

THE LIFE OF MARTHA OF BETHANY BY PSEUDO-MARCILIA

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[Editor's Note: While the biblical record of Martha of Bethany is relatively sparse, details of her legendary life are preserved in several Latin documents from the late 12th and 13th centuries. Of these the Life by Pseudo-Marcilia is the most interesting from a theological perspective, in particular in its comparison of Martha and the Christian Church.]

ELISABETH MOLTSMANN-WENDEL describes Martha of Bethany as one of “the three most important female figures in the New Testament,” placing her alongside Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene.¹ It is in recent years, however, that Martha has been “rediscovered” by theologians. Some writers have followed the lead of Raymond Brown, who identified Martha as an ordained officer in the Johannine church, as one of the first to confess faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and as a beloved disciple of Jesus, well-known and respected in the early Christian community.² Others, in particular Moltmann-Wendel and various women theologians influenced by her thought, have been drawn to the legendary Martha who subdued dragons.³ A few, such as Mary Rose D'Angelo, have offered speculations regarding Martha's role as a missionary in the early Church.⁴ Some, including a number of feminist and liberation theologians, have found in the story of Martha and Mary support for women's full partnership in the life of the Church.⁵ Nevertheless, Martha remains for the most part relatively unknown and unappreciated today.

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¹ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing With Milk and Honey: Perspectives on Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 57.

² “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” *TS* 36 (1975) 690–95.

³ See *The Women Around Jesus: Reflections on Authentic Personhood* (London: SCM, 1982) 15–48; *Humanity in God* (New York: Pilgrim, 1983) 17–34.

⁴ “Women Partners in the New Testament,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6 (1990) 77–81.

⁵ See Loveday Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha's Story,” in *Women in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. George J. Brooke (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1992) 167–86; Adele Reinhartz, “From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha,” in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991) 161–84; Dorothee Soelle, “Mary and Martha,”

Who was Martha of Bethany? Relatively little is known of her from the canonical Gospels, but her character attracted increasing interest on the part of writers after the 12th century. Her cult enjoyed great popularity in the later Middle Ages, especially in Southern France. Much of the literature which grew up around her during the medieval period was exegetical in nature, focussing on the contrast between Martha and her sister Mary, usually identified in the Christian West with Mary Magdalene. However, other sources, notably the four extant Latin "lives" of the saint and their numerous vernacular versions, present many "biological" details not found in the Gospels.

BACKGROUND OF THE MARTHA CULT

The name Martha occurs three times in the canonical Gospels; it is used of only one person, the sister of Mary and Lazarus. In Luke 10:38-42, Martha, in contrast to her sister, assumes the active role of hostess to Jesus and his companions. The Fourth Gospel notes that Martha and her siblings lived in the village of Bethany, and that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:1, 5). Martha plays a prominent role in the account of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:11-44). Some time later, when Jesus revisits his friends at Bethany, Martha once again serves the meal, while Mary anoints Jesus' feet with fragrant ointment and dries them with her hair (12:1-8). The anointing of Jesus is also described in Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9, but these Gospels indicate that it took place in the house of Simon the Leper. As a result some commentators have suggested that Martha, the hostess, was Simon's wife or widow.

Luke and John both portray Martha as practical, active, and outspoken. In Luke, she takes charge of the meal preparations, and berates her sister in front of the guests for failing to help. In John, Martha goes out to meet Jesus as he approaches the village and chides him for not coming sooner after he had heard that her brother was ill. She reminds Jesus that after four days in the grave her brother's body will have begun to decay. She engages in theological discussion with Jesus concerning the resurrection of the dead (John 11:21-27). Her confession of faith in Christ, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (11:27), is paralleled in the Gospels only by that of Peter in Matthew 16:16.

No further mention is made of Martha in the New Testament. However, extant gnostic and apocryphal texts suggest that the figure of Martha played an important role in religious life and thought in the early centuries of the Christian era. In his discussion of various gnostic sects in *Contra Celsum*, Origen notes that Celsus spoke of certain

groups which derived their name from Martha.⁶ The *First Apocalypse of James* in the Nag Hammadi Codex refers to Martha as one of those with special powers of perception,⁷ and she appears as an interpreter in one of the longest extant gnostic texts known as the *Pistis Sophia*.⁸ The second Greek version of the Gospel of Nicodemus specifically notes that "Martha, and Mary Magdalene, and Salome, and other virgins" accompanied the mother of Jesus at her vigil at the foot of the cross.⁹ Of special interest is a Coptic fragment, probably dating from the first half of the second century, which relates that Martha, not Mary Magdalene, was the first to tell the disciples of Jesus' Resurrection.¹⁰ Such texts provide interesting insights into the traditions of the early Christian Church and Martha's place within them, although the full extent of her influence is difficult to evaluate until further evidence comes to light.

It is difficult to trace with certainty the origins and development of the cult of St. Martha in the Christian West. For the most part, the writings of the earliest Church Fathers contain few references to her, but from the time of Origen Martha and her sister Mary play an increasingly prominent role in exegetical literature. Origen's homily on Luke 10:38–42¹¹ provides a model for later interpretations. Origen makes several comparisons between the two, but his identification of Martha and Mary as types of the active and contemplative lives was particularly influential.¹²

Brief notations in numerous medieval martyrologies suggest that from the late sixth century onwards a feast day of St. Martha was celebrated on January 19. Few details as to the nature or extent of such celebrations are known. The earliest official reference to a feast on this date dedicated to Mary and Martha appears in a manuscript of the martyrology of Jerome produced at Auxerre around 595. The designation is probably attributable to confusion on the part of a copyist

⁶ Origen, "Against Celsus" 5.62, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913) 570.

⁷ *The First Apocalypse of James*, ed. William R. Schoedel in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrot (Leiden: Brill, 1979) 99.

⁸ *Pistis Sophia*, ed. Carl Schmidt (Leiden: Brill, 1978) Bk. I, chap. 38 and 57, Bk. II, chap. 73 and 80, pp. 123–25; 223–25; 327–29; 353–55.

⁹ *The Apocryphal and Legendary Life of Christ*, ed. James de Quincey Donehoo (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903) 345; this Gospel is discussed in *New Testament Apocrypha* 1, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Edgar Hennecke (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 444–49, but the editors do not provide a text.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 1.189–227.

