

Sixteenth Sunday day in Ordinary Time C/2016

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of hospitality. They show that the practice of hospitality brings God's blessing to both the guest and the host. They also invite us to the practice of hospitality as a response of faith to the law of charity.

The first reading describes the hospitality of Abraham towards the three strangers who came to his home. It shows his readiness to serve them and his generosity in welcoming them in his home. It also shows the promise of blessing that Abraham had received, thanks to his spirit of hospitality.

What is behind this text is the idea that hospitality is a source of blessing for those who practice it. There is also the idea that the good deeds done in the name of our faith will never remain unrewarded. The last idea is related to the truth that God visits human beings in many ways, sometimes under the disguise of human appearance.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as Jesus is welcomed by the two sisters, Martha and Mary. First of all, the Gospel talks about Jesus coming to a village where the two sisters, Martha and Mary, lived. Then, it talks about the care that Martha took in serving him while her sister stayed in listening to Jesus speaking.

After that, the Gospel speaks of the reaction of Martha who pleaded with Jesus that her sister may help her. Then, it gives the reaction of Jesus who appreciated the attitude of Mary without necessarily condemning that of Martha.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about the joy of hospitality. Let me start with a story. In one of the Parishes I worked in my past, a couple invited me to dine in a restaurant. That invitation caused me a lot of joy, because they gave me an opportunity to go to a restaurant that I could not afford by myself.

As I was transferred to another Parish, the lady from that couple reminded me of the dinner they gave me, but not in good terms, but in terms of complaint. In fact, she complained that since they invited me, I never bothered myself to invite them in turn until now that I was leaving. I have sincerely to confess that I felt ashamed, because I openly failed to practice one of the rules of civility. But her complaint took away also my joy of having dined with them, because I was not expecting such a thing from them. There is no doubt that they were right, because our society requires that when you are invited, you do the same.

But, here is the question: is there any way that we can offer our hospitality without expecting something in turn, like Abraham did, but who only God rewarded? In other words, by expecting to be invited in turn, do not we limit the joy of hospitality to reciprocity and mutual pay? In that case, by claiming and expecting to be invited in turn, do not we let ourselves be paid instead of God alone paying us?

This attitude is exactly the contrary of Mary and Martha who welcomed Jesus to their home without hoping to be reimbursed in turn. Is not there some joy that God alone can reward when we welcome people without them giving us something in turn?

I believe that there is. And it is that joy that pushed Martha to serve with eagerness and Mary to listen to the guest, Jesus, with attention. Certainly in this Gospel, Jesus appreciates more the attitude of Mary than that of Martha.

However, this appreciation does not mean rejection, as though Jesus loved Mary for her passivity and disliked Martha for her activity. What is at stake in the Gospel is the expression of two different temperaments at the service of the Lord. In fact, we are all different and not alike; but we complete each other. Some people are naturally full of activities; others are naturally quiet.

There is nothing wrong in being who we are. That one may sit in silence and pray, and another may run and serve the Lord; it is all right. Both are serving the same God, but each one in his own way. God needs his Mary's as well as his Martha's. We need the Mary's, but we need also the Martha's. Therefore, the Gospel is not about Jesus scolding the workers and praising the lazybones.

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 their lives to serve their fellows and, thus, provide the hospitality. When drained by the burden of harsh labors, they can find strength and energy only in the word of Jesus.

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 encourage a lazy attitude in Mary. He only says that the most important thing is to listen to his word.

But, why is the listening to the word so important? For Jesus, indeed, 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 that they are anxious and nervous at the least difficulty. The word of Jesus, on the contrary, energizes and gives another look to our work. After all, as says the Psalm 127: 1, "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 watchers to stand guard".

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 health and blesses the work of our hands. If someone works within such a spirit, he can assume the difficulties of 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.

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 he help us show hospitality to one another without expecting to be repaid in turn! God bless you all!

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



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