

July 2010

Dear Friend of the Missions!

I hope that summer is shaping up to be a time of rest. There are some feasts in July worth remembering and using as days of prayer for special intentions. July 1st is the feast of Blessed Junipero Serra, a great day to pray for the missions. July 3rd is the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, a great day to pray for those who have doubts in faith. July 9 is the Feast of Our Lady of Peace and also the Martyrs of China. July 15th is the feast of St. Bonaventure, a good day to pray for the Franciscan family. On July 22, the Church remembers St. Mary Magdalene, one of the Lord's women disciples. July 26th is the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, the parents of Mary and the grandparents of Jesus. Please pray for all grandparents, living and deceased. There are also civil holidays that are important to observe: July 1st is Canada Day and July 4th is Independence Day. Pray for the people of Canada and the United States, that God may bless them and give them peace, prosperity and a spirit of generosity. Always be assured of our prayers for you, your loved ones and your intentions. There would be no missions, if it were not for all of you and people like you who believe in helping to share the gift of the Gospel. May God keep you in his love.

Thomas and Martha

Fr. Russell Becker, O.F.M.

The month of July has two feasts of people who are very interesting and who are often used as bad examples when we are discussing how we should be as disciples: July 3 is the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle and July 29 is the feast of St. Martha who in the Tradition is called one of the "equals of the apostles." For the most part, when we hear their names we think of Thomas's great doubting and Martha's being "busy about many things."

Another look at them will point out that there is a reason why these two are both saints.

Thomas. Tradition tells us that Thomas was the apostle who was sent to India. People argue about what that means. Is it the India we know or a general direction beyond Persia? The answer probably is not all that clear. The Church in India certainly claims Thomas as their founder, and even call themselves "Thomas Christians." There are also some secular affirmations of names that were used in the stories about Thomas, his travels and his martyrdom. His name basically means "twin." It is thought that he was martyred because of the success of his mission in India somewhere around the year AD 72. It is also a tradition that his relics were taken to Edessa in the third century.

In the Bible, there are a few references to Thomas. We usually remember the story of Thomas who doubted the resurrection when the disciples told him and wanted real proof: touching the very wounds and seeing the Lord face to face. The next Sunday (a week after Easter—the Tradition refers to this Sunday as *Thomas Sunday*) the Lord appeared and Thomas was there. Jesus gave him the opportunity to see and touch. Thomas seems to have been reduced to silence, except to exclaim those words of faith: *My Lord and my God!* [John 20, 24-29]. There are two other references to Thomas. In the account of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus had left the Judea because of the attempt to stone him. When he heard of the death of Lazarus, he decided to go to Bethany to be with Martha and Mary. The disciples tried to talk him out of it because of the danger, but Jesus was determined to go. It was Thomas who said to the others: *Let us go along, to die with him!* [John 11, 16]. At the Last Supper as Jesus was sharing with his disciples and encouraging them not to be afraid because they will go with him, Thomas says to Jesus: *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?* Jesus replies with a wonderful revelation of himself: *I am the way and the truth and the life.*

Thomas is more complicated than we usually think. The first encounter with Thomas is not with a doubter, but with someone of great courage. He understood what the dangers were and encouraged the others to follow Jesus anyway. It may take great courage to admit doubt, and doubt is not a bad thing as long as we do what Thomas did: ask questions and try to resolve the doubt. Jesus is a great teacher. For a great teacher there are no bad questions, only opportunities to teach. It was Thomas trying to find out what Jesus meant about following him that gave Jesus the opportunity to reveal himself as the true, life-giving way. And it was Thomas' need to know that gave Jesus the opportunity to make clearer to his disciples what the resurrection meant and still means to this very day.

