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**Transcript of “Encountering the Risen Jesus:  
Mary Magdalene as Prototype”**

**presented on July 19, 2013 by  
Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M.**

Introduction:

My name is Thomas Groome. I have the privilege of serving as the director of the Summer Institute of Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry. And with... we co-sponsor... Our Summer Institute co-sponsors this celebration of Mary Magdala Day with our Office of Continuing Education of the School of Theology and Ministry, and that office is directed by my colleague, Dr. Jane Regan, and with the associate director, Melinda Brown Donovan. And on behalf of both of our programs, it is my privilege to offer you a hundred thousand welcomes, and in my original tongue that’s not just *céad mile fáilte*, that’s *céad mile, mile, mile fáilte*. So it’s a hundred thousand welcomes. We’re so delighted.

To this fifth celebration of the feast of St. Mary of Magdala. Now, we are a few days early. As you know it’s on the 22nd, on Monday, but we just thought that Friday afternoon, that might be a more festive way or time to celebrate than on a Monday. So—and I think the full house proves the wisdom of that decision—we’re delighted that so many of... old friends and new friends are with us. Indeed, we had a waiting list. So it looks as if we have established this grand celebration as something of a high holy day, at least in our local liturgical calendar here in Boston.

And why? Why would we do so? I mean, why do we sponsor such a grand celebration for this good feast day? Well first, a quite pragmatic reason. I must recognize the person who came to me some six years ago with the idea of celebrating Mary of Magdala Day, and she not only had the idea but she also had the commitment to help fund it and the lunch and the guest speaker of... a prestigious scholar, and to bring in somebody and to fund the whole day. And that was Rita Houlihan. I just want to ask Rita to stand and accept our gratitude. Well, as you know, places like Boston College never accept the offer of funding.

On the other hand, why did we... why did we accept this one, and especially for... What are the spiritual and the faith-based reasons that we celebrate this as a great feast day? The great theologian, Johann Baptist Metz, suggested that to maintain commitment to justice and resistance to oppression, that it’s imperative for a people to find their dangerous memories. Dangerous memories are ones from our own lives or from the life of our faith and our tradition that confront the status quo and, indeed, our own complacency. They’re memories that recommit us to the struggle. Memories like the memory of a suffering people, memories like the memory of a God who suffers with us in Jesus of Nazareth. But let me submit that by way of justice for women in our Church and in our world, there is no more dangerous memory than the memory of Mary Magdalene, especially now that we’ve debunked the false myths about her as a sinner and reclaimed her for what she truly was, the *apostola apostolorum*, the Apostle to the Apostles. As a recent editorial in *America* opined and as three of the four Gospels record, she was indeed the first witness to the Resurrection, and so then for those fateful moments, hours immediately thereafter, there’s a deep sense in which Mary Magdala was the Church. She was the only person who knew the story and could proclaim it of the Resurrection.

Thanks to our funding we have been able to bring in the finest of scholars to help us retrieve such dangerous memories, and this year is no exception. The dean of our School of Theology and Ministry,

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Father Mark Massa of the Society of Jesus, will introduce this year's St. Mary of Magdala lecturer. Father Massa.

Mark Massa:

Good afternoon. I've been delegated to offer you the one hundred thousandth and first welcome. Last year when we had this very day, we did it on the very hottest day of the summer. And this year... It's actually very hard to coordinate this to have this event on the hottest day of the year. So thank you all for showing up.

Sandra Schneiders is a Sister of the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and... she is, as all of you know, an internationally known biblical scholar and is one of the most respected scholars on religious life today. She holds an S.T.L. license from the *Institut Catholique* in Paris and she has a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Currently she serves as professor emerita of New Testament Studies in Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California.

She is the author of ten books. Let me say that again, okay? She is the author of ten books and has made distinguished contributions in the fields of biblical scholarship, Christian spirituality, feminism, and religious life. In 2006, a volume of essays by distinguished scholars was published and presented to her in her honor. Also in 2006, she won the John Courtney Murray Award which is the highest honor bestowed by the Catholic Theological Society of America. In 2011 Sandra was elected as a Luce Fellow for the 2011/12 academic year, a prestigious award for a year-long creative and innovative theological project, and it was during that time that she finished *Risen Jesus, Cosmic Christ: Biblical Spirituality in the Gospel of John*.

At the 2012 assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the conference presented its highest honor, the LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award, to her. In her acceptance speech she said that "the leaders of a genuinely Christian community must be capable of leading that community not only to *do* what is needed in this world but also to *be* what is needed by this world, not only to act efficaciously but to live with integrity."

We at the STM are honored and privileged to have such a leader with us today: one who *does* what is needed, who *is* what is needed, and who acts with utter effectiveness and lives with integrity. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Sandra Schneiders as our Mary of Magdala speaker.

Sandra Schneiders:

Thank you, Mark and Tom, and good afternoon, all. Let me begin by thanking the School of Theology and Ministry for inviting me to participate in this annual celebration of Mary of Magdala—more familiarly known to most of us as Mary Magdalene—by giving this lecture in her honor.

When 40 years ago I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the Resurrection in the Gospel of John, I fell in love with this wonderful biblical character who plays a major role in John's Easter narrative. Most people, even as recently as 30 or 40 years ago, and even those who identified psychologically with this colorful woman, not only did not consider Mary Magdalene particularly theologically significant, they thought that the most important fact about her was that she was a notorious sinner, a prostitute whom Jesus rescued from her wicked ways and who repaid his mercy with a life of humble penitence in well-deserved obscurity and near silence. Who could have guessed that a couple of decades later she would have become the unofficial, but very real, patron saint of the movement for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church and the heroine of all, men as well as women,

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who longed for a Church in which all the baptized participate equally as children of God, disciples of Jesus, and emissaries of the Holy Spirit in the world.

