

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Lectionary: 108

Reading 1 - Genesis 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, while the day was growing hot. Looking up, Abraham saw three men standing nearby. 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. Now that you have come this close to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way." The men replied, "Very well, do as you have said."

Abraham hastened into the tent and told Sarah, "Quick, three measures of fine flour! Knead it and make rolls." He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice steer, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. Then Abraham got some curds and milk, as well as the steer that had been prepared, and set these before the three men; and he waited on them under the tree while they ate.

They asked Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?" He replied, "There in the tent." One of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son."

Responsorial Psalm - Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 5 R.(1a) He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Reading 2 - Colossians 1:24-28

Brothers and sisters: Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, of which I am a minister in accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past. But now it has been manifested to his holy ones, to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope for glory. It is he whom we proclaim, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

Gospel - Luke 10:38-42

Jesus entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." The Lord said to her in reply, "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."

Ecclesiology and Spirituality: Active Contemplatives

Today, the church reminds us of the importance of hospitality in the general sense. That it is a Christian virtue and our duty towards others. She also reminds us of a more intimate hospitality, that which we offer toward Christ in our homes, our lives, our hearts. Most importantly, we are encouraged to be attentive to the disposition of our hearts when we serve our Lord and others. The better dispositions are exemplified in Mary's choice to listen and contemplate at Jesus' feet, as well, the words of St. Paul in the second reading wherein he describes his disposition for us, and in the disarmingly eager welcome of Abraham.

Finally, the first and gospel readings are also linked in the way Luke teases out the meaning of how the whole life and ministry of Jesus, is a *visitation* of God to Israel and the world. We might say that the crucial point for Luke is that those who do receive him find that he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality, the "hospitality of God." The One who comes as visitor and guest in fact becomes *host* and offers a hospitality in which human beings and, potentially, the entire world can become truly human, be at home, *know* salvation in the depths of their hearts.¹ This we discover most especially through the Church and intimately during Mass as we listen to the living word of God and receive the Lord in the Eucharist.

Saint Augustine, commenting on this passage, brings to bear this interpretation of Martha's busy service and Mary's quiet contemplation to our understanding of the Church. This is the more precise picture of the Church, the mystical body of Christ, that receives. He says that Martha, receiving Jesus into her home, represents "*the Church which now receives the Lord into her heart.*" He adds that Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, represents "*the same Church, but in a future life, where ceasing from labor and the ministering to her wants, she shall delight in Wisdom alone.*"² The phrase "*the Church which now receives the Lord into her heart*" encapsulates a profound theological truth within Catholicism, particularly concerning the Church's relationship with Christ and the Eucharist. This concept is deeply rooted in the understanding of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ and her reception of the Eucharist.

Saint Paul frequently used the imagery of the Church as Christ's body. In his letter to the Colossians, he states that Christ "*is the head of the body, the church*". He also emphasizes that "*in him all things hold together*" and that "*in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*"³. This means that the Church is not merely an organization but a living entity intimately united with Christ, who is its head⁴. Through Christ, all things were created and hold together, and in Him, the fullness of deity dwells bodily.⁵ The Holy Fathers of the Church wrote extensively that the Church is understood as the Mystical Body of Christ, an expression that is considered noble, sublime, and divine.⁶ This intimate and inseparable bond between Jesus Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church, signifies that Christ continues His saving mission through the Church throughout the centuries.⁷

The phrase "*receives the Lord into her heart*" primarily refers to the Church's reception of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The Eucharist, which most profoundly expresses and brings about the unity of the Church with Christ and with one another.⁸ When the faithful receive Holy Communion, they receive the Body of

¹ Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God A Reading of Luke's Gospel, Rev. Ed.* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 8.

