

Today we celebrate the Feast of Mary Magdalene. We have come to place a hope in this feast day as a celebration of the role of women in the Church rooted in the epithet of “Apostle to the Apostles” .. a title started by St. Augustine because she was the first one to bring news of the Resurrection to the apostles.

But first, an observation: Actually, we know so little about the people and the characters that populate the Story of Jesus in the Gospels and in the New Testament.

Some examples:

#1: Outside of the Infancy Narratives, Joseph is mentioned only once.

#2: Outside the Infancy Narrative, Mary is mentioned only about eight times in the Gospels and once in the Acts of the Apostles. She is never mentioned by Paul.

#3: Actually Paul never mentions any of the preaching of Jesus in all of his letters. He only talks ABOUT Jesus – not what Jesus said (with one exception – the Eucharistic institution scene.)

#4: Mary Magdalene is mentioned 12 times – although only in the Gospels, never in the Acts or in the Epistles.

The traditional view of Mary Magdalene is based on a series of sermons given in 591 AD by Pope Gregory – which then formed the basis of the developing traditions of Mary Magdalene in art and in Medieval culture. What he said

- a. She is the repentant prostitute of Luke’s story
- b. She is the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany
- c. She had seven devils cast out of her by Jesus
- d. She is the “woman of the alabaster jar’ who washed his feet in tears and anointed him with oils
- e. She was the woman caught in adultery

What his sermon did was conflate all the mentions of various Mary’s and “unknown” women into a single person – who came to be called Mary Magdalene

But there is a problem: There are a whole host of Mary's mentioned in the Gospels. Each of them is a separate person, unless specifically identified as "Mary Magdalene"

Actually in 1969 Pope Paul VI acknowledged this in some of his writings – and in effect abrogated the sermons of Pope Gregory I - THERE GOES PAPAL INFALLIBILITY out the window!

What do we know about Mary Magdalene from the Gospel stories?

#1: The name "Magdalene" may refer to two things:

-either a place – hence Mary of Magdalla

-or an occupation – the Aramaic roots of the word "Magadal" goes back to the phrase, "plaiter of women's hair" that is a hair-dresser – which actually makes sense. She is described in Luke as

Mary (called Magdalla) from whom seven demons had come out – and many other women. These women were helping to support them [Jesus and the disciples] out of their own means.

...In other words, she was one of the disciples of Jesus and a wealthy follower who supported him – something a hairdresser would be able to do because she would have been wealthy.

#2: The seven demons mentioned – not that they were expelled by Jesus – but that seven demons "had come out" of her – which seems to indicate that at one point she was someone who was sick (either physically or mentally) and then had been cured and recovered.

#3: In all the lists of women given in the New Testament, she is always listed FIRST.

#4: Her prominence rests on the fact that according to the gospel story

-she was at the crucifixion Mtt 27:56, Mk 15:40, Jn 19:25

-she was at the deposition and burial: Mtt 27:61, Mtt 28:1 and Mk 16:1

-she was the first at the resurrection Mtt 28:1, Mk 16:9, Lk 24 and Jon 20:1

-after the resurrection Jesus appeared to her first: Jn 20:16, Mk 16:9, Mtt 28:9

#5: Interesting that

-she is never mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles

-she is not listed in Corinthian I 15:6 – where Paul lists all the people Jesus appeared to after the resurrection

-the incident in the Garden after the resurrection contains an interesting phrase.

When Mary realizes that this is not the gardener but Jesus, he says “Do not hold me...” - an interesting phrase of “endearment”. Why would Mary try to “embrace” Jesus? - unless there was a special relationship between them. There has grown some speculation that maybe Mary Magdalene was “the beloved disciple” mentioned in the gospels.

But that’s it – that’s all we know about this woman.

Which brings me to a second topic – where do we get the information from about the people, places and events in the story of Jesus and the Jesus movement?

