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# Teaching the **FAITH**

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John Gavin, S.J., *Editor*

## *Contemplation, Activity, and Choosing the Better Part*

*By Rev. Paul Kucharski, Ph.D.*

July 20, 2025—16<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Ordinary Time

Readings: Genesis 18.1-10; Colossians 1.24-28; Luke 10.38-42

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Often, a good way to enter the Sunday readings is to find puzzles, things that confuse us or give us pause. In the readings for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we find such a puzzle in how the first reading and the Gospel depict the value of activity or busyness, in contrast to contemplation or quiet time before the Lord.

In the first reading (Gen 18.1-10), God and two angels appear to Abraham in the form of three men traveling near the city of Hebron. Abraham's response? Almost frantic activity – he runs from his tent, prostrates himself on the ground before the men, and asks them to accept his hospitality; after they accept, he runs to Sarah, his wife, and tells her to prepare three rolls of fine flour; he then runs to his herd to kill and prepare a tender steer; finally, he presents the rolls and steer, along with curds and milk, to his visitors. All this busyness is presented in a positive light, as a fitting response to the Lord's presence. In their subsequent conversation, God assures Abraham that by next Spring, Sarah will have a son, thus fulfilling God's promise to give him an heir and make him a father of many nations.

Contrast this with the Gospel (Luke 10.38-42). In Bethany, Jesus enters the home of Martha and Mary as their guest. While Mary sits at his feet, absorbed in his teaching, Martha goes about the practical tasks of hospitality and service. One imagines her, like Abraham, rushing about, occupying herself with much activity. Yet her activity is not presented in a positive light. Quite the contrary. Our Lord gently rebukes her after she requests that Mary help with the burdens of hosting: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her" (Luke 10.41-42).

Why the seemingly different attitudes toward activity? Why is Abraham's busyness rewarded, and Martha's rebuked? And how does this relate to our own efforts to balance contemplation and activity, prayer, and the practical demands of life?

## *Pondering the Puzzle*

At first glance, the second reading (Col 1.24-28) offers little to resolve the puzzle presented by the first reading and the Gospel. In the Sunday cycle in Ordinary Time, while the first reading pairs thematically with the Gospel, the second reading is a semi-continuous presentation of some epistle or letter, and so it marches to the beat of its own drum, so to speak. Thus, there can be little thematic connection between the second reading and what comes before and after. The readings for the Sixteenth Sunday seem an obvious instance: while the first reading and the Gospel deal with activity, contemplation, and the mysterious encounter between God and man, the second reading speaks of suffering, the Church as the Body of Christ, and the Church's saving mission to the Gentiles.

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that our second reading does in fact help solve the puzzle. St. Paul notes that the Church is the Body of Christ (Col 1.24). That is, Christ, who is the founder and head of the Church, and we, its members, are so intimately connected that we are like a single organism. As members of the Church, all our activity, and especially our efforts to bear suffering well, must flow from a profound, contemplative awareness of who Christ is and a concerted effort to remain in his presence. There is nothing wrong with activity *per se* – in fact, activity is necessary to build up the Kingdom of God – but apart from Christ, such activity is mere busyness or, worse, positively damaging, akin to an organ acting out of sync with the rest of the body. This solution, explicit in the second reading, is found implicitly, I think, in the first reading and the Gospel. With this in mind, let us unpack all three more thoroughly.

Our first reading takes place within the following context: Abraham has been called to a new land by God, who promises to make him the head of a great nation, and through that nation, a father of many nations and source of blessing for the entire world. In Genesis 15, this promise is ratified in a covenant oath. Yet a problem remains: God has promised that it will be through Sarah that Abraham is a father of nations, yet she, like her husband, is elderly and well beyond child-bearing years.

Genesis 18 opens with Abraham resting in his tent in southern Palestine during the hottest part of the day. Three men approach, and Abraham recognizes immediately that one is God, whom he addresses as *adonay*, a Hebrew word in the Old Testament reserved for God alone. The other two men are angels, who eventually leave God and Abraham to investigate the wickedness of nearby Sodom (see Gen 19.1), though often the three men together have been seen as a type of the Triune God (for example, they are the basis for the famous Russian icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev). We should note that before serving the Lord, Abraham first prostrates himself in worship. He then asks permission to serve: "Sir, if I may ask you this favor, please do not go on past your servant. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves under the tree. Now that you have come this close to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way" (Gen 18.3-5). Only after he is told, "Very well, do as you have said," does he begin his frenetic meal preparations. In sum, Abraham first recognizes God for who he is, worships him, and then seeks an alignment between his will and God's before acting. Contemplation precedes and leads to activity.

