

“In the household of Bethany the Lord Jesus experienced the family spirit and friendship of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and for this reason the Gospel of John states that he loved them. Martha generously offered him hospitality, Mary listened attentively to his words and Lazarus promptly emerged from the tomb at the command of the One who humiliated death.”ⁱ Considering the important evangelical witness that all three offered in welcoming the Lord Jesus into their home, in listening to him attentively, in believing that he is the resurrection and the life, Pope Francis has designated July 29 as the Memorial of Saints Martha, Mary and Lazarus rather than just Saint Martha as had previously been the case. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Martha was anxious and worried about many things. Now that her brother and sister are included in her feast day, we might jokingly say that she can stop worrying so much.

In addition to Mary the Mother of Jesus, the gospels also tell us of Mary Magdalene, Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and Mary the sinner whose sins the Lord had forgiven (Lk 7:47). Recent studies have clarified that each Mary is unique, and this has cleared the way in the Latin Church for including Mary with her brother Lazarus and her sister Martha in one feast day.ⁱⁱ

The home in Bethany sits on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Sometime after raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus set out from the area of “Bethany for his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and he spent his nights there before the days before the Passion.”ⁱⁱⁱ “Jesus spent his evenings on the Mount of Olives including the night of the Last Supper.”^{iv} When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was on the western slope of the Mount of Olives and this is where Jesus was betrayed by the kiss of Judas. Amidst a time of great anxiety, Jesus spent the time in prayer rather than worry.

Like Martha, there are many things that we can be anxious over. To the extent that we can exert some control over a situation, a little worry may spur us to take positive action. But so often, our worry can spin us around in circles without helping us to move forward.

Earlier this week, I picked Fr Kumar up at the airport. He originally left Nome for vacation shortly after Easter and was not able to return on schedule in May, much less, June or the better part of July. He very much wanted to return to his priestly ministry in western Alaska, but circumstances beyond his control, the pandemic and the international travel ban, made it most difficult for him to return sooner. Instead of being anxious over things he could not control, he followed the example of Mary who sat at the foot of Jesus and took everything in without worry. Fr Kumar enjoyed the extra time with family. We too can learn from Mary’s silent witness not to be so anxious but to spend that time at the feet of Jesus.

ⁱ press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/02/02/210202c.html

ⁱⁱ americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/02/02/pope-francis-martha-mary-lazarus-feast-day-doctor-239897

ⁱⁱⁱ Hahn, Scott. Catholic Bible Dictionary, pg 106.

^{iv} Ibid, 662.