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Brían de Búrca

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Dalia Marx, associate professor of liturgy and midrash at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College-JIR writes:

“Whenever I read about Mary Magdalene or think of her, I cannot escape a bitter sense of loss. This Galilean woman, a faithful disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, merited, according to the Christian Bible, to be with Jesus at the time of his painful death and later to receive from an angel the gospel about his resurrection. She served as the “apostle to the apostles,” bringing the news to the rest of his disciples. In the general cultural memory, however, she is often remembered as a sinner. Even I, a Jewish woman, who until recently had little knowledge of the Christian Bible, knew her as such. What a pity: we have such an impressive woman with profound religious feelings who had a crucial role, and yet, we mostly think of her as a sinner! This phenomenon is not unique to the story of Mary or to Christianity. In many traditions we find stories of strong women who later are put down as immodest, unworthy, or sinners, typically defamed as sexual sinners....”¹

Mary Magdalene is first mentioned in St Mark’s passion narrative after the death of Jesus. “*There were some women watching from a distance. Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the younger and Joset, and Salome. These used to follow him and look after him when he was in Galilee . And there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with him*” (Lk 15:40-41).

At the crucifixion the male disciples were nowhere to be seen. In all of the four gospels Mary Magdalene along with other women, stood near his cross and witnessed his death and where he was

1 Barbara E. Reid OP, and Shelly Matthews *WISDOM COMMENTARY Volume 43B, Luke 10-24, p 392ff.*

Brían de Búrca OMI ministered for many years in Britain and the continent. He is now retired.

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buried. It was Mary, with other women, who discovered the empty tomb.

Mary Magdalene is the person of continuity between the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“She was there at the beginning of his ministry and she was there at the end. She was there when they were following him in cheering throngs. And she was there when they were taking his life, dashing it against the stones of synagogue and state, turning on him, jeering at him, shouting for his death, standing by while soldiers poked and prodded him to ignominy. She tended his grave and shouted his dying glory and clung to his soul”²

We know very little about her background or who she was from the Gospels. St Luke describes Mary Magdalene with these words:

“After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means” Luke 8:1-3.

In the verses quoted above Luke tells us that women were also there involved early on in the ministry, well before the passion. He mentions the women who accompanied Jesus by name (8:2-3) indicating that they are important and remembered as disciples of Jesus, who with the Twelve heard Jesus’ word, and were with him as he journeyed along the way to Jerusalem.

“Mary (called Magdalene)” means that she came from Magdala, a small town near Tiberias on the western shore of lake Galilee. We know nothing about her family background. We are told that all of the women accompanying Jesus and the male disciples had been cured of ailments with both Mark (16:9) and Luke (8:2) adding that seven demons were driven out of Mary Magdalene by Jesus.

Luke, like Mark, credits the women with serving (*diaconia*), while adding that the service was *out of their own resources*: from their own means, possessions, property, money, or goods. That the resources belonged to the women is clear from the feminine plural pronoun “*their*” own means. Luke depicts them as “givers.” These women were not there as servant women cooking for Jesus and the

2 Joan Chittister, *The Friendship of Women*, BlueBridge Books, 2006. [*Mary Magdalene, Loc 639 Kindle*]

male disciples but were a group of women taking initiative to help Jesus and his religious movement financially. In some way Luke is showing that Jesus *depends* upon the help of women, and at the end of the Gospel, this help shifts away from the material into the urgent mission of spreading the good news of the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene and other women are the first to hear the news of the resurrection and told to share the good news. They are told by Jesus: ‘*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there*’ (Mt 28:10). In Mark’s Gospel they are told by the young man in a white robe that Jesus is risen and that they must ‘*go and tell his disciples and Peter; “He is going before you to Galilee; it is there they will see him, just as he told you”*’ (16:8). In Luke the women, Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them told the apostles the message they heard that he had risen – but “*this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them.*” (Lk 24:7-11). The Fourth Gospel portrays her as the first disciple to meet the risen Lord and be commissioned by him to bring the good news to the unbelieving male disciples. In this Gospel Jesus says to her: ‘*Go and find the brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*’ So Mary went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her” (John 20: 17-18).

