

Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus monastic order in the 15th century (a.k.a. "the Jesuits"). His method of spiritual practice, Ignatian spirituality, is rooted in the notion that God is an active God, at work and present in our everyday lives—in our relationships, in our arts and culture, in our intellectual life, in creation itself.

Those who practice Ignatian spirituality are often called "contemplatives in action." According to this method, we can enter into a closer relationship with Jesus by using our imaginations to put ourselves in the scenes of the Gospel stories as onlookers and as participants.

I was introduced to Ignatian spirituality by my spiritual guide, the late (beloved) Sister Alice Reid of the Community of the Transfiguration. It was she who suggested that I imagine sitting with Jesus as a means to deepen my relationship with him.

I tried this method to imagine what the scene might have been like when Jesus visited Martha and Mary of Bethany. I tried to put myself into the setting and focused on the relationship of Martha and Mary to one another and to Jesus. I'm not very good at this kind of thing. But asking myself some questions helped:

Who else was there? There must have been other family members, their brother Lazarus at least. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, so his traveling companions must have been there, at least some of them. Did Jesus know the family before? It would seem so. There is something about the encounter that tells me Jesus was very close to this family. We sense the tension between the sisters and how they relate to one another and to Jesus, their Lord and their guest. Would a female hostess complain to a male guest about her hospitality duties or sit at his feet unless they were close friends?

Social boundaries in those days were well-established so there are some interesting cultural oddities in this story. Women were responsible for hospitality, meal preparation, and serving at the table. Instead of helping the other women with the meal, Mary was sitting at the feet of a rabbi, taking on the posture reserved for men.

More questions: Were other women in the kitchen fussing over Mary's behavior? Was it typical of Mary to shirk her share of the duties or was this a special case? What might have been the reaction of the men who were there? How close was Mary sitting to Jesus? Were the others uncomfortable about the situation? Was Mary bringing shame on the family by acting outside the norms of the culture?

We may find Martha's annoyance with Mary totally justified. This kind of thing happens to us all the time in our families and in our churches and we know what it feels like. We know only too well that the most complex and exasperating relationships we have are with those closest to us, especially our families. *Especially* our families!

What struck me about Martha's complaint is this: She was serving the Lord in a way that was a hallmark of Jewish culture: hospitality for guests, preparing and serving a meal. As Ignatius taught, God is at work in us in all the things that we do. So what was her

problem?

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things," Jesus told her. "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

What did Jesus mean by "the better part"? Was he telling Martha that Mary's contemplative posture and devotion to him were more important than her "place" in the cultural norms of the time, her role of hospitality?

I don't think so. I think that Martha's busy-ness – fussing with the dinner, "distracted by many things" – was getting in the way of following Jesus ... *because of her attitude*. Had Martha done her work with joy and in praise of God, would she have complained?

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Yesterday I had the pleasure of attending Fr. Daniel's introductory lecture on the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a book by an anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic. *The Cloud*, as it is known in shorthand, has greatly influenced mystics of the Christian contemplative tradition ever since, including Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross. It is a book that offers a practical guide to the path of contemplation, what we now call centering prayer. Here is the gist of it: all thoughts and concepts must be buried beneath a "cloud of forgetting," while our love must rise toward God hidden in the "cloud of unknowing."

Several chapters of the book are devoted to the Martha and Mary story. The author uses this story to illustrate what Jesus meant when he told Martha that "Mary has chosen the better part ..."

In describing the work of contemplation which he deems excellence over all other works, the author of *The Cloud* writes:

"... you are to ... lift your heart up to the Lord ... Center all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart. Do all in your power to forget everything else, keeping your thoughts and desires free from involvement with any of God's creatures or their affairs whether in general or in particular. ... What I am describing here is the contemplative work of the spirit. It is this which gives God the greatest delight."

"Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

It is not how many things we accomplish in our earthly lives; it is how we are transformed in this life through love in our relationships – with Jesus and with one another. Mary was focused totally on Jesus in the moment. She was being transformed in love. Martha too was being transformed in love by the work she was doing, the good work of hospitality, the work of welcoming God. But when she let petty matters distract her, her openness to God's love was diminished.

In his commentary on *The Cloud*, Trappist monk William Meninger, who leads retreats on centering prayer, writes this:

"We are all, dear friends, combinations of Martha and Mary. Sometimes we lean more toward the one than the other. Sometimes we opt for permanent lifestyles that emphasize one over the other. These is one thing we must understand, however, and that is that our love must dominate our action and give it direction."

In practice, very few of us can be Marys all the time. But we probably overdo being Marthas. As in everything else, we strive for balance. We can be *both* active *and* contemplative. The image on the front of your booklet created by Connie Butler for the Sts. Martha and Mary Mission in Trinidad captures this idea beautifully. We can discover and rejoice in God's love in our activities *and* we can experience God in contemplation through several 20-minute sessions of centering prayer each day.

I mentioned earlier that those who practice Ignatian spirituality are often called "contemplatives in action." I am thinking of Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite monk who served in the kitchen of his Paris monastery. He was known for finding God in his everyday tasks of washing dishes or slicing vegetables. For Brother Lawrence, the sacredness or worldly status of a task mattered less than the motivation behind it. (Martha could learn something from him!)

Eventually our activities will pass away after our mortal life and our busy-ness will cease. What will endure is the transformation into Christ's love that we have nurtured during our earthly lives.

"Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

"For the work of perfect love which begins on earth is the same as that love which is eternal life; they are but one."