

10. October 2023

The primacy of contemplation

Lk 10:38-42

'In the course of their journey he came to a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking. Now Martha, who was distracted with all the serving, came to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me. 'But the Lord answered, 'Martha, Martha,' he said, 'you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her.'

The usual and correct interpretation of this text is that the contemplative dimension must have the first rank in our life, even above action. This is why contemplative communities - that is, those which devote themselves entirely to prayer and the path of inner transformation - have a special place in the Church.

In the upheavals of the French Revolution, for example, contemplative orders were no longer tolerated, and were required to convert their monasteries into active communities, to provide education, health care, etc., because the dimension of the interior life was not understood.

Indeed, when people turn away from God, they will oppose contemplation in the first place, for the fruits of such a path can only be recognised with the eyes of faith. Contemplation escapes the logic of natural life, so to speak. What St. Paul rightly said: *"The natural person has no room for the gifts of God's Spirit; to him they are folly; he cannot recognise them, because their value can be assessed only in the Spirit"* (1 Cor 2:14). And since he does not understand the things of God, his first attack will be directed against that which most glorifies God, which is precisely this way of life, totally focussed on the Lord, in which the intimacy of the loving relationship between God and man is reflected in a special way.

St. Martha also had to be corrected by the Lord in order to understand more deeply. Certainly she thought that Jesus would support her in asking for her sister's help. But, as on so many other occasions, the Lord gave a totally unexpected answer and broadened her horizon.

Mary, on the other hand, had a better understanding of what Jesus' presence meant. If the Lord is there, the first thing to do is to listen to Him and interiorise His words.

The contemplative life rests in the heart of the Father, and seeks to live in His love and to cultivate it. This is particularly true in prayer. In fact, God Himself wants to dwell in our hearts (cf. Jn 14:23), and it was easier for Jesus to communicate to a Mary, attentive to His words and sitting at His feet, than to a Martha, too busy with chores.

It is this receptive attitude that corresponds to the life of grace, for grace always precedes us and is offered to us. It is God who acts, moved by love; it is He who gives Himself to us, but He needs our receptive response. And then, having internalised God's Will, we will also know how to act correctly.

So we are called to be, first of all, receptive and listeners, so that, knowing God more deeply, we can act in His Spirit.

We never waste time when we dedicate it to God in the right way! The teachers of the spiritual life are right when they insist that every work done in conformity with the Will of God and in purity of heart has a supernatural character. These works surpass those that we do out of our own goodwill on a merely natural level!

This is the right order and balance: prayer first, then works! If we apply these words in the place where God has placed us, the fruits will be great and will enrich our lives.