¹¹ See Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, tr. Joseph T. Lienhard, *The Fathers of the Church* 94 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996) 192–93.

¹² For a summary of the exegetical literature on Martha and Mary, see Aimé Solignac and Lin Donat, "Marthe et Marie," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1932) cols. 664–72; and Mary Elizabeth Mason, *Active Life and Contemplative Life: A Study of the Concepts from Plato to the Present* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1961).

between the names of the early Persian martyrs Marius and his wife Martha and those of Mary (Maria) and Martha of Bethany.¹³ Textual studies suggest that the Auxerre manuscript was widely copied; what was probably an inadvertent mistake was at least partially responsible for the late medieval spread of the cults of Martha and Mary Magdalene in the Christian West. The confusion regarding Martha's feast day is further compounded by the fact that certain martyrologies and early calendars also suggest that the saint and her brother Lazarus were honored on December 17. Opinion, however, is divided as to whether such references apply to anything more than local cults.

According to the modern church calendar, St. Martha's feast day is celebrated on July 29, the date of her death according to two of the major extant versions of her life, the *Vita Pseudo-Marcilia* and the *Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae*. The custom of commemorating her death on this date likely arose sometime between the mid-12th and mid-13th centuries. By the 12th century it was generally accepted that Lazarus and Mary Magdalene had travelled to Provence after the Ascension of Jesus. The inhabitants of Tarascon in Provence concluded that Martha probably accompanied her siblings, although no other town had laid claim to her relics. Tarascon already possessed a church dedicated to a St. Martha.¹⁴ In 1187 a search was undertaken, and the body of "Martha of Bethany" was discovered. It was after this time that Martha's cult began to flourish.

THE MEDIEVAL MARTHA LEGENDS

The details of the life of Martha are preserved in four major Latin documents dating from the late 12th and 13th centuries.¹⁵ The earliest is likely that which has come down to us under the title *Vita Auct. Pseudo-Marcilia, Interprete Pseudo-Syntyche*.¹⁶ This life was probably used not only by the compiler of the lengthy double life of Mary and Martha, *Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae et sororis eius Sanctae Marthae*,¹⁷ which may have been compiled at Clairvaux by a follower of St.

¹³ See Victor Saxer, *Le culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident des origines à la fin du Moyen-Age* (Paris: Clavreuil, 1959) 38-39.

¹⁴ References to a "terra sancte Marthe" or "sancta Martha" at Tarascon are found in charters dating from 964 and 967, and a bull of Pope Urban II dating from 1096 mentions a church of St. Martha; see H. Leclercq, "Lazare," in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie VIII/2*, ed. Fernand Cabrol (Paris: Létouzey, 1929) col. 2071.

¹⁵ For a translation of the Martha material in these four Latin documents, see Diane Elizabeth Peters, "The Early Latin Sources of the Legend of St. Martha: A Study and Translation with Critical Notes," M.A. diss., Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, 1990.

¹⁶ For the Latin text of the life of Martha by Pseudo-Marcilia, see Boninus Mombritus, *Sanctuarium seu vitae sanctorum*, ed. Duo Monachi Solesmenses, 2 vols. (rev. ed. Paris: Fontemoing, 1910; reprint Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1978) 2.231-40. All references to this *Life* will be to my unpublished translation mentioned in the previous note, cited as "Early Latin Sources."

¹⁷ For a recent published translation of the complete text of this work, see *The Life of*

Bernard,¹⁸ but also by the French Dominican Vincent of Beauvais in the Martha chapters of his *Speculum historiale*.¹⁹ The most concise medieval account of St. Martha's life, and the most influential, was that included by Jacobus de Voragine in his *Legenda aurea*.²⁰ Of the four texts, three appear to be closely related: the *Life by Pseudo-Marcilia*, as well as the lives compiled by Vincent of Beauvais and by Jacobus de Voragine. The *Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae* likely shared common sources but differs in a number of respects.

The basic outline of the Martha legend that appears in all four of the extant medieval documents is similar. All begin with an account of her family background and include to varying degrees references to her activities as recorded in the New Testament. Then all the texts, though differing in the amount of detail, describe the dispersion of the apostles after Jesus' Ascension, in particular the journey of Martha to Provence with her sister Mary, identified with Mary Magdalene, and other companions, their arrival at Marseille, and their work of conversion among the people of the region surrounding Aix en Provence.

Central to all versions of Martha's life is the account of her battle with the dragon of Tarascon. This huge beast, half animal and half fish, had long terrorized the countryside, devouring passersby and overturning ships. It is described as a descendant of the mighty Leviathan, mentioned in Job 40:23 and 41:1, and of an animal known as the bonasus.²¹ Since the natives of the region had been unable to subdue it, they called upon Martha for help. She encountered the dragon in the forest, confronted it with a cross and holy water, and subdued it. It was then slain by the people. Because the dragon was known as "Tirascurus," the name of the place was changed to Tirasconus or Tarascon.²²

Following her victory over the beast, Martha is said to have lived in

Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha: A Medieval Biography, trans. and annotated by David Mycoff (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1989).

¹⁸ Victor Saxer suggests that this work was compiled by Nicolas of Clairvaux, author of a poem on Mary Magdalene, although he admits authorship cannot be proven ("La vie de Sainte Marie Madeleine attribué au Pseudo-Raban Maur, oeuvre claravallienne du XIIe siècle," in *Mélanges Saint Bernard* [Dijon: Marilier, 1953] 408–21). Some earlier scholars attributed the work to Rabanus Maurus, based on the evidence of a single late manuscript (Oxford, Magdalen College, MS89, ca. 1408) in which Rabanus is named as the author.

¹⁹ *Speculum historiale* (Vienna: H. Liechtenstein, 1494); Martha material is found in chapters 92, 94, 99–101 and 104–7. There is no published English translation of this work.

²⁰ *Legenda aurea*, ed. T. Graesse, 3rd ed. (Dresden, 1890; reprinted Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965); *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno, 1969); for a more recent scholarly version, see *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993).

²¹ Pliny described this remarkable animal in his *Natural History* 8.15.40. It was a bull-like creature, noted for its ability to produce massive quantities of dung so pungent that it scorched pursuers like fire.