One of the effects of the largely feminist-inspired rediscovery of Mary Magdalene in the wake of Vatican II has been a prodigious production of excellent scholarship on this biblical figure whose person and story is probably as historically confused, theologically contorted, and ecclesiastically manipulated and prostituted as that of anyone associated with the earthly Jesus. Besides the contemporary scholarly work attempting to redress this mistreatment of Mary Magdalene and mine her potential for the Christian community, she has also been, throughout Christian history, a rich inspiration of art, drama, sculpture, architecture, literature (including novels and poetry), legends, religious kitsch, and not a little sheer nonsense produced for pious and impious purposes. Most recently, on July 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year the well-reviewed opera by Mark Adamo, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, closed its premiere performance at the San Francisco Opera, closely following the Los Angeles Philharmonic premiere last season of John Adams's *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*.

Most of this stupendous outpouring of scholarly artistic and popular production on the subject of Mary Magdalene draws very heavily on what we call the apocryphal, that is, the non-canonical literature often written in the genres of the New Testament, such as Gospels and Acts of the first several centuries of the Common Era. While these writings did not become part of the Bible and are thus not regarded as inspired Scripture, they are important collateral sources for our knowledge of the variety of thought and practice in the early Church.

For a usable, select summary of the most important scholarly work on Mary Magdalene in the last couple of decades, you could consult the presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America of Boston College's own professor, Mary Ann Hinsdale. Her address is entitled "St. Mary of Magdala: Ecclesiological Provocations," and is published in the CTSA proceedings of 2011.

My concern this afternoon, however, is with the biblical Mary Magdalene, especially as she is presented in the Gospel of John and especially with the issue of how we, the readers of Scripture, approach the inspired text. Much of the recent resurgence of interest in Mary Magdalene in the Church at large is due to the efforts of an organization called Future Church, which describes itself as, and I quote, "a coalition of parish-based Catholics which works to preserve the Eucharist by advocating for opening ordination to all the baptized," unquote. It was founded in 1990 in Cleveland, Ohio, by a St. Joseph sister, Christine Schenk, and her associates. Chris continues as its director, and today Future Church is headquartered in Lakewood, Ohio. This organization undertakes all kinds of research—activist, educational, and other types of projects—to swell the movement toward and pressure for an inclusive ordained ministry in the Catholic Church. One of its most successful and popular efforts has been its Mary of Magdala Project, a multi-pronged effort to educate people about St. Mary Magdalene, to tell her story, to dispel unfounded myths about her sinfulness, to spotlight her role as an apostle and first witness to the Resurrection in the New Testament, and to promote celebrations of her feast such as the one that we are holding today. Future Church in the practical sphere and Mary Magdalene research in the academic sphere have combined to make Mary Magdalene a virtual cottage industry in the contemporary Church.

I mention this powerful grassroots movement because it embodies what is probably the primary reason for the massive interest in Mary Magdalene that has arisen since Vatican II, namely the potential leverage of Mary Magdalene in the argument for full equality for women in the Catholic Church. Many people are convinced that any talk of equality in the Church is disingenuous and empty at best, and flagrantly dishonest at worst, as long as women are excluded on the basis of gender from

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full participation in the Church's sacramental system, including eligibility for ordination. But, of greatest interest to me in this struggle, is not ordination itself or even the ordination of women, but the fact that the appeal to Mary Magdalene as the primary support for the ordination of women is so foundational to the overall argument.

There are excellent arguments from ecclesiology, sacramental theology, theological anthropology, moral theology, Christology, Church history, pastoral theology, as well as philosophy, sociology, psychology, and other secular disciplines against the exclusion of women from ordination and for their inclusion. But when all is said and done, believing Christians are convinced that no human reasoning in the sacred or secular disciplines can be finally persuasive unless in the end it can be shown from Scripture, from the Word of God witnessed to in the Bible, that the ordination of women is God's will for the Church.

From a pastoral—now, not a doctrinal—but from a pastoral point of view, the most persuasive single argument for the end of the exclusion of women from orders was delivered in 1976 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission when it voted by a large majority, after a thorough and intensive study of the New Testament by the Vatican's own chosen biblical scholars, that the New Testament of itself does not exclude the possibility of the Church ordaining women. This act of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, not a positive endorsement of the ordination of women but a negative statement that Scripture does not forbid it, actually has no doctrinal weight at all. The PBC is a purely advisory committee. By contrast, everything short of an explicitly infallible solemn definition of the absolute exclusion in perpetuity of women from orders by the divine will has been issued repeatedly by the Church's highest authorities, carrying a great deal of doctrinal weight. But despite these massive exercises of magisterial power, including literal gag orders threatening people with excommunication or even carrying out such threats for even discussing the possibility of ordaining women, and condemnations of books and theologians for even the most circumspect mentions of the topic, the believing community continues to discuss the question and even to engage in ecclesial disobedience—like the ordinations of the Roman Catholic women priests—because of the widespread conviction that Scripture in fact does not forbid the ordination of women. That conclusion has gradually expanded through numerous scholarly studies from this essentially negative position into a positive conclusion, that not only does Scripture not forbid the ordination of women but that there is excellent evidence, a good deal of it centered on Mary Magdalene, that such ordination is according to the will of God manifested in Jesus.

Now, I am not at all interested here in the question of women's ordination or anyone's ordination for that matter. But I am very interested in the evidence this conflict in the Church gives of the Catholic attitude towards Scripture and where we are being led by the Spirit in our engagement with revelation through the biblical text. Catholics are often unfavorably compared to Protestants on this point, and it is true that Catholics, for a variety of reasons we cannot go into here, were living or barely surviving on a biblical starvation diet for about 400 years between the Reformation and Vatican II. But they never lost their taste and appetite for the Word of God. And once the Council insisted that the sacramental table was to offer in abundance not only the Eucharistic bread of life but the scriptural Word of God, Catholics have ravenously consumed more than 400 years of biblical nourishment. And Catholic biblical scholars are among the best chefs in the biblical kitchen.

