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THE WORD PLACE OF UNITY: MARTHA AND MARY MARY OF NAZARETH

Elena Bosetti, sjbp



Elena Bosetti has been a member of the Congregation of Jesus the Good Shepherd (sjbp) since 1968. She received a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, followed by a Licence in Dogmatic Theology and, in 1988, a Doctorate in Biblical Theology. Her doctoral thesis, entitled *Poimēn kai Episcopos*, focuses on the figure of the pastor in the First Letter of Peter. Sr. Elena spent various periods of research at the Franciscan Biblical Study Center and the École Biblique in Jerusalem. From 1999-2005, she hosted the TV program *Reasons for Hope*,

broadcast on Rai Uno, Italy's principal TV station. She is a Professor of New Testament Studies at the Gregorian University and also teaches at other universities. She is a member of the Italian Biblical Association; of SAB (the Biblical Apostolate Sector of the National Catechetical Office of the Italian Bishops' Conference); of the Academic Committee of the Farfa Centre, and of the Permanent Working Group on the Petrine Ministry.

Sr. Elena lives in her Congregation's Jesus the Good Shepherd Spirituality Center in Modena, Italy, where she carries out many pastoral animations on the Bible.

THE WORD, PLACE OF UNITY: MARTHA AND MARY / MARY OF NAZARETH

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How can we reread the story of Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:38-42) from the perspective of apostolic mysticism? This episode, recounted only by Luke, has been interpreted in different ways, which often place the two sisters in opposition to each other: Martha as an example of the active life, and Mary of the contemplative life. But the question seems to be more radical.

Urged on by the theme of your Seminar, I would like to examine together with you this well-known and very intriguing Gospel story so as to listen to what it has to tell us. What is the critical point of the story? What tensions are revealed? What are its dynamics on the level of relationships? What sort of welcome and *diakonia* (service) come into play? What does the “better part” chosen by Mary consist of? And what kind of challenge does Jesus offer Martha (and us)?

It has been underscored time and again that in the Bible guests are often bearers of a message¹. A divine messenger visited Abraham as he sat near the entrance to his tent, bringing him the news that Sarah would bear him a son (something that made Sarah laugh). So what provocation did Jesus offer Martha when he visited her home?

In developing my talk, I will take as my point of departure the story’s context, which places us decisively in the open field of evangelization.

«AS THEY CONTINUED THEIR JOURNEY...»: IN THE HEART OF MISSION

The “context of mission” is expressly evoked by the evangelist in his introduction to the story: «As they continued their journey...» (Lk. 10:38). Luke depicts a community on the move, a Church that “goes forth” to proclaim the Good News and heal. Chapter 10 opens with Jesus sending 72 disciples out on a mission (Lk. 10:1-16), which is very significant because the range is much vaster than that of his first mission mandate, which was restricted to the Twelve (Lk. 9:1-6). This second mandate takes on a universal dimension due to both the number of disciples sent out and also the scope of their mission: they are sent to «every town and place» (Lk. 10:1). They must proclaim the Good News to everyone!

Jesus involves both men and women in his mission—a bold move that smacks of the Spirit. Luke reports that a group of women was already following Jesus in Galilee, with Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna in the lead. This information is communicated in the context of a summary that precedes the parable of the sower (8:4-8), as if to say that the work of sowing the Word involves women as fully as it does men².

All this questions us very directly as Paulines. We were born with a passion for the Gospel in our hearts, as indicated by the emblem you wear on a chain around your necks and the words of Blessed James Alberione, which circle around him like a halo: *The Gospel! The Gospel!* We cannot renounce this very Pauline passion: «Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!» (1Co. 9:16).

¹ M. Fornari-Carbonell, *La escucha del huésped* (Lk. 10:38-42). *La hospitalidad en el horizonte de la comunicacion*, Estella (Navarra) 1995; also see N. Caldach-Benages, *Il profumo del Vangelo. Gesù incontra le donne*, Paoline, Milan 2007, pp. 81-105.

