

HOMILY 18 JULY 2010 SUN 16C HT-W/XII-PC

Way back when, I studied at a seminary run by the Benedictines of St. Meinrad Archabbey. On the same campus is a lovely guest house which was renovated a few years after I was ordained. It gives elegant expression to one of the Benedictine sayings: all guests are to be welcomed as Christ. Back when I first heard it, it just fluttered through my consciousness like so many other monastic peculiarities that didn't seem to have much relevance for seminarians studying to be a parish priests. Yet it came back to mind this past week. For hospitality is the dominant theme in today's Scripture texts. We have the figure of Abraham who spares nothing to make his 3 visitors feel welcome. Likewise, we have the memorable figure of Martha, anxiously striving to make Jesus feel at home. Really, the passages are instructive for anyone engaged in the service of others. The passages show us what is, or at least ought to happen, when we serve others.

We all know it's good to do good for others. Abraham and Martha are sympathetic figures for us. But at times, we get burned out. It's particularly dangerous for those engaged in volunteer or ministerial activities. It's dangerous because ministers, volunteers, etc. usually don't get compensated a lot for their troubles. While we applaud the good work of ministers, caregivers, social workers, counselors, church volunteers, etc., and we recognize that their labors can be very demanding, society doesn't pay them very much and doesn't recognize them that much.

Part of the problem lies in the attitude with which we approach this sort of activity. It's a common notion that service is a kind of zero-sum game, where all the energy, wealth, effort, etc. goes out of the giver and into the receiver. And given the limitations of our resources, we can quickly reach the point of exhaustion. That's what happens to Martha. She's so concerned about so many things that have to be done that she starts to collapse under the strain, and she cries out to the Lord to have Mary lend a hand. Lord, don't you care! That's the cry of a frustrated caregiver who feels abandoned by God. So many cares, so many things to be done, and God just seems to be sitting off in a corner while our spirits crumble beneath the load. When people cross this breaking point, there's a tendency to quit, to step back from helping, to give up and to let others worry about it.

Part of the solution lies in a prayerful adjustment of our attitudes, that is, giving heed to what the Scripture passages teach us. The activity of serving others, if it be truly Christian in its inspiration, is not a zero-sum game. Rather, both parties, the one ministering and the recipient, gain from the exchange. This is the lesson of both Abraham and Martha's hospitality. For all his labors in making the 3 men feel at home, it is Abraham who gains the most: he receives the promise of a long-desired son. Likewise Martha has an opportunity to meet Jesus; he's literally sitting there right in front of her, but her obsessive focus on the details of hospitality causes her to lose sight of the very one who is being served. Dear Martha is more concerned with what she's doing, than with whom she's doing it for!

Brothers and sisters, the God who gives us the command to serve others has so arranged it in his marvelous providential plan that he himself is also the one we meet in serving them. As often as we do this to the least of Christ's brethren, we do it to him. In caring for those in need--tending to a disabled child, visiting a shut-in, giving comfort to a grieving soul, caring for a declining parent--we are not just "doing the right thing." These charitable actions are so much more. They

are an opportunity for us to encounter our God. It is this kind of awareness that sustained people like Mother Teresa, who found in the poor the person of her Savior, albeit in “distressing disguise” as she phrased it. May the grace of this Eucharist, in which our Lord is really present, open our eyes to see our Savior, also present, in those whom we serve. And may this awareness inspire us to serve them with greater devotion.