At the beginning of the Catholic biblical renewal, the emphasis tended to fall on developing biblical literacy. Catholics needed to learn not only the basic structure and content of the Bible but also how biblical scholarship worked and how readers could draw conclusions from the scholarly study of the text. For many this process was primarily historical, learning to deal with historical critical methods

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and how to handle the sometimes surprising results of going beyond both a literalist face-value reading of the text as if it were written yesterday in English, and how to read the Bible on its own terms rather than as a collection of proof texts to bolster dogmatic positions developed centuries, and even millennia, after the text in question was written.

But it seems to me that in general, theologically literate and ministerially engaged Catholics are beyond these more introductory issues. I think what is happening in Mary Magdalene studies is an excellent case study for understanding this movement in hermeneutics, that is, in biblical interpretation which is no longer primarily methodological but substantive. The bulk of Mary Magdalene scholarship during the last few decades has been basically historical in the very valid sense of historical critical. The driving questions were some of the following:

- Was Mary Magdalene a real person?
- Was she a single person distinct from other women in the Gospels, for example, the sinful woman in Luke 7 who, uninvited, anointed Jesus' feet at Simon's dinner party?
- Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus's feet in John's Gospel?
- The unnamed woman who anointed Jesus's head according to Matthew and Mark?
- Or are all these women figures really one composite figure, namely Mary Magdalene?
- Was Mary Magdalene a converted sinner or a faithful disciple of Jesus?
- Was she an apostle?
- What kind of relationship did she have with Jesus? Disciple? Friend? Lover? Spouse?
- How is she related to the real, that is, male disciples and apostles?
- Could she be the Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel?
- Could she even have had some role in writing that Gospel?
- Did Jesus really appear to her on Easter morning and commission her to announce the Resurrection?
- And if so, what are the implications for her relationship with Simon Peter and the first Christian communities?
- Why does Paul never mention her?
- Were there efforts to squelch her and her ministry in the early Church, and if so, why?
- And so on.

These questions are extremely important because Mary Magdalene is presented in the text as the premiere woman disciple of Jesus, as one who went about with him during his public life, who was steadfast at the foot of the cross and witnessed the Church-founding outflow of blood and water from the pierced side of Jesus, who witnessed the burial and thus knew exactly where the body of the Lord was placed, by whom, and how, who discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning, who informed the male disciples that the body of the Lord was gone, who received the first appearance of the Risen Lord, who played the role assigned by Jesus to Peter before the Passion according to Luke, namely to strengthen the other disciples once he himself had been converted. And Mary Magdalene fulfilled that role by bearing witness to the disciples of the Resurrection once she had recognized the Lord.

If, in fact, historically Mary Magdalene was who the text presents her to be and did what the text says she did, then it is perfectly legitimate to raise, on the basis of her experience, the questions being raised today about the discipleship and apostleship of women in the New Testament, and to apply a vigorous hermeneutic of suspicion to her marginalization in the history of interpretation and the marginalization of women down through the ages in the Church's life and ministry. As a Church we have not finished with this agenda, and it will only expand as more and more use is made of the

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collateral non-canonical literature over the first Christian centuries as our questions become bolder and our hermeneutical finesse develops.

In her presidential address to which I referred earlier, Mary Ann Hinsdale took a new tentative but very interesting step beyond this strictly historical critical inquiry. Hinsdale, without abandoning the historical questions, raised a genuinely theological, specifically ecclesiological question about the Mary Magdalene material in the Gospels. Hinsdale took a cue from the 1973 ecumenical work directed collaboratively by the Catholic biblical scholar, Raymond Brown, and Lutheran scholars, Karl Donfried and John Reumann, on the role of Peter in the New Testament. These scholars working across denominational lines, and with an expressly ecumenical objective, posited a Petrine function in the New Testament rather than insisting on the traditionally Catholic position that Peter was personally constituted the first pope and vicar of Christ by a direct act of Jesus himself, or the traditionally Protestant refusal of Petrine Primacy. These scholars were interested in finding a richer interpretation of Peter, one which would be ecumenically more fruitful as well as being more historically and biblically tenable. That is, more validly rooted in the New Testament material than either of the two traditional positions.

Was there a way of understanding the figure of Simon Peter as the instantiation in the original community of a Jesus-intended ministry of leadership in the service of unity of the Church which might be exercised not only by the individual historical person, Simon Peter, and his manually designated successors, but by others in a variety of ways even during Peter's own lifetime and *a fortiori* in successive generations? If so, there might be a way in which non-Catholics could appreciate and recognize the unifying leadership role of the Bishop of Rome in relation to other churches. And Catholics could appreciate and recognize the exercise of genuine ecclesial leadership based in office in non-Catholic communities.

There seemed to be a basis for this non-monarchical, transpersonal understanding of the Petrine ministry in the New Testament itself where, for example, the so-called "power of the keys" is conferred on Peter individually in Matthew 16:18, and the power of binding and loosing conferred on the community of disciples as a whole in Matthew 18:18. According to Acts 15, the role of pastoral leadership and decision making which seem to be entrusted in the Gospels to the Twelve in a special way, was exercised by the council of the Church in Jerusalem considering of... consisting of, quote, "the apostles and elders with the consent of the whole Church," unquote, under the leadership of James, who was not one of the Twelve in the settling of the dispute about the entrance into the Church of the uncircumcised. Paul, who was not a disciple of the pre-Easter Jesus and not one of the Twelve, was recognized with Peter as one of the two primary apostles in the first generation Church, and played a pivotal role in this most important, indeed fundamental... foundational decision of the Church in Jerusalem.

