

“Yes Lord, I Have Believed”

**THE ROLE  
OF MARTHA'S  
CONFESSION  
OF FAITH**

**IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL**

**RICHARD FRANCIS D'SOUZA, OCD**

Foreword by Rev. Dr. Luca Pedroli

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## FOREWORD

One of the significant elements that characterizes the Fourth Gospel is undoubtedly Jesus' encounter with certain women, who thus fulfill the function of key characters in the Johannine narrative.

First and foremost, stands out *the mother*, protagonist of the first of the "signs", at Cana of Galilee (2,1-11) and present at the foot of the cross, in the fulfillment of the "hour" (19,25-27), to mark the beginning of a new, spiritual motherhood, called to extend over the church and over the entire humankind.

Then there is the *Samaritan woman* (4,5-42), who assumes a powerful symbolic value, as a character who embodies the new relationship established by Christ, "in spirit and in truth" (4,23). It is for this reason that she is never identified: her name is not relevant to the narrative. What matters most is that she is a Samaritan and that she is a woman: in this sense, she can exercise the symbolic function as a betrothed and a future bride, in the name of her people, thereby embodying the new, profound, and boundless family bond that the Lord is about to establish.

In the footsteps of the Samaritan woman, there appears *Mary Magdalene*. She assumes a leading role in the Passion (19,25-27) and the Resurrection (20,1-2.11-18) narrative, as the *alter ego* of the beloved disciple. She indicates that the moment has indeed arrived when one can fully know the Lord and initiate a unique and indissoluble relationship with him, just as a bride with her bridegroom. And this is accomplished at Easter, when Christ can finally inaugurate the messianic wedding which was long-awaited and already prefigured at Cana.

One of the locations that is particularly dear to Jesus is the village of Bethany. It is not only that Jesus performs there a sign in favor of Lazarus, the last of the signs recorded in the first part of the Fourth Gospel, and the clearest pointer to Jesus' resurrection. It is also that, at Bethany, Lazarus lived with his sisters *Martha* and *Mary*, and as soon as Jesus found himself close to Jerusalem, he never failed to stop by them, perhaps even for a few days, as he felt at home there and part of the family.

And it is precisely in this intimate and confidential context that an illuminating episode takes place, in the nuptial framework which John has been developing. During a meal, to the amazement of all the guests, Mary kneels at the feet of Jesus

and anoints them with a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard and dries them with her hair (12,1-8).

Interestingly, scholars highlight the centrality given to the figure of Mary in the narrative at 11,1-2. No sooner is our gaze directed to Bethany in John's account than the place is explicitly defined as "the village of Mary" - while Martha and Lazarus get mentioned afterward and in relation to Mary, as her sister and brother.

Another characteristic trait is represented by the profound connection highlighted by John, in this same introductory section of chapter 11, between the sign of the raising of Lazarus and the anointing at Bethany. This last episode, in fact, is anticipated and mentioned alongside the first right at the beginning of the Lazarus narrative. It is as if John wanted to make it clear that these two episodes can only be understood in relation to each other.

Furthermore, both episodes acquire their profound meaning in relation to the paschal mystery. In the case of Lazarus, this is explicit. While it is a mistake to speak of a resurrection, since Lazarus is only brought back to life or resuscitated, nonetheless the reference is clearly to the salvific event which is imminent, in which Jesus, having defeated death, will rise again and this time to the new life which has no end. In the episode of Mary's anointing, however, John himself indicates the paschal reference, through the progress of his narrative and in Jesus' own words.

In the light of all this, it is obvious that the profile of Mary also is clearly delineated in the Fourth Gospel. Just as the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene, so Mary of Bethany becomes the symbol of her entire community and expresses the new and definitive nuptial relationship, which is achieved by Jesus, the messianic spouse. Here, however, it is not an anticipation or a prefiguration: rather, the paschal mystery truly constitutes the long-awaited "hour", the hour towards which the Johannine narrative tends, for which Calvary and the tomb effectively constitute the *bridal chamber* in which this marriage is consummated. This should be viewed in light of the Song of Songs: never before has the deepest meaning of the affirmation been so apparent, that "love is as strong as death" (Songs 8,6).

Richard D'Souza's fine study is in line with this reading and reiterates how women characters play an important role in the perspective of the Johannine narrative, as they become the privileged means used by the evangelist and his community to communicate their own faith experience.

