

This photo is available in the
print version of *Hospitality*.

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Christ's feet.**

Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), CHRIST IN THE HOUSE OF MARY AND MARTHA, 1578-1580. Oil on panel. Palazzo Portinari-Salviati, Florence. Photo © Collezione Privata Palazzo Portinari-Salviati – sede Banca Toscana, Florence.

Host and Guest

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

AND MIKEAL C. PARSONS

Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) is a familiar, if puzzling, account of Christian hospitality. While Mary listens attentively to Jesus' teachings, Martha plays the good hostess and cares for his needs. Martha goes so far as to ask Jesus to instruct her sister to help her. But instead of chastening Mary, Jesus informs Martha that it is Mary who has chosen the better activity. This is the moment in the story that Alessandro Allori depicts in *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*.

Was it appropriate in the first century to visit with your guests before you made them comfortable? Probably not any more than it would be today to not take a coat or offer a drink to a guest arriving at your home. So, what is Jesus teaching us about hospitality?

In Luke's narration of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:27), many stories like this one feature the ancient Mediterranean practice of hospitality, in which it was the custom for good and generous people to welcome, feed, house, and extravagantly provide for travelers.¹ Luke presents Martha as a virtuous host who "welcomed [Jesus] into her home" (10:38) and immediately tended to his needs. In this light, Luke's original audience would not interpret Jesus' praise of Mary to be an implicit criticism of Martha's hospitality.

Indeed, Mary and Martha engaged in the complementary actions appropriate for all servant-disciples, studying at Jesus' feet and showing hospitality, though hearing is clearly the more important activity.² Theologians beginning with Augustine, Ambrose, and Gregory the Great would interpret Mary's and Martha's actions (and, by extension, the two women) as representing the crucial *vita contemplativa* (life of contemplation) and *vita activa* (life of action) respectively.

Allori's *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1578) hangs above the altar in a chapel in the Palazzo Salviati, Florence, which was dedicated to the life of Mary Magdalene.³ Since at least the third century, the character in Luke's story had been confused with the sister of Lazarus who lived in Bethany (John 11:1), the disciple Mary Magdalene who had been cured of seven demons and discovered Jesus' empty tomb (Luke 8:2, 24:10, and parallels), and the "sinful" woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50).

By the sixteenth century Allori was taught the “composite Mary” view declared by Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604): “he whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark.”⁴ The Council of Trent (1545-1563) reaffirmed this composite picture and further assigned to Mary Magdalene the role of a penitent sinner to be admired by the faithful. A Roman missal in 1570 affirmed the Council’s position as it emphasized the doctrine of penance and merits over the Protestant Reformation’s doctrine of grace.⁵

Allori had learned the elegance, color palette, and complex composition of *la maniera*, or style of the day, from Mannerist painter Agnolo Bronzino, an artist popular with the Medici. Allori was a colleague of important artists like Michelangelo, Giorgio Vasari, and Michele Tosini. In 1563 he participated in establishing the Accademia del Disegno, one of the first art schools that expanded the education of artists beyond the craftsman and workshop tradition of previous centuries.

In *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, Allori evocatively suggests we must balance the contemplative Christian life with active work in our Christian communities. He depicts Martha as a virtuous host and Jesus is not rebuking her. Yet Mary is doing something even better than being a host: she is a guest, learning at Christ’s feet. These two activities – thoughtful action (like welcoming the stranger) and meditation on Scripture – are complementary. Discipleship requires both.

NOTES

1 For more on this text and painting, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 110-133, and Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

2 Pamela Thimmes, “Narrative and Rhetorical Conflict in Luke 10:38-42: A Cautionary Tale,” *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 20 (2000), 51-60.

3 The Salviati family were cousins to the powerful Florentine Medici. The Palazzo serves today as the headquarters of the Banca Toscana in Florence. We greatly appreciate the bank administrators’ allowing us to study and photograph the chapel.

4 Gregory the Great, Homily XXXIII, cited in Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1993), 96.

5 Hornik and Parsons, *Illuminating Luke*, 118.



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