In other words, is there such a thing as a Petrine function or Petrine ministry of unifying leadership which is not exclusive to a particular historical figure, not always conferred in a direct line of descent by manual ordination, and not always identical in scope and function to previously established offices? This understanding of authority in the Church is much more open, for example, to a theology of the episcopacy in which the individual bishops throughout the world are not branch managers of the pope's personal fiefdom but genuine pastors who exercise the ministry of unifying leadership with him as equals. The Bishop of Rome might be *primus... primus inter pares*, but he is not a divine right monarch with vassals ruling his outlying provinces. He is not outside or above the Church's leadership structure nor its sole authority. This is, in fact, the conception of the episcopacy that Vatican II tried to reinstate in *Lumen Gentium*, chapter two, when it insisted that episcopal authority is collegial

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because it is grounded in the genuine sacramental ordination of every bishop, not in papal delegation. As had been originally understood in the early Church, the Bishop of Rome as pope is the vicar of Peter while each bishop in his own diocese is the Vicar of Christ. This is the sacramental understanding that can ground a genuinely synodal—that is, collegial—ecclesiology. Parenthetically, reestablishing this understanding of a collegial episcopacy seems to be part of Francis's agenda in styling himself, from the moment of his election as Bishop of Rome in relation to his brother bishops. He is pope only because he is Bishop of Rome, not vice versa.

Mary Ann Hinsdale made a similar, if tentative, theological move in relation to Mary Magdalene. Is there perhaps a Magdalene function, she asked, or a Magdalene ministry analogous to the Petrine function? That is, could one reading of the Mary Magdalene material support an understanding of her as the original historical instantiation of an ecclesiological ministry or function or role that is not exclusive to nor exhausted by this one historical woman, but is biblically presented through her? You might suspect quite correctly that I want to answer that question in the affirmative. Let me suggest two sorts of evidence to support this suggestion.

First, there is a close parallel between the way Mary Magdalene is presented and the way Simon Peter is presented in the New Testament. Although they both feature in certain extraordinary or singular episodes—for example, Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi and Mary Magdalene's encounter with the Risen Lord on Easter—they are most often mentioned as part of a small group in which they are prominent but not solitary. Peter is usually part of a special group among the male disciples—Peter, James, and John—who were the only disciples present, for example, for the raising of the daughter of Jairus, the Transfiguration, the Agony in the Garden, during Jesus's public ministry, and were together in the first persecution of the Jerusalem Church. Paul refers to James, although it's not clear... entirely clear which James he's referring to, Cephas, that is Peter, and John as pillars of the Church of Jerusalem. In a similar way, Mary Magdalene is usually mentioned as part of a special group of female disciples, a confusing number of whom are named Mary, including the other Mary, Mary the mother of James and Joses, the mother of James and John, Salome, Joanna, Mary the wife of Clopas. Just as Peter is usually named first in the group of male disciples, Mary Magdalene is always first in the group of female disciples. Peter is part of a group that is sometimes twelve, sometimes 70 or 72, and sometimes more. And Mary Magdalene is sometimes part of a group of two or three and sometimes of many other women disciples.

In other words, there might well have been circles of male and female disciples during Jesus's public life and after his resurrection with Simon Peter as the leader of one group and Mary Magdalene of the other. Luke suggests that the two groups together followed Jesus in his itinerant ministry. However, at other places in the story, for example during the Paschal events, the groups are strikingly contrasted. The male disciples were in hiding from the moment of Jesus's condemnation until his appearance as risen from the dead. The female disciples were at the cross, the burial, and the empty tomb. It has been very plausibly suggested that members of both groups were at the Last Supper since the role of women was central to that celebration. And we know that members of both groups were among the hundred and twenty disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem for the descent of the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

My second evidence for a parallel between Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter is the way their respective roles or functions are characterized. Peter's role is frequently connected with leadership, either how to lead and unify the disciples or, at least as frequently and often dramatically, how not to lead. Jesus is very concerned to correct Peter's inveterate tendency to try to grab first place among the disciples, to lord it over the others, and even to tell Jesus how to save the world, and why and

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how to keep hierarchical roles in the community straight and inviolate. The issue comes to a head at the Last Supper when Peter refuses to accept the servant character of Jesus's salvific ministry, symbolized by Jesus's washing of his disciples' feet which clearly threatens the power structure of master and servant which was crucial to Peter's self-definition. And Jesus threatens him with permanent separation from Jesus and his work unless Peter gets with the program. This Johannine scene closely parallels, in substance, the scene in the Synoptic Gospels in which Peter rejects God's plan for the salvation of the world through Jesus's Passion and death. And Jesus calls Peter "Satan" and imposes a time-out while Peter reflects on who is in charge of the world. At the same Last Supper, Peter has to acknowledge that Jesus shares his most intimate communications not with Peter, but with the Beloved Disciple. Just as after the Resurrection it will be the Beloved Disciple, not Peter, who sees and believes the sign of the face cloth in the tomb and who recognizes the stranger on the shore who beckons them to come and eat breakfast. It is the Lord.

All four Gospels record Jesus's warning to Peter, bragging of his bravery and fidelity as the Passion approaches, that when the chips are down Peter will deny his friend repeatedly. And even after Peter's rehabilitation during the breakfast on the shore in John 21, Jesus has to tell Peter that the fate of the Beloved Disciple is not Peter's business and that Peter has plenty to do to tend to his own discipleship and fulfill the mission entrusted to him. But Peter's leadership is also signaled by Jesus, who prays for Peter that his faith not fail during the Passion and charges him to act on his... out [of] his own conversion by strengthening his companions. Jesus also reminds Peter that when Peter does get it right, as in his confession of Jesus's identity at Caesarea Philippi, that it is God's revelatory action in him—not Peter's superior spiritual insight—that is responsible. Jesus's education of Peter is Peter's formation for leadership, a leadership that is gift and responsibility, but neither a recognition of Peter's superiority nor a reward for his virtue. His leadership must be rooted in his love for Jesus and must express itself in loving care for Jesus's flock, which is never Peter's flock; a care that he is to exercise in partnership with others, like the Beloved Disciple, who have equally or more important roles in God's plan.