²² Even today a festival honouring the victory over the dragon, featuring a large

austerity at Tarascon. She was joined by a group of disciples who formed a religious community around her. Martha performed many miracles, including raising to life a young man who had drowned, and changing water into wine at a banquet held to celebrate the dedication of her home as a basilica.

Martha was forewarned of her death one year in advance, and from that time onwards she suffered from fevers. On the eighth day before her death, she had a vision of angelic choirs bearing the soul of her sister Mary Magdalene to heaven. Knowing then that her own death was imminent, she encouraged and instructed her companions. In the middle of the night before the day of her death, those keeping watch fell into a deep sleep. A sudden violent gust of wind extinguished the lamps and a crowd of evil spirits gathered around Martha. The watchers awoke and rushed out to find a flame to rekindle the lamps. During their absence Mary Magdalene appeared and relit the candles and lamps with her own torch. Christ himself then entered into Martha's presence.

On the day of her death, Martha was carried outside and placed on a bed of ashes. She asked that the account of the Lord's Passion be read to her, and at the words "Father, into your hand I commend my spirit," she died. Her funeral was conducted by Christ and Bishop Fronto of Périgueux who was miraculously transported to Tarascon when he fell asleep during a mass at his own church.²³ This reference to the miraculous appearance of a saint at her funeral may have been grafted onto the Martha legend as a result of confusion between St. Martha and the fourth-century St. Martin of Tours. The account of the latter's funeral, as recorded by Gregory of Tours in the first book of the *Miracles of St. Martin*, is very similar to that of Martha, with St. Ambrose of Milan officiating rather than St. Fronto.²⁴ After Martha's burial, numerous miracles took place at her tomb, including the healing of Clovis, king of the Franks. Again, the Martha/Clovis connection may have resulted from confusion between Martha and Martin. The latter was adopted by the Merovingians as their patron saint following Clovis's conquest of Aquitaine in 507. Gregory of Tours states that it was Martin to whom Clovis paid allegiance.²⁵

THE LIFE BY PSEUDO-MARCILIA

The earliest of the extant Martha legends, as we have already noted, is likely to be the *Vita Pseudo-Marcilia*.

mechanical reproduction of the beast, is observed annually in Tarascon; see Louis Dumont, *La Tarasque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) for an ethnographic study of the ritual.

²³ There are many chronological anachronisms in the Martha texts, including the reference to St. Fronto, a fourth-century bishop of Périgueux.

²⁴ See Gregory of Tours, *Selections from the Minor Works*, tr. William C. McDermott (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1949) 36-37.

²⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, tr. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1974) 151-52, 154.

The *Biblioteca Hagiographica Latina*²⁶ lists two major sources of that life: the *Catalogus codicum latinorum Bibliothecae Mediceae Laurentianae*, published in Florence by A. M. Bandini in 1774, which in turn was derived from the *Sanctuarium* of Boninus Mombritius, a collection of saints' legends compiled in the 1470s. Mombritius was an Italian humanist, born in Milan around 1424 and known to have died sometime before 1502. His *Sanctuarium seu vitae sanctorum*, produced in two volumes and setting forth the lives of 334 saints, was dedicated to Francis Simoneta (d. 1480), secretary to the Duke of Milan.²⁷ Mombritius was known to be a careful scholar who preferred to produce texts as he found them rather than adding personal embellishments and alterations. Gerhard Eis names the *Magnum Legendarium Austriacum* as the most likely source for many of Mombritius's texts, including the Martha legend.²⁸ A number of manuscripts of this 12th-century collection of saints' lives are extant,²⁹ but the ultimate origins of these texts remain obscure.

In the version of the legend which has come down to us in the *BHL*, authorship is attributed in the text to Martha's maidservant Marcilia (Marcella), who composed it in Hebrew. Later it is said to have been translated into Latin by Syntyche (Sinticus or Syntex). According to Provençal legends of the saints from Bethany, Marcilia (Marcella, Martilla) was the woman who cried out to Jesus from the crowd, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you" (Luke 11:27). From the 12th century, St. Marcella's tomb was among those venerated in the basilica of the town of Saint Maximin in Provence. The name Syntyche (Sinticus or Syntex) appears in the New Testament in Philippians 4:2, where Paul admonishes Syntyche and Euodia to resolve their differences.

The Pseudo-Marcilia text consists of thirteen chapters, which follow the general outline of Martha's life presented above. The introduction provides background on the saint's family and her character, and notes that Jesus was often received into her home. Chapter 2 describes and comments upon the scene in Luke 10:38–42. Chapter 3 is derived from the biblical account of the raising of Lazarus in John 11. The remaining chapters describe Martha's life after the Ascension of Christ. Chapter 4 includes some material drawn from the Book of Acts, namely the facts that the believers had all things in common (4:2), and that as a result of the persecution of the Christian believers by the Jews, the apostle James was killed and Peter and others were taken into custody

²⁶ *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiquae et Mediae Aetatis* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1898–99) nos. 5545–47.

²⁷ A Latin edition of the *Sanctuarium* was published in Paris by the monks of the Abbey of Solesmes in 1910 (see n. 16 above).

²⁸ Gerhard Eis, *Die Quellen für das Sanctuarium des Mailänder Humanisten Boninus Mombritius* (Berlin, 1933; reprinted Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1967).

²⁹ For list of manuscript locations, see Eis, *Die Quellen* 7; for description of contents of variant manuscript versions of the Martha legend, see *ibid.* 84–86.

(12:1–3). However, the chapter moves quickly away from the biblical sources and discusses the division of the land of Gaul among the various bishops who were exiled there. Chapter 5 describes the arrival of Martha, Mary Magdalene, and St. Maximinus in Marseille and their success in evangelizing the region. To this point, only material common to both the Martha and Mary Magdalene legends is considered, but the remainder of the work is concerned specifically with the life of Martha.

