



St. Mary of Magdala Proclaims the Resurrection", M. Beaudette, SC. 2014.
Photo: J. Vericker.

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

June 12, 2015 – Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

Topic: St. Mary of Magdala - Faithful Witness and Proclaimer of the Resurrection

Most Holy Father,

This letter brings many prayers and greetings from New York City. It also brings a simple, but urgent request for a formal, corrective Papal Teaching regarding St. Mary of Magdala's true role in salvation history. For centuries our church has misrepresented her as the "sinful Magdalene" and some continue this error today. This distorts the Gospel and has virtually erased our memory of her as one of the disciples Jesus included among those who "came up from Galilee with him." (Luke 23:55) As a Church that champions itself as the keeper of the deposit of true faith, we are obliged to teach the truth about Mary of Magdala.

We need an official Papal Teaching that 1) presents the true Gospel story of Mary of Magdala, the faithful disciple who remained, unflinching at the cross, led the visit to Jesus' tomb and was chosen by the Risen Christ as his first witness and proclaimer of the Resurrection and 2) rejects and corrects the erroneous depiction of her as the anonymous, sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50 or any other woman in scripture. This erroneous depiction derives from an ancient, negative stereotype, not from Jesus' teaching or example. It dismisses her leadership and prevents others from experiencing her faith and witness. As you know, this error was solidified in the late 6th century by Pope St. Gregory I who did not have the benefit of modern biblical scholarship¹.

We have been blest with Catholic New Testament scholars who, since the mid-twentieth century, have shown there is no evidence in scripture that Mary of Magdala was the “sinful woman” in Luke 7 or any other anonymous woman in the Gospel.² There is, however, strong evidence that she was a leader among the disciples.² By 1974, Church leaders accepted this and changed the Gospel reading for her feast (July 22) from Luke 7:36-50 to part of John’s Resurrection text. Sadly, the Vatican did not issue a clear, public correction and the error, now a slander given our knowledge, persists in both subtle and overt ways. For example:

- The Resurrection text that most beautifully records Mary of Magdala’s journey from darkness and loss to radiant first proclaimer (John 20:1-18) is never read in full on Easter Sunday or on any Sunday.
- Church leaders still allow images of her as a repentant prostitute or, unbelievably, being rejected by a disdainful looking Jesus at the tomb (“Noli me tangere” paintings) to hang in our churches with no explanations that these are false interpretations of scripture.³

We have little new art presenting positive images of her in our churches and schools. Some priests, Catholic writers, and filmmakers still present this slander as fact in homilies, catechetical books and movies, without any corrections from local or Vatican church officials.³ As a result, many Catholics still do not know her true role. What a loss to the faith life of our people!

Learning about the depth of St. Mary of Magdala’s faith and witness has been life-changing; it opened my eyes to the love and inclusiveness of Jesus, as shown in the Gospel and continues to nurture me in ways I never could have imagined. I have seen the joy of similar awakenings in others. This rekindling of my faith through Mary of Magdala’s witness is a gift I am compelled to share.

A formal, Papal Teaching confirming the truth and rejecting the distortions will allow all to experience her faith and love in action and to hear, through her, Jesus’ powerful Resurrection message. It will inspire and empower us, especially our young women to become personal evangelizers of this Good News.

Attached to this letter are footnote references and a list of possible actions I dare ask you to consider. I am ready to assist with finding and funding new art and spreading the true word about St. Mary of Magdala. However, this distortion is so deeply ingrained in church tradition and the general culture that we need your voice to correct and undo it.

With prayers and hope for healing,

Rita L. Houlihan
Member of Church of the Ascension Parish, NY, NY 10025 USA

Cc. Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York
Reverend Daniel Kearney, Pastor, Church of the Ascension, NY, NY 10025
Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, USCCB President
Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston
Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, Pontifical Council for Culture
Barbara E. Reid, OP, President, Catholic Biblical Association USA
Cardinal Robert Sarah, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments
Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, Congregation for Catholic Education
Archbishop Carlo M. Vigano, Papal Nuncio USA

Attachments:

1. Footnote References
2. Actions Requested to Restore our Memory of St Mary of Magdala's True Role as First Witness and Proclaimer of the Resurrection

FOOTNOTE REFERENCES for St. Mary of Magdala – Faithful Witness and Proclaimer

¹Pope Pius XII opened modern methods of studying the Bible; subsequent popes expanded on this:

- *Divino Afflante Spiritus*, issued by Pius XII on Sept. 30, 1943 encouraged Catholic scholars to study the literary forms of the Bible. *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 21, 1964) and *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council (Nov. 18, 1965) expanded this guidance.
- *Dei Verbum*, Section 12 states, "... (6) the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words."
- "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," Pontifical Biblical Commission, April 23, 1993 (as published in *Origins*, Jan. 6, 1994) directs us to "... examine all the methods likely to contribute effectively to the task of making more available the riches contained in the biblical texts." (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21).