D'Souza, however, to some extent subverts the most common interpretation and introduces a new element. For the reasons we have given above, it is usual to prioritize and link together, along with Jesus' mother, the figures of Mary of Bethany and the Magdalene; this is because they are the ones who take us by the

hand and lead us to Golgotha and to the tomb, there to contemplate with them the messianic fulfilment of God's long love story with his people.

D'Souza, on the other hand, through a meticulous narrative analysis of the text, tries to highlight how among these women the central role in the Johannine structure and narrative is occupied by Martha, in virtue of her profession of faith in 11,27 against the background of the Johannine community's creedal formula in 20,31.

At first, the reader is taken by surprise. However, if he has the patience to follow the author in the steps of his exposition, he will see a new and intriguing horizon open up before him, destined to raise questions that cannot fail to feed one's personal relationship with Christ, as well as providing interesting insights for the ongoing academic debate.

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Mary concerning their brother. The narrator's comment highlighting Martha's prominent role in her Jewish community is significant against the background of her personal encounter with Jesus as she will receive an important revelation on life, death, and resurrection (cf. 11,25-26).

#### 4. Encounter with Martha (11,20-28a)

As the narrator's transitional comment shifts the focus back to Bethany (vv. 17-19), it also brings Martha into prominence. Jesus' encounter with Martha and their ensuing dialogue is considered the centre of the Lazarus narrative.<sup>16</sup> It puts an end to the entire mystery surrounding Jesus' delay in arriving in Bethany. His encounter with Martha also prepares for the sign of the raising of Lazarus, in which God's glory would be manifested.

##### 4.1 Translation

<b>Jn 11,20-28a</b>	
<p><sup>20</sup> Ἡ οὖν Μάρθα ὡς ἤκουσεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἔρχεται ὑπήντησεν αὐτῷ· Μαριάμ δὲ ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ ἐκαθέζετο.<sup>17</sup></p>	<p><i>Now Martha, when she heard that Jesus is coming, went and met him. But Mary was sitting in the house.</i></p>
<p><sup>21</sup> εἶπεν οὖν ἡ Μάρθα πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν· κύριε, εἰ ἦς ὥδε οὐκ ἂν ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός μου·</p>	<p><i>Then Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you were here, my brother would not have died."</i></p>
<p><sup>22</sup> [ἀλλὰ] καὶ νῦν οἶδα<sup>18</sup> ὅτι ὅσα ἂν αἰτήσῃ τὸν θεὸν δώσει σοι ὁ θεός.</p>	<p><i>[But] even now I know that whatever you may ask God, God will give you."</i></p>
<p><sup>23</sup> λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ἀναστήσεται ὁ ἀδελφός σου.</p>	<p><i>Jesus says to her, "your brother will rise."</i></p>

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. ONISZCZUK, "La Risurrezione di Lazzaro. Analisi retorica di Giovanni 11,1-46", *Studi del terzo convegno RBS. International Studies on Biblical and Semitic Rhetoric* (ed. R. MEYNET – J. ONISZCZUK) (RBS 2; Roma 2013) 224.

<sup>17</sup> Mary's posture of sitting in the house is designated with the imperfect verb ἐκαθέζετο. Therefore, it may be translated as "was sitting" in order to emphasize the continued state of an action in the past. She will change her position only when Martha reports to her privately about the arrival of Jesus (ἡγήρθη ταχύ, v. 29).

<sup>18</sup> The verb οἶδα here and in v. 24 can either be taken as the present or the perfect tense. In v. 24, it underlines the long-standing Jewish hope of the future resurrection. Martha being a Jew also knows and lives in that eschatological hope. It should be noted that the verb οἶδα in v. 22 is preceded by the adverb of time νῦν ("now"). Martha's knowledge about the mediatory role of Jesus, could not have been gained at that very moment. But it could have been acquired over a period of time from her past experience and association with Jesus during his public ministry. Hence the effect of that knowing still continues in the present (cf. also 15,24; 17,7).

