

Martha and Mary, the embodiment of relationship with Jesus Christ

In line with this month's theme, "On the Way: views from our faith journey" I want to talk about my personal faith journey in relation to the readings for today, the story we just heard about Martha and Mary and the Psalm ([15](#): 1- 5).

The Gospel of Luke presents to us the story of these two women, Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, the one resurrected by Jesus, from Bethany, a village placed about two miles southeast of Jerusalem. The story comes after the parable of the good Samaritan which could be interpreted as pointing to the second commandment, the idealization of belief, faith and religion.

Each name of these women has a meaning. Martha, means "lady" [of the house]. Following her name, in Luke's story, Martha is depicted as a person in charge: the one that welcomes Jesus in her home. She was placed as someone concerned in following the demands of her name, making sure that Jesus is received well, making sure he feels at home. The Holman Bible Dictionary unpack for us the meaning of the name Mary. Mary is "a Greek personal name derived from the Hebrew name Miriam, meaning 'rebellious, bitter, God's gift, beloved, defiant'". Miriam plays a significant role in the Old Testament. According to the Exodus, Miriam is a character of relevance in the liberation of Moses, later becoming the prophetess that led other women in a song of victory, which to this day in the Catholic Tradition, serves as inspiration and means for remembrance of the liberation of the Israelites every Easter. I find fascinating that Mary's name is placed in stark contrast to Martha's. While Martha is the active one, the lady of the house, the one making sure Jesus is properly served, Mary (with a name strongly linked to action and bravery) is depicted seating at Jesus' feet, listening, as if listening to Jesus, required rebelliousness and defiance (perhaps of structures of oppression?)

The story of Martha and Mary seems to deal with the first commandment, the duty of listening to Jesus as the teacher of the word of God. The story places two women at the center, one receiving Jesus, the traveler needing hospitality, the master; the other attentive to his teachings. One, in charge of making sure the guests are well served (Martha), the other engaged in learning Jesus' teachings. Mary is at his feet, her posture conveys fervour, passion which by the standards of the time was counter cultural. Women were not supposed to learn the law. When Martha, distressed for the lack of collaboration of Mary, using some sort of triangulation (which is asking a third person to support your claim), she turns to Jesus asking for his support on her claim about Mary's lack of care for the matters of attention to guests. Jesus reply is as Melvin Tinker in its Bible Commentary suggests "couched in sympathetic terms, as the double vocative indicates; "Martha, Martha..." There is need only for one thing, referring to the spiritual, the good portion chosen by Mary, listening to Jesus.

At first glance this seems to be the main interpretation of the text. However, Jesus' words for Martha and Mary are placed in the context of each one's sense of call.

Since the time of Origen, one the “fathers” of Christianity, Martha and Mary have been interpreted as ways to understand a Christian relationship with Jesus, namely service and contemplation. According to Origen, “neither action nor contemplation could exist without the other. Martha received the Word through her physical act of service; Mary received him spiritually through her attentiveness to his teachings”. Although Jesus himself emphasizes Mary’s listening, Martha’s disposition is also necessary for the contrast between action and contemplation to take place. Jesus is not downplaying Martha’s mission, he is not saying that action is not important, he is saying that action should not happen at the expense of listening to Jesus (contemplation); “Jesus should not be neglected in the name of service”. For a holistic experience with Jesus to take place, contemplation must be first, but action needs also to be present. An encounter with Jesus requires of both Martha and Mary.

This is the dynamic I would like to invite you all to contemplate today. With this dynamic as the background, I would like us to move into the details of my faith journey, one that at times have been Martha-like and at times a Mary-like.

My faith journey is deeply intertwined with my upbringing, my experiences growing up and the many turns my life has gone through. To talk about faith in my context, requires shedding light on the many aspects, circumstances and people that have surrounded my formation as a person. Thus, my faith journey starts in my childhood. As I guess many of you already know, I am Colombian, born in a small town called Libano (Spanish for Lebanon) in the middle of the Andean coffee-producing region of Colombia of a Catholic family. I am the third of the Palacio Trujillo brothers, no sisters (and yes, in Latin –America, we take both last names of our parents, that’s where the Trujillo comes from). Libano is a small town, with the regular dynamics of small towns, which, more or less, repeat around the world. Everybody knows everybody, there is a sense of closeness, of togetherness, of community, of belonging but also of scripted ways of being. In the case of my hometown, those ways of being are tied to a code of conduct dictated by an ingrained Catholic way of thinking and living combined with a strong male centered mentality.

