

Toward a New Relationship Between Men and Women Re-interpreting the Account of Martha and Mary, Lk 10:38-42

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We know quite well the account of the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is received by two sisters, Martha and Mary (10:38-42). For centuries, these women have been regarded as illustrating two major types of religious life. Martha, in her eagerness to serve, represented the apostolic life while Mary, seated at the feet of Jesus, illustrated the contemplative religious life.

It is quite obvious that was not what the text evoked in the first century, since at the time of its writing, these forms of consecrated life did not yet exist. However, in a re-reading for today, could we not see in it the evocation of new possibilities that Jesus offers to women, as well as the illustration of a new type of relationship between men and women in the Church?

New Positioning for Women

Martha, bustling about cooking and preparing the table, symbolizes the traditional role of women in a patriarchal context. Women are truly at the service of men's well-being. Martha is moving about in every direction so that her male guest lacks nothing, which was usually what women in the first century were doing in their house.

But with the character of Mary, Luke shows that Jesus opened up new possibilities for women. In a prophetic way, within a patriarchal society, Jesus imagined and experimented with another way of living the status of women. That is what Mary's character is illustrating.

One notes that she is seated at the feet of Jesus. In Judaism, that is the position in which the Holy Scriptures were studied under the guidance of a master. It is the position of someone who becomes a disciple and dedicates himself to the study of the Word. That was reserved for men. It was unthinkable that women study the Law. So, Jesus is not only open to that, but he even says it is the best choice that a woman can make. In fact, he says to Martha, who was complaining about her sister's attitude: "It is Mary who has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her." (10:42)

Resistance

We notice that the novelty of what Jesus is doing arouses resistance: "Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me." (v. 40) This protest probably reflects the criticism that women in the first century received who availed themselves of this new idea.

But is it not surprising that this criticism comes specifically from a female character? Don't we have here an example of what Simon-Pierre Arnold, OSB, said at the last CRC General Assembly? He said that, very often, colonized people have a "colonized spirit," that is to say, that their representation of themselves has suffered the effects of colonization. They have integrated this vision of themselves, this positioning of

dominated people. Martha defends, in a way, the status quo of the model she knows, of the model that has been instilled in her since childhood.

Transformation of the Male-Female Relationship

This narrative from Luke not only opens up new possibilities for women, but it also illustrates another type of male-female relationship. In the patriarchal model, women are at the service of men. Our text shows that, in an astonishing way, Jesus does not enter into this relational framework. While Martha suggests to him that two women be at his service, Jesus refuses this type of relationship.

If we examine the relational dynamics between Jesus and Mary, we see that this woman is not at the service of Jesus. It is instead Jesus who is at the service of Mary. Jesus is indeed a master, but a master who positions himself as a servant. He serves Mary by making her hear the Word. Doesn't Jesus say: "Yet here am I among you as one who serves!"? (Luke 22:27) And that is how Jesus also places himself in his relationship with women. In Lk 10, we are witnessing an inversion of the situation. Jesus does not expect Mary to prepare a meal for him, but he himself offers her a meal, a meal of the Word. We are a long way from the patriarchal model.

Shared Listening of the Word

But can we not take another step? A step that authorizes an interpretation of this pericope in light of the whole of the Gospel of Luke. Could we not understand that Jesus is placing himself, with Mary, in a position where they listen together to a Word at which they are both filled with wonder?

At the beginning of Jesus's ministry, there is an experience of hearing the Word. Having been baptized, "And a voice came down from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Lk 3:22) In the narrative of the temptations (Lk 4:1-13), Jesus rejected the devil by using the words of God. Moreover, when the tempter suggests to him to change a stone into bread, he will reply: "Human beings live not by bread alone." (v. 4) In short, it appears that listening to the Word was at the heart of Jesus's spiritual experience and that he nourished himself deeply from this Word.

Mary joins him in this experience. With her, he shares what he has heard. He invites her to the table of the Word from which he himself is nourished. Would it be going too far to think that he welcomes her as a commensal and that they nourish themselves together from the same Word that transcends both of them?

Does not this call upon us, in the domain of male-female relationships in the Church, to place ourselves side by side in mutual service and in an attitude of shared listening to the Word?

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is new for me in this interpretation of the account of Martha and Mary? What reflections arise in me?
2. Concretely, how could we experience in our community this type of mutual service and this type of joint listening to the Word?