² Cf. E. Bosetti-N. Dell’Agli, *L’altra metà della Chiesa. Per la reciprocità donna-uomo nella Pastorale*. Cittadella, Assisi 2015.

«SHE WELCOMED HIM INTO HER HOME»: FROM ABRAHAM TO MARTHA

Wearied by the demands of his mission, Jesus (and his group) are welcomed by Martha into her home. Thanks to the hospitality of this woman, we can say that the village as a whole offered Jesus a warm welcome, in sharp contrast to the Samaritan village that wanted nothing to do with him (Lk. 9:51-56) and the houses/villages that rejected his missionaries (Lk. 10:10-12). To find a welcoming house was undoubtedly a blessing for these itinerant evangelizers. Luke experienced this himself during his missionary trips with the Apostle Paul: it is enough for us to remember the hospitality offered them by Lydia (Acts 16:14-15).

Luke does not mention the name of the village in which Jesus and his group stopped, nor does he say anything about the feelings and relations between Jesus, Martha and Mary. It is the fourth Gospel that tells us the women lived in Bethany, a village on the eastern flank of the Mount of Olives, close to Jerusalem. Six days before celebrating his last Passover, Jesus would again be the guest of the two women (cf. Jn. 12:1-9). The evangelist John underscores the bonds of affection that linked Jesus to this house, where his friend Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, also lived.

In the Bible, hospitality is sacred. Emblematic of this is the story recounted in Gn. 18 about Abraham's welcome of three travelers at the Oak of Mamre (vv. 1-2), as he sat by the entrance to his tent during the hottest part of the day. Abraham does not realize that the travelers are the presence of God himself and thus the warmth of his welcome is even more meaningful and exemplary: «When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, he said: "Sir, if I may ask you this favor, please do not go on past your servant". Let some water be brought that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves under the tree» (Gn. 18:2-4).

Abraham sees the travelers, runs to meet them, expresses his profound respect by bowing to the ground, and invites them to stop awhile with him. His attitude is paradigmatic of the hospitable person, who is not concerned about him/herself but about the other person. A Jewish *midrash* describes Abraham's welcome in this way:

The house of Abraham was open to every human being, to casual passersby and to exiles returning home. Thus every day someone arrived to eat and drink at his table. He gave bread to the hungry, and his guests ate and drank until they were satisfied. If someone arrived naked, then Abraham clothed that person. From him they came to know God, the Creator of all thing³.

Martha's welcome is in keeping with this biblical hospitality. She is the figure of Wisdom, the hospitable woman of the house who invites others to her table (Prv. 9:1-5; 31:10-31). It is not a minor fact that Luke introduces Martha first. This detail points out her social position and role: she is the older sister and the owner of the house⁴. In the fourth Gospel, when Jesus arrives at Bethany after hearing about the death of Lazarus, it is Martha who goes out to meet him, while Mary remains at home (cf. Jn. 11:20). In the Gospel passage we are currently examining, it could be said that Martha feels so honored to welcome the Master that she can't do enough for him. She wants everything to turn out perfectly; she wants to offer him the maximum hospitality.

«SEATED AT THE LORD'S FEET...»: VERY BOLD BEHAVIOR

Mary is the younger sister but she is also the more daring of the two, especially in her relationship with the Lord. She doesn't say anything; she remains in silence, but her behavior is very eloquent (and daring). «Mary sat beside the Lord at his feet, listening to him speak» (Lk. 10:39). Her welcome is decidedly different from that of her sister. She sits on the floor at the feet of

³ Cited by C. Di Sante, *Lo straniero nella Bibbia. Ospitalità e dono*. San Paolo Editions, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2012, p. 96.

⁴ Cf. C. Osick and M.Y. Macdonald, *Il ruolo delle donne nel cristianesimo delle origini. Indagine sulle chiese domestiche*. FSP Editions, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2007.