You have to wonder why no one else asked any questions, when surely they did not understand everything that was happening. It takes courage to ask questions and to admit that we doubt or do not understand. It is not wrong to ask anyone WHY? Those who do not often find it hard to believe in difficult times. Doubt can nourish our faith, if we have the courage to acknowledge them and to ask questions. The resolution of our doubts and the answers to the questions we have the courage to ask can make it possible for us to come to exclaim deep faith, sure faith and strong faith, as did Thomas when his doubts passed away and he could exclaim: *My Lord and my God!*

The Tradition tells the story of Thomas being a great part of the understanding of the promise of Easter being fulfilled. As Mary was dying, she prayed that she would be able to see those apostles who

were still alive one more time. All of them were miraculously brought to her bedside and were with her when she died except Thomas, he was late. When he came, he was told that she had died, and he wanted to see her body. He went to the tomb. Here there are a couple of versions. In one, he found the tomb empty and realized that Mary had been assumed into heaven. In another, he went and saw Mary being raised up and she left him her sash. In both stories, he got to announce the fulfillment of Easter for Mary to the other disciples, who at first did not believe—a reversal of the story at Easter. And again, if Thomas had not asked to see the body. The others would not have believed.

Martha. Martha lived in Bethany and was the sister of Mary and Lazarus. Tradition speaks of her as being put into a boat without oars and rudder with Lazarus and her sister, Mary with many others after the ascension of the Lord. God directed the boat to the south of France where her brother became the bishop, her sister became a hermit and she lived with the people doing things for them. She is even celebrated as saving a town from a dragon.

In the Bible, we encounter Martha seeming to be scolded by the Lord: *Martha, you are anxious and upset about many things!* [Luke 10, 41]. The next time Martha appears is in the story of the death of Lazarus. When the Lord finally came, she ran out to meet him. He encouraged her to believe that he is the resurrection and the life. Jesus asks her if she believes this and she replies: Yes Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the son of God who is to come into the world! [John, 11, 27]. The last time she is mentioned is at the banquet that was given for the Lord in Bethany at which Martha's sister, Mary, anointed the feet of Jesus. The text says of Martha: *They gave him a banquet at which Martha served* [John 12, 2].

So Martha comes across as anxious and upset, too busy to be true and just as we might name people a Thomas because they doubt and ask questions, we call people a Martha if they seem to be doing too much. Would it be better to understand Martha as a great example of hospitality in welcoming the Lord to her house? Often when we come into someone else's house, we try to make them comfortable by saying that we do not need much and we are fine, though they continue to "fuss" out of kindness and graciousness. Then Martha becomes one of those remarkable people who show gospel hospitality and give us a model for welcoming. She recognized Jesus; do we, when someone comes to us? And Mary then comes across as a little less helpful than someone might be when welcoming a guest? Your response to Jesus is an act of faith comparable to the one that Peter gave at Caesarea-Philippi. That was not the response of someone who did not take time to pray and reflect on who Jesus was. She is a great model of service and of deep faith.

The Tradition honors Martha as being one of the women who went to the tomb on that first Easter morning. They were the ones who first heard of the Resurrection and were given the privilege of announcing the good news to the ones who were to announce the good news: the apostles. So she, the one whom many thought was just too busy, is among the great women who are known as "equals of the apostles."

Both Thomas and Martha are far more complicated and deeper than the usual oversimplifications that we apply to them. Great models of faith and courage, great models of action rooted in the gospel and great saints who give us hope that we too can be great disciples.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you have the courage to ask "Why?" when you do not understand?
2. Are you afraid to doubt? How do you resolve doubts? Do they bring you to a deeper understanding of God?
3. How gracious are you with guests?
4. Most of us are busy, do you still keep time to pray and reflect as it seems Martha did?
5. Have you had the courage to go the distance for the Lord as Thomas and Martha did?

Please remember the following missionary friars on their birthdays:

Fr. Thomas Kornacki, O.F.M. (Bolivia): July 12
Fr. Bede Fitzpatrick, O.F.M. (Japan): July 13
Fr. Anthony Wilson, O.F.M. (Peru): July 14
Fr. Carlos Sarmiento-Diaz, O.F.M. (Peru): July 25
Fr. William Keenan, O.F.M. (Bolivia): July 27
Fr. Christopher Dunn, O.F.M. (Peru): July 29

May God bless them with health, strength and happiness!

Remember our present and retired missionaries who are ill:

Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)
Fr. Ignatius McGeady, O.F.M. (Brazil)
Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)
Fr. Boniface Hanley, O.F.M. (Bolivia)
Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Southern US)
Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)
Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan)

May God's healing love care for them and give them peace.