I was also born gay. Growing up gay in a small-town Colombia, in the 70s and 80s, with a father like mine, was quite a challenge. My father was a taxi driver. He was a temperamental man with very narrow ways of understanding maleness mixed with clarity on the value of formal education and a way of loving based on discipline and a strong sense of responsibility. The Colombian society, is a very macho society where roles are very strict, and gayness (back then) was just something to hide. So, I just had to blend, I just had to have a low profile, not to call attention on me, and make all I could to not show myself as a target in any way, neither for my father nor for society at large. The worst scenario was being found out in any way at school, that would be terrible, a disaster. The humiliation and “dishonor” for my father...a total disaster.

In contrast, my mother was the source of hope, faith and unconditional love in our home. Moms are definitely the most direct link between God and us. My mother was a shield, was open arms to receive us after a day at school, always with a warm meal, a

fresh glass of juice and with kind words of love. My father loved us too, but he gave us love in the way he could, the way he learned to love, the way of the harshness of latino maleness, that of toughness that borders with violence (he himself was victim of violence as a child). My mother's love and sense of care was grounded in an upbringing in prayer. My grandma, was a woman of prayer. She was another source of consolation and joy. She was a shield and a source of wisdom. She taught us all to pray. Prayer was something very important, I would say central growing up. We used to pray the rosary with my brothers and my mom every day. We used to take turns to lead the rosary. For those who do not know, the rosary is a type of prayer to Mary (the mother of Jesus) that combines reiteration of parts of the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, with repetitions of prayers to Mary framed by recurrent "Our fathers". The rosary was our first encounter with Gospel readings, and Gospel teachings about Jesus. Was a Mary-like time in my life.

The women in my early life (my mom and my grandma) where the first means to God. Like in the story of Martha and Mary, in the lives of my brothers and I, women embodied the means for relationship with God, with Jesus Christ. My mom, and my grandma, were really the Maries of our lives, the Maries that showed us a relation with God through unconscious contemplation of Jesus and his mysteries (as we call Jesus' stories in the rosary). A closeness to Jesus became a natural, perhaps mechanic, but ever present way of waiting in hope. It was a child-like faith, but with profound roots, that to this day continues to nurture and to define my way of engaging Jesus.

Processions in holy week were also significant markers in my faith as a child. Processions were a way of learning about characters in the bible or in the broader Catholic faith. Processions required activity, required walking while praying and singing. Processions were a kind of bible and Catholic faith school. We learned about Bible stories through the statues in our churches. I was always intrigued by Mary Magdalene's perfume in one of her hands, intrigued to the point to ask my grandma about it at the age of seven. She then told me, it was meant to wash Jesus' feet so Mary Magdalene could later wipe them off with her hair. I did not understand at all what was all that about, but I do recall it was magic, it was majestic. It opened in me a door to contemplate the mystery not in a rational way but in a rather mystical way. It was a contemplation linked to feelings of joy mixed with wonder and awe. I also recall the statue of the Veronica. The word Veronica seems to come from the Greek words "vero icono" ("True icon", "true image"). According to the fourth century apocrypha writing "The Gospel of Nicodemus" or "Acts of Pilate", Veronica was a woman that used her veil to wipe Jesus' face when He was on his way to Calvary. As a result, an image of His face was impressed upon the cloth. I recall the strong desire as a nine-year-old to see that image. I was attracted to that part of the statue that represented the depicted image of Jesus on a cloth. The mystery is again revealed in contemplation, a contemplation that required a Martha like mode of connecting with Jesus, an intentional desire of going to the processions, but a Mary-like surrender to the ungraspable mystery. Although I did not have back then a cognitive sense of faith, faith was a means for belonging to either the community of my family, or the community of my hometown's church.

Processions and statues represented my first encounter with the Spanish Catholic inherited relationship with the suffering God. My faith has been very much marked by the suffering Jesus on the cross. Most of Catholic churches in Colombia have a significant emphasis on the suffering Christ, the dying Christ, the Christ on the cross. The cross has served many purposes, positive and negative. The cross was used by the Spaniards and Portuguese to justify the entire colonial project. Abuse, death, persecution, expropriation of land, cultural appropriation, exploitation and slavery have all taken place under the banner of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross has also been a means, a way to liberation. Brazilian Theologian Leonardo Boff reminds us of the very personal and either burdensome or liberating meaning of the cross: "We all carry on our shoulders . . . or in our hearts some cross. And every cross, as little as it may look, is onerous, but can be lived as a tribulation or [as] a liberation."