² Sermon 103, St. Augustine

<https://archive.org/details/saint-augustine-sermons/Saint%20Augustine%20-%20Sermons%2094A%20%3B%20147a/page/77/mode/1up>

³ Colossians 1:18 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/colossians/1>

⁴ Ephesians 1:22-23 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/ephesians/1>

⁵ Congregation for the Causes of Saints https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20021210_martins-rosto-de-cristo_en.html

⁶ Pope Francis, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180307_udienza-generale.html

⁷ Ephesians 4:12 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/ephesians/4>

⁸ Saint John Paul II, Pope. Pgh 5 Homily Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ celebrated at St John Lateran

Christ so that together they may more truly be the Body of Christ in the world.⁹ As Saint Augustine noted, in the Eucharist, *"we are to be what we see and receive what we are"*. The "Amen" said when receiving communion signifies consent to enter into the life of communion that Christ achieved through His death and resurrection.¹⁰

The reception of the Lord into the Church's heart signifies a continuous process of being rooted and built up in Christ, established in faith, and abounding in thanksgiving. This reception leads to a fullness in Christ, who is the head of every ruler and authority. The Church, through this reception, is equipped for the work of ministry and for building up the Body of Christ, striving towards the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, and to the full stature of Christ. This unity is maintained through humility, gentleness, patience, and love, recognizing that there is *"one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all"*.¹¹

In essence, *"the Church which now receives the Lord into her heart"* speaks to the Church's identity as Christ's Mystical Body, continually nourished and unified by His presence, especially in the Eucharist, enabling her to fulfill her mission of salvation and bring all people into communion with God. With this in mind, we delve deeper into nature of the Church, as represented by her theologians and scripture scholars reflecting on the gospel reading for today, which has throughout history, primarily viewed Martha and Mary as representatives of two dimensions of the life of the Church and Christians – the active and the contemplative life, respectively. Although both Martha and Mary, in their own ways, exemplify the nature of our discipleship and contribute to the life and mission of the Church in its earthly journey and its ultimate fulfillment.

Martha represents the Church militant or pilgrim Church. The Pilgrim Church refers to the Christian faithful on Earth, who are actively engaged in the world, striving to live out the Gospel message and working towards their salvation. Like Martha, who was busy with preparations for Jesus' visit, the Pilgrim Church is seen as serving God through actions, charity, and striving for holiness in the present moment. This interpretation highlights the Church's journey through time and space, her mission to spread the Gospel, and her commitment to serving others.

Mary represents the Church triumphant, toward which we are journeying. The Church Triumphant is composed of the saints, declared and unknown to us by name, who have achieved the beatific vision of God in Heaven. Mary's act of contemplation and prioritizing the presence of Jesus is seen as a reflection of the ultimate goal and reward of faith: union with God in the eternal glory of Heaven. This perspective emphasizes the ultimate triumph of God's grace and the Church's final destiny in the heavenly realm.

It is important to note that these interpretations are not meant to devalue either aspect of the Church. Instead, they illustrate the interconnectedness of active service and contemplative devotion. Just as Mary's contemplation was a necessary complement to Martha's action, the Church's work on Earth is ultimately oriented towards and informed by the hope of the heavenly reward.

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790617_laterano.html

⁹Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with one another; Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses 2012 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pont_committees/eucharist-congr/documents/rc_committ_euchar_doc_20110215_50-testo-base_en.html

¹⁰ Sermon 272 <https://ctk.org/st-augustine-sermon-272>

¹¹ Colossians 1 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/colossians/1>

Thus, as St. Gregory says, “the works of an active life pass away with the body, but the joys of the contemplative life rather begin to increase from the end.”¹² According to the Fathers of the Church, we are being directed by Christ to consider our supernatural destiny as the context for our faith in action. We must serve each other here on earth, without forgetting that our ultimate fulfillment is eternal union with God—where our being in body and soul experiences its fullness and our joy is electrified in our perfect contemplation of the divine essence. Therefore, we acknowledge that the choice of Martha which represents our ‘work’ in this world is good, but the choice of Mary is better insofar as it reflects what we will experience in heaven—unlike servile work, contemplation of God’s word will not be taken away in the life to come.¹³