“The apostles proclaimed the resurrection of Christ to the whole world. But Mary proclaimed the resurrection of Christ to the apostles themselves: she was an apostle to the apostles”; “Mary Magdalene is held by the Christian Church to be an ‘equal of the apostles’: because she was the first messenger sent by the Lord Himself to announce His resurrection.”³

As Brendan Byrne rightly remarks on Mary Magdalene: “It is hard to overestimate her significance in the early Christian tradition.”⁴

And yet, Mary Magdalene, named fourteen times in the New Testament – more than any other woman apart from Mary, the mother of Jesus, herself, known in the early Church as Apostle to the Apostles, became known over time as a repentant sexual sinner. How did this come about?

Many myths have developed about Mary Magdalene. She is often confused with other gospel Marys and other unnamed women: Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-8) and the anonymous women of Mark 14:3-10 and Matthew 26:6-13 who anoint Jesus for burial, the unnamed woman called a sinner who sat at Jesus’

3 https://orthodoxwiki.org/Mary_Magdalene#Titles

4 Brendan Byrne SJ, *Come to the Light: Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Liturgical press, Collegeville. Ch 16, At the Empty Tomb.

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feet crying and dried his feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-50), the unknown woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), and the nameless woman healed of haemorrhaging (Luke 8:43-48). It should be noted that *no gospel text* makes any reference to her having been a ‘sexual’ sinner or indeed a sinner in any way.

The first textual evidence associating Mary Magdalene with sinful sexual activity is a sixth-century homily by Pope Gregory the Great. By several imaginative leaps, he connects the story of the woman “who was a sinner” (Luke 7:36-50) and the first mention of Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:2. The through-line involves the myrrh the woman uses to anoint Jesus’s feet: for Gregory, the woman procured the myrrh through selling her body. In his homily, he denigrates the woman by imagining her motives and practices before her repentance:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman [Luke 7:37] ... we believe to be Mary from whom seven devils were cast out [Luke 8:2]. ... And what did these devils signify, if not all the vices. ... It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.⁵

Pope Gregory’s inaccurate identification of Mary Magdalene with the ‘sinful woman’ of Luke 7 became more or less church teaching for over a thousand years. Over time the very name “Magdalene” has come to be associated with institutions for ‘fallen women’. The women and girls who suffered in the Magdalene Laundries included those who were perceived to be ‘promiscuous’, unmarried mothers, the daughters of unmarried mothers, those who were considered a burden on their families or the State, those who had been sexually abused ... Confined for decades on end – and isolated from their families and society at large – many of these women became institutionalised over time. It is a sad and shameful part of Ireland’s recent history.

5 Pope Gregory the Great, *Homily 33* [PL 76:1239–40]. Quoted in Barbara E. Reid, Shelly Matthews *Luke 1–9 (Wisdom Commentary Series Book 43)*, pp. 462-464

There were other Magdalene centres, like the Magdalene House in Chicago, offering a place of healing for women who survived trafficking, prostitution, addiction, and homelessness.

Important to note is that Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:2 is introduced to us *immediately* following the story of the unnamed woman in Luke 7:36-50 who, in Jesus' words, "showed such great love." This woman is seen in two different ways by Simon and Jesus. Jesus sees a woman who has been freed from her sins and who is extravagant in her gestures of love. Simon sees a sinner, and because that is all he sees, he is convinced Jesus is not a prophet (7:39).

How interpreters of this text see this unnamed woman is also interesting. A glance at the way Bible editors title the passage is revealing (there are no titles in the Greek text).

"Many editors keep the reader's view firmly fixed on the woman's sin: "The Pardon of a Sinful Woman" (NAB); "The Woman Who Was a Sinner" (NJB); "A Sinful Woman Forgiven" (NRSV). La Nueva Biblia Latinoamericana mistakenly makes her "La mujer pecadora de Magdala," "The sinful woman from Magdala". We have yet to find a version of the Bible that places the focus on "A Woman who Showed Great Love," which is the way Jesus characterizes her in the text. In a social system built around domination, or submission, while men are understood to be complex, varied, and capable of an array of deeds both good and bad, women tend to be defined under one of two poles, either the good woman/wife or the bad woman/whore... The most common interpretation of the woman in Luke 7 is that she is a prostitute. That is the catch-all term for any woman who sins. Interpreters who assume she is a prostitute tend to focus on her being known in the city, her loosened hair, her expensive alabaster flask of ointment, and her sensual way of touching Jesus's feet. Typically, they project much more onto the story concerning her "prostitute lifestyle" than the details of the story allow. Consider, for instance, the sermon of Pope Gregory the Great (sixth century), quoted above, that links Mary Magdalene to the "sinner" of Luke 7 and suggests that the oil she uses on Jesus's feet was "previously used ... to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts."⁶