Although Peter narratively carries the role of formation for and responsibility of leadership in the Gospel, Jesus's teaching on the subject applies to all his followers. They are all to shun arguments over who is the greatest, all to receive the Kingdom as a little child who has no claim on anyone for anything. They are all to take the lowest place, all to wash one another's feet, all to avoid ostentatious clothes and hierarchical titles and first places in the liturgical assembly and obsequious salutations in the marketplace. They are all to renounce any temptation to exercise power over others, to sit in judgment over or punish transgressors as if they were God, to ostracize those who believe differently or even not at all, to decide who may and may not approach Jesus for healing or blessing. The Petrine ministry of leadership for unity is the work of the whole Church and it must never result in class distinctions, condemnations, or exclusions, domination or violence, binding up burdens too heavy for people to carry. But Peter is the figure in the Gospel who instantiates, symbolizes, but must not monopolize this function of ministerial leadership. This, I think, is well-captured in what Vatican II had to say in *Lumen Gentium* about the whole Church as the body of Christ, sharing by baptism and confirmation in the identity and mission of Jesus.

Let us turn now to Mary Magdalene with the question: is she presented in a parallel way in the Gospels? An interesting feature of Mary Magdalene is that in both the exegetical and the spirituality traditions, especially in the West, Mary Magdalene has tended to be conflated with most of the other outstanding women in the Gospels. And this hermeneutical tendency is abetted by the seemingly inconvenient fact that most of the women characters in the Gospels are either nameless or named



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Mary. So Mary Magdalene has been identified with the sinful woman who crashed the dinner party at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7 and anointed Jesus's feet with perfume, as well as with the nameless woman in both Matthew and Mark who anointed Jesus's head in the house of Simon the leper in Bethany before his passion, and with Mary of Bethany who sat at his feet listening to his teaching while her sister served, according to Luke, and who also anointed his feet with costly ointment, according to John. These stories invite conflation because of the name of Simon, the location in Bethany, the anointing of Jesus's head or feet with precious ointment which is directly related by Jesus himself to his passion, the male objections to the women's actions, and the defense of the women by Jesus against the men. From a literary point of view, this identification suggests not necessarily that the authors of the tradition were confused, but that in fact, as in relation to the leadership function which is not Peter's personal possession, the Magdalene role and function is not unique to Mary Magdalene even though she focuses it narratively. But the actual reference to the historical Mary Magdalene before the Passion is the note of Luke 8 that she went about with Jesus during his public ministry, along with many other women and the Twelve, and that the women put their resources at Jesus's service. And it is noted that she was the beneficiary of Jesus's ministry of exorcism.

Strangely enough, or more distressingly, not strange at all, the tradition is rife with references to Mary Magdalene as a great, undoubtedly sexual sinner because she was liberated by Jesus from seven demons, even though the man from Gerasenes from whom a legion, that is three- to six-thousand, devils was expelled is never presented as a sinner, much less a sexual sinner, but simply as an unfortunate victim. Some things never change. But be that as it may, the mention of demons in relation to Mary Magdalene might very well have encouraged her conflation in the exegetical tradition with the sinful woman in Luke. In fact, what we know about Mary Magdalene is that she was one of the restricted group of disciples, male and female, who made up the itinerant band who participated in Jesus's pre-Easter ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. That band shared a common purse, had nowhere to lay their heads, and apparently had made some kind of break with their families in order to be with Jesus in a continuous way.

Once the Passion starts, however, Mary Magdalene, according to all four Gospels, moves to center stage. She is with the mother of Jesus and Jesus's aunt at the foot of the cross throughout Jesus's agony. She heard his last words, witnessed the offer of sour wine to slake his thirst, witnessed the flow of blood and water from his open side. She, with other women disciples, witnessed the burial and could testify to the location of the tomb. It is interesting that some contemporary biblical scholars like John Dominic Crossan seem to discount the value of the women's witness to the location of the tomb as the first male disciples discounted their witness to the Resurrection. Some things never change. According to the Synoptics, Mary Magdalene and other women disciples came to the tomb on Easter morning, found it empty, received the proclamation of the Resurrection, and delivered it to the other disciples. In John's Gospel, Mary is highlighted by being presented as alone in the garden of the tomb on Easter morning and the only receiver of the commission to announce the Resurrection.

So, in summary, like Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene is commonly presented in a group of disciples. But in the most striking moments she emerges as the single actor and it is in these singular moments that we get some hint as to what ecclesial trait, role, ministry, motif, function these characters are instantiating. With Peter it is his struggle with leadership which he seems to be involved in to this very day, his vacillation between hubris and cowardice on the one hand, and contrition and devotion on the other, and his commissioning by Jesus to lead from his own weakness and Jesus's strength the disciples who would be the Church. In Mary Magdalene I would suggest what we discern is the role of

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the witness and prophet. The witness is one who first sees what must be seen and then is empowered by the vision to announce or proclaim what is revealed in the vision. Jesus is the ultimate witness, the only one who has ever seen God, and who is empowered to bear witness to what he has seen and heard with his Father.

Mary Magdalene is one who goes about with the earthly Jesus, witnessing what he does and hearing what he says; who experiences his healing power in her own person and has always been recognized as an archetypal lover whose love and courage are strong as death and who never abandons Jesus; who is the only privileged witness of all aspects of the Paschal Mystery—the suffering, the death, the burial, the empty tomb, and the resurrected Lord returned to his own; and who is commissioned by Jesus himself to communicate that mystery for the first time in the name and with the authority of that Risen Lord. She claims the credential formula of an apostle, the same formula used by the disciples bearing witness to Thomas who was absent when Jesus appeared to them on Easter night, the same formula used by Paul when he was unfavorably compared to the other apostles; in both cases, “I have seen the Lord.” And she delivers his message, “he said these things.”