Thus, these two dimensions of the life of the Church must also be recognized as defining truths for every missionary disciple of Christ, and we must strive to balance them. A life of prayer that ignores the needs of others, or an active life of service that neglects prayer, becomes imbalanced. In our daily exams we must thoroughly reflect and discern about the proper balance in our lives between the contemplative and active dimensions and ask the Holy Spirit to help us establish a more perfect order in our lives. We must also study the example of Jesus revealed in scripture, that gives us the perfect example of deep prayer that drives and informs compassionate and fruitful ministry.¹⁴ Called as we are to grow in our sanctification in the world, action and contemplation cannot be regarded as two opposite ways of practicing the Christian faith. The key lies in being able to combine these two aspects of Christian life, without either harming the other. Close union between action and contemplation can be achieved in very different ways, depending on the specific vocation each person is given by God.¹⁵

Many of us assume the false dichotomy between these two dimensions of the Church and Christian life. In so doing we set ourselves up to misunderstand the nature of the Church and our Eucharistic celebrations, as well as to frustrate attempts to have and to grow personal relationship with God. The contemplative dimension is not the sole purview of monks, nuns, and Saints. Neither is the active dimension the sole purview of the lay faithful. The balance of the two dimensions will be appropriately different dependent upon the vocation, but they are necessary in the lives of both groups.

Considering the hospitality given by Abraham and Sarah, the heroic ministry of St. Paul, and the necessary hospitality of Martha; we are clearly not being taught that we must all become contemplative hermit disciples. Imagine the amount of practical hospitality that was necessary for Jesus and his followers throughout his three years of ministry. The Lord’s correction of Martha, as to her disposition, consistent with so many of his other teachings on the subject, tells us that we are not supposed to focus only on the actions. The work. The only way to really understand how to strike this balance is to realize that ‘the one thing necessary’ of which Jesus speaks, is himself, is God. These readings focus in on the question of how we welcome God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and what it means to have a relationship with them. In the first reading we see how that looks in actions of Abraham and Sarah, and how that looks in this gospel in the choice made by Mary. Both involve being attentive to their presence, listening to his words and contemplating their meaning as well as being attentive to the practical aspects of hospitality / service. It means accepting his love for us, experiencing his love and acceptance of us as the individuals we are.

¹² <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/catena/untitled-71.shtml> - A great resource for consulting the Fathers comes to us from the Middle Ages. Among the numerous works of St. Thomas Aquinas, we find his compilation called the *Catena Aurea*, or “Golden Chain,” a commentary on each of the four Gospels made up of quotations from the Church Fathers.

¹³ Curtis Mitch, “Introduction to the Gospels,” in *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 129.

¹⁴ Joseph L. Ponessa and Laurie Watson Manhardt, *The Gospel of Luke*, Come and See: Catholic Bible Study (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2015), 94.

¹⁵ *Saint Luke’s Gospel*, The Navarre Bible (Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers, 2005), 111.

Today the question is, are we people who feel we have access to this relationship with a God who visits us and keeps visiting us? It's true that it's hard to sustain our awareness of a relationship like that in a world where there is so much noise and frenetic activity, where we can lose hope in God's presence. And yet God never ceases to seek us. Christ never abandons us. God is present to us, not just in our inner lives but through the Church as teacher, provider of the sacraments of salvation, and the place in which the disciples are gathered for worship, restoration, and nourishment.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Active Life (Martha):** Refers to the dimension of Christian life characterized by service, work, and practical ministry in the world. Represented by Martha, who was busy preparing and serving Jesus.
- **Beatific Vision:** The ultimate direct self-communication of God to the individual person, a state of perfect contemplation and joy experienced by the saints in Heaven.
- **Church Militant / Pilgrim Church:** Refers to the Christian faithful on Earth who are actively engaged in the world, striving to live out the Gospel, serving God through actions, and working towards salvation. Represented by Martha.
- **Church Triumphant:** Refers to the saints who have achieved the beatific vision of God in Heaven. Represented by Mary's quiet contemplation, reflecting the ultimate union with God.
- **Contemplative Life (Mary):** Refers to the dimension of Christian life focused on listening, prayer, reflection, and intimate relationship with God. Represented by Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet.
- **Disposition of Hearts:** The inner attitude, mindset, or spiritual state with which one approaches service to God and others. The source emphasizes its importance over mere actions.
- **Eucharist:** The sacrament of Holy Communion, in which Catholics receive the Body and Blood of Christ. It is presented as the most profound expression of the Church's unity with Christ and with one another.
- **False Dichotomy:** An erroneous separation or opposition between two concepts (like active and contemplative life) that are, in reality, interconnected and complementary.
- **Hospitality:** A Christian virtue and duty, defined as welcoming others (general sense) and, more intimately, welcoming Christ into one's heart and life.
- **Mystical Body of Christ:** A theological concept describing the Church as a living entity intimately united with Christ, who is its head. Through this bond, Christ continues His saving mission.
- **The One Thing Necessary:** A phrase from Jesus' words to Martha, interpreted as referring to Himself, to God, and to having a deep, transformative relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which gives context to all other activities.
- **Sanctification:** The process of being made holy; growing in holiness and conformity to God's will, a lifelong journey for Christians.
- **Vocation:** A calling from God to a particular state of life (e.g., priesthood, marriage, single life) or a specific mission, which influences the balance between active and contemplative dimensions of one's life.