Jesus—this was the behavior of a “disciple”. In fact, the idiom “to sit at the feet of [someone]” describes how a disciple acts toward his rabbi, as can be inferred in Acts 22:3, where Paul says he was brought up “at the feet of Gamaliel.”

Mary is absorbed in the words of her Master. She listens to him quietly and it is precisely this characteristic that has given rise to widespread (even though partial and somewhat biased) interpretation, making her behavior an icon of the contemplative life. But in hindsight, Martha too is initially quiet.... So this is not the point: it is not a matter of silence. Something more is involved. What?

The way in which Mary welcomes Jesus—by sitting at his feet—is something a man, not a woman, would do. When the three men visit Abraham at the Oak of Mamre, Sarah does not come out to meet them; she is very busy preparing a meal for them (in fact, in order to listen to their conversation she has to eavesdrop!). Jewish culture of that time relegated women to the kitchen: discussions and business matters were the affairs of men. So Mary appears to be overstepping herself. She detaches herself from the cultural stereotype by not getting involved in domestic duties and instead sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Jesus too seems to be acting outrageously. No Jewish teacher of that time would have found it acceptable for a woman to adopt the attitude of disciple toward him. Instead, Jesus does not disapprove of Mary’s behavior; indeed he favors it right from the start, already displaying this in the house of Peter, when he hears that his mother and brothers are outside. His reply to this information is shocking: «Who are my mother and my brothers?» And looking at those who sat around him (both women and men) in the attitude of disciples, he said: «Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother» (Mk. 3:33-35). In a parallel passage, Luke interprets “doing the will of God” from the perspective of listening: the mother and brothers of Jesus are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice (Lk. 8:19).

**«LORD, DO YOU NOT CARE....? TELL HER TO HELP ME»
(Back to the kitchen!)**

It could be said that Martha is concretely “putting into practice” the word of God, who asks us to offer hospitality to others. She welcomes her guest with great warmth and cordiality, and does all she can to provide him with the best hospitality possible. So what’s the problem? Martha feels abandoned: she has been left to carry out her “service” (*diakonia*) alone.

She is very irritated to see her sister sitting serenely at the feet of the Master. We can imagine the questions that the agitated Martha must have been asking herself: “Why isn’t my sister lending me a hand? Is it possible she can’t see that I need her help? And Jesus? He too doesn’t seem to be aware of my situation—that Mary is not doing her part in carrying out this service (*diakonia*). Doesn’t he see me too?” At the end she explodes and accuses the Master: «Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me!» (Lk. 10:40) Incredible! Martha is giving orders to the Lord (the statement is an imperative). What happened to the warm, hospitable lady of the house?

Martha’s words are an explosion of bitterness. Taking it for granted that her sister should automatically understand her need for help, she does not have the simplicity to ask, perhaps in a firm tone: “Mary, could you please give me a hand here?” Her choice to address Jesus instead of Mary reveals her withdrawal and resentment. Martha complains about her sister to the Lord and also voices her displeasure with him. She is wounded because he doesn’t seem to notice her; he seems to have eyes only for Mary. Martha is afraid of being excluded from the circle of affection: «Her problem is not so much linked to the fact that she was physically tired. Martha cannot tolerate Mary’s ‘otherness’—she sees her diversity as a potential threat»⁵.

⁵ R. Manes, “*Il cielo si aprì.*” *Il Dio misericordioso e tenero di Luca.* Cittadella, Assisi 2015, pp. 86-87.

Martha is annoyed by Mary's attitude and asks the Lord to help bring her sister back within the parameters of the traditional role of woman (*Back to the kitchen!*). But Jesus does not cooperate with her. He has no intention of invalidating Mary's bold choice. It is Martha who has to change her views.

The Master questions her directly, calling her twice by name. Later, he will do the same with Simon when his great temptation looms on the horizon (Lk. 22:31). In fact, Martha is tempted to understand herself in view of the services that need to be provided: «You are anxious and worried about many things...» She is being sucked into the spiral of “many things” (*peri polla*). It is obvious that her labors are for the sake of Jesus, but she gets so involved in these “many things” that she forgets “for whom” she is working, and thus ends up losing sight of the essential.