Chapter 6 describes the miracle of the conquering of the dragon of Tarascon. Chapter 7 reveals how Martha decided subsequently to remain in Tarascon, and highlights the austerity of her life there. Chapter 8 describes another of the saint's miracles, the raising of the young man who drowns while attempting to swim across the Rhône to hear her preaching. The chapter concludes with an account of the visits of Bishops Maximinus of Aix, Trophimus of Arles, and Eutropius of Orange, who consecrated Martha's church. At the banquet which followed, another miracle occurred: water was turned into wine. Before the bishops left, Maximinus informed Martha that her sister Mary would visit her. A short time later, during a time of persecution, two other bishops, St. Fronto of Périgueux and St. Georgius of Velay, sought refuge with Martha. Before they returned to their own homes, Martha asked St. Fronto to return to bury her. Chapters 9 and 10 discuss Martha's death and the events leading up to it. Chapter 11 describes her funeral, conducted by the Lord and Bishop Fronto. Chapters 12 and 13 discuss some of the miracles which took place at the tomb of Martha, including the healing of Clovis. The legend concludes with a discussion of the fates of Martha's close companions at Tarascon.

In addition to this common form of the legend, Mombritius records an alternative ending (*BHL* no. 5547), which contains material not found in other versions. It begins with a description of the bishops who came to Tarascon and dedicated Martha's church. At the banquet following, water was transformed into wine. Through St. Maximin, Mary Magdalene conveyed a message to Martha, promising that she would visit her. Next comes a garbled passage in which a number of bishops, along with many others, are described as having come together near the city of Arles in the cemetery of a church built by the bishop of Arles, St. Trophimus. The Savior appeared and instructed them. After his departure, the disciples present built an altar in the place where the Lord had stood. Subsequently Trophimus was buried there. The source and meaning of this variant legend are uncertain.³⁰

Each of the four extant versions of the Martha legend has its unique character. The shortest of the four, the *Legenda aurea*, was written for inclusion in a collection of saints' lives probably designed for popular distribution. It provides only a brief summary of the basic "facts" of Martha's life. The Martha chapters of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum*

³⁰ *Ibid.* 85.

historiale include some additional commentary, but again are essentially “factual” descriptions of the saints’ background and activities. These are interspersed in the text among chapters describing the lives of other saints, in particular Mary Magdalene. The lengthy *Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae et sororis eius Sanctae Marthae* is in many respects a “story-tellers” version which reflects the author’s concern with embellishing the basic outlines of the legends of the saints from Bethany with additional narrative detail.

The *Life* by Pseudo-Marcilia is the most interesting from a theological perspective. The author is concerned not only with preserving the “biographical” details of Martha’s life but with commenting upon her significance. From its opening statement, it is clear that the writer views Martha as a person of symbolic importance, despite a disclaimer that this is not the author’s primary concern. Within the text, Martha is interpreted in both the traditional way, as a symbol of the active Christian life, and, more uncommonly, as a symbol of the Christian Church itself.

Martha as Symbol of the Active Life

As noted earlier, Origen’s homily on Luke 10:38–42 was particularly influential in establishing the view of Martha and Mary of Bethany as symbolic of action and of contemplation. In Origen’s view, neither action nor contemplation could exist without the other. Martha received the Word through her physical act of service; Mary received him spiritually through her attentiveness to his teachings.

In their further reflections on this theme, some later commentators were led to conclude that Martha’s response to God’s Word was inferior to that of her sister. This was especially true of those writers influenced by Eastern monastic traditions, such as John Cassian (ca. 365–435). Such an attitude is also present in the writings of Augustine, who suggested that the form of service which Martha offered was necessary in this world, but would be superceded in the world to come by the life of contemplation, anticipated by Mary. The “lives” represented by the two sisters from Bethany, the active and the contemplative, represented different stages of Christian growth.³¹

These two broad avenues of interpretation—according to which the sisters from Bethany are seen as representative of either (1) alternative responses to God’s Word, with Martha’s role portrayed as the inferior one, or (2) progressive levels of spiritual development, with Martha’s role considered inferior but necessary—dominated exegetical thought on the Mary-Martha passage during most of the later Middle Ages.³² However, there were dissenting voices which described Martha

³¹ See Augustine, *Sermons* 54–55; Eng. transl. Philip Schaff, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 6 (New York: Scribner’s, 1908) 427–30.

³² For a more complete summary of the exegetical literature on Mary and Martha, see

in more positive terms, and an increasing number of writers came to see the two forms of life as complementary.

In his treatise on the Gospel of Luke, Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–397) distinguished between *intentio visionis*, the quality of seeing or focusing attention upon something, and *actio*. He noted that the two did not occur simultaneously but that they were intimately linked.³³ The one inevitably led to the other: if Martha had not first heard the Word, she would not have been spurred to service.

In some of his writings, Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) described the contemplative life as greater in merit than the active, but elsewhere noted that the most desirable state was, in fact, the union of the two lives. For this Christ himself provided the model.

For when he wrought miracles in the city, yet continued all night in prayer on the mountain, he gave his faithful ones an example not to neglect, through love of contemplation, the care of their neighbors; nor again to abandon contemplative pursuits through being too immoderately engaged in the care of their neighbors; but so to keep it together in the mind, in applying it to the two cases, that the love of their neighbor might not interfere with the love of God, nor again the love of God cast out, because it transcends, the love of their neighbor.³⁴

In an ideal world the “two lives” would exist simultaneously in those striving for perfection.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) expressed a somewhat similar sentiment but put forward the Virgin Mary as the ideal. The feast of Mary’s Assumption on August 15 had been celebrated as early as the ninth century, and by the eleventh Luke 10:38–42 had been established as the gospel lesson for the day.³⁵ Bernard’s sermon for this feast day likened the village of Bethany to the world and the sisters’ house to Mary’s womb. Both sisters dwelled there: Martha, the elder, had the privilege of receiving the Savior on earth in her womb; Mary, the younger, prepared herself to receive the heavenly Christ. “Martha decorates the house; Mary fills it. The busyness (*negotium*) of Martha and the ‘not idle leisure’ (*non otiosum otium*) of Mary are both united in the Blessed Mother Mary. The ‘best part’ belongs to her, who is simultaneously a mother and a virgin.”³⁶

Aimé Solignac, “Marthe et Marie,” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* 10 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1932) cols. 664–72; Charles Baumgartner, “Contemplation,” *ibid.* 2/2 cols. 1643–2193.

