

Unbarring the Doors

Séamus O'Connell

'Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about many things ...' (Luke 10:41). Whatever else one can say about Martha in today's gospel story, she is not indifferent. Her cry of compassion is in stark contrast to the 'globalized indifference [of our] globalized world...'¹ Like the Good Samaritan – whom we met last Sunday – Martha sees the need of the other. She sees the need of Jesus and his disciples and, in compassion, opens her home to them. But unlike the Samaritan, Martha has her limits. Her frustration and fatigue show themselves before the day is out. Like us all, she has her expectations: she expects her sister to support her in serving and she expects the Lord to acknowledge what's going on. But support she does not get! The Lord does not indulge her justified complaint. He doesn't engage with it at all. He puts something else before her: the action of Mary, her sister, who, 'was sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his word' (Luke 10:39).

'Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about many things ...' Martha – and we – are left open-mouthed before Jesus. The tension between them is *not* resolved. And that tension reaches down into this Cathedral and into this Diocese today. Her fatigue is like the fatigue that characterizes being part of the Church in Ireland in these days and years. We are more like Martha than we think!

We often feel that things have passed the Church by, that the action is elsewhere, that the huge work in education is no longer

1 Shocked by the sinking of yet another refugee boat with significant loss of life, Pope Francis undertook a hugely symbolic pastoral visit to the island of Lampedusa, to 'weep for those who died seeking a better life,' to 'beg forgiveness for our indifference to so many of our brothers and sisters.' For him, that journey was a Christ-like embrace of the world in its weakness and in its pain. It could be described as a counter-witness to what he terms the 'globalized indifference [of] this globalized world...' See Pope Francis, Homily at the 'Arena' Sports Stadium, Salina, Lampedusa. Monday, 8 July 2013. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa_cn.html.

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remembered or appreciated – the work in parishes, in hospitals, the outreach, the service to emigrants, the heroic sacrifice of missionaries, in every corner of the globe, beautiful young women and men who literally gave everything for the sake of Christ – and who in the latter part of the 19th century, and especially all through the 20th gave ... and gave ... and gave. That appears to have faded. All that appears to be left is the memory and the hurt from the betrayals and failures. And failures there have been. And betrayals. However, we fool ourselves if we think that the leaching of life from the Church is to be ascribed solely to the horrific betrayals and failures and the inaction which followed for so long. The ultimate root of the Church's fatigue, and of our lack of life is to be discerned in what is happening between Martha, Mary and the Lord.

Martha buries herself in attending to the needs of the Lord and his companions. Mary loses herself in listening to the Lord.

Martha's big, generous and strong heart permits her see one essential part of human life, but it blinds her to another part of life. Her generosity has blinded her to the other, to the guest – to the person who is to be met. Martha is so busy giving that she cannot receive her guest. She is so preoccupied with looking after her guests, that she does not look at them. She looks through them.²

Martha serves the companions of Jesus. Mary listens to him. However, Martha and Mary belong together, they go hand in hand. Without attending to the Lord, the serving of his disciples becomes far less than it might be.

The Christian faith is not an either/or faith. Sunday after Sunday we profess that Jesus is true God AND true man. Not either/or, but both/and.

Last Sunday we heard the scribe answer Jesus' question about the greatest commandment in the Law: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind AND your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27).

The way of Christian faith is the way of both/and: both God AND man, both flesh AND spirit, both man AND woman, both Martha AND Mary. In the early Summer of 1989, the Diocese of Stuttgart got a new bishop, just like ourselves today. That new bishop, in his first pastoral letter – which he titled, 'A Letter to the Parishes [or Communities] of the Diocese,' – noted that

2 Significantly, this is also what is happening in the Story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32): the elder brother complains that he has always slaved for his father and his father never acknowledged. The father's response implies that the elder brother has not seen his younger brother (the Prodigal) for what he is: his brother.

without our own personal conversion,
all the reforms – even the most necessary and well intentioned
– will fail
and, without our own personal renewal,
will end in empty activism.
Without listening to the Word,
without discerning the will of God,
without a spirit of adoration
and without constant prayer,
there will be neither renewal of the church
nor new evangelisation in Europe.³

That was 24 years ago! What Bishop Walter Kasper had to say to the parishes of Stuttgart, still holds for parishes in Kerry and across Ireland today!

