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Examples of Faith (VIII): Martha and Mary

Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus made our Lord feel welcome in their home.

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The Gospels tell us about our Lord's journeys along the roads of Palestine. Many people met him on these journeys. Sadly, some did not recognize this compassionate, attractive, extraordinary Person as the Son of God. Others, however,

believed in him and welcomed him. These included people in Galilee who had seen the signs he did,[1] and many others whose names do not appear in the Gospels. Among those who said yes to Christ, we find the Twelve Apostles, Zacchaeus, and the centurion. In past articles in this series, we have been considering the example of faith left us by some of these people. Now we will look at Martha and Mary, who had the marvelous good fortune of being able to offer hospitality to our Lord.

Martha's reception of our Lord into her house[2] is the expression and result of her faith in him. Martha believed in Jesus. She not only opened the doors of her home to him, but the doors of her heart as well. And as he did with Martha, our Lord calls at the hearts of the men and women in every age, asking to be allowed in. The Eternal Word of the Father made Man comes out to

meet us, his brothers and sisters, looking for a welcome. On our part, all we have to do is to receive him by faith. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, faith is our response to God who reveals himself and gives himself to us.[3] Faith means opening our doors to Christ, welcoming him into our home, sharing our table with him; it means letting him into the most intimate part of our soul. That is what the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus did at Bethany. And by imitating them, we too can share in God's intimacy. "Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below. Then we shall see God 'face to face,' as he is," because "faith is already the beginning of eternal life."[4]

Faith with deeds

Faith requires the trust and abandonment in God that is the

beginning of justification. This virtue also entails assent to a group of truths set forth to be believed. At the same time, faith, if it is true faith, works through charity,[5] shown in specific deeds of love, because meeting Christ “gives life a new horizon, and a decisive direction.”[6] “Far from divorcing us from reality, our faith in the Son of God made man in Jesus of Nazareth enables us to grasp reality’s deepest meaning and to see how much God loves this world and is constantly guiding it towards himself. This leads us, as Christians, to live our lives in this world with ever greater commitment and intensity.”[7] Martha welcomed our Lord and showed her faith and trust in him by busying herself in serving.[8] She did not just believe in Jesus, but let him into her life, acknowledging his lordship by her actions and honoring her Divine Guest with specific deeds.

Martha's attitude shows that our response to God should not just be a matter of the intellect or emotions, but must also be expressed in deeds. Once someone has accepted the God who reveals himself, faith affects every aspect of their being and actions. That is why deeds done with love are also necessary for salvation. Saint James, given the possibility that someone might claim he has faith but not deeds, said, *show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith*.[9] Works help to increase a soul's justification.[10] As the Catechism teaches, "The gift of faith remains in one who has not sinned against it. But 'faith apart from works is dead' (*Jas* 2:26): when it is deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body."[11]

Hence just as Christ showed his love for his Father with deeds, we Christians as good children must show that our divine filiation is real, and bring it to maturity, by lovingly fulfilling God's will. It is not enough to say that we believe in God, and that we abandon ourselves to his will, unless we confirm this with deeds: finishing our work as well as possible for love of him, being able to suffer for him, showing our loving concern for others in specific acts, accepting illness and setbacks. Saint Augustine wrote, "All your works must be based on faith, because the just man lives by faith and faith works through love."[12] Our good works, deeds carried out with hope and for love, will accompany us when we come to present ourselves before Almighty God. This is what Saint Josemaria meant when he talked about "operative faith,"[13] faith that works by love and is seen in the daily lives of God's children.

Martha, though at the start she complained about her sister's apparent inactivity, is an example of faith in Jesus. Saint Josemaria encouraged us to imitate her trust in our Lord. "Make your worries known to him, opening your heart sincerely about them all no matter how little they may be."[14] For us too, the real sign that we believe in and love God will be our deeds of love: our desire to fulfill a specific act of piety or devotion with affection, our charity towards the people around us, the care with which we work, the effort we make to understand and help the people we know, and the endless list of things that fill our day. All these activities should reflect our faith, because they are started and finished for love of God and neighbor. Specific deeds carried out for love confirm the genuineness of our faith, for then faith is working in us through charity.

Faith that adores

Works, of course, must not replace faith. Then we would be at risk of activism, of doing things for the sake of doing them, letting ourselves be carried away by a whirlwind of activities. Jesus reproached Martha for having forgotten the most important thing. *You are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful.*[15] Our Lord repeats this teaching when he warns us about the danger of focusing too much on our immediate material needs. *For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.*[16] Being busy about many things, activism, is a danger we always face.

