

16th Sun OT - Luke 10:38-42

Martha and Mary

In *Catholic Women Preach*, Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan who served as director of **Lay Ecclesial Formation** and **Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology** at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Cincinnati for twenty-three years writes about today's gospel passage,

"Is this the narration of an event in the life of Jesus, presented as it happened, or is it, as scripture scholars Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Barbara Reid suggest, an incident that has been filtered, shifted, re-imagined, and shared through the lens of Luke's early Christian community, a community that may have been struggling to discern and define and re-define women's roles in leadership, study, and *diakonia*—service?"

"(The word) can mean waiting upon, helping to support, doing the work, serving, preparation, it can mean many things—and, among them, **ministry** in the name of the Church." What certain words mean that are used for ecclesial titles, positions, etc., are especially important to us today, and **diakonia** is one of the more contested of them. For example, **ecclesia** can mean originally the congregation or the assembly and not necessarily the building. Just as *ecclesia* has come to mean something more specific when used by the "Church" authorities, so also can "the diaconate" mean something very specific.

Dr. Susan continues, "Is it possible that Martha's distress does not originate in cooking, cleaning, or being relegated to the kitchen, but in something deeper?"

"Martha's state is typically translated as "distracted, overburdened, busy," but the verb also commonly means, "to be pulled or dragged away." Does Martha's frustration emerge from pain over a "pulling away" or "taking away" of her place and role in ministry? Could this story reflect a post Resurrection struggle in the evangelist's community over the proper ministerial roles for women—active or docile? Leader or passive listener?"

Recall to mind that in John's gospel, it is Martha who makes her profession to Jesus, "I come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." However, at the meal for Jesus in thanksgiving for raising their brother from the dead, Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair."

The author also asks, "Is this passage a remnant? A lingering memory from a community that tamed the diaconal ministry of women while advocating for a more traditional feminine role?"

"Is Martha a cautionary tale for the overwhelmed? Or do we hear in her the anguished voice of a woman who sees her role and her ministerial responsibilities being pulled away, diminished, dismissed, and calling on her sister in ministry to come to her support?"

"Is Mary the model of a cold disciple, claiming her space among the men, or is she a figure that illustrates the importance of women keeping silence?"

Like all the issues in the Church today, we continue to move forward, a little at a time, because changes take place, even though the pace of the Church can be slower than a snail. For me the important point of the story is that the three siblings welcomed Jesus into their home. One commentator mentions that theirs was not a typical family dwelling. Three adult, unmarried siblings living together, because they were too poor to have separate dwellings? Could it be that Martha and Mary had decided to forgo marriage to care for a brother with special needs, or some mental disability? His neighbors many have avoided him; religious leaders may have regarded his condition as a punishment for sin; but Jesus loved him and called him a friend.

The word for love of a stranger in Greek is "*philoxenia*," or "*xenia*," like the flower, *love of stranger*. Now you are learning all these Greek words for love. But more like Zaccheus to whom Jesus, looking up at him in the tree, invites himself into his home. Last Sunday, Jesus answered the Lawyer's question, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" And Jesus answered, "Love God and your neighbor as yourself."

The first meeting places of the early Christians were in private homes. There **deacons** would imitate Martha, and Peter's mother-in-law, in carrying out duties of service. The twelve in Acts complained that it was not right that they should neglect the Word of God in order to serve at table." A balanced Christianity must combine the Samaritan's practical compassion for the neighbor with Mary's devotion to the Word, with the energetic acceptance of Jesus into our lives as Zacchaeus showed.

