have become well-known: i. e. words which imply what he has on his mind more effectively.

Martha was troubled and we have just explained why, but I believe that Jesus himself has felt a pang of annoyance, which he immediately turned into a kind warning, inspired by human compassion, with a slight ironic tinge.

As we often find in the Gospels, Jesus, however “gentle and humble in heart” (Mt 11, 29), had a somewhat difficult temper. There are a number of things which he found most irksome. By way of example, he was definitely annoyed at whatever constitutes a hindrance, an impediment to proclaiming the coming of God’s Kingdom.

In a book devoted to missionary figures I read once the following definition of the family: “The family, the burial place of vocations”. It is a sarcastic definition which does not tell you the whole story about it. But it is a fact, however, that quite often, far

too often, those who feel the calling of God, which demands full commitment on their part, have to wage a harsh struggle with their families.

The mother of Don Bosco, Mamma Margherita, his heroic and hard-working assistant, still stands out as a different example, even though she herself went through times of distress and discouragement.

In all cases the mother is always overprotective, doting on her children. She is inclined to keep her young son safe in her nest, or in her lair, or in a nicely furnished home. Heaven help that he be too overworked, that he may sweat and catch cold. The son who is restless, fretting to embark on an adventure, eager for commitment, yearning to be free for God's service, is held back, entangled by the soft, warm tentacles of an octopus, which has the double sweet name of "Mum" and "Family".

Jesus too must have had a remarkable controversy with his family. I believe that it is not by chance that he lets out the words: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14, 26)

A Monsignor who explains the Bible would hasten to add the note that "to hate" should be understood to mean "love to a lesser extent". Well, as a matter of fact it does say "hate". Nobody would dare think that Jesus truly hated his parents; we cannot exclude that such wording - hyperbolic as usual according to Jesus style - carries an emotional connotation which is related to his having problems in relating to his family. Let us try to read the Gospels more carefully, between the lines, and stick to what it says line by line.

Mary of Nazareth, Jesus' mother, received the message of the Annunciation given by the Angel sent by God. After she gave birth to the child, she fled with him and Joseph the father of the child, to Egypt. The three of them later came back to Nazareth and settled down in the town. Whilst Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Lk 2, 52), his mother, after what the angel has disclosed and after going through several experiences, "treasured all these things in her heart" (Lk 2, 51).

As he went to Jerusalem with both his father and his mother, Jesus, lost and found in the Temple, "went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (Lk 2, 51).

As a matter of fact he had not really obeyed his parents, as he failed to ask their permission to go off and listen to the Doctors of the Temple, and caused them great sufferings. One could argue, on the other hand, that his parents did not keep an eye on him: after all they realized he was no longer with them after a day's journey on their way home.

At any rate they went back to Jerusalem, looked for him everywhere and eventually found him in the Temple amidst the most distinguished rabbis who were impressed by his understanding of the Scriptures at such a young age.

It makes me shudder even to think about what my own parents would have thought and done in a similar circumstance, had I vanished without warning them. We know very little of Joseph the carpenter, as he leaves it to his wife to scold their son, to avoid over-reacting.

We hear instead Mary say a very affectionate rebuke, even though the language she uses is quite strong and more painful than being smacked: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety".

The young boy does not utter one word of apology. He replies to his mother's gentle reproach with another equally sweet but firm rebuke. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2, 48-49).

“But they”, adds at this point the evangelist, “did not understand what he said to them” (Lk 2, 50).

Twenty years later, after Joseph died his family was still unable to understand, if what Mark tells us is true, that Jesus had come back to a home where he was hosted to have a meal with the twelve apostles whom he had just appointed, “they went out to restrain him, for they said, ‘He has gone out of his mind’ ” (Mk 3, 21).

As they got there, they could not reach Jesus because of the huge crowd surrounding him, and his mother and his brothers waited outside the house and asked somebody to fetch him. There is a crowd surrounding Jesus and somebody tells him: “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you”. And what does Jesus say to that? He could have said, “Will you excuse me for a minute”, and get out to greet his family, who was as “worried” as the earlier time, to reassure them. Alternatively, he could have told them to be patient that he would be with them as soon as possible.

Instead...? In his hyperbolic language he denies that they are indeed his own mother and his own brothers, and says that those who follow him and work for the advent of God’s Kingdom are to be considered as his family: “And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ ” (Mk 3, 31-35).

As we hear such an answer let us try to imagine how the poor woman felt, as she was already greatly distressed and bound to go through further and far more appalling traumas. Let us try and think what a mother feels when her son tells her: “And who are you, I do not know you”.

There is indeed a precedent to that, in what she tells her son at the wedding in Canaan, when she says: “‘They have no wine’” (Jn 2, 3). Here we see the typical housewife concern for proper housekeeping, before we hear that from Martha: the food, the drinks, the proper accomplishment of family rituals, weddings...

To that we may add the sacraments of confirmation and first communion, which have been downgraded into a kind of family celebration with plenty of food and picture taking, and eventually the movie where everything must be properly orchestrated to ensure that nothing is missed, neither a moment of the ceremony, nor a mouthful of the banquet: a movie which is shot by professionals who direct the guests as if they were the extras of a movie set.

We find that Jesus is challenging all this. He feels intolerant and addresses his own mother with a form of words which is neither a son’s language nor is it very gentle: “Woman, what have I to do with you?” (v. 4). Which is tantamount to saying: “What have I got to do with you?”.

“The fact that there is no more wine for the banquet, what has it got to do with the Kingdom of God and his justice? I have come on earth to provide wine to the ‘drunks’ who have already drained all of it?”

That is my understanding of what Jesus failed to say. And then, as he adds deliberately, “my hour has not yet come” (v. 4).

