Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
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10.03.08: Martha, Mary and the Life of Contemplation

One of the surprises in my walk as a Christian has been that I now find my life to be far busier and more
difficult than it was before the advent of Christ in my life. I have only lately considered this to be a fruit. For
shouldn’t the life of discernment be spent in quiet leisurely contemplation of the Word? Should I not, as 1 Kings
19 implies, find God in the gentle movement of the breeze, and not in the maelstrom of the hurricane or the
tumult of the earthquake? I yearn to be at the feet of Jesus, to contemplate Him who is Wisdom Incarnate, to
invite Him to make His home within me, to form my heart and mind so that I might imitate Him in all that I
think, do and feel (Luke 10:38-42). And yet, I can rarely find the time to contemplate Him as I think I should.

It is not that I dissipate my energies selfishly or inconsiderately, or shun the contemplative life, as people so
often interpret Martha to be doing in her frenetic activity. This I know most assuredly when I go on retreat,
especially with the Monks at the Abbey of Genesee in New York State. I could easily — and I say this in all
honesty — I could easily become a Trapist, take the vows, and be silent the rest of my days, taking up
the position of Mary of which Christ so approved. However, as much as I desire this, as much as I feel so at home
in the monastic enclosure, nonetheless I find that I am not called to enjoy that life right now. It seems, rather,
that I am called to be busy and tired.

Now, I am sure beyond any doubt that I dislike pain, and that I take no enjoyment in the psychological and
physical suffering that I experience. In fact, there are times where the best part of my day seems to be its
completion, where I not only pine for my bed at night, but that I hope that I will succumb quickly to blessed
sleep once nicely tucked away under my sheets. While some people have told me that there will be plenty of
time to rest in the grave (Psalm 16), and that without pain nothing good is born (even the seed must burst in
order for the wheat to grow — John 12:24-25), such sayings are cold comfort to me, particularly in those
situations where, coming out of my sweet slumber, the burden that I shuffled off the night before stands ready
at my bedside, ready to be taken up once again.

And yet I consider all this to be fruit and gift from God, that I have discerned correctly the course my life was
and is to take, and that I have great cause to rejoice.

Although I have found consolation in works devoted to the place of suffering in the Christian life (such as C. S.
Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*, and David Bentley Hart’s *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the
Tsunami*?), this is not my primary problem. Rather, I ask: how do I reconcile the examples of both Martha and
Mary in my own life, especially when it is clear to me that I am not permitted to do as I like, namely to take up
Mary’s position in a monastery, but rather am asked to take up Martha’s part, as a professor at DeSales
University? Here is what I have discerned: I have been gifted with all that I am and have so that I might go out
into the world in the way in which I do and live the active life of Martha, but as Mary would so do. We are all
called to sit at the feet of Jesus, and will so do, God willing, in the next life. Indeed, some are called in this life to
partake of the example and position of Mary as monks and nuns in monastic enclosures. However, the rest of
us, as much as we yearn to become like Mary in this way, understand that we are sent forth by Christ to do
whatever it is that we are called to do on His behalf, and to do this always with our hearts and our minds ever
set upon His person, never attending only to the work itself (as Martha does) and thus risk loosing sight of our position in this work, namely as servants acting in obedience to the command of our Master.

In some ways it is jarring to use such language since we are taught that we are no longer slaves but friends of Christ (John 15:15ff). Nonetheless, in our understanding of this Scripture, we must be careful not to make the mistake of reducing the divine down to our level, but to see this text as an invitation to explore a more beautiful way of relating to God than that which is implied by servitude alone. One element that protects our misunderstanding of Christ’s powerful revelation at John 15 can be found in not losing sight of the fact that Christ is King (1 Timothy 6; Revelation 17 and 19), and that in our love and service of Him, we stand, as Psalm 123 states, as servants with our eyes fixed dedicatedly, eternally and lovingly upon the hand of our Master.

In my service of my Master, I find one of the reasons for the necessity of the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In poverty, I am freed from my slavery to the riches of this world, and the power and status that they bring. In chastity, I am freed from slavery to the pleasures of my animality, and thus rescued from the illusion of completeness that they promise but are incapable of delivering. Finally, in obedience, I am freed from the arrogance that comes with my progress in the intellectual and moral life. The last vow is the most difficult to understand. In short, I have a very healthy distrust of my humanity: even though I am redeemed through the blood of His cross, I am still subject to the fallleness of my humanity and all the disorder that this brings with it. It is easy, relatively, to control the desires addressed by the vows of poverty and chastity. The temptations, however, of the mind and heart are most insidious, specifically that I, and no one else, am best suited to determine how I understand the word of God, and how I am to effect it in my daily life. I need the direction of others so that I might not fall victim to intellectual vanity and the defects natural to human love (all would do well to read C. S. Lewis’s development of these points in his book The Four Loves).

Thus, I can understand, be at peace with and even rejoice in that life that has been allotted to me. I can understand the busy-ness to which I have been called, the tiredness, the pain and suffering that is part of my life. I am blessed to see my life to be so little different from the lives of those who have taught and loved me, whom in turn I have loved and whose memory and example I have so desired to honor and emulate in my life. Lastly, I am so grateful that I can finally understand the example of the poor who in the midst of their hardship and oppression, can still rejoice in their Lord, and never think for a moment of being angry with Him, or of blaming Him for the evils that afflict them. Thus do Paul’s words (at Romans 8:35-39) reveal their meaning:

> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: “For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let me leave you, then, with the prayer from Habakkuk (the one that we prayed this morning) which expresses everything above ever so more beautifully than I could hope to do:

> For though the fig tree blossom not, nor fruit be on the vines, though the yield of the olive fail and the terraces produce no nourishment, though the flocks disappear from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord and exult in my saving God. God, my Lord is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of hinds and enables me to go upon the heights.

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