

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Retreat on Living Religiously By Faith in the Year of Faith
Sisters of Jesus our Hope, Bloomfield, New Jersey
July 29 to August 2, 2013
Ex 32:15-24; 30-34; Ps 106; Lk 10:38-42

Saint Martha and Faith

- There are no coincidences in God and therefore it's quite fitting that God, who from before he said "let there be light" knew that we would be on retreat this week, arranged for us to have the Gospel of Martha and Mary with Jesus in Bethany, so that we can focus on the one thing necessary, so that we can choose the better part, so that we can sit at Jesus' feet in prayer and prepare to anoint those feet not with 300 days wages of aromatic nard, but almost 365 days of work done out of love for him.
- The essence of this Gospel, something that Mary grasped and Martha didn't, was that Jesus had come into the world to serve and not to be served, and that he had come to their home to feed and not to be fed. Martha was worried and distracted about so many items of hospitality whereas what Jesus was looking for was not to be received into their dining room but into their hearts.
- We've heard this Gospel so many times in our lives and it's almost always that Martha suffers in comparison with her sister Mary's having chosen the better part. But it's important for us to grasp that we celebrate today the feast of SAINT Martha. Yes, she needed a gentle fraternal correction from Jesus for putting the lesser things of the love of God above the more important things, but she was one who clearly loved the Lord and lived a holy life for him..
- Shortly before he entered their home, Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan, praising the one who made the effort to take care of another in contrast to those who did nothing. In several other places in the Gospel he praised service of others: he washed his disciples' feet at the Last Supper and told them to do the same (Jn 13:12-14); he promised to gird himself with an apron and wait on those at the heavenly banquet (Lk 12:37); and he said that the greatest among us would be the one who serves the rest (Mt 23:11). Jesus was clearly not in any way reproving her for this work, but reminding her that there was no reason to get worked up about them and helping her to remember that she was forgetting the most important thing of all. The welcome Jesus sought most was their time, their friendship, their love, their open ears and open hearts. Mary understood this and sat at Jesus' feet listening to him as if nothing in the rest of the world really mattered — because, in fact, Jesus implies, nothing in the rest of the world really does matter anywhere near as much as that. Jesus once said in a parable, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Mt 13:45-46). Jesus was for Mary that pearl of great price more valuable than everything else put together.
- Martha just needed to learn how to work with her hands with the contemplative, receptive heart of her sister. She complained that Mary had left her to do all the work by herself, but she had forgotten what Jesus would teach in the Capernaum synagogue, that "this is the work of God: that you believe in Him who He has sent" (Jn 6:29).
- Martha would show that faith very clearly at the death of her brother Lazarus. She ran out to Jesus and said, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died, but even now I know that whatever you ask of him, he will give you." Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise," and she responded, "I know he will rise in the Resurrection on the Last Day." Doubtless this was part of their conversations with Jesus in their home, about what happens after we die. Jesus told them about the resurrection and Martha believed him. But Jesus wanted to teach her that the resurrection is not principally an event, but a relationship. "I AM the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me, even though he dies, will live and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." The Christian life is meant to be a risen one, lived in loving relationship with risen Jesus, the source of life itself. He then asked Martha very directly a question he will be asking us many times on this retreat: "Do you believe this?" Do you believe in me? Do you believe that whoever lives in me will never die, even when your brother is four days in the tomb and there will be a stench?