Mary knows well her son’s temper: he is used to such bouts of impatience. She is a woman of few words, she knows how to deal with him, and gets what she wants from him. So she does not reply and tells the servants: “Do whatever he tells you”. Jesus is somewhat taken aback and is forced to work his first miracle. He is a nice boy, who loves his mother; he has a deeply human understanding for his fellow men and their small delights, and he is sorry to see that there is no wine left for those men. It is a beautiful wedding feast and people are enjoying the company and are relaxed and the kingdom of God may wait for a couple of hours.

What Jesus cannot definitely tolerate are the things that stand in the way of the Kingdom of God and put it off till the day of Greek kalends (which don't exist at all), as the emperor Augustus, who died a few years earlier, would have said. God's word is a seed which may fall among thorns and be choked by them as in the parable of the sower (Mt 13, 1-9; Mk 4, 1-9; Lk 8, 4-8). And what do the thorns represent? Jesus explains it further: they are "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things" which penetrate the heart of man (Mt 13, 1-9; Mk 4, 1-9; Lk 8, 4-8) and "choke the word, and it yields nothing" (Mk 4, 18-19).

The Gospels depict a long list of all such obstacles, sorrows, lures and greed, and it is up to us to pick a number of examples here and there.

The attachment to material goods, the concern about our own self-interests, the greed for money, are combined with the craving for power; it is wise to provide for it as well, as it is one of the three temptations that Jesus undergoes at the hands of Satan in the desert: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'" (Mt 4, 8-9)..

These are major temptations when compared to the ludicrous one that James and John, the sons of Zebedee could not resist to, before Jesus warns them. As they were all travelling to Jerusalem the two young men approached Jesus and told him: "Master, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you". "What is it you want me to do for you?", asks Jesus. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mk 10, 35-37).

That is written in the Gospel of Mark whilst in the Gospel of Matthew it is their mother that makes the request. Again we see here a very enterprising mother who nurses her offspring (boys or girls), and when they are grown up, or even at an early age puts them forward as candidate for a great career. This kind of mother figure is quite common today.

When they are asked whether they are ready to stand any test to deserve the honour they are requesting, the two young men say they are indeed ready; Jesus however is unusually elusive as he says that it is not up to him to grant it, as it belongs to those to whom it has been allotted.

He does not let the opportunity slip to remind them that to accept power in the appropriate manner does not mean to rule over one's subjects, but rather, to serve them.

To take power as a mere service to render means to be detached from it. In spiritual terms I believe the Gospel teaches us not to be attached to material goods, and to use them selflessly, so that both our belongings and our talents can be put to the service of the Kingdom of God.

Let us however revert to the material concerns which are most frequent amongst ordinary people, while major ambitions are the prerogative of the few who can afford them.

In the parable of the impolite guests (Lk 14, 15-24), a rich man has given a dinner, and at the agreed time send out his servant to tell his guests: "Come; for everything is ready now". The banquet is a clear symbol of the feast of the kingdom of God. But all the guests decline the invitation: some have bought a field and must tend to it, some have purchased five pairs of oxen and must try them, other have gotten married...

This parable of the impolite guests is matched by the one on the wedding feast (Mt 22, 1-14). Here the host is a king and he wants to celebrate his son's wedding. He sends out his servants to fetch his guests, but nobody cares and all get off: "one to his farm, another to his business".

Let us not talk about the sad story of those who actually killed the messengers for reasons better known to themselves.

At the end of the day they were all busy, all worried about their material wellbeing. It is a fact that we could not survive without such means, however if they take absolute precedence we might lose sight the core reasons for existence.

Jesus urges his disciples not to worry about it : “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them...

“And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these...

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today!” (Mt. 6, 25-34).

What Jesus advises the young rich man to do is based on entrusting oneself to the Divine Providence: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor...” (Mt 19, 21; cfr. Mk 10, 21; Lk 18, 22).

A further confirmation is Jesus’ appreciation of the poor widow contributing two small copper coins, which all she owns, to the Temple treasure (Mk 12, 41-44; Lk 13, 34-35).

Here Jesus’ advice can be split into two components: he warns his disciples not to fret and worry about material means; furthermore he advises them to get rid of their possessions and give them to the poor, not to do anything to get other means nor to think in the least about the future.

This rather more pragmatic advice is not easy to put into practice. To make plans for the future is becoming a prerequisite for our survival. Can we really do away with planning our future without destroying our economy and our society as a whole? We definitely have to reinterpret such an advice.

The inalienable value of the Gospel lies rather in the former warning, to dismiss our worries and concerns for the future. Let us think about tomorrow without unduly worrying about it, retaining in our inner self a peace of mind which is strictly necessary to build an authentic spiritual life.

The Church has great Saints who have organized a number of communities and devoted all their energies to planning the future but never let such concerns stand in the way of their spiritual life. And they have eventually called on the Divine Providence, after working to the best of their ability to lay the groundwork.

What can the Gospel tell us on this particular question which is going to be helpful and valuable for our own society? It would advise us not to throw our life away but rather to redirect it to pursue absolute values.

Too much emphasis is placed on material means which made us lose sight of the Kingdom of God which is the ultimate and supreme goal of everything.

Applied to the modern time, God’s words of warning to Martha could definitely apply to a sort of dreadful and huge Super-Martha, i.e. our own civilization and our life style typical of a consumer society. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴there is need of only one thing!”

Jesus’ warning still applies today and is very relevant for each individual human being, it takes on an unexpected and substantial relevance in the collective way of life of a society which is fretting after too many things, and forgets the only one which is really necessary, the only one which does provide the absolute, profound sense to our life.