



July 18, 2010 Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

“Jesus entered a village where a woman, whose name was Martha, welcomed him.” Luke 10: 38

Dear Friends;

Luke’s Gospel story of Jesus’ visit to Martha and Mary is sometimes simplistically interpreted as a commentary on active ministry versus a contemplative ministry. Martha is so preoccupied with her work and Mary sits at Jesus’ feet taking it all in. So according to this line of thinking Mary’s contemplative posture (“she has chosen the better part”) is to be preferred over the active service by Martha. This may not be the question that this passage is addressing.

Luke is wrestling with the question of what is the role of women in the Church’s ministries. We can see throughout the New Testament examples of women in various ministries: teachers and evangelizers like Prisca (Acts 18:26), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:3); women prophets like the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9); women heads of house churches like Nympha (Col 4:15), Mary (Acts 12:12), Lydia (Acts 16:40) and Prisca (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19).

There were those who supported women’s ministries. And those who opposed it felt (following the dominant culture) that a woman’s place was in the home and public ministry belonged in the sphere of men (e.g. 1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Tm 2:11-12). Luke’s Jesus approving the silence of Mary places Luke with those who opposed the active ministry of women.

Scripture scholar Barbara Reid commenting on this passage says:

There was never any question in the early church about women becoming disciples. Both Martha and Mary welcomed Jesus and the word he spoke (vss.38-39). The controversy swirled around what women could do with what they learned while sitting at Jesus’ feet. The answer Luke gives was quite understandable for that time. Today’s Gospel invites us to reflect on what answer Jesus might give today to the question of woman’s place in the ministries of the church as they have now evolved.

One place where we might begin to consider the role of women in the Church is to restore women to the Order of Deacon in the Church. There is enough historical evidence for the ordination of women as deacons in both the churches of the Christian East and West. Women were ordained to the diaconate in identical rituals as men.

The ordination ritual of the Apostolic Constitutions for women deacons was codified by the Councils of Nicea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (421 AD). The instruction begins: “O bishop, you shall lay hands on her in the presence of the presbytery” (the college of priests). The oldest known complete rite for the ordination for women to the diaconate is a mid-eighth century Byzantine manuscript known as Barbarini 336. It indicates that women be ordained by the bishop within the sanctuary, the proximity to the altar indicates that this was seen as a sacramental ordination. In other texts the woman deacon is given to drink from the consecrated wine of the liturgy.

So what happened? The diaconate of women faced challenges particularly in the West. Ancient Rome’s culture was exceedingly patriarchal. Roman law forbade women from holding public offices. When the empire collapsed the Latin Church adopted Roman Civil Law in its essentials. Also, there was a cultural hang-up with the menstruation of women and it became a cultic taboo. Women in the diaconate would continue into the middle ages as a blessing imparted to abbesses.

The diaconate for women continued on a little longer in the East. And the Armenian Orthodox Church began ordaining women as deacons again in the mid 20th century, and the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece has also elected to start again ordaining women deacons. We recognize Orthodox Holy Orders as valid. The question we face today is we have proof that for centuries women were admitted to Holy Orders, under the sanction of ecumenical councils, producing ordained ministers who confirmed the equality of men and women in Christ. Should we not today follow this long-standing Tradition?

Peace,

Fr Ron