

16th Sunday of Ordinary time C/2007

We all enjoy the visit and the hospitality of friends and families. When a visit and hospitality happen in a relaxed ambiance and sincere friendship, it becomes an opportunity for mutual enrichment for both the guest and the host. It is that common human experience of opening our hearts and the door of our home to welcome friends that today's readings are talking about.

In the first reading Abraham, motivated by his faith in God and the eagerness to practice charity, welcomes joyfully the strangers who come to his tent. That gesture will be rewarded because, thanks to these mysterious travelers, his wife Sarah will conceive and have a son.

The point of the text is not only to show us that Abraham was gracious and could courteously give without counting the cost. It teaches us also that at times God visits us under human appearances when we least expect it. Sometimes, under the appearance of a poor or needy person, God is asking us for hospitality, just as he did with Abraham on that particular occasion. When we react positively and open our heart to the poor, it is God himself who is hidden in these persons we help and win his friendship.

The fact that, from his hospitality toward the three visitors, Abraham was rewarded with the conception of his son by his wife, Sarah, teaches that any good deed done to others on behalf of our faith will never remain without a reward. When we graciously come to the help of those in need in the name of our faith, God is able to give us back a hundredfold. The gratuitous hospitality of Abraham is the symbol of all forms of service to our fellow humans. Our eagerness to generously serve our fellows is a source of blessing from God.

It is the same message of hospitality we find in today's Gospel as Jesus is welcomed by his friends, the two sisters, Martha and Mary. From the outset, the Gospel shows the two sisters in different postures before Jesus. While Martha is busy with cooking and caring for food, Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him.

Instead of opposing the two sisters, as though Jesus loved Mary for her passivity, and disliked Martha for her activity, let us see in them two different temperaments. We are all different and not alike; but we complete each other. Some people are naturally dynamos of activity; others are naturally quiet. There is no right or wrong in this. One may sit in silence and pray, another may run and serve the Lord. Both are serving the same God, but each one in her own way. God needs his Marys as well as his Marthas. We need the Marys, but we need the Marthas too.

Very often some use this text to consider contemplative life as better than the active life. I wonder if that interpretation is right. It is my understanding that Mary was not absorbed in prayer or in contemplating Jesus, but rather in listening to him speaking. Those who take Mary as a model to justify the importance of their long prayers have not understood that at this point, the Gospel does not talk

about devout practices, but rather about “listening to the word”, which is another thing.

That being said, it is clear that in this Gospel it is not a question of Jesus scolding the workers and praising the lazy-bones. If Martha is rebuked, indeed, it is not because of her work, but because she is anxious and worried about many things. She engages in work before listening to the word. In other words, the word of Jesus is an important source of strength for those who commit themselves to serve their brothers and sisters and provide the hospitality. When drained by the burden of harsh labors, where can they find strength to energize themselves than in the word of Jesus contained in the Gospel?

Of course, Mary is praised by Jesus, but it is not because she is idle and appears not to see the burden of her sister in the kitchen. When Martha complained to Jesus about her sister, Jesus does not say that Martha was wrong to remind her sister of her commitments, nor does he foster a lazy attitude in Mary. He only says that the most important thing is to listen to his word.

Why is the listening to the word so important? For Jesus, and that is really true, when people engage in work without listening to the word first, there is a risk of turning their activity into activism. At the end they are so consumed with it that they are anxious, confused, worried and nervous at the least difficulty. The word of Jesus, on the contrary, energizes and gives another dimension to our work. After all, as says the psalmist, “if the Lord does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless; if the Lord does not protect the city, it does no good for the sentries to stand guard” (Ps 127, 1).

The awareness that the fruits of our work come from God’s blessing provokes the sentiment of gratitude and the prayer of thanksgiving toward God who keeps us in good shape and blesses the work of our hands. If someone works within such a spirit he can assume the difficulties linked to his work with joy, as a participation in the bettering of God’s creation, the improvement of the life of his fellow humans and the well-being of his own.

We find a model of such a spirit in St Paul. We all know how St Paul has worked totally and selflessly for the Church. However, in spite of all the sufferings he had endured, St Paul feels quite happy because he knows that he has dedicated all his life to a noble cause, that is, the Gospel. With joy he has given the best of himself to admonish, to teach every one with wisdom, and to bring each one to perfection in Jesus. May his example stimulate us! May the Lord Jesus bring each one of us to give the best of ourselves to the service of our fellow humans for the glory of God and our well-being! May we not forget the hospitality that brings God’s blessing upon us. God bless you all!



Homily Date: July 22, 2007

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Document Name: 20070722homily.pdf

Genesis 18, 1-10a; Colossians 1, 24-28; Luke 10, 38-42