

Mission Appeal at St. Matthew Philadelphia

Where did Martha get it wrong in today's Gospel? Was it not on account of his hospitality to and waiting on strangers that Abraham was so much praised and rewarded in our First Reading? How then could Jesus say that it is the *lazy* Mary, who does not want any part in the hospitality ministry, that has chosen the better part?

To get at the root of the Martha and Mary story, we have to follow the chronological sequence of Luke's Gospel. Today's story comes immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan that we read last Sunday. At the end of that story, one could imagine all the disciples leaving Jesus in search of wounded victims on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. With the Martha and Mary story, Jesus seems to be saying: "Wait a little; there is more to being a disciple than social activism. To be Christian, social activism must spring from listening to the Word of God."

So understood, the story of Martha and Mary is a warning to us to guard against an exaggerated activism that has no place for the Lord. As a matter of fact, whenever our social engagement becomes an obstacle to finding time to be with the Lord, then something is wrong with that engagement. We become less of disciples and witnesses; and become more of mercenary workers in the Lord's Vineyard. We do the work of the Lord, but at the same time we forget the Lord of the work. Jesus' remark to Martha in today's Gospel shows his disapproval of such an attitude.

Again, there is nothing wrong in Martha waiting on Jesus. But there is everything wrong in her using it to prove that she is better and more dutiful than her sister. It is not so much about the work we do; but about the attitude we bring to that work. Martha need not stop her many labours. She just needs to stop making too much fuss about them. Instead of complaining as she did, Martha could have invited Jesus into the kitchen. Given what we know about Jesus, we know that he would not mind doing the dishes. And in that way, Martha could have shared in the discussion with Mary. Yes! A genuine divine encounter can also take place in the kitchen, especially when there is the only place we find ourselves.

An anonymous Christian once wrote this prayerful poem:

Oh Lord of pots and pans
Since I have not the time
To be a saint by doing lovely things
Or watching late into the night with thee
Make me a saint by serving meals
And washing up pans and and pots

Precisely, this, my dear friends, is what we try to do as a Church; and what I am here today to appeal to you to help us to continue to do. I am a priest of the Diocese of Orlu in Nigeria. My diocese is located at the South-eastern part of Nigeria. Created in 1981, the Diocese has grown in number; from 350,000 (40% of the population) in 1981 to over 625,000 (70%) today. Unlike the church in many parts of the world, ours is still a very young and dynamic church. Our pews are still filled to the brim on Sunday, and our formation houses are still thriving with young men and women willing to answer the call to priestly and religious life. For 12 years, I taught in our seminary; and for each year, we have on the average over 600 candidates preparing for the priesthood.

Despite this growth in number, we remain a very poor church. A typical Parish in my diocese consists of 1000 families. But of this, over 20% live below the minimum standard of living. 5% of all infants born in the Diocese do not live to celebrate their first birthday; 10% of those who do have no opportunity of school education. Of those who manage to go through the public

education system 30% end up with no job and therefore no hope. In most cases, they end up roaming the streets, the boys in child-labour, and young girls, in commercial prostitution.

It is among this people that we try to function as a Church. Because they have lost hope in the State, they look upon the Church as their last resort. They come to us for everything, and for anything. They fill our churches every Sunday to listen to the Word of God and share in the Sacraments. But they also fill our social service centres to ask for things as basic as food and water. For some time now we have been doing our best to respond to their needs. For the past three past years, our signature project has been to drill water wells in different parishes in our diocese to help solve the problem of drinking water.

My dear friends, if you are used to turning the tap and getting water, you may not appreciate how precious a commodity water can be. But for most communities in my diocese, getting water to drink can be a very difficult task. Sometimes we wait for rainfall, which falls 50% in the year. At other times, we must carry their pots to rivers and streams located several miles away, a job that, unfortunately, is mostly reserved for women and children. Thanks to our participation in the MCP of your Archdiocese, we succeeded in drilling five water wells in different parishes in my diocese last year: and each well serves a community of over 50 families. During the opening of one of the wells, Mary, a little girl of 11, walked up to me, looked me straight in the eyes and asked: **“Fr. Bernard, does it mean that after today, I would no longer have to wake up 5 A.M. every morning to go to the stream before going to school?”** And I replied: **“Not anymore!”** She said, **“Thank You father!”** And you could feel the joy in her innocent eyes as she ran away to re-join her peers.

My dear sisters and brothers, it is for the sake of Mary and other kids of her age that we are constrained to embark on this project. But it costs money. It costs about \$8000 to drill a functional well. This includes the costs for drilling 500 feet below the surface, erecting the Water reservoirs, and generating the energy to pump the water from below the ground to the reservoirs. It is to enable us to continue this work that we appealed to the Mission Office of your Archdiocese, and this year it is our lot to appeal to you.

So, on behalf of the Church in my Diocese, I address a very personal appeal to each and all of you. Today, a special collection will be taken up our behalf. Whatever you put into that basket will help us to continue this mission of restoring hope to a people on the verge of loss of hope. Just imagine that for \$8000, an entire community will have water to drink. As you put your bills and sign your checks, I want you to remember little Mary. I want you to remember that for whatever you are willing to give, the likes of Mary may no longer have to wake up 5.AM. every morning to go to the stream before they could go to school. By responding generously to our appeal today, you will be joining the league of those who, though are unable to become saints by doing extraordinary things, can still become Saints by serving meals and washing up plates and pots.

Frs. Pat and Kevin, your pastors, have been generous to offer me hospitality in the Rectory all through this week to enable me to move from here to my next Parish. I look forward to interacting with anybody interested in more ways they can be of help. May the good Lord bless and reward you as you come to our aid through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.