«THERE IS NEED OF ONLY ONE THING. MARY HAS CHOSEN THE BETTER PART» WHAT IS IT?

The reply of Jesus to Martha is not a rebuke but an invitation to reflection. It can be connected to another of his surprising replies—the one addressed to a woman in the crowd who raised her voice to praise his mother: “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed!” And Jesus responded: «More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it!» (Lk. 11: 27-28)

It is not enough to do a lot of things for Jesus. Indeed, this attitude could be risky, as Paul reminds the Corinthians (1Co. 13:1-3).

Jesus tells Martha that there is need of only one (*enòs*) thing. In saying that *one* thing alone is necessary, he invites Martha to strive for *unity* within herself; to leave behind the dispersion she has reached due to her preoccupations (*merimnáo*) and interior agitation (*thorybazomai*: to be troubled, anxious). In the parable of the sower, the protagonist is worried about the thorns that prevent the word of God from growing (cf. Lk. 8:14).

The contrast is very clear: on the one hand, worry and apprehension; on the other, “the one thing necessary,” which Jesus does not specifically define. Instead he returns to Martha's behavior and obliges her (and the reader) to interpret his words intelligently⁶.

Jesus describes the behavior of Mary as a choice of “the better part.” His words remind us of the “good soil” in the parable of the seeds. Just as what Jesus says about “worries” evokes the image of soil plagued by thorns (Lk. 8:14), which make it incapable of allowing the seed to mature, so too his reference to the “better part” reminds us of fertile soil, that is to say, the listener's good and perfect heart, which guards the seed and produces fruit (Lk. 8:15).

It concerns listening to his words. This is the “better part” that Mary has chosen, in full accord with what the Lord asks of his people: «Listen, Israel!» (*Shemà Israel*, Dt. 6:4).

Mary recognizes the Lord's visit (Lk. 1:68) and consequently rejoices in his presence. Her behavior—she seems to be “doing nothing” by remaining at the feet of the Master (like a disciple), attentive to his word—coincides with the choice of the “better part,” which will not be taken from her. In fact, it corresponds to the “good” God wants for his people, for each one of us: the good of listening, because it is only by listening to his Word that we can attain fullness of life.

We said that in the Bible, a guest is always the bearer of a message. So what message does Jesus bring to Martha's house? It is up to us to interpret it, although not arbitrarily, because Jesus himself points us in the right direction by clearly defining Mary's behavior. “The only thing necessary”—the one thing we absolutely need to do—is to “listen to his word.”

⁶ Cf. M. Crimella, *Luca. Introduzione, traduzione e commento*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2015, pp. 193-205.

THE WORD AS A “HOUSE”

I would like to underscore another aspect, that follows as a consequence. Since the Master is present, the house of Martha is not simply a place of hospitality and restoration: it is a “house of the Word”—a place where one listens to the Master; a unique *Bet midrash* (House of study) where something surprising and new takes place, namely: women, as well as men, can “sit at the feet” of the Lord as his disciples.

Therefore, let us look at the Word as a “house,” a place of unity: first of all, interior unity (allowing ourselves “to be unified” by the Word); a place of relational unity (learning to become a community); and a place of dynamic unity between being and doing, that is, between contemplation and action.

Every activity becomes agitated and restless if it is not rooted in listening to the Word⁷. In contrast, profound (and constant) contact with the Word makes every service (in whatever situation and whatever one’s age) precious and fruitful.

We must make the Word our “home,” that is to say: we must “inhabit” and “dwell” in the Word. «If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples» (Jn. 8:31). To remain in—to dwell in—the Word: this is the challenge of apostolic mysticism!

Listening is the dimension—the “vital space”—that distinguishes us as persons and believers. In fact, faith springs from listening: *fides ex auditu* (“faith comes from hearing”) (Rm. 10:17). Prayer itself is first of all listening—listening to God through the sacrament of his Word (the Scriptures), and listening to God in history, in our daily life.

