

Sunday July 17, 2022
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Parishioner Reflection

By: Edmond Lo

The Give and Take of Hospitality

This Sunday's readings feature two stories of hospitality: Abraham and three mysterious guests from the Book of Genesis; the two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their guest, Jesus, from the Gospel of Luke. In both stories, the hosts are exceedingly generous in receiving their guests.

In the Genesis account, three mysterious men identified by the author as "the Lord" appear to Abraham as he sits in the entrance of his tent. He is very respectful and generous in receiving the three guests, bathing their feet, feeding them with freshly kneaded rolls and a choice steer, and waiting on them while they eat.

In the gospel account, Martha and Mary are just as affable and warm in receiving Jesus, the former working very hard to serve, the latter taking the time to listen attentively to every word her guest utters.

"The New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old revealed in the New", St. Augustine has taught famously. The Church has always followed the tradition of the apostles and the Church Fathers in seeing the Old Testament and New Testament books as closely intertwined. Both are divinely inspired and thus contain no errors. They represent the same word of God. This is why the lectionary readings usually include selected passages from both the Old and the New Testament books. They are put together, in other words, for a reason.

So, why does the Church choose to highlight these two different stories of hospitality from Genesis and Luke? It's not hard to identify many interesting themes in these two stories. For simplicity, in this reflection let's just focus on one that may not be noticeable to many people.

For our purposes, our interest is not so much the host characters' act of giving, generous as it is. Instead, we are more interested in what they receive because of what they give. In Abraham's case, if his generosity is excessive, what God eventually gives him must be

considered disproportionately lavish. Not only does God give Abraham, an elderly man, the promise of offspring, He will also “make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky...and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing” (Genesis 22:17-18).

Both Martha and Mary are also very cordial in receiving Jesus. Martha is actively serving, Mary attentively listening. The Lord’s commendation of Mary’s active reception of his word is understandable. After all, how can she resist the word of God which is “more desirable than gold...sweeter also than honey or drippings from the comb” (Psalm 19:11)? It “is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword...and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). How Jesus’ word might have enlightened Mary that day, Luke didn’t say. But conceivably, her choice to “[sit] beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak” could have been the most spiritually enriching experience of her life (Luke 10:39)!

Surprisingly, the most important aspect of hospitality is not what is given. Rather, it is what is received. As Jesus teaches, “Give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38). “For it is in giving that we receive” (Prayer of St. Francis