She is the prophet par excellence, disciple and apostle of the Risen One. Like the Petrine function of leadership for unity, the prophetic or witness function embodied in Mary Magdalene is not meant to be monopolized by a single disciple. It is an identity and mission shared by all Jesus’s disciples who exercise it in different ways and to different degrees. It is, in a sense, one mission, one function that is like the tongues of fire on Pentecost symbolizing the one Spirit conferred on each disciple individually. But in their biblical archetypes, Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene, we see what the particular ecclesial function or dimension or role looks like. It seems to me that the two functions are complimentary. Leadership or any position of authority that rests in office has an inborn tendency to corruption. Power tends to corrupt in or out of the Church. The weaker the officeholder, the more vulnerable she or he is to corruption. The history of the Church bears eloquent testimony to the weakness, the venality, the self-serving abuse of the flock of Christ by those who have held office, even the highest offices in the Church. And it also bears witness to Jesus’s limitless mercy in drawing those he has set as leaders of the Church back to the truth, to the truth of their vocation, with his insistent question, “Do you love me? Do you love me?” Because that is ultimately the only qualification for leadership in this entity which is not in substance an organization or a world power or an institution, but is the very body of Christ in this world.

But there is another function which has no place in the power structure. It begins and remains rooted in the experience of weakness strengthened in the infinite and unmerited mercy of the one in whom we can do all things. This is a ministry contemplative and active, witnessing what God is doing and bearing witness to what one has seen and heard, in season and out of season, with or without permission, despite all efforts, often of officeholders, to silence it. Think of Joan of Arc before the violence of the Inquisition, or Theresa Kane in the presence of the most powerful pope in recent memory. It has nothing of its own to lose—no power, no status, no agenda, or project—so it risks everything, even life itself, in fidelity to the truth of the one whom it loves.

As we look at Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene in the New Testament, we can ask the historical questions. Who were they historically in the life of the pre-Easter Jesus? What roles did they actually play in his earthly ministry and in his community after the Resurrection? What conclusions might we draw from this historical data about who should play what roles in the institutional Church? I am suggesting that we can also ask, through examination of the narrative presentation of these two characters, theological questions about the meaning and practice of discipleship. Every member of Christ is baptized into his Paschal Mystery, into his body, but also into the visible organized institution

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we call the Church. How do the two dynamics, apostolic leadership on the one hand and prophetic discipleship on the other, find expression in the Church as a whole and in the life and ministry of every individual Christian? Are these separate functions assigned exclusively on the basis of gender to certain members of the Church, or are they functions which all the baptized are called to exercise according to the measure of the giving of Christ?

But now I would like to venture tentatively into the third type of engagement with the biblical text that the Mary Magdalene episode invites. Beyond the historical examination and the conclusions about Church order that it might suggest, and the literary narrative investigation that stimulates theological ecclesiological conclusions, I want to raise aesthetic questions that might have something important to offer in the area of spirituality. This third step, in other words, is neither historical nor literary but aesthetic. How does personal contemplative participation with the text, as distinguished from either analysis or criticism, plunge the reader into the mystery of revelation, not as informing but as transforming? Biblical scholars are just beginning, I believe, to undertake the development of the theory and practice that will open up this dimension of engagement with the biblical text, namely biblical spirituality, not as an extrinsic application of insights to one's spiritual life but as a process intrinsic to the reading of the text, something the text does in and to the reader in the very process of reading.

Part of this inquiry in respect to our topic today will probably involve approaching, very carefully, the gender dimensions of the Simon Peter/Mary Magdalene dialectic. Is it purely random chance that leadership for unity, or what I have called the Petrine function, is acted out in the person of a man, and the apostolic, prophetic, or Magdalene function in a woman? Is that due to historical or literary constraints or to gender stereotyping? Or is there more to it than that? And can we even raise these questions in a way that steers clear of gender essentialism on the one hand and sexual amorphism on the other? But these questions are for another day and another full-length paper.

In the meantime, we are left, both men and women, to respond with Peter to the only question that matters—"Do you love me?"—which is not a stereotypically male conversation, and to assume with Mary Magdalene the ecclesial responsibility of bearing witness—"I have seen the Lord and this is what he says to us"—which is not a stereotypically female function, at least not in our Church. I turn here, however, not unaffected by but for the moment abstracting from these gender issues, to the issue of theological aesthetics.

Theological aesthetics has to do with how engagement with the beautiful, whether in the... in visual art, ritual, music, text, discourse, or other expressions, changes the viewer or hearer not by changing their mind but by transforming their personal dynamics. We have, I'm sure, all had the experience of going to a film expecting to be entertained or enlightened or informed or even thrilled or terrified, and being so overcome by the experience that we are speechless, in tears, or even disoriented as the credits begin to roll. We want to be alone, not to have to move, as we try to re-find or reestablish our relationship to the so-called real world we left a couple of hours ago when the lights in the theater went out. I remember having this experience when I saw *Schindler's List* a few years ago and when I saw *Lincoln* last year. It was not that I knew more, had different ideas than I had before seeing the film. It was that I was a different person, even if only for a short time. And in a sense, even as the impact of the film subsided, I knew I could never go home again.

