

In October of 1943, the Gestapo took a young social worker named Irena Sendler into the woods outside of Warsaw in order to execute her. She had been worried and distracted by many things, at least 2500, because that is the number of Jewish infants and children she had helped smuggle out of the infamous Warsaw ghetto. More than double the number that Oskar Schindler saved, but nobody made a movie about her.

Working under the *nom de guerre* Jolanta, Irena was a leader of the Polish resistance, the head of the children's section. She and her team evacuated as many children as they could, hiding them in any container available from toolboxes to coffins, giving them new identities, and placing them with families outside the ghetto. Although the penalty for hiding anyone from the Nazis was death, Irena and her team had no trouble finding host families; their greatest challenge was convincing the parents to part with their children.

Irena wasn't Jewish herself, mind you; she was Roman Catholic. She could have very, very easily sat out the war with relatively little risk. She could have even satisfied her conscience by using her skills as a social worker and a nurse to help people in other ways, ways that would not have made her live in constant fear of discovery and death. Clearly, this was a woman who would never be content to sit down when there was urgent work to be done, work for which she turned out to be perfectly suited. I can not imagine Jesus telling her that anyone else had chosen a better part.

Today's Gospel is difficult for some of us to hear. Many of us have been working hard to rebuild our church's programmatic and liturgical offerings. For some, there is a sense that our parish should be doing even more, even though for many of us, our service here comes in addition to managing a household and a working life. We tend to equate more activity, more ministries, with a healthier church. But Jesus seems unambiguous in his response to Martha's concern that even more should be getting done.

We could try to play word games with Jesus, and say that when he says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things," he's talking about minor, unimportant tasks, the busywork we use to put off doing bigger, more difficult projects. And that is a plausible interpretation, if not entirely satisfying. Jesus certainly understood the pitfalls of letting unimportant rules get in the way of a meaningful spiritual life and the desperately-needed works of mercy and charity that such a life produces. But the lawyer from last week's Gospel discovered that when you play word games with Jesus, they never turn out the way you expected.

Martha was merely trying to provide the hospitality that was required of her place and time and culture. While Bethany is a long way from Warsaw, and far removed in time, the imperative to hospitality was not entirely dissimilar. The harsh desert climate of the Near East meant that refusing to offer hospitality to a visitor was tantamount to letting them die, and so a code of hospitality had been a key part of the culture since

before the time of Abraham. Both for Jesus and for the Jewish children of Warsaw, the work that other people did to offer a sanctuary let them go on living when the world wanted them dead.

Fortunately for us, the way of grace overcomes the ways of the world. It just doesn't always look the way you expect. Irena Sendler did not die on that fall day in 1943. Her subordinates in the resistance bribed her guards and she spent the rest of the war in hiding, even as posters went up announcing her execution. She continued her work in hiding and after the war did all she could for the children she had rescued. She would receive a litany of honors including the title of Righteous Among the Nations, the State of Israel's highest honor for gentiles. Irena lived out her days in peace, coming to dwell in the peace of Christ at the age of 98.

I believe that Irena first came to know the comfort and peace of Christ long before her wartime heroics, not long after. She had grown up in a faithful family, learning to stand up for the ways of righteousness long before her faith would be put to the test. She had already spent much time in faithful devotion to Jesus, absorbing his lessons and enjoying his presence. It was there that she became a servant according to God's commission.

So I have come to believe that Mary and Martha do not represent two opposing lifestyles, but two sides of the same coin. The more we sit at our Lord's feet, listening to what he is saying, the stronger we are to do his will. Our spiritual renewal gives us boldness, determination, and resilience. Our time spent in prayer, worship, and study is the essential foundation of our practice of faith, and the source of our spiritual strength, that lets us "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith," rejoicing in the suffering the world throws us because God has given us "the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in" us.

Christ in us leads us to service, and to renewal. Both are powerful experiences of his grace, and it is not our choice between them, but rather our relationship with Jesus and our deference to his leadership that today's Gospel reveals as being most important. For Jesus is the Lord of both our resting and our rising, our going out and our coming in. He is the head of the body, the giver of wisdom, and the maker of peace. He is "the better part." When he leads you to work in his name, follow him. When he leads you to rest in him, follow him. Trust that he will give you what you need. Accept his gifts, the fullness and diversity of his grace, so that you may share his grace with the world.