²A Sample of Catholic Biblical Scholars who present clear evidence St. Mary of Magdala was a leader and disciple and not Luke's "sinful woman in the city" (7:37) or any other anonymous woman:

- M. R. Thompson, SSMN, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader*, 1995, 15, 32. "This false identification is still made in spite of the fact that it is non-scriptural and has no basis in the apocryphal writings through the first three centuries of the Christian era." "Mary of Magdala was so prominent in the early church that it was impossible to change the form by which she was known.... Mary of Magdala was indeed, leader and apostle in the early church."
- R. E. Brown, SS, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 1979, 92. As cited in J. Turpin. *Twelve Apostolic Women*, 2009, 49. "Another proof that women could be intimate disciples of Jesus is found in chapter 20 [John's Gospel]."
- J. Winkler, OFM Conv, *The Gospels Simply Explained*, 2008, 25. "In Matthew's account, the women go to the tomb just before dawn as they do in the other gospels. Here, though, there are two women.... The reason for two women is that one needs two to give witness to anything in the Old Testament. ... [But] Women couldn't even give witness to anything in the Old Testament. Even the Gospel of Matthew deemphasizes the role of women. Yet, here we see two women giving witness to the Resurrection. It seems...Matthew is saying that with the Resurrection, the rules are changed. Women are credible witnesses."
- B. E. Reid, OP, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke*, 1996, 204. "The women in the Fourth Gospel—the Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene—enter into theological discussion with Jesus (John 4:7-26, 11:21-27, 20:14-17), make profound faith proclamations (John 4:29, 11:27, 20:18), and act as prophets and apostles (John 4:28-30, 39-41; 12:3-7; 20:18) over the objections of Jesus' male disciples (4:27, 12:5). Such stories would only have made sense in a community in which women acted as theologians, teachers, prophets, preachers, and apostles and were approved for doing so."

³Perpetuating the Slander--A Sample of movies, art, books, and Catholic websites or applications:

- Movie: "Mary of Nazareth" by F. Arlanch, 2012. Depicts St. Mary of Magdala as an aimless, sinful woman in the court of Herod Antipas. Sold by Ignatius Press, 1-800-651-1531, USA.
- Art: Large mural of the "Sinful Woman," Cathedral of the Madeleine, Salt Lake City, UT, USA. Their website states, "The mural...is of the woman (traditionally identified as Mary Magdalene) washing the feet of Jesus..." No correction is offered.
- Art: "Noli Me Tangere", Chiesa de S. M. Maddlena, Rome, Italy. Shows the risen Jesus rejecting Mary of Magdala; distorts the essence of Jesus--his compassion. Luke's "sinful woman" is displayed in the arch over the high altar. There are no corrective explanations.
- Book: M., M., and S. Bunson, *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Saints Revised*, 2003, p.564. States that St. Mary of Magdala is "identified in Scriptures as the [sinful] woman who anointed Christ's feet at the house of Simon." (Lk 7:36).
- Web Application: "Laudate" presents St. Mary of Magdala as the "sinful woman" in Luke 7 and refers to the outdated, 1894 edition of Butler's Lives of Saints.

ACTIONS REQUESTED to Restore our Memory of St. Mary of Magdala's True Role as Faithful Witness and Proclaimer of the Resurrection

1. ISSUE CORRECTIVE TEACHING STATING THAT:
 - a. Scripture shows St. Mary of Magdala was the faithful witness entrusted with the first Resurrection appearance and was the first commissioned by Jesus to proclaim this good news.
 - b. There is no scriptural evidence that Mary of Magdala was the "sinful woman" in Luke 7:36-50 or any other anonymous woman in the Gospels.
2. EXPAND THE EASTER SUNDAY GOSPEL to include John 20:1-18 and include John 20:1-18 as one of the Easter Vigil gospel texts.
3. DESIGNATE ST. MARY of MAGDALA's FEAST DAY (July 22nd) as a SOLEMNITY rather than a MEMORIAL and expand the gospel reading to include the full Resurrection narrative in John 20:1-18. Allow her feast to be celebrated on a Sunday.
4. INSTRUCT ALL BISHOPS and CATHOLICS TO PROMOTE THE CORRECTIVE TEACHING AND INCLUDE IT in:
 - a. Seminary and Diaconate Education as well as Formation for members of religious communities,
 - b. Catechetical and RCIA programs,
 - c. Homilies,
 - d. Communications with parishes and the press.
5. COMMISSION NEW ART to PRESENT the TRUE ST. MARY of MAGDALA:
 - a. Following and supporting Jesus as one of his disciples from Galilee,
 - b. Standing at the cross as a dignified (with her hair covered) and faithful presence (for example, in depictions of the Stations of the Cross),
 - c. Discovering Jesus at the tomb,
 - d. Receiving the good news from a welcoming, risen Jesus,
 - e. Being commissioned to proclaim the good news to the others,
 - f. Proclaiming the good news to the other disciples.
6. REMOVE AND REPLACE ART in Churches that portray St. Mary of Magdala as a prostitute or as a woman being rejected by Jesus at the tomb ("Noli me tangere"). Where this is not possible, churches can display signs that explain these images are incorrect depictions of scripture and include the Gospel texts that explicitly refer to St. Mary of Magdala to educate viewers.
7. INSTRUCT ALL CATHOLIC PUBLISHERS, FILM PRODUCERS, WEBSITE MANAGERS, etc. to correct errors in their materials and to produce corrective materials. Work with other Christian denominations to do the same.