

The Flemish chronicle of that house is still in manuscript and preserves record of their entry as follow:—"On the 8th of December of the year 1572 we generously received into our community Dame Elizabeth Grassener, Joanna Zachville, Elizabeth Exmes and Jacquemine Cornelis, laysister. The first was prioress of certain monasteries of the order in England and with eight of her sisters was driven thence by the heretic Queen Elizabeth".

Further trials lay in store for the little company. Twice (in 1572 and 1578) they were driven inside the walls by Calvinists; and in 1580 the convent of Val des Anges was razed to the ground, after which the nuns existed on a small yearly pension, barely enough to sustain life.

Before this Elizabeth Cressner had died—on April the 27th, 1577. She was followed on May the 6th, 1581, by Joan Sackville, who is probably to be identified with the young postulant who joined the community during Queen Mary's reign, and had elected to follow their fortunes. Four years later, on the 6th of February, 1585, Sister Elizabeth Exmew died, fifty years after her brother's martyrdom, one of the very last survivors of those nuns who had been professed in the far off days of Henry the Eighth.

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## MARTHA AND MARY : THE TWO LIVES

By

SAINT AUGUSTINE.

(*De Martha et Maria significantibus duas vitas.* Tractatus inediti. XXIX. Ed. Dom Morin).

Translated by E. J. B. Fry.

1. When the holy Gospel was being read, we heard how the Lord was received by a good woman, named Martha, who was working busily to serve him, while her sister Mary sat at the Lord's feet, hearing his word. Martha worked, Mary sat at leisure; Martha spent herself, Mary received her fill. Yet Martha, working hard at her serving, appealed to the Lord, complaining that her sister gave her no help. But the Lord replied on Mary's behalf, and, although he was called upon as her judge, himself became her advocate. *Martha*, he said, *thou art busy about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part which shall not be taken away from her* (Luke X, 41, 42). We have heard both the appeal to the Judge and his verdict: that verdict both answered the plaintiff and upheld the defendant. For Mary was absorbed in the sweet savour of the Lord's words. Martha was intent upon how she should feed the Lord; Mary upon how the Lord would feed her. Martha was making ready for the Lord a feast which Mary was already enjoy-

ing. She was listening with delight, and receiving her fill with eagerly waiting heart. How much then must she have feared that the Lord might say to her at her sister's appeal: "Arise, help your sister"? For she was enthralled by a wonderful sweetness of the mind, far greater than that of the body. But she was defended, and sat at ease. Yet how was she defended? We will ponder it and turn it over in our minds as we may: we too shall receive our fill.

2. And how can we imagine that Martha was condemned for her hospitality—she who received the Lord himself with welcome? How can she be rebuked when she rejoices in such a Guest? If this be so, let men scorn what they minister to the needy; they choose for themselves the better part, which shall not be taken away from them. Let them busy themselves with the Word, be open-mouthed for the doctrine of sweetness, be occupied with the knowledge of salvation: let them care nothing who is a stranger in the place, who lacks bread or clothing, who should be visited, who should be set free, who buried; let the works of mercy cease, that one may seek knowledge alone. If it is the better part, why do we not all lay hold of it, since we have the Lord as an Advocate? We need not fear to offend his justice, when we have his express judgment as an advocate.

3. And yet it is not so: but as the Lord said, so it is. As you understand it, it is not true; but it *is* true in the way it was meant to be understood. Now consider. *Thou art busy about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part*: you have not chosen ill, but she has chosen better. Why better? Because you are busy about many things, she about one. One should be preferred to many: for one does not spring from many, but many from one. Many are the things which are made; one is he who makes them. Sky, earth, sea, and all things that are therein, how many they are! Who shall number them? Who shall conceive the multitude of them? Who made them all? *And God made all things, and behold, they were very good.* (*Gen.* 1, 31). Good indeed the things which he made: how much better he who made them? And so let us attend to our many employments. We must necessarily minister to bodily needs. Why is this? Because of the reality of hunger and thirst. We needs must have mercy on misery. You break bread for the hungry, because you found him hungry. Do away with hunger, if you can; for whom will you break your bread? Abolish journeying: to whom will you show hospitality? Do away with nakedness: for whom will you prepare clothing? Let there be no sickness: whom do you visit? Let there be no captivity: whom do you ransom? Let there be no strife: whom do you reconcile? Let there be no death: whom do you bury? In that future age there will be none of these ills: therefore none of that

ministry. And so Martha was well employed about the Lord's bodily—I do not know whether to say needs, or desire, or else needful desire? She was ministering to the mortal flesh. But who was in this mortal flesh? *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* (John, i, 1). That is what Mary heard. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.* (John, i, 14). That is he to whom Martha ministered. Therefore *Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her*; she has chosen that which shall last for ever: wherefore it shall not be taken away from her. She wished to be employed about one thing: she already possessed it, for *it is good for me to cleave to God.* (Ps. lxxii, 28). She sat at the feet of Christ our Head: the lower her place, the more fully she received. For the waters flow together into the depths of the gully; they run swiftly down from the heights of the hill. The Lord does not, therefore, condemn the work, but he makes a distinction in the reward. *Thou art busy*, he says, *about many things*: whereas *one thing is necessary*. Now that one thing Mary has chosen for herself: busy-ness about many things passes and the charity of oneness remains. Therefore what she has chosen shall not be taken from her; but what you have chosen—this follows necessarily, this is understood—what you have chosen shall be taken away from you. But it shall be taken away for your good and you shall be given what is better. Labour shall be taken away, that rest may be given. You are a ship at sea, she is already in harbour.

