

Editorial: Choosing the 'better part' in a busy world

In his [Angelus address](#) on July 17, Pope Francis reflected on the Gospel reading from Luke in which Jesus visits the home of Martha and Mary. The story is a familiar one. Martha anxiously tends to the needs of her guest, while Mary sits "beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak." Irritated that she is doing the work by herself, Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to help, but Christ tells her: "Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her" (Lk 10:38-42).



Christ in the house of Martha and Mary. Johannes Vermeer, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Jesus couldn't have been more direct in his words to Martha. Yet despite his very clear message that "Mary has chosen the

better part,” our world today continues to be overworked, overstressed and under-rested. Like Martha, we are not listening.

In the mid-20th century, Josef Pieper, a German Catholic philosopher, wrote extensively on the importance of leisure. “The world of work begins to become – threatens to become – our only world, to the exclusion of all else,” he wrote. “The demands of the working world grow ever more total, grasping ever more completely the whole of human existence.”

Over the past decades, Pieper’s prediction has proved to become true. This “world of work” has only gotten worse. According to recent studies, Americans are working more than ever before, and considerably more than some of our European counterparts. The average American works nearly [10 hours a week more](#) than those in Germany and the United Kingdom. Seventy-five percent of U.S. workers say [they have experienced burnout](#) in their jobs. Sixty-one percent of remote workers and 53% of on-site workers say they find it [more difficult to “unplug”](#) from work during off-hours. Hundreds of millions of vacation days per year [are being unused](#), wasting nearly one-third of Americans’ paid time off. When we do take time off of work, we are largely shunning much of our normal leisure activities, as Gallup reports that we are [traveling less, reading fewer books](#) and watching [far fewer movies in the theater](#).

All of this is not only to our detriment, it is to our demise.

Gallup reports that workers who say they are burned out are [23% more likely](#) to have visited the emergency room. Worse, a [study by the World Health Organization](#) published in 2021 claims that those who work 55 or more hours each week are 35% more likely to suffer a stroke and 17% more likely to die from heart disease compared to those following the widely accepted standard of a 35- to 40-hour work week. In all, the WHO found that more than 745,000 people died in 2016 from overwork that

resulted in stroke and heart disease.

Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have strongly encouraged the faithful to use times of rest and relaxation not only to recharge our batteries, so to speak, in order that we might be more productive at work, but to rejuvenate our souls and offer us an opportunity to be intentional about spending time in the presence of God. In [*Laudato Si'*](#), Pope Francis wrote that “rest opens our eyes to the larger picture” (No. 237).

During a 2010 apostolic visit to the central Italian city of Sulmona, [Pope Benedict](#) summed up well the extent to which we busy ourselves like Martha: “We live in a society in which it seems that every space, every moment must be filled with initiatives, activity, sound; often, there is not even time to listen and dialogue. Dear brothers and sisters, let us not fear to create silence, within and outside ourselves, if we wish to be able not only to become aware of God’s voice but also to make out the voice of the person beside us, the voices of others.”

At his July 17 Angelus, Pope Francis acknowledged that “nowadays it is increasingly difficult to find free time to meditate. For many people, the rhythm of life is frenetic and wearisome.” However, he said, summertime can provide us with an opportunity to slow down and begin the day by reading Scripture. “This lets us enter into this dynamic of Jesus. Let us allow ourselves to be challenged by those pages, asking ourselves how our life – my life – is going, if it is in line with what Jesus says.”

To do that, let us sit at the feet of Jesus daily and listen to him. Let us be a little less like Martha and a little more like Mary. For this is the better part.

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