Down through the centuries, the Easter encounter in the garden between Mary Magdalene and the Risen Jesus has had this effect on readers and hearers. Mary, reaching toward the one she has suddenly realized is her slain *rabbouni* as he restrains her with the words, "do not touch me," and the

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commission, "Go to my brothers and sisters," with the mysterious connective phrase about ascending to his and their God and Father, have moved people deeply. Huge volumes of exegetical ink have been spilled trying to decipher the meaning of this scene. Some explanations are better than others, but nothing explains the fascination of interpreters with this scene or its resistance to satisfactory explanation. How did that single word, "Mary," transform, turn around, convert the desolate and weeping woman? What kind of turn did she who was facing Jesus throughout the exchange undergo that opened her eyes which had been physically looking at him, unseeing throughout the encounter, so that now she could see, recognize who it was who was speaking to her? What did her use of the caritative diminutive "rabbouni," used nowhere and by no one else in the entire New Testament, mean to these two? Why did Jesus not yield himself to the embrace of this beloved friend whom of all his disciples he had come to first after his death? All the poignancy of the classical recognition scene is built into this two-word encounter. All the power of the uttered name on the lips of the lover, all the tension toward physical meeting that can never slake the desire for personal union nor be satisfied with what is given to the outward sense, all the mystery of the personal encounter in which touch is both mediator and boundary, gift and restraint, all the ache of reunion in which the surrender of the precious past is the only way into the mysterious future, are captured in that restraining "Do not touch me."

Mary's world is falling apart and being reconstructed because something she cannot fathom is being revealed to and in her. Jesus is not back as if the Passion had been a nightmare from which he had just awakened, as if they could embrace and wipe away their tears in the oblivion of sorrow past. Jesus is not resurrected; he is risen; not reanimated but glorified. In the Resurrection, the Jesus she lost to death is restored and not restored to her. He comes not as he was prior to his death, but as he is now and always will be, bodily and glorified, imminent and transcendent, present and ungraspable, intimate and universal. When exegetes try to reduce this scene to a rational theological explanation that Jesus cannot slow down at this point because he's on his way to the Father and that he will be back shortly when Mary will be able to touch him because his Paschal journey will be complete, readers rightly turn away the way they do from the platitudes of the funeral preacher who assures them that their loved one is in a better place. The reader who is able to really enter into this scene, no matter how tentatively, because it does burn with the incandescence of the aesthetically dangerous, understands in some way his or her own longing for life in a new world, the world in which Jesus's God and Father is finally ours in which participation in the community of faith is the locus of enduring encounter with the Risen Lover. This is not only or primarily a scene to exegete or explain or test for historical plausibility. It is not a theological conundrum to be unraveled by comparison with the Lukan Ascension narrative. It is an occurrence of the beautiful into which one is invited again and again the way one listens over and over to a symphony. As poet/philosopher Rubem Alves says, "We do not ask of a symphony whether it really happened. No, it never happened. What happens is over. It belongs to the past. The symphony, like great literature or art, happens once upon a time, every time it is played or seen or read or heard."

Mary Magdalene is not simply a figure of the past, and her encounter in the garden is not something that happened in the past. She lives. This encounter occurs every time the believer reaches toward her Lord and lover and knows herself created anew by his speaking of her name. There are three Easter episodes that seem to have this effect on sensitive New Testament readers. The encounter of the spiritually desolate Mary Magdalene with Jesus, the meeting between Jesus and Thomas, the resolute nonbeliever, on the Sunday after Easter, and the encounter in word and meal of the two Emmaus disciples with the Jesus they meet on the post-Easter road of daily life and disappointment. Each is a consummately constructed artistic masterpiece, interestingly enough created by the two

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admitted great artists of the New Testament, John and Luke. And it is also interesting that the two Johannine events involve one, a woman, Mary Magdalene, and one, a man, Thomas the Twin. The Emmaus event very probably involved a man and a woman. Again, the issue of gender is intriguing.

What I have tried to do in this brief consideration of the biblical Mary Magdalene is use her to illustrate the development of the engagement of readers (especially post-conciliar Roman Catholic readers) with the biblical text. Reading the Mary Magdalene text has never been—especially for women—simply a quest for information. It has been a personally engaged search for identity, for self-worth, for acceptance, for role in the community of faith. I have tried to suggest by this investigation that this... that that search is not only completely justified and necessary and that Mary Magdalene is indeed a, or even the right locus for that adventure, but that the engagement of Mary Magdalene in the biblical text is perhaps richer and deeper than we tend to think. It is indeed important to ask the historical questions of who this woman was in early Christianity and what the implications of her identity and roles are for the place of women in the Church today. It is also important to ask the theological questions about how, through the narrative construction of this figure, ecclesiological questions that are deeper than simply legitimation issues are opened up.

But my final and most passionate interest is in the theological aesthetics of the text which lead or can lead the reader, male or female, into the depths of the encounter with the living Christ, risen and present in our midst. “Rabbouni,” “my Lord and my God,” “were not our hearts burning as he spoke to us,” can never come fully alive as simply historical or theological data. They are the expressions of experience. “I have seen the Lord.”

Thank you.

Thomas Groome: And to Sandra, a hundred thousand thanks. Sandra, another *go raibh mile, mile, maith agat*. That was spectacular. It gets us caught in the throat. What a spectacular presentation. We’re so blessed to... being present for it. Let me invite you into an aesthetic moment of encounter, not just with the historical or the literary, but with the aesthetic of what we’ve just experienced. Just take a moment of silence and if it helps, maybe jot a note from yourself. What are the sentiments that are emerging in response to that extraordinary presentation, the wisdom that you’re seeing, finding in it, the insights that you’ll take away, the judgments you’re making, perhaps even the decisions that are emerging. Let me be quiet. Let you be quiet. Let’s take a minute and as I said, if it helps, take a note from yourself.

Now let me invite you for about three minutes, so be good stewards of your time, turn to a neighbor and have a chat. If you don’t feel like talking to the neighbor, don’t bother. Just turn to the neighbor and be willing to listen to the neighbor because the neighbor always has something to say. Just wait ‘til you see. It’ll happen. So turn to a neighbor three minutes, and then we’ll re-gather and reengage Sandra in some conversation.