³³ Ambrose, *Traité sur l’Evangile de s. Luc* 1.8, trans. Gabriel Tissot, *Sources chrétiennes* 45 (Paris: Cerf, 1971) 50–51.

³⁴ Gregory, *Moralia* 28.33, J. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* 76.467; English translation from Mary Elizabeth Mason, *Active Life and Contemplative Life* 66.

³⁵ See Martina Wehrli-Johns, “Maria und Martha in der religiösen Frauenbewegung,” in *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter*, ed. Kurt Ruh (Stuttgart: Metzlersche, 1986) 355, 363.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 355; cited in Blake R. Heffner, “Meister Eckhart and a Millennium with Mary and Martha,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 5 (Summer 1991) 175.

A useful summary of the intimate relationship between contemplation and action is given by Thomas Aquinas.³⁷ Thomas notes that there are many arguments to support the position that the contemplative life is superior to the active, but that “in some circumstances and in some particular respect the active life has to be given preference because of the needs of this present life.”³⁸ Also, “the practice of the active life is beneficial for the contemplative life in that it calms our inner passions, which are the source of the images which interfere with contemplation.”³⁹ In a later section of his treatise, dealing with religious orders, Aquinas argues strongly in favor of the kind of work “which flows from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching . . . this is better than mere contemplation. It is a greater thing to give light than simply to have light, and in the same way it is a greater thing to pass on to others what you have contemplated than just to contemplate”; those who engage in such activity have indeed chosen the “best part,” followed in second place by those who engage in pure contemplation and finally by those who are merely “busy about external activities.”⁴⁰

The author of the *Life* by Pseudo-Marcilia makes reference to the traditional association of Martha with the active life at several points in the text. The first appears in the context of the description of the meal at Bethany:

Each of the two sisters, namely Martha and Mary, chose to perform her own ministry, which pleased God greatly. Mary, sitting before the feet of the Lord, heard the words of His mouth, as if feasting on that which she preferred to eat. But Martha occupied herself greatly with the preparation of the feast, and because she received so distinguished a Guest in her home, she was eager to serve with the greatest of care; cleaning the house, setting the table, preparing the food. But it did not seem to her enough: it seemed that all the household was unable to give sufficient service and that her sister should come to help her with the preparations. She wished that all her household would prepare the feast. Therefore she stood before the Lord astonished, and complaining about this thing, she said: “Lord, do you not care that my sister leaves me to serve alone? Tell her to help me.” But He who is not a respecter of persons loved the different forms of service which were offered to Him: He received and praised the service of the one but did not condemn that of the other: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. On the other hand, one thing is needful. Mary has chosen for herself the better part, that is the spiritual life, which will not be taken away from her. She will reap eternal life. Together your service which you choose completes and makes well. She strives for the health of the soul, you, in truth, work for the health of the body. Complete what you have begun, and you will do well. The promise of a crown awaits those who

³⁷ *Summa theologiae* 2–2, qq. 179–82; English translation from *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings*, trans. Simon Tugwell, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1988) 534–85.

³⁸ *Ibid.* q. 182, a. 1, resp.; Tugwell 577.

³⁹ *Ibid.* a. 4; Tugwell 582.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* q. 188, a. 6, resp.; Tugwell 629–30.

persevere in good works, and their praises will be sung at the end." This is clear: the active life which Martha symbolizes in the holy Church is not at all able to continue as active or to please the highest King without the contemplative life which Mary signifies. Wherefore the merciful Guest conceded to each of these holy women her office and choice.⁴¹

In this passage the emphasis is clearly on the complementarity of the two forms of life represented by the sisters from Bethany. The same is true of a later passage, near the end of the section describing the raising of Lazarus:

The pious women Mary and Martha, representing the contemplative and the active lives, rejoiced in the favour of the Saviour, and He equipped them and showed their successors in the Christian churches how to live uprightly. In these two lives all the doctrines of the laws of all the religions of the Old and New Testaments have their meaning and are fulfilled. By which all the saints and elect of God come and will come to the highest kingdom by loving their neighbours as themselves. Let us persist in the active life with Martha by fulfilling in all necessary ways whatever is required in it. By loving God over all and disregarding earthly love, and looking towards the heavens, let us rejoice in the contemplative life with Mary.⁴²

Finally, the association of Martha with the active life appears again in the closing lines of the text: "Thus Martha, the hostess of Christ, is a form of the active life in the present and for the future, for she will receive the needy who come to her home in the kingdom of heaven, as it was said to her by the Lord."⁴³ These passages are clearly inspired by the traditional view of Martha and Mary as counterparts: the two together, representing the life of action and the life of contemplation, combine to form a perfect role model for the Christian disciple.

Nevertheless, if one moves beyond the pericope in Luke 10 from which this dualistic notion is derived and examines the medieval images and legends surrounding the sisters from Bethany, it is evident that during the later Middle Ages, Martha alone was considered to have embodied both characteristics. The legendary Martha is not concerned solely with activity, despite her prodigious efforts to convert unbelievers, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and perform miracles. The austerity of her existence at Tarascon reflects the life of a penitent, despite the fact that no sin is ever attributed to her. Prayer and meditation play a vital role in her life. In many respects Martha emerges as a much more rounded figure than her sister, the legendary Mary Magdalene, who spends most of her latter years in mystical ecstasy in the wilderness of Ste-Baume. In texts such as Pseudo-Marcilia's *Life*, Martha stands on her own as an exemplum for believers.

⁴¹ "Early Latin Sources" 78–79.

⁴² *Ibid.* 83–84.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 103.

Martha as Symbol of the Church

It is easy to see how the legendary Martha, an amalgam of the active worker and the pious follower of Christ, could be considered a symbol of the Christian Church. However, this image features prominently in the *Life* by Pseudo-Marcilia. This text begins with the comment: "St. Martha, the follower of Christ, is considered a type of the holy Church because of her piety, and her life would require a great volume for the understanding of its mystical sense. Therefore we will write briefly of the declarations of the Gospel regarding her distinguished life, forgoing discussion of her as reflecting types."⁴⁴ The author goes on to point out that this image of Martha as a type will not be developed "in order that an extended account of her life will not be distasteful to readers or onerous to the memory of hearers, but that it may be an exemplum for pious imitation for the minds of the faithful."⁴⁵ Nevertheless this notion of Martha as a type of the Church reappears at several points in subsequent sections of the text.