Homily Breakdown:

Hospitality, the Church, and the Balance of Active and Contemplative Life

This homily synthesizes key themes and important concepts from the 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time, focusing on the nature of hospitality, the identity of the Church, and the crucial balance between active service and contemplative devotion.

The Virtue of Hospitality: Beyond Mere Service

The sources emphasize that hospitality is a fundamental Christian virtue and duty, extending beyond common social interactions to encompass a profound spiritual dimension.

A. General and Intimate Hospitality

- **General Hospitality:** The Church reminds us of "the importance of hospitality in the general sense that it is a Christian virtue, our duty toward others." This applies not only to our homes but also to "our surroundings, our places of work, how we serve." It is particularly crucial in parish life, where we are encouraged to be welcoming: "You see a stranger, say hello, shake hands, what are you studying, where do you work, what are you involved in at the parish, you know, like be hospitable."
- **Intimate Hospitality:** There is also a "more intimate hospitality, that which we offer toward Christ. in our homes, our lives, our hearts." This involves a deeper reception of Christ into one's being.

B. The Crucial Role of Disposition

The central message regarding hospitality, as highlighted by the Gospel reading of Martha and Mary, is the *disposition of the heart* when serving.

- **Martha's Rebuke:** Martha's issue was not her "busy providing for the practical needs of her guests," but her "really bad attitude about it." Her tone was demanding, reflecting a sense of resentment: "Hey, I'm doing all this work and I'm doing it for you. And there's my sister just sitting there. Make her help me."
- **Mary's Exemplary Disposition:** In contrast, "The better dispositions are exemplified in Mary's choice to listen and contemplate at Jesus' feet." This eager welcome is also seen in "the words of St. Paul in the second reading wherein he describes his disposition for us and in the disarmingly eager welcome of Abraham."
- **Receiving God's Hospitality:** Luke's Gospel highlights how "the whole life and ministry of Jesus is a visitation of God to Israel and the world. How are we receiving him?" Those who receive Jesus find that "he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality, turning it on its head really. The one who comes as visitor and guest becomes the host think church and offers a hospitality in which we human beings God's creation brothers and sisters in Christ and the entire world through him through us can become truly human. be at home. No salvation in the depths of our hearts." This "hospitality of God" is most clearly experienced through the Church, "intimately during Mass as we listen to the living word of God and receive the Lord in the Eucharist."

Ecclesiology and Spirituality: The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ

The Martha and Mary narrative offers a profound framework for understanding the nature of the Church itself, particularly its identity as the Mystical Body of Christ and its relationship with the Eucharist.

A. The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ

- **St. Augustine's Interpretation:** Saint Augustine interprets Martha's reception of Jesus as representing "the Church which now receives the Lord into her heart," while Mary sitting at Jesus' feet represents "the same Church, but in a future life, where ceasing from labor and the ministering to her wants, she shall delight in Wisdom alone."
- **Profound Theological Truth:** The phrase "the Church which now receives the Lord into her heart" encapsulates "profound theological truths of our faith. particularly concerning our relationship with Christ. Christ and Christ in the Eucharist." This concept is "deeply rooted in the understanding of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ and her reception of the Eucharist."
- **Biblical Basis:** Saint Paul frequently used the imagery of the Church as Christ's body (Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 1:22-23), emphasizing that Christ is "the head of the body, the church" and that "in him all things hold together." The Church is "not merely an organization but a living entity intimately united with Christ, who is its head."
- **Christ's Ongoing Mission:** This "intimate and inseparable bond between Jesus Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church, signifies that Christ continues His saving mission through the Church throughout the centuries."