I was struck by this detail: Luke describes Mary’s relationship with the Lord by saying that she listened to «what he was saying,” instead of simply saying that she listened to him. Is this just a formal detail? In retrospect, it is not just a matter of form. Instead, it highlights the difference between the historical person, Mary, and the readers of the Gospel.

That subtle but substantial difference invites the reader to recognize that Mary’s experience is possible for him/her too, many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the story of faith that was initiated. Even though it is not possible for the reader to listen to Jesus directly, inasmuch as this is linked to his historical presence, he/she can still listen to his word, accessible to him/her through meditation on the text composed on the basis of the transmission of witnesses who became ministers of that word (Lk. 1:2)⁸.

Thus the evangelist directs us to the *lectio divina*, which is a prayerful listening to the Scriptures. Word and Spirit always go together. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that the Word took flesh in the womb of Mary. It is the Holy Spirit who spoke through the mouths of the prophets and who inspired Sacred Scripture. It is the same Spirit who inspires us to read and listen to the Word.

This listening is in tune with *agape*, with God’s passionate love for this world. Therefore, those who truly listen to the Word cannot help but proclaim it with their whole being.

THE “SUBVERSIVE” HYMN OF MARY, WHO CARRIED THE WORD IN HER WOMB

Mary of Nazareth’s welcome of the Word “activated” her profoundly: she “got up” (*anastasa*, the verb used to indicate resurrection) and “set out” (Lk. 1:39). The symbolism of her trip is especially dear to the evangelist Luke, who, in describing Mary’s journey, seems to offer us a foretaste of the great journey Jesus would make.

⁷ Cf. Dom Guillaume, *Gesù lo guardò e lo amò. Meditazione sul Vangelo di Luca*, Paoline Editions, Milan 2015.

⁸ M. Crimella, *Luca*, p. 205.

Pope Francis comments:

Mary is not in a hurry, she does not let herself be swept away by the moment, she does not let herself be dragged along by events. However, when she has clearly understood what God is asking of her, what she has to do, she does not loiter, she does not delay, but goes “with haste.”⁹

And so the two women blessed by the Lord meet face to face: the elderly mother of the precursor and the young mother of the Messiah. Enlightened by the Spirit, Elizabeth intuitively grasps Mary’s secret: “Blessed is she who believed!” (Lk. 1:45) Mary’s greatness can be interpreted in terms of her *faith*. As Augustine put it, she “conceived [Jesus] first in her heart, then in her womb.”¹⁰

Mary is aware that she is the center of God’s attention and, consequently, the center of all humanity’s attention (“all generations will call me blessed”). But she completely *decentralizes* her *central position*:

Mary is fully aware of being chosen by God but in spite of this she clings fast to the attitude of complete humility. It was unthinkable for her to attribute to herself anything she had received from God (Adrienne Von Speyr).

The *Magnificat*—a portrait, so to speak, of Mary’s soul—is entirely woven from threads of Holy Scripture, threads drawn from the word of God. Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the word of God; the word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God. Since Mary is completely imbued with the word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate.¹¹

We can ask ourselves: What does it mean to **evangelize** from the perspective of the *Magnificat*?

Like Mary, we cannot remain under the loving gaze of God without interpreting history from another perspective—one that turns it decisively upside down!

The *Magnificat* is **terribly subversive** and we must be aware of the challenge it involves!

We must enter the logic of Mary’s canticle, which means learning to “look beyond” and sing not only of the past but also of the present and the future: the “not yet” based on hope.

In the school of Mary, we learn to adopt a gaze of amazement, welcoming with awe the great things the Lord continues to accomplish....

In the Church, functions are not in competition with one another, each one vying for the top position. Indeed, a woman—Mary—is more important than the bishops... (cf. Pope Francis).

⁹ 31 May 2013.

¹⁰ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon* 196.1.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, n. 28.