The information I have been talking about has been restricted to what we would find in the New Testament – BUT Would you believe there are actually 36 gospels that we know of – not just the four we have; that there are innumerable epistles; and acts and books of revelation and other literature – all from the early centuries of the Christian era – all of which St. Augustine will call “The Christian Writings” - and what we find there is often very fascinating.

First – we need to recall that “the Bible” did not exist until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1213. Ironically we are celebrating the 800th Anniversary of that council this year. It was at this Council that the Roman Catholic Church definitively “closed” the Bible in its current form- although that formal definition will not be finalized until the Council of Trent.

Second – we need to recall that the New Testament did not exist until the 4th century. It was closed at the Council of Carthage in 397 – just shortly before Augustine died.

Personal NOTE: I've been reading a new biography of Augustine – throughout his life he referred to “the Scriptures and the Christian Writings” – the former was what we call the Old Testament – the Jewish writings – which were paramount in developing his theology – the latter was an open group of writings that consisted of all kinds of writings

Third – both the Bible and the New Testament need to be read as an ANTHOLOGY – a group of different kinds of writings – all put together for convenience sake in a single book – but in no sense is it a book with a consistent theme, plot or purpose – It consists of 72 pieces of literature – each one separate in style, purpose and intent – and each one needing to be read and understood that way.

Here are some of the OTHER GOSPELS AND WRITINGS:

Diatesseron 175-90 AD

First – Infancy Gospels

Infancy Gospel of James	145 AD
source of the later idea of the perpetual virginity of Mary	
– parts actually incorporated into the Koran	
Infancy Gospel of Thomas	2 nd cent
Life of John the Baptist	4 th cent
Syriac Infancy Gospel	6 th cent
History of Joseph the Carpenter	6 th cent
Infancy Gospel of Matthew	7 th cent
The Koran	7 th cent

Second – Jewish Gospels

Gospel of the Ebionites	-all 2 nd century
Gospel of the Nazarenes	
Gospel of the Hewbrews	
-where the Holy Spirit is understood as Jesus' Divine Mother	

Third – Other (Gnostic) Gospels

Gospel of Marcion	2 nd cent
Gospel of Mani	3 rd cent
Gospel of Apelles	2 nd cent
Gospel of Bardesanes	3 rd cent
Gospel of Basileides	2 nd cent

Fourth – Sayings Gospels

Gospel of Thomas

Q-Gospel –inside Matthew and Luke
Gospel of the Cross – inside John and the Synoptics

Fifth – Other Gospels

Gospel of Peter

-interesting plot line for the death of Jesus – this is where we get the
Scene of soldiers being posted at the tomb by Pilate, etc.

Gospel of Nicodemus (Gospel of Pilate)

Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem

Gospel of Bartholomew

Questions of Bartholomew

Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Gospel of Judas

Gospel of Philip

Gospel of Mary

It is from some of these other sources that we find mention of Mary Madgalene”

ALLOW ME: READING

When the Blessed One had said these things, he greeted them all. "Peace be with you!" he said. "Acquire my peace within yourselves!

"Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, 'Look over here!' or 'Look over there!' For the child of true Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.

"Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it."

After he had said these things, he departed from them.

But they were distressed and wept greatly. "How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the good news about the Realm of the child of true Humanity?" they said. "If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?"

Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, "Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings."

When Mary had said these things, she turned their heart [to]ward the Good, and they began to deba[t]e about the wor[d]s of [the Savior].

Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don't because we haven't heard them."

Mary responded, "I will teach you about what is hidden from you." And she began to speak these words to them.

[At this point 14 pages of the document are missing. Hopefully someday they will be found hidden in the basement of some monastery.]

FROM THE GOSPEL OF MARY

It is from this passage that Augustine will give Mary Magdalene the title of "Apostle to the apostles" – not simply because she was the first to give witness to the resurrection. She was the "teacher" of the apostles, according to this document.