In a way, that is what Jesus puts before Martha! And the Church was and is a community of Marthas! We are a community of Marthas before the Lord. And here is the heart of the matter: before the Lord. Jesus invites Martha to remain in his presence, to be present to him, as he is to her. What the Lord puts before Martha, is neither easy nor rapid. In the real world, change is slow, very slow; miracles have to be discerned.

This still remains new territory for us in Ireland; this way of being Church. There are some who would say that the Church in Europe is broken and needs to be fixed. It might be wiser to say that Church in Ireland, as we know it is leaving one place, and the Lord is bringing us to a new place: as it says in the Letter to the Colossians, 'when you were dead ... God made you alive along with [Christ]' (2:13).

It is God who does this, who brings us from death to life, from a dying Church to a living Church. The journey from death to life is not an easy journey for people in the real world. And I hope we are the in the real world! However, we are not alone: the Holy Spirit is in our hearts (see Romans 5:5) and our Father in heaven gives the Spirit of the Life-giving Lord to all who ask (Luke 11:13) – as we will hear in next Sunday's gospel.

Our diocese is under the patronage of Brendan, a person of faith and courage who set out on uncharted waters. Today, in Brendan's wake, Raymond Browne is ordained Bishop of Kerry. It is a very important day for us. It is a day of joy and a day of hope for all of us who comprise the Body of Christ in this place.

3 Bishop Walter Kasper, *Pastoral Letter to the Parishes of the Diocese of Rottenburg – Stuttgart*, 28 August 1989.

THE FURROW

Ray, you come to us as a person of significant pastoral experience and administrative skill, and more – as a person of integrity and openness, a person of faith, a man of gentleness and respect, compassion and concern. You are someone who will be able to build on the significant legacies of our bishops since the Council, and who will gather us and find a way with us, as we are brought through these uncharted waters.

Today is a very important day for you too. As we say in Kerry, 'You're stuck with us now!' In a real sense, God entrusts you to us; your life among us will be part of your way to eternal life (see Luke 10:25). These are big things, mysteries of faith. I pray that we may give you the welcome you deserve, that we may engage with you and be honest with you.

I have one thing to ask this day – that God help us realize that Providence is at work among us all. If the Lord is with the Church, then the way will be full of surprises, like the way of Jesus with the disciples – the way of the cross *and* of the resurrection. A Church which takes that way seriously is a Church on the path to renewal. It is a Church which realizes that without Christ, there is little point in this endeavour. So let us not be afraid. Let us put out into the deep (see Luke 5:4).

Do not be afraid!

Open, throw open – unbar the doors to Christ!

To his saving power ...

Do not be afraid!

Christ knows 'what is in everyone.'

[see John 2:25]

Only he knows it.⁴

'Do not be afraid! Unbar the doors to Christ!' The words of the 58-year old Karol Wojtyla, in his inaugural homily as the newly-elected Bishop of Rome in October 1978. The words of a saint, the call of a saint, a saint of our time, a man of our age.

May God who has begun this good work among us, bring it to completion.

4 John Paul II, 'Homily for the Inauguration of his Pontificate,' St. Peter's Square, Sunday, October 22, 1978. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19781022_inizio-pontificato_en.html The original Italian reads: Non abbiate paura! Aprite, anzi, spalancate le porte a Cristo! Alla sua salvatrice potestà aprite i confini degli Stati, i sistemi economici come quelli politici, i vasti campi di cultura, di civiltà, di sviluppo. Non abbiate paura! Cristo sa 'cosa è dentro l'uomo'. Solo lui lo sa! Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19781022_inizio-pontificato_it.html