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The Case for Martha



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December 9, 2014 by irene Archos (<https://greekamericangirl.com/author/gree7053/>)



(https://greekamericangirl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/With_Mary_and_Martha006.257165020_std.jpg) Recently I heard that a friend of mine, a fellow parishioner, a beautiful, serious young woman and talented fashion designer, renounced the world and joined a convent. Incidentally we share the same name— for the Great Martyr Irene— so sometimes we get mixed up in people's conversations. We are both struggling Orthodox Christians who aim above all for our soul's salvation. Yet our lives and circumstances could not be more different. How we go about it remains at the heart of the long-standing debate in theological circles, works or faith; the contemplative life or one of service and action to the other. Our situation is akin to Mary and Martha's, that well-known parable that is preached over and over again as the exemplar of Christian action in the world. Now I know my counterpart has chosen the better part, but somehow I don't think it's fair she gets all the credit. I am just going to take a bit of your time to reflect on the life of the Marthas in the world, to show you that the life of Martha is as hard if not harder than Mary's. And instead of giving all the praise to Mary, forgive me Lord if I seem contrary, you might not just have compassion on Martha and give her some sympathy.

Martha is a servant lest we forget. She is stuck, even if she has an advanced degree, with attending to everyone else's needs except her own. Martha's life is hard because of the myriad of details she must attend to. If Martha is a mother and a wife, not to mention full-time career woman with employees / clients / bosses / co-workers to appease, well, frankly there's mighty little time in the day to devote to praying. I carry a full-time job, care for three very demanding children, two of whom are teens, an ailing mother, a husband prone to moody depression, manage the household finances and its management, while also responsible for mine and my family's spiritual direction. Here's a typical list of some of the responsibilities a typical Martha may be expected to perform throughout her day:

-change the baby diaper as the baby is hollering because of rash while simultaneously making the baby formula

-wake all school age children who grumble are nasty and picky "Oh I don't want to wear that sweater it is too scratchy" "I don't want to wear those pants they don't match." "Where are your socks?" "I can't find them." "Hurry up you will be late." This refrain happens in some variation every morning

- coordinate babysitter's schedule to cover the extra-long management meeting she has tonight
- make lunches and snack packs for brood
- bring coffee to hubby
- make breakfast sandwiches serve cereal
- "Don't forget to brush own teeth, Martha, and apply liquid eyeliner" quickly enough to sign permission from that child who forgot to show night before
- pack up kids in car not before a mad search for newly bought alpaca mittens." Where's your mittens?" "I don't know I had them yesterday at cafeteria." Turns out mittens are lost.
- "Hurry, hurry!" beat traffic whizzing through double and triple parked caravans of parent cars dropping off their kids before the side door of school to breakfast room. Door slams shut exactly at 8:10 am (Didn't make it in time; have to get out of car and accompany child into late room; that's her 15th lateness so far)
- make a mental note to pick up bread crumbs and pasta sauce for eggplant parm for dinner
- make credit card payment of \$300 during lunch break to beat deadline of 5pm
- catch up on emails (have 3456 in my inbox)
- concentrate enough to write report and coordinate with other departments all while constantly interrupted by phone and emails to do this and that; reminders for meetings and cc the heirarchy for any changes
- deal with the pressure of meeting quotas or interacting with clients in a high pressure environment
- eat nuggets at desk for lunch. Getting roll round the middle because there is no time to work out or eat at a decent pace without having to bolt down whatever fast food sustenance one can manage in 15 minutes
- so much whirlwind of activity at work who remembers all that is done during a day?
- After meetings rush home not without picking up bread crumbs and pasta sauce on the express lane of Pathmark to dethaw cutlets and whip up some lettuce for a salad.
- make sure to pay babysitter and after-school Greek school
- prostrate for the thousandth time to pick up mismatched socks and stray sneakers while folding laundry

-deal with the tantrums of school-aged kids who hate to do math homework and slave patiently while the perfect t is crossed for the sentence beginning with spelling word "there"

-sort and read through the stack of bills and statements that have to be answered

-have a "talk" with the teen who was marked absent/cutting from yesterday's classes;"How are you going to graduate?" I'm so disappointed in you. Why are you a follower?" "It's only one class. I got it under control. I have all the work."

-Set dinner and call camp.

-"Maybe, after dinner table is cleared do I have time to tweeze eyebrows that are becoming box bushes or just breathe" quick thought

-Not before answering the call, "Mom please wipe my butt" because I am the delegated butt- wiper of the house charged with making sure everyone's private parts are sanitary and soft. While in bathroom I notice the mountains of laundry, the assorted socks and t shirts and underwear waging war with dirt and grass and sweat not to mention shit

-While wiping butt, take note to replenish the assortment of household items such as toilet paper, laundry detergent, deodorant, bleach etc etc that are running low or at zero.

Besides all the physical tasks that Martha must attend to, she is also fraught with playing the life coach/psychologist/advisor of the residence: "Your nose is not too big; you don't need rhinoplasty" a snippet of the longer conversation to one teen followed by a half-ignored talk of the importance of inner beauty.

-Damage control given for "bad score on math test" to the grade schooler who goes into a tantrum that she is a failure at math because "My friend Melia got 100 on the math test while I only got an 83."