Therefore, since we want the activity in which we are engaged to be enriched with deeds of love for God, we need to listen to the divine Word

with an attentive and contemplative heart. That is what Mary did: she *sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching*.[17] It is easy to imagine the scene: Mary gazing intently at Jesus, drinking in his words. This is why the Church's Tradition has seen in her an image of the contemplative life. Saint Josemaria, who was a contemplative, encouraged us to talk to Jesus in our prayer as Mary did, totally absorbed, "hanging on to Jesus' every word."[18]

Faith without works is dead, while faith that is not nourished in prayer and adoration languishes. Our day, from morning until night, is filled with many different concerns: absorbing and demanding work, looking after our family, caring for our friends. But we want all these activities to be a place where we meet our Lord. Therefore we need to find some moments in the day to "sit" in God's presence, to kneel before

our Lord and adore him. And during this time we want nothing to distract us from contemplating, from looking at and listening attentively to our Lord. “Before any activity, before the world can change there must be worship. Worship alone sets us truly free; worship alone gives us the criteria for our action. Precisely in a world in which guiding criteria are absent and the threat exists that each person will be a law unto himself, it is fundamentally necessary to stress worship,”[19] adoration.

Faith, then, leads to adoration. Faith guides us to anticipate what our life with God will be for ever in heaven; it leads us to want to do on earth what the angels do in heaven, giving glory to God. Faith that adores leads us to prostrate ourselves before God and to desire to unite ourselves with Him.

That is why faith, which is confidence in God and closeness to him, finds a culminating moment in Eucharistic adoration. “God our Lord needs you to say, on receiving him every morning, ‘Lord, I believe that it is You. I believe that you are really hidden in the sacramental species! I adore you, I love you!’ And when you go to the oratory to visit him, tell him again: ‘Lord, I believe that you are really present! I adore you! I love you!’ That’s how to show love for our Lord. And how our love for him will grow every day. And then go on loving him during the day, telling yourself: I am going to finish things very well for love of Jesus who is watching over us from the Tabernacle.”[20] Hence we can understand why Saint Josemaria referred to the Tabernacle as Bethany and encouraged us to “enter inside” each one.[21] Through our faith in our Lord’s sacramental presence we can enter into the

Tabernacle and taste in advance the vision of God. And our spirit of adoration will lead us to stay close to him throughout the day in a union of love shown in all our activities.

On one occasion, someone told Jesus that his Mother and brethren wanted to see him. He said in reply, *My Mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it*. [22] The scene at Bethany underlines this teaching. To listen to him as Mary did, and to do what he says as Martha did, sums up the faith of the members of God's family. Through listening to the Word and striving to put it into practice we will be living members of the Church, and with God's grace we will reach the goal. "To live, grow and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith (see *Mk* 9:24; *Lk* 17:5 and 22:32); it must be 'working through charity' (*Gal* 5:6;

Jas 2:14-26), abounding in hope (see *Rom* 15:13), and rooted in the faith of the Church."[23]

And if ever it seems difficult, or we don't really know how to do it, we can find an example and help in our Mother Mary. She was the one who listened to God's Word most attentively and who, with her *fiat*, put it into practice most faithfully. In our Lady's life, at every single moment, faith acted through love.

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[1] See *Lk* 8:40.

[2] *Lk* 10:38.

[3] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 26.

[4] *CCC*, 163.

[5] See *Gal* 5:6.

[6] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1.

[7] Pope Francis, Enc. *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, 18.

[8] See *Lk* 10:40.

[9] *Jas* 2:17-18.

[10] Council of Trent, *De Justificatione*, 10.

[11] *CCC*, 1815.

[12] Saint Augustine,*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 32, 2, 9.

[13] See *The Way*, 317, *Furrow*, 111, *The Forge*, 155, *Friends of God*, 198, etc.

[14] *Friends of God*, 222.

[15] *Lk* 10:41-42.

[16] *Lk* 12:30-31.

[17] *Lk* 10: 39.

[18] *Friends of God*, 222.

[19] Benedict XVI, Speech to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2005.

[20] Saint Josemaría, notes taken in a get-together, 4 April 1970, in Javier Echevarria, Pastoral Letter, 6 October 2004.

[21] See *The Way*, 269 and 322.

[22] *Lk* 8:21.

[23] *CCC*, 162.

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