4. You see therefore, dearly beloved (and, as far as I can judge, you already in some measure understand) that by these two women, who were both pleasing to the Lord, both beloved, both disciples, the two lives are symbolised, present and future, laborious and restful, toilsome and blessed, temporal and eternal. Whoever understands this understands a great thing, and those also who do not understand, ought to hear and learn. These are the two lives which I have described as briefly as I could: now you yourselves must meditate upon them more fully. Look well into what is contained in this life—which I do not call evil, or unjust, or sinful, or luxurious, or undutiful; but laborious, full of toil, chastened by dread, made anxious by trials. As becomes Martha it is a blameless life—therefore look well into it, as far as you can and, as I said, meditate upon it more fully than we are able to do now. There was no really sinful life in that house, neither Martha's nor Mary's; and if it had once been there, it fled when the Lord entered. In that house which received the Lord there remained, therefore, in the two women two lives: both blameless, both praiseworthy: one laborious, the other leisured: neither sinful, neither slothful. Both blameless, both, I say, praiseworthy: but one laborious, the other leisured:

neither sinful, which is the danger of the laborious life: neither slothful, the tendency of the leisured life. In that house there were therefore those two lives and the very Fount of life himself. The image of present things was there in Martha, of things to come in Mary. We are now busy in Martha's employment; we hope for Mary's; let us do the one well that we may have the other fully. For in so far as we have anything of things to come while we are yet here, what have we? How much is it? For certainly we already do something that belongs to that world. When you had laid aside your business, and left your household cares, you came together, and now you are standing and listening: in doing this, you resemble Mary. And you can more easily do what Mary did, than I can do what Christ did. And yet if I say anything of Christ, I thereby feed you, because it *is* of Christ, because it *is* the common bread, whence I too live, if I live at all. But *now we live if you stand in the Lord*: (I. *Thess.* iii, 8) not in us, but in the Lord; for *neither he that planteth is anything, nor he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase.* (I. *Cor.* iii, 7).

5. And yet how much have you grasped and made your own of what you have heard and understood about that life, the model of which Mary has set forth—how much is it? Let the night of this world pass. *In the morning I will stand before Thee, and I will contemplate.* (*Ps.* v, 5). *To my hearing Thou shalt give joy and gladness, and the bones that have been humbled shall exalt.* (*Ps.* l, 10). The bones that have been humbled, as the members of one prostrate. Mary acted thus: she was humbled, and she received her fill. She was sitting: and yet what is this that I said: *In the morning I will stand and contemplate?* . . .

6. We shall lie down—I would not dare to say it, unless the Lord had promised: *He will make them lie down.* (*Luke* xiii, 37). Promising a great reward to his servants; *He will make them lie down*, he says, *and passing will minister unto them.* (*ibid.*). We are promised this life, for the Lord will make us lie down, and passing will minister unto us. He also said the same thing when he marvelled at the Centurion's faith and praised it: *Amen, I say unto you, that many shall come from the East and the West and shall lie down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.* (*Matt.* viii, 11). A glorious promise, a joyful reward. Let us act that we may merit, receive help so as to be worthy to come to that place where we shall lie down and the Lord shall minister to us. For what will lying down be but resting? And what will ministering be, but feeding? What is that food? What is that drink? Most certainly the very truth itself. That food refreshes and never fails: it feeds and makes whole in feeding. It is not consumed in him whom it feeds, but remaining whole, makes whole. Do you not believe that God

can so feed us, since in this way your eye is fed by the light? Your eye is fed by light. Many may use their eyes, it remains the same: few may use their eyes, it does not change; and those eyes are refreshed, and it is not diminished. The eye draws from it, it is not diminished; it drinks it in, it is not dried up. The light can do this for the eye, and can God not do it for transformed man? He can, clearly he can: why do you not grasp it? Because you are busy about many things: Martha's busy-ness has taken possession of you, or rather of us all. For who is free from this service of giving help? Who is relieved of this care? Let us do this blamelessly, let us do it in charity: it will also come about that we shall lie down and passing he will minister to us. For he would not then minister to us unless he had passed hence to the Father; for he was here when he made the promise. And so that we may not think that he will show us something extraordinary, it is clear that we shall look upon the form of a servant, for he says that *passing, he will minister unto them*. And about this passing: the Gospel says: *But when the hour was come that Jesus should pass from this world to the Father*. (John xiii, 1). *Have I been so long with you*, he says, *and you have not known me?* (John xiv, 9). If he understands what he hears, the man will reply: I have not known, because Thou hast not yet passed. For the same reason it was also said to Mary after the resurrection: *Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to the Father*. (John, xx, 17).

7. And so, dearly beloved, I beseech you, exhort, warn, instruct, beg you, together let us desire that life, together let us run while we reach after it, so that, by persevering in it, we may stand firm. That hour draws near, and without end that hour shall be, when the Lord will make us lie down and will minister to us. What will he minister, unless it be himself? What do you long to eat? You have the Lord himself. For what shall we be fed upon, but *in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God?* What is to lie down, but to rest? What is to be fed, but to be unutterably filled with delight in the contemplation of Him? *At thy right hand are delights*. (Ps. xv, 11). *One thing I have asked of the Lord, that will I seek after* (Ps. xxvi, 4); not many, about which I am busy: but *one thing I have asked of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord through all the days of my life, that I may contemplate the delights of the Lord*. (Ibid.). That is not the blessedness of those who toil. *Be at rest and see*: see what? *That I am the Lord*. (Ps. xlv, 11). A wonderful seeing, a joyful contemplation. For what else is *We lie down and eat*, other than *Be at rest and see*? Therefore let us not taste carnally, nor think in terms of banquets, if I may say so, of lust. These things will pass: they are to be borne, not to be loved.