Commentators rarely conjecture about the nature of men's sins. People complained when Jesus went to the house of Zacchaeus to eat: "*He has gone to eat at a sinner's house*" (Lk 19:8). His sins

6 Barbara E. Reid, Shelly Matthews *Luke 1-9 (Wisdom Commentary Series Book 43)* p 432

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could be multiple and varied. The presumption is that Zacchaeus' sin was working for the Romans. No one suggests his sin had to do with sexual acts. When Peter says "*Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!*" (Luke 5:8) his sins, likewise, could be multiple and varied. But commentators never suggest his sins were of a sexual kind.

The unnamed sinner in Luke 7 might also have been working for the Romans and so, like Zacchaeus, would have been "a well-known sinner." But being a woman the general presumption is that her sins, her many sins, were of a sexual nature. There is a sexual bias that haunts this story as with the story of Mary Magdalene. However, Mary Magdalene's is a healing story, no less so than the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26ff); no one connects the poor man chained in the tombs with sexuality.

From New Testament times many stories, both true and false, praiseworthy and negative have developed about Mary Magdalene. In conclusion I would mention how Mary is seen in the fourth Gospel and how she was proposed to us as a model for the new evangelisation in the decree of Pope Francis.

"She (Mary Magdalene) not only discovers the empty tomb but is also the first to receive a resurrection appearance. Thus in a double sense she becomes the *apostola apostolorum*, the apostle of the apostles. She calls Peter and the Beloved Disciple to the empty tomb and she is sent to the "new family" of Jesus to tell them that Jesus is ascending "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."... Thus she is the primary apostolic witness to the resurrection."⁷

"Mary is a model for everyone on how to respond to the risen Christ: Proclaim the good news. Seek knowledge and clarity when you do not understand this mystery of faith, and inform and inspire the faith of others... as we celebrate Jesus' triumphant resurrection, let Mary, the first person to witness and proclaim the resurrection, inspire all of us to do the same."⁸

In the early third century, Hippolytus of Rome calls the woman who met the risen Christ "apostle to the apostles" in his commentary on the Song of Songs (25.6, 7). Pope Francis recognised this tradition in June 2016 and elevated the memorial of Mary Magdalene on July 22 to a feast day. Mass on that day now also includes a preface titled "Apostle to the apostles".

7 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad Publishing Company: Tenth Ann edition, 1994. pp719-720

8 Jaime L Waters, '*Everyone is called to preach*', *America*: April 8, 2022.

“The Church, both in the East and in the West has always regarded Saint Mary Magdalene the first witness of the Lord’s resurrection and the first evangelist, and with the greatest reverence has always honoured her although in diverse ways. Given that in our time the Church is called to reflect in a more profound way on the dignity of Woman, on the New Evangelisation and on the greatness of the Mystery of Divine Mercy, it seemed right that the example of Saint Mary Magdalene might also fittingly be proposed to the faithful. In fact this woman, known as the one who loved Christ and who was greatly loved by Christ, and was called a “witness of Divine Mercy” by Saint Gregory the Great and an “apostle of the apostles” by Saint Thomas Aquinas, can now rightly be taken by the faithful as a model of women’s role in the Church.”⁹

- 9 Holy See Press Office *Mary Magdalene, apostle of the apostles*, 10.06.2016 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/sanctae-magdalенаe-decretum_en.pdf

I and You. People are relational beings, created to seek another, a ‘you’. Nevertheless we are often confronted with our own egoism or with the egoism of others. We long to be seen, we long for real encounter, yet we often suffer from a lack of personal relationships and from isolation. We desire a life with depth, yet we run away from ourselves, diverting ourselves with any number of distractions. Is there some kind of medicine to heal us from the sicknesses of a false self-centredness and lead us into living relationships?

- JOACHIM HARTMANN & ANNETTE UNKELHÄUßER, *Joy in God*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2021. p.27.