And it is interesting that the early Church fathers, even though these other writings were NOT part of the emerging New Testament – were used by them as sources for understanding the roots of Christianity – and made use of them in their own writings and commentaries.

In fact many of these other gospels are ONLY known where they have been quoted and cited by the church fathers.

SECOND SOURCE: Gospel of Philip

Citation #1:

There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary.

Mary Magdalene is called Jesus's companion, partner or consort, using Coptic variants of the word *koinônos* (κοινωνός), [13] of Greek origin, or the word *hôte*, of Egyptian origin. [2]

Koinônos has a range of possible meanings

it denotes a “person engaged in fellowship or sharing with someone or in something,” but what exactly a koinônos “can share with his or her partner can take many forms,
-it is sometimes used to refer to a spouse (Mal 2:14; cf. 3 Macc 4:6),
-is also used to refer to a "companion" in faith (Phlm 17),
-a co-worker in proclaiming the Gospel (2 Cor 8:23),
-or a business associate (Luke 5:10).[

It can refer to the literal pairing of men and women in marriage and sexual intercourse, or metaphorically to a spiritual partnership, and the reunification of the Gnostic Christian with the divine realm.

And importantly, there are occasions in the Gospel of Philip when the regular Coptic word for wife is used directly in reference to people who are clearly spouses, suggesting that the term koinônos is “reserved for a more specific usage” in the Gospel of Philip.

Citation #2

As for the Wisdom who is called 'the barren', she is the mother of the angels. And the companion of [the saviour was Mar]y Ma[gda]lene. [Christ loved] M[ary] more than [all] the disci[ples, and used to] kiss her [softly] on her [hand]. The rest of [the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval]. They said to him "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Saviour answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.

However, "hand" is not necessarily the word after "kiss her... on her". It may have been cheek, forehead or feet to simply show respect.[15]

So we are offered some other interesting details about Mary Magdalene – but again rather incomplete.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE:

#1: that Mary Magdalene was indeed a disciple of Jesus

#2: that she supported him financially and seemed to be attached to him personally

#3: that she was there at the important events at the end of the life of Jesus in the Jesus story of the gospels

#4: that she continued in some kind of leadership role in the early Christian community
Mary Magdalene was courageous – supportive – and important.

BUT NOW I MUST ADD – SO WHAT! WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES ALL OF THIS MAKE – IN OUR OWN TIME AND DAY. WHAT ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN OUR OWN TIME?

We live in a world where the Roman Catholic Church (along with its sister Orthodox Church) remain one of the major misogynist institutions in our culture. How is this ever to change.

Idea #1: We have had women – strong women – who have “stood up” to this misogynist authority and challenged it.

-we have Catherine of Sienna – who really challenged and threatened the pope (Gregory XI) to return from Avignon back to Rome – and she was NOT going to take “NO” for an answer

-but we also had Elizabeth Ann Seaton – who really had to fight and struggle against all kinds of hardships and clerical hesitations to establish her dream of education – especially education for girls.

-and then of course more recently we’ve had Sr. Theresa Kane – lecturing Pope John Paul II on the role of women in the Church – and his rather “ungracious” response.

These we need to praise, to honor, to remember and to encourage. And that we will today in our Liturgy

But what about the future...

Idea #2: This past week I attended a talk by Fr. Helmut Schuller –founder of The Priest’s Initiative – Appeal to Disobedience – Catholic Tipping Point Tour. This is a group of priests, whom Pope Benedict actually referred to, who have decided NOT TO LISTEN to the restrictions from the Vatican.

There fundamental idea is that priests need to be honest. As they go about their pastoral duties, they know what the “real” situation is about. They are however caught in a schizophrenic approach. On the one hand, they go to dinner at a gay couples house and find a loving couple. Then they have to go into the pulpit and preach how gay coupling is an intrinsic evil. They know it’s not. So now it’s time to be HONEST...and in the end to say NO to the words; and yes to the lived reality. The goal is to be pastoral, not academic or legalistic.

