

A Conscience Well-Formed or Informed?

Lawrence Klimecki, deacon

This is one of those Gospel readings that always left me with more questions than answers. Did Martha do something wrong? Why wasn't her sister helping her and why did Jesus take Mary's side?

Sometimes our translation of scripture works against our understanding and we have to do a little more research. So I looked at the word "better." In Greek the word is *agathos* and it means not only better, but also good, pleasant, enjoyable, happy, etc. It is also used to describe the feeling that is awakened by what is good, pleasant and enjoyable. And as used in scripture it frequently describes a peaceful or good conscience. So in this light we start to see something new in what Jesus is saying.

Martha is anxious over many things, worldly, practical things like feeding 15 people without a microwave, a refrigerator, or an electric cook top. We sometimes discount the role of the Marthas in our lives. Every time we come to Mass as "Mary," to listen to the Word of the Lord, we should remember all the Marthas that worked so hard to make our liturgies beautiful and reverent. Martha is doing all this work for Jesus and His apostles. That's a good thing, isn't it?

But Mary chooses the way that brings her peace and contentment. She sits at the feet of the Lord and listens to Him. Because of her love for Him Mary wants to hear all that He has to tell her. She loves the sound of His voice and hangs on every word. Doing things for Him can come

later but right here, right now, she takes advantage of the opportunity to listen to Him, and in so doing her conscience is being formed.

Martha and Mary appear only a few times in scripture but it is apparent in those few brief mentions that Jesus loved them both. He does not condemn Martha's actions but points out that Mary has made a better choice. He is glad to be served but the one thing that is truly necessary is to love Him and listen to Him. Everything else flows from this.

In the final judgment God will care less about how we served Him and more about why we served Him. Let us not get so caught up in how we serve the Lord that we forget why we are doing it.

Martha seems to have been thinking more of herself than of Jesus. If she had been trying to please Christ would she not have been happy to do the extra work so her sister could enjoy her conversation with the Lord? Instead Martha's concern is all about how Mary's actions are affecting her. When she complains Jesus takes the opportunity to remind her that wanting to be in control of everything can sometimes get in the way of what matters most; loving Him.

Keeping our relationship with God as our first priority allows us to live supernaturally. It gives God the room to do things that we could never do alone. Abraham and Sarah learned this.

Many scholars see Abraham's three visitors as a manifestation of the Holy Trinity. When they appear before him unexpectedly he dropped

everything, and changed his plans in order to honor the Lord, just as Mary put everything on hold in order to honor Christ. The result is that Sarah becomes pregnant even though she and Abraham are well past their childbearing years. God works a supernatural wonder in their lives.

Every saint is proof of this. Think of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. A little nun from Albania, tending the poor in Calcutta, and on February 3 1994, she was invited to give the keynote speech at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C. She explained the Gospel of life to some of the world's most powerful people, many of whom were pro-abortion. This is the kind of work that God can accomplish through us if we choose the better path of listening to Him.

We hear a lot about conscience these days. People use the phrase "following their informed conscience" to justify everything from murder to a complete break with Church teachings. Those who dissent from Catholic teaching seem to think the Church has given them license to do so by following their "informed conscience."

But the Church does not speak of an "informed conscience," it speaks of a "well formed conscience." What's the difference? My informed conscience allows me to look at a particular problem from all sides, gather the facts, weigh the pros and cons, and ultimately make a decision based on how the problem affects me and how I can control it, a decision that will make me feel better about myself.

But a “well formed conscience” a conscience of the “better part,” is one that is formed by listening to the teachings of the Lord, handed on to us through His Church. That is why the Church exists, to pass on to us the teachings of God. And so a “well formed conscience” is a conscience that humbly accepts the teachings of the Church as the teachings of God.

An informed conscience is all about myself; a well-formed conscience is all about my love for God. And they are incompatible with each other.

You cannot love the author of life, and decide that the killing of an unborn child is better for you. You cannot love the God who created man and woman to share in His sanctifying grace through the sacrament of Matrimony, and then feel that same sex marriage is a matter of fairness, or that sex outside of marriage is a matter of personal choice.

Everyday we are faced with the choice to be more like Martha or more like Mary. Do I make decisions based on my own needs or those of God? And God allows us the freedom to make that choice. We can freely choose the priorities of our lives. We can choose our destiny.

We can make our own achievements our highest priority, like Martha, or we can make knowing, loving, and imitating Christ our highest priority, like Mary. Christ offers the benefits of following Him to every person, but every person is free to accept or reject those benefits.

And the wonderful thing is that God does not make the offer one time only. He offers us His love continually. Do you think that after receiving a mild rebuke from Jesus, Martha adjusted her thinking and her

behavior for next time? It's a pretty safe bet that she did, because we know how deeply both sisters loved the Lord.

Every time we choose to give Christ and His will priority in our lives we allow His sanctifying, healing grace to work on us and transform us into something greater than we could be on our own.

The world is moving ever faster around us and we are all busy. But that is not a new problem. People in every culture in every age have been just as busy. Each of us needs to find time every day to listen to what God has to say to us. It may mean starting our day a few minutes early, listening to God in the quiet early hours of the morning before the work of the day consumes us. Or it may mean staying up just a few minutes later in the evening, thinking back on the moments of the day and listening to God speaking to us in our hearts.

When we do this, when we form our conscience by listening to the Lord, then we can act on what we have learned at the feet of Christ and live His words in our lives.

This means living by standards that are different from the world around us. It means being honest when everyone around us seems to cheat. It means speaking well of others when we are surrounded by gossip and criticism. It means governing our desires for pleasure when everyone else is just giving in. It means staying faithful to our duties and relationships, assisting those in need, giving our best at school, at work, and at home even when we are tired and cranky, even when no one notices what we do.

But above all it means doing those things because we love Christ and want to follow Him. It is the grace of His friendship that strengthens us to follow His instructions. It is the grace of His friendship that makes following them worthwhile. And it is the grace of His friendship that brings us peace in a world full of trouble and anxiety, a peace that brings us wisdom and joy, a peace that “will not be taken from us.”

So let us take the better part. When the Church teaches on matters of faith and morals, it is not a set of arbitrary rules, it is the voice of God speaking to us through His Church. Listen to Him.