The association of Martha and the Church is not common, although it is possible that it did not originate with the Pseudo-Marcilia author. In the later fourth century Ambrose of Milan wrote of a woman who symbolized the Church.⁴⁶ This woman was the one described in Mark 5:25–34, who touched the hem of Jesus' garment and who was immediately healed of a hemorrhage which had been ongoing for twelve years. In another sermon attributed to Ambrose, Christ's benevolence towards the family at Bethany is noted as follows: "Christ dried up a copious flow of blood in Martha, expelled demons from Mary and reunited the body and life spirit in Lazarus."⁴⁷ By the later Middle Ages the identification of Martha of Bethany and the woman with the flow of blood was firmly established. It was included, along with the attribution to Ambrose, in some later medieval "lives" of the saint, most notably the *Golden Legend*:

Eusebius, in the fifth book of the *Ecclesiastical History*, refers to a woman with a hemorrhage, who, after she was healed, made a statue in the image of Christ with a fringed garment, as she had seen Him, in her courtyard or garden. And it was greatly revered. The herbs growing up around the statue, which had previously had no power, were of such potency when they touched the fringe of the garment that they subsequently cured many illnesses. Ambrose said that this woman with a hemorrhage whom the Lord healed was Martha. Jerome relates, and it is also found in the *Tripartite History*, that afterwards Julian the Apostate took away the statue which the woman with a hemorrhage had

⁴⁴ Ibid. 75.⁴⁵ Ibid.⁴⁶ Ambrose, *La Pénitence* 1.7.31, trans. Roger Gryson, Sources chrétiennes 179 (Paris: Cerf, 1971) 81.⁴⁷ Ambrose, Sermon 16 (De Salomone), in *Sermones S. Ambrosio hactenus ascripti*, J. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina 17, col. 698; my translation.

made and put in place one of himself, which was destroyed by a bolt of lightning.⁴⁸

If Jacobus de Voragine's sources are examined in more depth, his assumptions do not stand up to close scrutiny. In his early fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* 7.18, Eusebius does discuss a statue of the woman with the hemorrhage which was found at Caesarea Philippi, but makes no mention of a commonly held belief that she was identified with Martha, nor do the references to the statue in Jerome or the *Tripartite History*. It is likely that the association was of late derivation, and consequently, so is the sermon attributed to Ambrose. Of possible relevance to their dating are legends surrounding a tenth-century St. Martha, an abbess of Mombasia in Laconia, which note that this St. Martha was miraculously cured of a debilitating hemorrhage after a vision of St. John the Evangelist.⁴⁹ It is conceivable that "Ambrose's" description of "Martha of Bethany's" healing was derived from the story of this other St. Martha. Nevertheless, Pseudo-Marcilia is likely to have been aware of the by-then traditional association of Martha and the woman with the hemorrhage, despite its probable inauthenticity.

Martha and the Old Testament Progenitors of the Church

In explaining the typology of Martha as the Church, Pseudo-Marcilia compares Martha to a number of Old Testament figures who are also seen as types of the Church, in that their lives and actions foreshadow pivotal people and events in the New Testament. "It is noted that Martha's hospitality is not destined to be forgotten. For just as Abraham and Lot and Joshua and many others had pleased God and likewise welcomed angels as guests, so was the diligent and most pious hostess attentive to all."⁵⁰ The reference to Abraham recalls Genesis 18:1-19, where the Lord, in the form of three men (or angels), appears to Abraham as he sits at the door of his tent by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham offers his visitors food and drink and washes their feet. In return, they offer him two promises: that he would be the father of a great nation, and that the Lord would not destroy the city of Sodom if only ten righteous people could be found there.

Genesis 19:1-29 records that Lot welcomed two angels into his home in Sodom and provided them with lodging, even offering his daughters as substitutes to a group of Sodomites who wished to rape the visitors; as a result of his actions, he was saved when the city was consumed. Pseudo-Marcilia's reference to Joshua is less straightforward, but is

⁴⁸ *Legenda aurea*, in "Early Latin Sources" 174-75.

⁴⁹ See Judith Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, ed. (London: Croom Helm, 1983) 180-81.

⁵⁰ Pseudo-Marcilia, in "Early Latin Sources" 77.

probably intended to recall Joshua's reverence towards the holy visitor who confronts him in Joshua 5:13–15.

Abraham's hospitality, and its similarity to that of Martha, is mentioned again at several points. Later in the same section of the *Life* as that cited above, it is coupled with an allusion to Job 8:7–9: "One greater than he whom Abraham received as a guest, namely God and man; this great King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who alone encloses all in the palm of his hand; whom Job described as higher than the sky, broader than the greatest land, deeper than the sea; whom many prophets and kings wished to see and did not see, to hear and did not hear: she [Martha] received and fed this Guest."⁵¹

In the section of the *Life* describing the raising of Lazarus, Martha is compared to various figures from the Old and New Testaments, including, once again, Abraham and Job. While Abraham "welcomed three angels as guests, because of faith in the Holy Trinity," Martha "received into her home this God, three in one, and what is more, God and Man."⁵² In this passage, she is said to be comparable to Job on the basis of her confession of faith. In Job 19:25–26, "the blessed Job . . . said, 'I believe that my Savior will rise up on earth on the last day, and even though my skin be destroyed, in my flesh I will see God,' and Martha, believing in the future resurrection, said, 'I know that my brother will rise in the resurrection on the last day.'"

A final parallel between Abraham and Martha is drawn in the section "How His Own Were Sent Away." Martha and her companions were not destined to have an inheritance in the city of Jerusalem, but in a better place; the same was true for Abraham, who was told in Genesis 12:1–2: "Leave your land and your family and come into the land which I will show you, and I will make you grow into a great nation."⁵³ Here it is emphasized once again that Martha has much in common with the first of the renowned Hebrew patriarchs of the Old Testament.

