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Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of "Encountering the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene as Prototype"

presented on July 19, 2013 by

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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

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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

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

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:

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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 s

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 get s 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

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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 purpose, 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.

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

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 Jes

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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

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.