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FutureChurch celebrates Feast of St. Mary of Magdala

by Kate Oatis



Dominican Sr. Diana Culbertson gives her homily at a Magdala celebration hosted by FutureChurch in Independence, Ohio Wednesday. (Photos courtesy of Jim Metrisin)

INDEPENDENCE, Ohio -- "If we are to build the kingdom of God, we dare not ignore the words of Paul: 'There is no male and female among you.'"

Thereby Ann Klonowski, presider at FutureChurch's 15th annual celebration of the Feast of St. Mary of Magdala, opened the event, which took place Wednesday, July 20, in the aptly chosen town of Independence. This year's program, "Unheard Homilies: Ending the Silencing of Catholic Women," featured three homilists, all female.

FutureChurch was founded in 1990 to raise awareness of the consequences of doing nothing about the priest shortage and to call for opening ordination to all who are called to it, said Sister of St. Joseph Christine Schenk, founder of the organization.

Fifteen years ago, FutureChurch held its first celebration of the Feast of St. Mary of Magdala to restore

the saint's reputation and to bring to visibility women's leadership in the church.

"Mary of Magdala was not a prostitute, but she was the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus," Schenck said. "Jesus chose her to proclaim his Resurrection saying to her, 'Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I have seen the Lord.'"

The act of choosing a bible passage (John 20:18) to frame her homily held great significance for the women.

"Tonight, I got to pick the Gospel," said Sister of St. Joseph Theresa Hafner, who chose Luke 8:22-25, the passage in which Jesus calms the sea. During an interview later, she said, "Giving that homily meant a lot to me. I have a degree in religious studies. I have a passion for scripture. There are not too many opportunities to share that. So, whenever I get the chance I jump at it."

The resurrection story, John 20:11-18, was the scaffolding Dominican Sr. Diana Culbertson chose for her homily. "Mary of Magdala experienced grief so profound she didn't realize angels were speaking to her. And yet Jesus said to her, 'Let go.' Could any word have been more disturbing? Everything she'd thought about was rearranged. Nothing would ever be the same. 'Let go.' And so must we all -- let go of the Jesus we think we know so well. Let go of the Jesus prescribed by our understanding of him. Leave the tomb. He is alive. He is with you. He is unpredictable. Mary of Magdala is the patron saint of those who have to abandon preconceptions."

Noel and Rose Marie Egensperger, among the some 120 people at the event, have been members of FutureChurch for about 19 years and attend the Magdala celebration each year they can. They were present at the first Magdala celebration.

"This is our way to support women in the church who are really struggling with not being able to share their gifts," Rose Marie Egensperger said. "Being a member of FutureChurch has helped me to stay Catholic."

The yearly Magdala celebration is important, said attendee Lynn Rollins, 40, who is married with four children. "Mary of Magdala is a symbol of how Christ really treated women. She was the person Christ chose to herald the resurrection. I want to celebrate that and to celebrate her. And I want my children to see women in positive leadership roles in the church."

Modeling effective leadership to children is important as well to homilist Patricia Shullick, a pastoral minister at Mary, Mother of God Parish in Lorain, Ohio. During her homily, framed by Mark 7:24-30, which tells the story of the Syrophenician woman's faith, she shared a story of her own: "Years ago, I began to tell my 4-year-old daughter about God and referred to God as 'he.' She said, 'God isn't a he or a she. God just is.' The woman in Mark got Jesus' attention and challenged him to set in motion avenues to inclusivity. It shows that personal exchanges can change us, if we remain open to the spirit in others. This gospel shows how Jesus continued to grow."



The event included some strong singing -- "Christ be our light, shine in your church" --and a litany of women witnesses and leaders throughout the ages, including Esther and Judith, Perpetua and Felicity, Scholastica and Hildegard, Catherine of Siena, Clare of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Theresa of Avila, Dorothy Day, Teresa of Calcutta, Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Stang. Each homilist was blessed by the congregation before she began speaking.

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Joan Reidy, 58, has been a member of FutureChurch for about four years. "About five years ago, I got involved in the JustFaith program, a lot of which is about social justice. When you start looking at these issues, you look in your own backyard, which includes your church. As I grow more in my faith, I realize there has been misogyny in the church and that it's just time to recognize women's gifts."

Reidy said the Magdala celebration is so important to her that she's attending one today, July 22, at Boston College.

Attendees said the Magdala celebration was uplifting and hopeful, that it stressed the importance of working together to foster change in the church. It's a long process, all who were asked agreed, but to a person, they are hopeful.

"We have to remain faithful and keep trying to educate one person at a time," Reidy said.

"Things have always changed this way in the church," Hafner said. "People push for change, and other people push back. I know it's going to happen eventually. I just concentrate on what I can do now for it to happen in the future. We just say who we are, what we believe. We give people a good experience. And we remain positive and open."

As of this writing, FutureChurch reports there have been an estimated 300 Feast of St. Mary Magdala celebrations planned, including 30 in 12 countries outside the United States: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Finland, Ireland, Jamaica, Mexico, New Zealand, England and Puerto Rico.

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