

Mary Magdalene: A Witness of Faith to Generations

Kathy Kuczka

On July 22, the Church will celebrate the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene. Few saints have been as misunderstood as this saint, which is why popes and poets continue to set the record straight on this woman who has been shrouded in mystery and misinterpretation.

The name *Magdalene* refers to the town where Mary was born, Magdala, a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of what was then ancient Palestine. Scholars say that the naming of Mary Magdalene in Scripture is significant. She is, in fact, named twelve times, which is more than most of the Apostles.

Mary Magdalene was a friend of Jesus who stood by his side all the way to the cross. All four Gospel accounts say that Mary Magdalene accompanied Jesus to his crucifixion. She was, according to these texts, the first person, or among the first, to witness the empty tomb. Both Mark (longer ending) and John say that Jesus not only first appeared to Mary Magdalene after he rose from the dead, but also that he commissioned her to be the first to announce the Good News. This is one reason why she is known as the “Apostle to the Apostles.” Later texts from the early Christian era further testify to her closeness to Jesus and her status as an apostle. So how did Mary Magdalene come to be known as something other than who she was?

Both Luke (8:1-2) and Mark (16:9) first mention Mary Magdalene in association with evil spirits from which she was healed. These texts have led interpreters to believe that Mary Magdalene was possessed by evil. But scholars believe it is more likely that she had been cured of physical or, perhaps, mental illness.

Further, Mary Magdalene has long been confused with other women in the Bible, some of whom were also named Mary, and some of whom are unnamed. Most problematic is her association with the penitent woman in Luke’s Gospel and with Mary of Bethany in John’s Gospel.



Mary Magdalene is honored for being the first to bear the Good News and as a faithful follower of Christ. She is known as the “Apostle to the Apostles.”

The second problematic passage comes from John’s Gospel:

Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the village of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they gave him a banquet, at which Martha served. Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary brought a pound of costly perfume made from genuine aromatic nard, with which she anointed Jesus’ feet. Then she dried his feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the ointment’s fragrance. (John 12:1-3)

It’s difficult to understand the confusion since this is clearly Mary of Bethany. However, in a sixth-century homily, Pope Gregory the Great identified Mary Magdalene as the repentant sinner in Luke’s Gospel, as well as Mary of Bethany. Since that time, Mary Magdalene has been depicted as a sinner, a promiscuous woman, and a prostitute in art, literature, and film. In fact, before the reform of the liturgical calendar, the Gospel proclaimed on the memorial of Mary Magdalene was Luke 7:36-50, about the unnamed sinner who anointed the feet of Jesus. In 1969, Pope Paul VI removed that identification, replacing that reading with the account from John that describes Mary Magdalene as the first person to whom Jesus appeared.

In 2016, Pope Francis raised the rank of the day on which Mary Magdalene is honored to a feast, making the day equal in rank to the days that the Apostles are honored. In doing so, the pope wants us to know who the saint was, a model and an inspiration, a woman who is to be remembered primarily as a faithful follower of Christ and the first bearer of the Good News.

Text by Kathy Kuczka, author of *Connecting the Liturgy with Our Lives: Print and Digital Resources for Faith Formation* (LTP, 2019).

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