Questioner: Thank you so much for the depiction of the Petrine ministry of unifying leadership and the Magdalene ministry of prophetic witness, and the... then also the aesthetic of being affected by those. And I was talking; Colleen was my neighbor and I said, “Do you know, I really think that gender makes no difference and that the message in the Gospel perhaps is that we cannot survive as faithful witnesses if we don’t have both of these ministries active, honored, and participated in by all regardless of your gender.” So thank you for those images.

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Sandra Schneiders: Thank you. Yes, I think that's exactly the point; that I don't think the gender issues are insignificant, but I don't think we've been going about them the right way. In other words, I don't think the Petrine ministry is limited to males nor the Mary Magdalene function of prophetic witness limited to women. But it does make a difference, even in a Shakespearean play, whether men or women play particular roles. So what I would want to say is, aesthetically we need to pay attention to this, but not in the way that we have tended to pay attention to it, of saying, "Okay, so what does this mean for men and what does this mean for women, and what can men do and what can women do?" Those aren't the right questions, I don't think. But I do think that's what I meant by saying we don't want to get into either gender essentialism—here are feminine traits and here are masculine traits type of thing—nor sexual amorphism that says, fundamentally there are no differences between men and women. If we think that women bring particular gifts and sensibilities and men bring particular gifts and sensibilities even in our day-to-day relationships, then when we approach Scripture why do we kind of cut and dry these in a way that kind of flattens out the text? But we've been so led astray, I think, by the way in which gender has been... gender should never have been used to determine who can do what in the Church. Jesus didn't seem to think he had any problem with both. But because it has been used that way, it's really difficult for us to find our way through that jungle and retrieve the richness of... I mean, God probably made men and women because he found that more interesting than just men or just women. At least if I had been God, I would have wanted at least two.

Questioner: Hi. I teach at an all-girls Catholic high school. And I teach Mary Magdalene as well as other women leaders like Miriam and Junia and people like that. The freshmen that I teach are really inspired by these women leaders in the Old and New Testaments, especially by Mary Magdalene. We spend a lot of time on her. And I was wondering what you would say to a 14- or 15-year-old who is very inspired by these women leaders in the New Testament, but then when they look around and they look in the Catholic Church they are just outraged, and I use that word specifically. They are outraged that there are these women leaders in the New Testament, and yet they cannot become ordained if they would want to do so or if their friends want to do so. How would you answer a 14- or 15-year-old young girl?

Sandra Schneiders: Yeah. That's a... this is one of the sad, sad, sad things in our Church. This is simply tragic, what you're describing. To cut young people off at the knees when they are most moved by the message of Jesus is simply wrong and it's tragic. That's what you're describing. I think for one thing I would never try to soothe their outrage. I would never try to soothe their outrage. They should be outraged and we should be outraged with them. But then we also have to give them examples and even living examples. I mean, you are an example for them, to give them examples of how women have survived in a deeply unjust situation. It's kind of like asking, you know someone, what would you say to someone Trayvon Martin's age who happens to be black after the decision, the court decision last week? I mean, what can you say? So we're dealing here with evil. We're dealing with injustice and it has to be called by its right name. But at the same time, we have to find a way to empower people not to go down in outrage and in frustration and in a sense of powerlessness but how to empower them to say, "This is going to change no matter how long it takes, no matter how many of us it takes. This is going to change." And that's much more difficult than consoling somebody and trying to make them think, "Well, it's alright," and "Well, you can do this." We need to channel that outrage into change. But I'm glad you're talking to 14-year-olds rather than me.

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Questioner: Hi. How are ya? So I found your talk to be very inspirational and powerful. I'm still trying to process it and I actually don't even have, like, a retort for you so I'm going to have you retort yourself.

Sandra Schneiders: Lotsa luck.

Questioner: So if I was sitting right here next to our friends in the magisterium, how would they respond to your talk, would you say?

Sandra Schneiders: Oh, I think they'd be entranced. Obviously, this is not the going position in certain quarters. What can I say?

Questioner: Thank you very much for your wonderful and inspiring talk. One thing just comes to mind when you mention about the 14- and 15-year-old girls. And I happen to be a mother of a 15-year-old girl and an artist and a chaplain, so dancing that line with her, hopefully by example and by invitation. But also I think I sense... I'm living in New Jersey as a chaplain in the inner city. And one of the things that has struck me is that in that environment working so closely with the marginalized, I've only seen two priests in our diocese who have been with us in that work. And our bishop... our bishop's cathedral is very close, and I honor and I respect the wonderful work and the money and everything that comes to make the work possible. And I'm a reformer within the institution, but I think there are beautiful opportunities to invite our young seminarians as well to come and work alongside us with the poor, and invite our young 14- and 15-year-old kids when they're most moved to come, because as you said, sometimes being a part of the institution can corrupt us, being part of power structures. And if we always stay with the poor and with them so closely and invite others in, I sense that that's what the invitation of Jesus in this mystery really is, and that's the transformational priesthood that we all are blessed with and can be empowered with every single day because very few people come that closely with us. And the harvest really, really needs laborers. So I just want to say, invite the kids into these settings because they'll be transformed and changed. Thank you.

Sandra Schneiders: Thank you. I can't add to that.

Thomas Groome: Thank you, Sandra. This concludes our celebration here. Go celebrate together and elsewhere. Same time, same place next year. Sandra very generously footnoted Mary Ann Hinsdale in her own presentation and just by good blessing, not luck, but by good blessing Mary Ann Hinsdale is our Magdala lecturer next year. So come and hear her in person. And also Sandra's books are on sale outside, and she has graciously agreed to autograph a few if you would like that. So blessings, go your way, and we'll see you all again to celebrate together next year.