

I am going to base a lot of what I am saying today on Bishop Robert Barron's essay on today's gospel as found in the Word on Fire Bible. Bishop Barron begins by writing: "The story of the conflict between Martha and Mary has often been interpreted as a conflict between the active and the contemplative life, with Jesus signaling his preference for the latter over the former." This doesn't really get to the heart of the matter. Martha complains that her sister is not helping her with the numerous and time-consuming tasks of hospitality and tells Jesus to do something about it. The Lord responds, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

Martha's problem is not that she is busy or that she is engaging in the "active" life; her problem is that she is uncentered. Her mind is divided, drifting from this concern to that, from one anxiety to another; there are many things that preoccupy her.

What Mary has chosen is not so much the contemplative life, but the focused life. She is anchored, rooted in the one necessary thing—Jesus himself. The implication seems to be that, were Mary to help with the many household tasks, she would not be "worried and distracted" by them, since she could relate them to the center, and that, were Martha to sit at the feet of Jesus, she would still squirm with impatience, since her spirit is divided. As is so often the case in the spiritual life, the issue is not what they're doing, but how they're doing it. Indeed, the surest sign that something is off in Martha's soul is that she even tells God what to do!

Martha is worried about many things while Mary has the peace of Christ helping her to stay focused. How often are we more like Martha? How can we become more like Mary? First, we must identify what it is we are anxious about. How does that problem concern us, meaning, is it really any of our business? If it is something that concerns us, is there anything we can do about it? If not, put it into God's hands and let him handle it according to his will. If there is something we can do, and it is appropriate for us to act, and we can act according to God's will, then we should do what we can, even if it is something small. For example: several months ago I referred to a quote by the author/farmer/conservationist Wendell Berry who said that if you are concerned about the environment, go ahead and join the Sierra Club or World Wildlife Fund and contact your senators and representatives. But while you are doing that, don't be afraid to get your hands dirty by picking up trash and throwing it away. When put together, small local actions can lead to big results.

Jesus tells us that he wants to give us rest and ease our burdens. He tells us we can do this by imitating him who is meek and humble of heart. What Jesus is saying there is that he is humbly trusting of and obedient to his Father's will. Jesus wants us to do the same. He wants us to maintain our peace by staying focused on him and by handing our distractions over to him and letting him take care of them according to his will which is also his Father's will. Whatever we are anxious about, we cannot let that situation rob us of the peace of Christ. Because Mary was focused on Christ and trusted in him, the implication is that would be able to go to work without all of the distractions that plagued her sister. The more time we are able to sit at the feet of Jesus, the better we will be able to carry the peace of Christ within us no matter what we are doing, and this is how Jesus will lighten our burdens and give us rest.