

Honour to the penitent: Feast of St Mary Magdalene

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In recent years Mary Magdalene's image has been more sharply drawn in the Catholic Church. She was always prominent, frequently mentioned in the New Testament as a supporter and benefactor of Jesus and his disciples, as present near Jesus' cross when he died, and as one of the chief witnesses to the Resurrection.

In the Western Church, however, her story became tangled with other stories – those told about Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha in Bethany, who in John's Gospel were friends of Jesus. Because both Mary of Bethany and an unnamed woman described only as a sinner, are described as pouring oil over Jesus' feet out of love, they were often combined into the single person of Mary, and that Mary came further to be combined with Mary Magdalene. In this way, Mary Magdalene became Jesus' benefactor and friend, the pardoned sinner, the sister of Martha and the Mary who stood by Jesus' cross and was one of the first witnesses to the Resurrection. As the first witness who believed in the face of the Apostles' doubt that Jesus had risen, she came also to be called an apostle to the apostles.

Thanks to the work of scriptural scholars, including many women, those strands have been untangled. Her feast day has now been given the same standing as that of the apostles, she is no longer called a Penitent, and she has been named Apostle to the Apostles. This is yet another brick laid in the slow building of proper recognition of the place of women in the foundation of the Church and so in its ongoing life.

Nevertheless, it is possible to have mixed reactions to Mary Magdalene's loss of identity as a penitent. The reform is good because it represents a more careful reading of Scripture and the early Church. It is also good because the picture built up of Mary as a reformed prostitute reflects the way in which she was seen through the gaze of men. In the Gospel, the woman who washed Jesus' feet is described as a sinner. The men who preached the Gospel assumed that the sin of a deeply moved woman can only have been sexual and that she must have been a prostitute. The same gaze made her an object of fascination and titillation to male painters who gloried in her uncovered flesh. To see her as an active, mature and rounded woman who is to be reckoned with is a great improvement.

The image of Mary as penitent, however, did emphasise the fact that Jesus came to call sinners, and highlighted the weaknesses and betrayals in the stories of his early followers. These give us confidence that our own betrayals will not separate us from Jesus or disqualify us from following him. In an increasingly puritanical and punitive age where notable sin can lead to your ostracism from society, the honour given to a penitent for whom sin was followed by repentance, acceptance and a leading place in Jesus' mission sends a good message both to Church and society.