- Martha's response points to one of the most important truths about faith. She says, "Yes, Lord, I do believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." She doesn't profess directly in the content of what Jesus himself had said, namely resurrection itself as a fact, because she had never seen it even though she had heard of the resuscitations of the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Nain. She professed her faith rather in Jesus, and because of that trust in him, she believed in what he said. She professed him the long-awaited Messiah. She proclaimed him the Son of God. And then very beautifully, and powerfully from a theological point of view, she said, "he who is coming into the world." God is constantly coming into our world, including in the darkest moments. He's not someone who runs away from us in our difficulties and sorrows, but one who is constantly coming in, knocking, seeking to enter. And we know the miracle that ensued.
- Throughout this retreat, Jesus will be asking each of us, "Do you believe this?" "Do you believe that I am the one constantly coming into your world, to help you in the midst of your trials and triumphs, sorrows and joys, pains and pleasures?" "Do you believe that I have been waiting from all eternity to come to you today during these days of retreat, hoping to have you enter into the type of relationship with me so that you will experience my risen life?"
- This retreat will be on Religiously Living By Faith in the Year of Faith, which is about the way we respond to the fact that Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, is constantly coming into our world. Faith is letting him who is coming enter, moving from Advent to God-with-Us and then in the liturgy of life allowing him to feed us and lead us all the way toward the eternal celebration of Christ the King. As we'll be talking about later today in the first conference, this type of faith cannot be taken for granted. Walking by faith and not by sight isn't easy. We see what happened to the Israelites in the first reading today. After the ten plagues, after the parting of the Red Sea, after the being fed miraculously by manna and quails, after seeing the rock gush forth water for them to drink and so many other miracles, they still didn't have the faith to accept God's constant coming. When Moses was in prayer at the top of the mountain too long for them to handle, they surrounded Aaron and said, "Let us make gods who will go before us. As for this Moses, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And Aaron, who was supposed to be a religious leader leading them to the encounter with God who is always coming, even if delayed, instead of forming them and helping them to be patient, told them to bring him all their gold and he sculpted for them a calf out of gold, saying, "These are your gods, O Israel." And when Moses confronted him, he gave the lamest excuse in all of human history. When Moses asked him "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" he said, basically, "Don't get mad at me. It's the people who are evil. ... For they said to me, 'Make us gods who shall go before us. ... So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!' No design. No responsibility. No real faith on his part to strengthen the faith of the Israelites when they were having doubts even after so much daily signs of God's fidelity. They had lost what the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* will call the memory of faith, and because of this spiritual amnesia, they went astray. They forgot that the same Lord who had done so much for them was still coming into their daily life. And when they lost that sense they fell to idol worship.
- It's the same way with us. The encyclical whose insights will be guiding us throughout this retreat stresses, "The history of Israel also shows us the temptation of unbelief to which the people yielded more than once. Here the opposite of faith is shown to be idolatry. While Moses is speaking to God on Sinai, the people cannot bear the mystery of God's hiddenness, they cannot endure the time of waiting to see his face. Faith by its very nature demands renouncing the immediate possession which sight would appear to offer; it is an invitation to turn to the source of the light, while respecting the mystery of a countenance that will unveil itself personally in its own good time. ... In place of faith in God, it seems better to worship an idol, into whose face we can look directly and whose origin we know, because it is the work of our own hands. Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols "have mouths, but they cannot speak" (*Ps* 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the center of reality and worshipping the work of our own hands. Once man has lost the fundamental orientation that unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires; in refusing to await the time of promise, his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants. Idolatry, then, is always polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another. Idolatry does not offer a

journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth. Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: "Put your trust in me!" Faith, tied as it is to conversion, is the opposite of idolatry; it breaks with idols to turn to the living God in a personal encounter. Believing means entrusting oneself to a merciful love that always accepts and pardons, that sustains and directs our lives, and that shows its power by its ability to make straight the crooked lines of our history. Faith consists in the willingness to let ourselves be constantly transformed and renewed by God's call. Herein lies the paradox: by constantly turning towards the Lord, we discover a sure path that liberates us from the dissolution imposed upon us by idols."

- That's the path of conversion to which Christ is constantly coming to the world to offer us. In contrast to the nearly inescapable labyrinth of idolatry, he offers himself as the Way. In contrast to the dead ends of self-worship, he gives himself as the Resurrection and Life. In distinction to the idols who have mouths but cannot speak, Jesus the Good Shepherd calls us by name to follow him into verdant pastures, even if it means leading us through a valley of darkness.
- It is that Good Shepherd, Mercy incarnate, who comes here to the modern Bethany of this Chapel, so that we can say to him, "Jesus I trust in you!" "Yes, Lord, I do believe!" He wants to free us from the idolatry of some of our habits, especially the idolatry of our Martha-like habit that gives exaggerated importance to the work of our own hands, so that we may allow the divine sculptor to do his work inside of us. As we being this retreat, we, like Mary, have listened at Jesus' feet while he has fed us with his word. As he prepares to feed us even more profoundly with his flesh and blood, we ask him, through this nourishment, to help us to see the many ways he wishes to come anew into our lives during this retreat and beyond, to raise us from the dead and fill us with life in abundance. Jesus is the one thing necessary. Mary chose the better part and so, although by a more circuitous route, did Martha. Now let us ask them both to intercede for us from before Jesus' feet in heaven for the grace to make the same choice today, tomorrow and each day going forward. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good! It is good, Lord, that we are here!