In our second reading, St. Paul writes the church in Colossae to assure Gentile converts that they do not have to become Jewish before becoming Christian. He does so by emphasizing the primacy and kingship of Christ, and thereby the ability of the Church, Christ's body, to serve as the sole vehicle for salvation.

The Church as Christ's body is no mere metaphor. Christ and his followers really are in a serious sense one entity. Thus, when Christ appears to Paul on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, he does not ask, "Why are you persecuting my Church?" or "Why are you persecuting my followers?" Rather, he asks, "Why are you persecuting me?" This also explains how we as members of the Church are able to receive sanctifying grace: the body shares in the life of the head, and so members of the Church participate in the divine life that is Christ's as God the Son.

Paul alludes to his many sufferings in ministry and then makes a mysterious claim: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church" (Col 1:24). We might suppose that this line indicates something insufficient about

Christ's sufferings, but this is not what Paul means. Rather, he is drawing out an implication of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. Because Christ is our head, we are called to imitate him in all things. To use a technical term, our lives are to be a "recapitulation" or summing up of his. This is especially true with respect to suffering – Christ suffered for the sake of others, and while his sacrifice on the cross is perfect and infinitely meritorious, we are called to participate in his merits through the carrying of our own cross. Thus, our own suffering can become salvific both for ourselves and for others.

In short, the ultimate goal of Christian life is, as Paul says, to become "perfect in Christ" and to help others do the same. "For this I labor and struggle," he notes in the verse immediately following our passage, "in accord with the exercise of his power working within me" (Col 1.29). Activity, then, is obviously not bad – something to be eschewed whenever possible in favor of contemplation – but a Christian's activity must proceed from a profound awareness of who Christ is and a serious effort to imitate his life.

### ***Dangerous Distractions***

Moving on to the Gospel, we should note that Luke is the only evangelist to give us an account of the Visitation. Mary, having been visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she is to be the mother of God, does not sit quietly with this fact; rather, she leaves immediately to visit and assist her cousin Elizabeth. So, obviously Luke would not intend Jesus' words to Martha to be some blanket indictment of activity. Indeed, Christ's own public life is marked by periods of intense activity, a fact highlighted especially in the Gospel of Mark.

Christ's gentle rebuke of Martha, then, is not for her activity *per se*, but for the way that she goes about her activity. The key word, I think, is the Greek verb *periespato* in verse 40, which literally means that Martha "was dragged around" or "was drawn away." Our translation reads, "Martha, burdened with much serving," but a better translation might be, "Martha was distracted with much serving." In contrast, Abraham's activity flows from, rather than distracts, his focus on God, who appears as a man before him; Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth flows from, rather than distracts, her focus on the Savior within her womb; Paul's missionary activity flows from, rather than distracts, his focus on Christ as head of the Church and savior of all. Martha, it seems, amidst her activity loses focus on the Lord, and thus she is gently called by Jesus to refocus and imitate the posture of her sister, who sits quietly and contemplatively at his feet. In his reminder to Martha that "there is need of only one thing," we hear echoes of Jesus' words at John 15.5: "Without me, you can do nothing." An important reminder for us all, especially in an age of seemingly endless distractions and demands upon our time.

*Before entering seminary for the Archdiocese of New York, Fr. Paul Kucharski was an associate professor of philosophy at Manhattanville University. Currently, he is parochial vicar at the Church of St. Joseph in Bronxville, NY and adjunct professor of philosophy at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, NY. His most recent publication is ["Loving As the Trinity Loves"](#) in Homiletic and Pastoral Review.*

### ***For Further Reading***

[\*The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible\*](#)

Donald Haggerty, [\*The Hour of Testing\*](#)

Paul Quay, S.J., [\*The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God\*](#)

### *In Short . . .*

- *The first reading and the Gospel present a puzzle: why is Abraham's activity in service to the Lord rewarded, but Martha's gently rebuked?*
- *The second reading suggests a solution, namely, that activity in service of the Kingdom of God should flow from contemplation. For the Christian, St. Paul's notion of the Church as Body of Christ reminds us that our goal is to recapitulate the life of Christ, that is, to imitate Christ's life in such a way that we "sum it up." Activity, then, must flow from a contemplative appreciation of who Christ is and a serious effort to remain connected to him.*
- *This solution is supported by a careful re-reading of the first reading and Gospel: Abraham acts out of a profound recognition that he is in the presence of the Lord, and only after seeking the Lord's acceptance of his hospitality; Martha's activity draws her focus from the Lord, so that her hospitality becomes a source of anxiety rather than peace.*