<p><sup>24</sup> λέγει αὐτῷ ἡ Μάρθα· οἶδα ὅτι ἀναστήσεται ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει ἐν τῇ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ.</p>	<p><i>Martha says to him, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection, in the last day."</i></p>
<p><sup>25</sup> εἶπεν αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἡ ζωὴ· ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ καὶ ἀποθάνῃ ζήσεται,</p>	<p><i>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even though he might die, will live,</i></p>
<p><sup>26</sup> καὶ πᾶς ὁ ζῶν καὶ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ ἀποθάνῃ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. πιστεύεις τοῦτο;</p>	<p><i>and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"</i></p>
<p><sup>27</sup> λέγει αὐτῷ· ναὶ κύριε, ἐγὼ πεπίστευκα<sup>19</sup> ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενος.<sup>20</sup></p>	<p><i>she says to him, "yes, Lord,<sup>21</sup> I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."</i></p>
<p><sup>28a</sup> Καὶ τοῦτο εἰποῦσα ἀπῆλθεν καὶ ἐφώνησεν Μαριὰμ τὴν ἀδελφὴν αὐτῆς λάθρᾳ...</p>	<p><i>And having said this, she went away and called Mary, her sister, secretly...</i></p>

## 4.2 Structure of 11,20-28a

Taking into consideration the important narrative markers and the synchrony within the narrative, we propose a progressive revelatory structure for the narrative unit in which the narrator has presented the account of Jesus' encounter with Martha (11,20-28a):

<sup>19</sup> Some translators prefer to translate ἐγὼ πεπίστευκα in the present as "I believe" or with an emphatic force "I do believe". Cf. NEWMAN – NIDA, *A Handbook*, 367. Cf. also MICHAELS, *John*, 633; D. B. WALLACE, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics. An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids 1996) 574; WESTCOTT, *John*, 169. BEASLEY-MURRAY, *John*, 182, prefers to translate as: "I have come to believe". Nonetheless, it is preferable to retain the literal translation in the perfect tense as "I have believed" (cf. 6,69).

<sup>20</sup> Some translators prefer to translate the phrase ὁ εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενος in the past tense as "who was to come into the world". This is difficult in some languages, since it involves a past reference *was* and a future reference *to come*. cf. NEWMAN – NIDA, *A Handbook*, 367. But once again it is preferable to retain the translation in the present tense (cf. 6,14).

<sup>21</sup> Literal translation of the phrase is preferred here. Whereas, NEWMAN – NIDA, *A Handbook*, 367, states that, "A more dramatic effect is attained by placing Martha's answer first and then the words she answered." Accordingly, it could be translated as "Yes, Lord!" she answered, "I have believed ... into the world".

<b>Martha</b> <i>A progressive journey of faith</i>		<b>Jesus</b> <i>A progressive revelation</i>	
<b>Entry</b> (v. 20)	Now Martha when she heard (ἤκουσεν)...went and met (ὑπήντησεν) him.	<b>Jesus' arrival</b> (v. 20)	that Jesus is coming...
<b>Level 1: Lazarus as the brother of Martha</b>			
<b>Complaint</b> (v. 21)	Then Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you were here, my brother would not have died."		
↓			
<b>Conviction</b> (v. 22)	"[But] even now I know (οἶδα) that whatever you may ask God, God will give you."		
↓		<b>assurance of a resurrection</b> (v. 23)	Jesus says to her, "your brother will rise."
<b>Hope</b> (v. 24)	Martha says to him, "I know (οἶδα) that he will rise in the resurrection, in the last day."		
<b>Level 2: Lazarus as part of a believing community</b>			
		<b>Jesus' self-revelation</b> (v. 25a) Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life."	
		<b>a) believer who has died</b> (v. 25b)	"The one who believes in me, even though he might die, will live,
		<b>b) believer who is living</b> (v. 26a)	and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."
		<b>Invitation to believe</b> (v. 26b) "Do you believe this?"	
<b>Belief</b> (v. 27a)	she says to him, "yes, Lord."		
↓			
<b>Confession</b> (v. 27b)	"I have believed (πεπίστευκα) that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."		
↓			
<b>Exit</b> (v. 28a)	And having said this, she went away (ἀπῆλθεν) and called (ἐφώνησεν) Mary, her sister, secretly...		



**FR. RICHARD FRANCIS D'SOUZA** is a member of the Discalced Carmelite Order of the Karnataka-Goa Province, India. After his initial seminary formation, he pursued his Philosophy in Mysuru and graduated in Commerce (BCom) securing first rank and a gold medal. Later he completed his Bachelor of Theology (BTh) at St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary, Bengaluru and was ordained a priest in December 2004. While serving as a director of the minor seminary, he did his Master's in Human

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“ Richard D'Souza's fine study reiterates how women characters play an important role in the perspective of the Johannine narrative, as they become the privileged means used by the evangelist and his community to communicate their own faith experience. Through a meticulous narrative analysis of the text, D'Souza tries to highlight how among these women the central role in the Johannine structure and narrative is occupied by Martha, in virtue of her profession of faith in 11:27 against the background of the Johannine community's creedal formula in 20:31.

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