In line with the medieval practice of interpreting Scripture in an allegorical or typological manner,⁵⁴ the angels who met Abraham were understood as a symbol of the Trinity, and their prophecy was considered a prefiguration of the Annunciation. In both the Old and New Testaments Abraham is presented as the prototype of the faithful believer, the elect of God.⁵⁵ The story of the destruction of Sodom was seen as an Old Testament type of the damnation of the wicked at the Last Judgment. In addition, the New Testament describes Lot as the

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 78.

⁵² *Ibid.* 82.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 86.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the way in which the Bible was interpreted typologically in the medieval period, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

⁵⁵ See Romans 4:13–25; Galatians 3:6–9.

righteous one rescued by God from the midst of sin and idolatry.⁵⁶ Joshua, whose name is a variant of "Jesus," was considered one of many Old Testament prefigurations of Christ. As a faithful leader who brings his people to the promised land and exhorts them to serve God alone, Joshua provides a further prototype of the role of the Church. Likewise, from the early Christian period, Job was seen as both a type of the suffering Christ and a model of faith.

Martha and Peter

The similarities between the confessions of faith made by Martha and Peter have already been noted. The author of the *Life* also draws several parallels between the two figures. In the introductory section, it is noted that both Peter and Martha were chosen to receive special attention from Jesus: "She [Martha] began to love the Lord, and she received him. And he who loves all, and who singled out St. Peter from all of us asking, 'Peter, do you love me?' [John 21:15-19], he loved her so much that he preferred her home to any other lodging."⁵⁷ Peter's name also appears in the section "How Lazarus Was Raised by Her Prayers," where their confessions of faith are said to be comparable. Elsewhere, there are references to Peter's arrest during the persecution of the Jews following Christ's Ascension, and to the fact that he had personally ordained St. Fronto of Périgueux, the bishop who played a prominent role in the account of Martha's burial.⁵⁸

In ecclesiastical tradition, St. Peter is considered to be the rock upon which the Church was built. In Matthew 16:18 he is specifically described by Christ as the rock on which the Church would be built. In artistic portrayals Peter's special attribute is a key or keys. These reflect Christ's commendation in Matthew 16:19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be

⁵⁶ 1 Peter 2:6-10.

⁵⁷ Pseudo-Marcilia, in "Early Latin Sources" 77.

⁵⁸ M. Coens notes that the earliest extant manuscripts of a life of St. Fronto date from the beginning of the ninth century, although a seventh-century *Life* of St. Géry indicates that the tomb of a St. Fronto was venerated at Périgueux at that time (see Coen's edition and commentary upon *La vie ancienne de S. Front de Périgueux*, in *Analecta Bolanndiana* 48 [1930] 324-60, at 326, 322). According to tradition, St. Fronto was one of the 72 apostles appointed by the Lord (Luke 10:1, 17). Later he was designated by St. Peter as an apostle to Gaul, where he journeyed in the company of St. Georgius of Velay. The latter died during the voyage, but was raised when Fronto touched him with the staff given to him by St. Peter (*ibid.* 324). References to St. Fronto as a missionary to Gaul also appear in such early martyrologies as those of Ado of Vienne, Usuard, and Notker (Faillon, *Monument inédits* 2, col. 391). St. Fronto's life abounds with inconsistencies and absurdities, e.g. an account of the saint's rescue from starvation in the wilderness near Périgueux by the arrival of 70 unattended camels loaded with food (see Coens 329-30). Some incidents of the legendary life of Fronto of Périgueux are likely to have been derived from that of a similarly named saint, Fronto of Nitrie, who probably lived in Cappadocia in the mid-fourth century (see Faillon 2, col. 389; Duchesne, *Fastes épiscopaux de l'ancienne Gaule* [Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1900-15] 130-34).

bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It is interesting to note that the same artistic attribute is also sometimes used to identify Martha.⁵⁹ According to traditional interpretations, the key is linked with Martha's "domestic" role: she is the mistress of the household, the chatelaine. There may also be a possible link between the key and the dragon imagery, since in Revelation 20: 1-2 an angel holding "the key to the bottomless pit" seizes "the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan" and binds him for a thousand years. The key imagery provides another way in which the figures of Peter and Martha are linked, and lends further support to the notion that in the later medieval period both were considered symbols of the Church.⁶⁰

Martha and the Virgin Mary/Eve/Woman of Revelation 12

In Christian art, dragon imagery is associated not only with Martha, but also with the Virgin Mary. In the later Middle Ages, the latter was commonly considered a personification of Ecclesia, the Church.⁶¹ This type of imagery came to be applied to the Virgin as a result of exegesis which associated her both with Eve and with the Woman Clothed in the Sun in Revelation 12. Since the time of the early Church Fathers, the curse of the serpent in the Garden of Eden after the fall of Adam⁶² has been interpreted as the first prophecy of a Redeemer. In Jerome's Vulgate translation it reads: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel."⁶³ As early as the second century reference had been made to Mary as a second Eve:

He [Christ] became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her. . . . And by her has he been born, to whom we have proved so many Scriptures refer, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ See, e.g., the late-15th-century image by Zeitblom in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, reproduced in Maillet, *Sainte Marthe* 56.

⁶⁰ Peter, when he appears in representations of the death or funeral of the Virgin, also shares Martha's attribute of the aspergillum; see Cahier, *Caractéristiques des saintes* 1.87.

⁶¹ For a full discussion of the history and significance of this image, see Otto Semmelroth, *Mary, Archetype of the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

⁶² Genesis 3:15.

⁶³ Douay version.

⁶⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Scribner's, 1926) 1.249. Note that Justin describes the Virgin's Son and not the Virgin herself as the destroyer of the serpent and its progeny.

In subsequent discussions of the Virgin and of original sin, this victory was seen as proof that from the beginning of creation Mary was predestined to become the vehicle by which sin was overcome.

The passage in Revelation 12 further developed the image of conflict between a woman and a serpent/dragon:

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. . . . And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.⁶⁵

Artistic representations of the Apocalyptic Woman are found from the ninth century onwards, although in many of the early versions she was identified only with the Christian Church. In Eastern tradition, however, this Woman of Revelation 12 was linked with the Virgin Mary as early as the fifth century and the theme was developed at some length by the Greek philosopher Oecumenius in the early sixth century. In the West, Bernard of Clairvaux applied the apocalyptic image to Mary in the 12th century in his *Sermon on the Twelve Stars*⁶⁶ and its implications were explored further by later writers.

