

Commentary on Luke 10:38-42 by Marie Balmory

Jesus, Martha, and Mary,
in Ce lieu en nous que nous ne connaissons pas - À la recherche du Royaume, p. 121-124

(Detailed summary)

Many images have been created from the brief story that composes it. But no concepts, no dogmas. A service entry, in short: a story of women, of home, of meals where it is precisely a question of service, the most everyday kind: serving at table. Religious people — and artists — generally believe that this text represents the opposition between the active life — Martha — and the contemplative life — Mary — which is superior to it. However, we usually hear it said, somewhat quietly, that both are necessary. Marthas are very useful, aren't they? They are thus consoled for not having "chosen the better part," and we are assured that, thank God, there will always be Marthas to serve others. That is to say, us, if I understand correctly.

As [Jesus and his disciples] were traveling, he entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his words [*logos*].

Martha was busy with many [*peri*] tasks. She came and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me."

The Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about [*peri*] many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Two prepositions separate the two women: Martha is busy around [*peri*] many things, but Mary is close to one person.

In the scene we are witnessing, Martha does not simply say to her sister, as would be normal, "Come and help me." She begins by reproaching him for his insensitivity towards her, his indifference to what she is going through: "Don't you care [you're not interested, it doesn't concern you] that my sister has left me alone to serve?" In short, she made him feel guilty. Having created her own slavery, she wanted to drag someone else into it. She asked the authority figure (in this case, Jesus) to reinforce her words and even reproached the authority figure for not doing his job as an authority figure: commanding more strongly than he did. Martha was overdoing it, and she wanted Mary to be caught up in her overdoing it.

The Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her." Jesus protects Mary from Martha. Or rather, he protects Mary from what governs Martha and is not her. Is that why he calls her twice? Martha, Martha... Far from wanting to subject Mary to her sister's self-enslavement, Jesus is more concerned with healing Martha. Jesus clearly means that Mary has chosen her part, which is not the case for Martha, who is undoubtedly possessed by a consuming obligation to be perfect.

Many people suffer from a persecuting superego resulting from a supposedly religious upbringing. Very often, this persecuting judge that has been instilled in them holds them to such an extent that they want it to extend its hold over others. And Martha wants to make Jesus this spiritual master, someone who will ensure that the world remains well subjugated to the constraint that governs her. She who obeys the superego feels unjustly abandoned ("my sister leaves me alone"). Jesus refuses to play this game.

Summary and translation by André Gilbert, January 2026