-Following up on the cutting report the other teen has to be confronted with.

Making sure the elderly and crotchety mother's fears are unfounded as Obama Care changed the benefits she was promised on her Medicaid card, "Don't worry Ma, we will go into the office together" next week. "Can't you take me tomorrow?" "I have important conference tomorrow. Don't worry we will go." "Ah Thee mou, they are going to cut my benefits!" she sighs and becomes anxious unable to sleep

Prodding a taciturn husband who has been underemployed and whose manhood is threatened because of his inability to provide for his family as a patriarch. "What's the matter honey? It's only a phase." Dancing a dainty tango of not appearing to yank on the male ego and staying within prescribed traditional feminine gender role while at the same time holding back the resentment of being the superwo-man having to accomplish everything in the household.

Before the lit vigil lamp in front of the icon of the Theotokos, I barely have energy to say the Lord's Prayer. How do I go have time to reflect on my passions? I can barely keep my eyes open. How do I think about what evil or tempting thoughts I have entertained? I barely have any of my own thoughts; I barely have a brain. I am literally out of my mind. I am lucky I can still keep track of the days on the calendar. I am harried, distracted and exhausted. I hardly have time for a contemplative life. I am a working mother. This is prayer enough. I have lived this grueling form of existence as the meanest basest slave day after day year after year. I don't have time to sin- I'm too busy running around like a chicken without a head serving everybody making sure the little annoying things in life that no one recognizes as needing attention get done. And what's my reward-the admonition that "Oh Martha, Martha, you are too busy. Slow down." Your sister who is sitting down (ie "doing nothing") contemplating gets the applause. But mind you, if everyone is sitting at the Master's feet, who-who will pick up the table? Who will serve the food and clear up the crumbs? Now wouldn't you, like Martha in the parable, be angry annoyed and ticked off? You are the one doing all the work and still you get chided for it. If I had been in the parable, I would have clawed at Mary and kicked her behind using a couple of the b words instead of just giving her a mean look. In fact I think Martha handled herself quite nobly in the story given the circumstances. I would have been hysterical.

Let's give Martha the credit that's due. The world needs both a Martha and a Mary to function correctly. In fact, I am sure in her deepest heart Martha really wants to be more like Mary. It would seem like a relief after all to sit down and pray. The prayerful life for Martha seems like a luxury. She yearns for the time she can hang it all up and join a monastery. Is it her fault she must be the responsible one? The go-getter the enabler. The picker-upper of crumbs and boo boos and spirits. She is the mover in the world. Her sister is the spirit, the wind in the sail, but without the sail pulled taut to the limit of its tenacity, there would be no motion.

I venture to say it is harder to be a Martha than a Mary. The one everyone turns to get things done. Children and families with all their demands can make the most austere of igoumen or Zen masters. Motherhood involves grueling nights without sleep, demands and more demands. Even when I try to be more prayerful, "Go get us breakfast" interrupts my trip to church. Morning prayers are cut short because of demands from empty stomachs. One fellow parishioner, in an effort to console me for falling asleep before my evening prayers were complete said, "a mother's prayer is her labors. God knows that you are meeting everyone else's needs so you are forgiven for not following a prayer rule." It is hard to be true to the Lord and still fill the needs of a human family. You always feel guilty for not properly focusing on the one or the other.

What is a Martha to do then? Should she drop all the dishes, abandon her children and run off to a convent? It would seem that is the answer that gets extolled in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. There has always been a superiority attached to the contemplative tradition to the discouragement if not total disparagement of the matrimonial/ maternal. No doubt to renounce the world is no easy thing. To adhere to the ascetic grueling practice of a monastery, to live in utter solitude is the ultimate test of a human soul for God. But how does Martha become a Mary once she's in the fray of it? Would it be acceptable or even admirable for women to abandon their post as administrators, mothers, wives? Ironically perhaps renouncing our families, the human loves on our lives, is the only sure way to sever all attachments so that we can truly become spiritual beings. Mary has chosen the one thing needful; perhaps she has made the more difficult choice.

So where does that leave Martha? The parable of Mary and Martha has been interpreted as the conflict between faith or prayer and works. They are supposed to be taken together two necessary sides of the same Christian call. Faith without works is dead and works without faith can be communism or a not for profit. They are the drive in each person to provide a balance in the

spiritual life. No question both Mary and Martha would make it to the kingdom of heaven. And it is not as if Martha will be barred from the heavenly kingdom because she did not make time to pray. Only that Mary chose the better path. But, I am sure my counterpart who has donned a cassock and forced to keep a strict rule of 300 prostration might be asking the flip side of the same question- "What use am I in the world?" The trick is for Mary to become more like Martha and vice versa.

Next time you read the parable of Mary and Martha, think of poor Martha as she runs around like a chicken without a head. She is tormented by her role as a fixer-upper and eternal go-fer. Take pity on poor Martha, Mary. Pray for her to find the inner and external peace she craves to be more like you as you sit quietly at the Master's feet feeding your soul. She will be too busy feeding the masses, the poor, the snot-sniveling homeless and the cranky elderly at the same time she is changing diapers. Your prayers will have to be enough for her, the same way her labor will feed you.

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