The image complex which associated the Virgin Mary, Eve, and the Woman of Revelation 12, derived in turn from the association of all three with a serpent or dragon, may also bear some relationship to Martha images. For example, one of the carvings on the door of the ancient church of St. Martha at Tarascon shows a woman with a dragon at her feet.⁶⁷ It is usually described as a depiction of Martha's victory over the Tarasque and can undoubtedly be understood as such. Much of the other imagery on the doorway, however, is derived from the book of Revelation: for example, Christ enthroned in judgment and the symbolic representations of the four evangelists as man, eagle, ox, and lion. Thus it is quite conceivable that the woman/beast symbolism

⁶⁵ Revelation 12:1-5. By the later Middle Ages this passage was commonly associated with the Virgin as the Immaculate Conception. Psalm 90 was also used occasionally to suggest the Immaculate Conception, probably on the basis of a text by Augustine; again it explores the woman/dragon imagery, although Augustine's interpretation of the passage refers to the Church rather than to Mary specifically. In his *Enarratio in Psalmum* 90, he describes the four animals mentioned in verse 13 of the Psalm as representative of four aspects of the devil. His open cruelty is like that of the lion and he lies in wait like the creeping dragon. His cunningness is like that of the serpent, the ancient deceiver of the Church, and he is the king of the demons, just as the basilisk is king of the serpents.

⁶⁶ See Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 1.132,239.

⁶⁷ Reproduced by Louis Dumont, *La Tarasque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) plate XIII.

also alludes to the passage in Revelation which, in turn, was related to the powers of the Virgin.

In the *Life* by Pseudo-Marcilia, the parallel between Martha and the Virgin Mary is related not to their common association with dragons, but to the fact that both, in different ways, offered shelter and hospitality to Jesus. The pairing of Martha's home in Bethany where she welcomed the adult Jesus and Mary's womb which held the infant Jesus is probably derived from Bernard of Clairvaux as suggested in his sermon for the feast day of Mary's Assumption:

[Martha] proved to have a common part also with the holy Virgin; for the glorious Virgin Mary received God and man in her holy womb, and Martha received God and man as a guest in her own home. The divine body of the former [Mary] nourished that which is most blessed in her holy womb; the holy hostess Martha cared for him in her own home. He whom the one begot, the other cared for. Therefore she proved to have something in common with the divine Virgin, but they were different. Their worth is different: for the former is blessed among all women and nothing is similar in worth. In her chaste virgin womb she received the Son of God. The latter [Martha] received him devotedly in her earthly home. The former cared for a small boy, the latter a man of thirty years.⁶⁸

Later, when describing the visit of Sts. Fronto and Georgius to Martha's home, the author of the Pseudo-Marcilia text makes no specific comparison of Martha and the Virgin Mary, but does emphasize the former's maternal qualities: she is the "pious mother and nurse" and the "mother hen who shelters her chicks under her wings."⁶⁹ The latter image brings to mind the medieval artistic portrayals of the Madonna Misericordia in which the Virgin as Ecclesia is shown with her protective cloak spread over her people.⁷⁰ Similar portrayals of Martha also exist as, for example, in the Martha church in Carona in the Tessin district of Switzerland.⁷¹ The image of Martha as the Church is not one which has been developed to any extent in literature on the saint, but it is worthy of further consideration.

MARTHA TODAY

As noted at the outset, Martha of Bethany has been "rediscovered" to a certain extent by contemporary theologians. Nevertheless she remains relatively unknown and unappreciated, especially among the general populace. Much of the contemporary literature on Martha con-

⁶⁸ Pseudo-Marcilia, in "The Early Latin Sources" 82.

⁶⁹ Compare Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34 where similar imagery is used in reference to Christ himself.

⁷⁰ Marina Warner discusses this image in her *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976) 327-28, and reproduces Piero della Francesca's portrayal of Martha (ca. 1445), now in the Museo del Sepolcro, Borgo Sansepolcro, Italy, as plate 11. See also the portrayal by Murano in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (late 15th century).

⁷¹ See Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, *Humanity in God* 31-32.

tinues to focus squarely on her Lukan image, to compare her to her sister Mary, and to cast her in a negative light. Published sermons and meditations bear titles like "The Fussier,"⁷² and include comments such as this: "Martha was like too many women who become involved in housekeeping tasks and who are burdened by unnecessary house pride. They need to see beyond the limitations of this small, task-centered world and to imagine themselves in some role other than domestic servant."⁷³ Another example: "Martha's problem was that she sometimes neglected prayer and devotion. I am sure that Martha was a prayerful and devoted woman. But every once in a while, she became so absorbed in the "things" of life (this world and all its cares) that she forgot that there are some values that are spiritual and eternal, and that these are what really count."⁷⁴ Much of the difficulty, of course, lies in the fact that most people are familiar only with the biblical Martha, and, unfortunately, the image of the Lukan Martha continues to be more memorable than that found in John. The medieval legends of Martha have had little general influence, due to both their relative inaccessibility and to the rather incredulous nature of much of their contents.

While it is difficult to interpret parts of the legendary material literally, the medieval stories of Martha are worthy of reconsideration. They help to give flesh to a biblical character and provide food for thought. Martha, a prominent figure in both early Church and medieval Christian tradition, has many lessons to teach. The twelfth-century *Life* by Pseudo-Marcilia, a work which outlined the many facets of Martha's life and described her numerous accomplishments, concludes with a statement that it is fitting that the readers call to remembrance the life of the holy Martha "for one who is mindful of her will be remembered by God."⁷⁵ Just as she did in the later Middle Ages, this Martha provides a model of the faithful servant, of one who professes the Christian gospel, and of a leader who sets an example through her piety and social concern.

⁷² William P. Barker, *Women and the Liberator* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1966) 83-90.

⁷³ Alicia Craig Faxon, "Martha of Bethany," in her *Women and Jesus* (Philadelphia: United Church, 1973) 72.

⁷⁴ R. Blaine Detrick, "Sisters in Conflict," in her *Favorite Women of the Bible* (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S., 1988) 87.

⁷⁵ Pseudo-Marcilia, in "Early Latin Sources" 103.