

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Oct 4th 2016

Memorial of Saint Francis of Assisi

It may seem strange that today's readings "ignore" Francis of Assisi, whose memorial we celebrate, yet the lessons offered us in the gospel reading do find an echo in the memorial.

Martha shows in her life a gradually growing friendship with Jesus from the time the two sisters invited him for dinner, as we read today. Did Martha feel sorry for herself? Maybe in her heart she blamed Jesus for keeping Mary chatting or listening, while she was swamped in her preparation chores. But she does not seem to have been free enough to confront Jesus about it. In the early stages of friendship confrontations are not sought, certainly not during a honeymoon. So she blames Mary for leaving her alone with hospitality chores, perhaps because at this early stage of friendship she was not assured enough to confront Jesus directly and blame him. Even when she tells him: do you not care...? Tell her to help me, it is Mary she is addressing only indirectly. The scene is evocative of the passage in Luke [13: 14], where the president of the synagogue, instead of confronting Jesus, blames those present after Jesus had cured a crippled woman on a Sabbath: why don't you come on other days of the week? Well, synagogue service took place only on the Sabbath, but of course the synagogue president was not trying to be logical. In addressing Mary through a "reproach" to Jesus, Martha is using what I would call oblique communication.

Are we free enough to "complain" to Jesus directly about his presence in our lives? Or do we take it on the people Jesus has placed in our lives: children, family, fellow workers, community members...? We may need to grow in our friendship with the Lord. Martha did grow in trust and felt more assured in her friendship with Jesus. After her brother died, she "complained" to the Master, not obliquely through complaining to the disciples, but directly: if you had been here, my brother would not have died, which translates: why did you not come? Martha was not sure about the meaning of her experience, yet she adds: But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask. Not sure, but by now she was assured. Being sure belongs in our head; being assured belongs in our heart.

There will be situations in our lives, when we are not sure either of ourselves or of the meaning of our experience in our relationship with God. We are invited to be assured even when we are not sure and to address our uneasiness to Jesus himself directly, not obliquely.

Francis of Assisi found himself in a Church situation that deserved confrontation and confront he did by embracing a life style opposite to what he was seeing in that Church. In a way he was using a constructive oblique communication. Today our own Francis, our Pope, confronts the unjust situations facing us and he does that not only with the constructive oblique communication of his example, but also with his direct non-oblique words.

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