B. The Eucharist: Reception and Transformation

- **Primary Reception of Christ:** "The phrase 'receives the Lord into her heart' primarily refers to the Church's reception of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist." The Eucharist "most profoundly expresses and brings about the unity of the Church with Christ and with one another."
- **Becoming the Body of Christ:** When the faithful receive Holy Communion, they receive the Body of Christ "so that together they may more truly be the Body of Christ in the world." As Saint Augustine noted, in the Eucharist, "we are to be what we see and receive what we are." The "Amen" in communion signifies "consent to enter into the life of communion that Christ achieved through His death and resurrection."
- **Equipped for Mission:** This reception leads to "a fullness in Christ" and equips the Church "for the work of ministry and for building up the Body of Christ, striving towards the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, and to the full stature of Christ."

The Active and Contemplative Dimensions of the Church and Christian Life

The Martha and Mary story is consistently interpreted as illustrating the two essential dimensions of the Church and every Christian's life: the active and the contemplative.

A. Martha: The Active, Pilgrim Church

- **Representation:** "Martha represents the Church militant or pilgrim Church." This refers to "the Christian faithful on Earth, who are actively engaged in the world, striving to live out the Gospel message and working towards their salvation."

- **Serving God through Action:** Like Martha's busy preparations, the Pilgrim Church "is seen as serving God through actions, charity, and striving for holiness in the present moment." This highlights the Church's "mission to spread the Gospel, and her commitment to serving others."
- **Work's End:** Just as Martha's work for the dinner would end, "the need for that kind of work ceases as we pass over into the next life in union with God."

B. Mary: The Contemplative, Triumphant Church

- **Representation:** "Mary represents the Church triumphant, toward which we are journeying." This comprises "the saints... who have achieved the beatific vision of God in Heaven."
- **Ultimate Goal:** Mary's act of "contemplation and prioritizing the presence of Jesus is seen as a reflection of the ultimate goal and reward of faith: union with God in the eternal glory of Heaven."
- **Enduring Joy:** As St. Gregory says, "the works of an active life pass away with the body, but the joys of the contemplative life rather begin to increase from the end." The contemplation of God's word "will not be taken away in the life to come." In heaven, we are "more perfectly like Mary truly hanging on every word. Truly bursting with joy, electrified in our being, enjoying the fullness of the beatific vision, presence and union with God."

C. The Necessary Balance: "The One Thing Necessary"

- **Avoiding False Dichotomy:** Both sources strongly caution against a "false dichotomy a separation between the contemplative Mary example and the active the Martha example." The contemplative life is "not the sole purview of monks, nuns, and Saints," nor is the active life "the sole purview of the lay faithful."
- **"The One Thing" is Relationship with God:** Jesus' declaration that "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42) refers to "the one thing that Jesus said was necessary... and that has to do with how we have how we develop that exemplary disposition. How we balance the contemplative with the active." "The one thing necessary' of which Jesus speaks, is himself, is God."
- **Relationship as Foundation:** "Relationship with him is at the heart." Without this "sustaining transformative relationship with the father, the son, and the holy the Holy Spirit," it becomes "difficult to strike the balance," to "serve when it's inconvenient," or "to be hospitable when there's so many other things to do."
- **Ordering Life to First Things:** Our busy lives often prevent us from focusing on "that one thing." Jesus teaches that "if you order your life according to first things, everything else will fall into place and there will be so much more peace in your soul." This balance allows for a "fully human life that necessitates this balance between the contemplative and the active."
- **Vocation-Dependent Balance:** The "balance between the two contemplative and active is going to be a little bit different depending on one's vocation." However, both are "essential both for the church and for our individual selves."
- **Jesus as the Perfect Example:** We must "study the example of Jesus revealed in scripture, that gives us the perfect example of deep prayer that drives and informs compassionate and fruitful ministry."