The cross of Jesus Christ together with the foundations of prayer and a mystical relationship with God, were all present in what it became the next stage of my faith journey.

The fact of being gay impelled me in a quest for independence and meaning. From my small town, I moved to Bogota. For some time, the pendulum moved back to action. Like Martha, I was busy searching for identity, searching for life, which, I think is a legitimate way of living a life in Christ. A search for what you are in your heart of hearts, an interior trip in search for meaning I see it as a trip towards God. I must say this was a challenging time. I felt at times the absence of God, the weight of having to respond to the demands of a straight-ruled society and straight-centered mentality in my family. In this search for meaning and identity I found a prayer group, I found a formal way of engaging Jesus in a contemplative way. So, my faith acquired again a more Mary-like type of expression. But as my existence was driven through prayer, my heart was awakened to the God that is in solidarity with the poor, a good that rejects all forms exploitation. Like in the Psalm, this is a God that calls for a total rejection of usury, of making profit, especially out of the poor, like we see today in the United States in for profit detention camps that use the needs of the most vulnerable to reap profit.

Priesthood began to be in my mind, but my search for identity was far from over. Part of my search for identity included moving out of Colombia. There was in me, since my early childhood, a desire for moving to other countries, to meet different peoples, to learn other languages. That innate desire led me to Canada. In Canada, I continue to nurture that dream of the priesthood, a Mary-like way of God acting in me. That desire led me into the Society of Jesus, The Jesuits. The Jesuits is a religious order of men in the Catholic Church. This order was founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the year 1540. The Jesuits showed me a very balanced way of expressing Martha-like and Mary-like ways of relating to Jesus. The Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, a 30-day silent retreat, was a way to a deep understanding of Jesus' life, passion and resurrection intertwined with my own life. This was a life-changing experience. Out of a deep Mary like encounter with Jesus, a Martha-like way of engaging Jesus was born. Thus, a desire to serve Jesus via engaging the quest of agricultural migrant workers became central to me.

The quest for identity and meaning lead me outside the Jesuits and to engage the struggle of migrant workers from an academic and a policy perspective. After leaving the Jesuits I obtained a master's degree and a PhD in Immigration Policy and joined the provincial government as a policy advisor. But identity also required wholeness, which is now coming after I met my partner, Pieter, who all of you know. Pieter has provided me not only with an opportunity to be in relationship but also to know about the Mennonite tradition in the specific context of TUMC. This has been the new face the Lord has chosen for me. TUMC has been an exquisite way to ground my faith. It has a very balanced way of action and contemplation. In TUMC, Martha and Mary merge. I am now walking in faith, letting the Lord dance with me.

These were the conditions under which my faith was born and evolved: Catholic, small-town boy, in the South-American Andes, with a father that was homophobic, in a homophobic society and with a lovely, loving, prayerful mother and grandmother. As a young child, faith was not something I could name consciously, but rather something I was brought into, something that became the source of hope amid a search for meaning. As an adult, faith was ingrained in a search for identity and meaning that to this day continues to go on.

As I age, I have been confirming that both, Martha and Mary are not two parts of a dichotomy but rather two subtle ways the Lord dances with me. Teresa of Avila reminded her sisters in the religious order of Discalced Carmelites through her Interior Castle that both Martha and Mary are in a coordinated effort to engage the Lord, to engage Jesus: "believe me, [said Teresa] both Martha and Mary must entertain our Lord and keep Him as their Guest, nor must they be so inhospitable as to offer Him no food. How can Mary do this while she sits at His feet, if her sister does not help her?" and in her masterful piece Way of Perfection, talking about the prayer of quiet, Teresa takes this appreciation to an even higher ground, that of the care of one's soul, of one's existence: "It is a great favour which the Lord grants to these souls, for it unites the active life with the contemplative. At such times they serve the Lord in both these ways at once; the will, while in contemplation, is working without knowing how it does so; the other two faculties [mind and memory] are serving Him as Martha did. Thus, Martha and Mary work together... I think, therefore, that as the soul experiences such satisfaction in this Prayer of Quiet the will must be almost continuously united with Him Who alone can give it happiness."