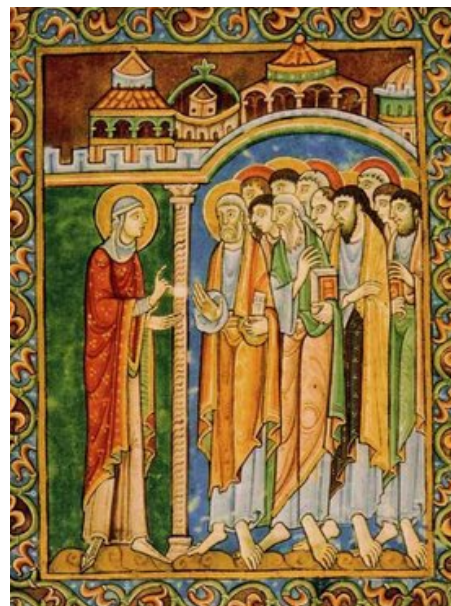


## PROGRAM NOTE FOR “JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR”

### *MARY MAGDALENE of SCRIPTURE WHO SHE WAS AND WAS NOT*

**Mary Magdalene is one of the most significant women of the New Testament. In 1969 the Vatican confirmed that she was a disciple who came up with Jesus from Galilee, stayed with him at the cross when most of his followers had left (Mt 27:55-56, Mk 15:40-41, Lk 23:49, Jn 19:25), went to his tomb early on Easter Sunday, searched and encountered the risen Christ – her teacher, her “Rabbouni.” (Mt 28:1-20, Jn 20:1-16) He spoke; commissioned her to proclaim his Resurrection and she did. (Jn 20:17-18)**



Albani Psalter c. 1123

Yet the dominant images of her in art and in our popular imagination are those of the penitent “sinful woman” or of an emaciated hermit in the desert, neither of which is supported by scripture. The misrepresentation of her as “Luke’s sinner from the city” conflated with Mary of Bethany was first seen in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century in a homily by Pope St. Gregory I. This misrepresentation slowly replaced the scripture based images of her as the faithful disciple at the cross and at Jesus’ tomb. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century her role as the courageous apostle who first proclaimed the Resurrection was virtually forgotten.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as biblical scholarship tools and techniques developed, scholars reexamined Mary Magdalene. They looked at scripture texts, first century naming conventions and the sources of different traditions. They concluded that only gospel texts that name Mary Magdalene describe her and her actions. Therefore, she is not any of the unnamed women in the gospels such as Luke’s unnamed “sinner from the city” (7:36-50) who, seeking forgiveness washed Jesus’ feet with her tears or John’s unnamed “woman caught in adultery.” (8:1-11)

The two main reasons for these conclusions center on Mary Magdalene’s unique name and evidence of the earliest traditions about her. Her unique name is recorded frequently and in the same format in all four gospels and in non-canonical texts such as the Gospel of Thomas. In lists of female disciples she is always named first indicating her leadership role. (See Note 1 for more detail.) Early Christian communities (third – tenth centuries) created reliefs, medals, ivory carvings, icons and other art honoring her as a faithful disciple at the foot of the cross and as one of the women going to Jesus’ tomb with jars of ointment on Easter morning. These images are found into the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The first known image showing her as the sinner washing Jesus’ feet did not appear until the eighth century on the Ruthwell Cross in Jarrow, England. It is also significant that the eastern Churches did not conflate

her with Luke's sinful woman and maintained separate feasts for Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene. She has been celebrated as a saint on July 22 since at least 720 CE in both the eastern and western Churches and still is today.

The Vatican's correction in 1969 was made only in the liturgical calendar and was not accompanied by additional teaching, publicity or new art works so she remained the "sinful woman" in our popular imagination. It is understandable that, in 1970, when Rice and Webber released their JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR concept album they presented Mary Magdalene as the sinner of legend. However, remarkably, Rice and Webber also captured a sense of her prominence and faithfulness and their song, "Could We Start Again Please?" shows her as a leader in parallel to Peter.

On June 3, 2016 the Vatican elevated Mary Magdalene's July 22<sup>nd</sup> commemoration to a Feast with a Proper Preface. She and Mary, Jesus' mother are the only woman with a Feast, the same honor given the male apostles. The announcement called her the "Apostle of the Apostles," an honorific from the fourth century. There were no additional public announcements or new hymns, church art, articles, lectures, etc. so some confusion still persists. But the Feast designation is significant. <sup>Note 2</sup>



It will take communications and teaching to restore our historical memory of Mary Magdalene as the apostle of the Resurrection. Please help by reading and passing on this information and sharing the postcard "Mary of Magdala Proclaims the Resurrection." Imagine the effect it will have on our girls to see her as a courageous and faithful leader and role model.

Thank you, Rita L. Houlihan, CSH '66, Newton College of the Sacred Heart, '70.

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Note: Mary Magdalene is named "fourteen times in the gospels, more than any other woman and more than most of the men in Jesus' inner circle." (Joann Turpin, Twelve Apostolic Women, Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2004. p.48.) Women's names were rarely recorded; when they were they were usually identified by their relation to a man (father, husband, son, etc.). So it is striking that Mary Magdalene is named by her place, Migdal. Her name is recorded twelve times in the same grammatical format in all four gospel texts and she appears as "Mary" twice in John's Resurrection text (20:1-18) where it is clear no other woman is present. Her name also appears in the same grammatical construction in the non-canonical texts such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary.

The gospels and non-canonical texts were written for widely dispersed communities over a span of about 300 years (c. 70 to 350). It is remarkable that her name survived intact; this indicates she was a well-known apostle. Based on this analysis, twentieth century biblical scholars concluded she would not have appeared as an unnamed person in a gospel story. So she is not Luke's unnamed "sinner from the city" who, seeking forgiveness washed Jesus' feet with her tears; she is not the unnamed "woman caught in adultery" (Jn 8:11) or Mark or Matthew's unnamed woman who prophetically anointed Jesus' head in anticipation of his death (Mark 14:1-9, Matthew 26:1-13) or Mary of Bethany who, in John's gospel, anointed Jesus' feet in anticipation of his death. (Jn 12:1-8)

Note · Decree: the celebration of St. Mary Magdalene raised to a feast in the General Roman Calendar.  
<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/06/10/160610c.html>