There is actually a group similar to this here in the USA. My own bishop, now retired – Bishop Trautman, just spoke at their Conference. Bishop Trautman used to be in charge of the National Catholic Conference of Bishops Liturgy Committee. He is very upset about the new English translation. He spoke about that and the need to go back to the Liturgy of Paul VI and Vatican II.

It’s an interesting movement – along with the Ordination of Women’s Movement; the Call to Action movement – and yes also Dignity/USA. There are others.

The bottom line to all of this though is the observation that perhaps the time has come to simply begin to develop grass roots communities – and “benignly ignore” Mother Church, ie. The Vatican, the Curia, and the Pope.

Idea #3: But I believe there is an additional challenge for Dignity.

Ever since the organization was founded, it has not attracted many women. Ever since the days when we were at St. Francis, there has been a concern – where are the women?

I have my own idea on why – because Dignity was founded by men for men – who are attracted to men. Their very sexual orientation - “men attracted to men” - means that maybe there is no place for women. As a gay man I am not interested (oriented) toward women. And similarly “women attracted to women” are not too interested in “hanging out with men.” So I believe that the sexual orientation of the GLBTQ community offers a special challenge to our formation of an all-inclusive Christian community.

In addition, this is a Roman Catholic organization founded by clergy – where women are explicitly “not welcome”. And so the testosterone level of Dignity is by definition and foundation, rather heavily misogynist.

Now recently I have been encouraged. We have many new younger members joining – and in this group we find both men and women sharing with one another. It’s like the younger generation has actually taken Paul’s words to heart – in Christ there is no male or female. We are all one in Christ. And I believe finally Dignity may be on its way to becoming that Christian community that Jesus hoped for and Paul envisioned.

So the Conclusion for us: We’ve got to continue in this direction – to do it on our own – we need to follow in the footsteps of the early Christian communities and to develop our own liturgy, community, social justice and morality. All “in communion” with the larger church; but defined by the specific circumstances, needs and challenges of our own time, space and place. And when it comes to the role of women, we must be the first to give applause, praise and precedence to the role of women in our own community.

Idea #4: Of course, now we have a new pope - Pope Francis. We will have to see what he does and how he proceeds. He did give a speech on women.

To cite a press release: VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis on Wednesday (April 3) said women play a “fundamental role” in the Catholic Church as those who are mostly responsible for passing on the faith from one generation to the next. While the new pope stopped far short of calling for women’s ordination or giving women more decision-making power in the church, his remarks nonetheless signaled an openness to women that’s not often seen in the church hierarchy.

However what he actually said was that “the mission of women, of mothers and women,” in the church is “to give witness to their children and grandchildren that Christ is Risen,” - women are more than mothers, a very traditional role.

So until now the reviews are mixed.

On the one hand he has continued the investigation into the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

On the other hand he has appointed a woman banker to the committee for reviewing the Vatican Bank – who will be above the Curial cardinals.

But in addition, I myself am not very hopeful, ... because he is very traditional in his own theology: the guy believes in the Devil – not sin/not evil – but Satan. And that just is “so weird.

Idea #5: And so in today’s liturgy – let us offer it up as a plea for change.

Yesterday, Helen Thomas died.

She was the first woman White House reporter and had a long and distinguished career as a journalist. I believe she was 92. Today’s news shows characterized her as someone who asked tough questions and took our leaders to task and held them accountable and responsive to the people.

Sounds like a good job description for women in the church – to hold the official structures of the Church – the Vatican and the Pope accountable and responsible to the Christian people; ask the tough questions and to be persistent and aggressive in getting the answers. And especially, we the Vatican-Two generation, have waited long enough. It’s time to move on to better days.

As we celebrate the Feast of Mary Magdalene, we will offer today’s liturgy for a new generation of leadership in our church – which recognizes the worth, value and importance of women and their “apostolic” mission in our own world.