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What would Mary Magdalene do?

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Once a pope trashes you, it's pretty much downhill from there. So once Pope Gregory the Great in 591 declared that the "sinful" woman in Luke's Gospel who anointed Jesus' feet was Mary Magdalene, a whole industry developed to discredit her. That's big stuff. I mean, she is the one who announced the Resurrection.

Or have they changed that, too?

I can't help but wonder what Mary Magdalene would have done if she heard -- even got a copy of -- old Gregory's homily on Luke 7:36-50 erasing all she had done, all she had said, all she had been.

How would she receive it? What pain would it cause? Would she be able to respond?

Who knows if Gregory wrote it himself? Still, it was quite obviously written by a man, for men. No matter the history of women in ministry, by the sixth century, women who wished to serve the church were steered toward cloisters. And beyond an occasional queen or two, women were not well-received in the papal courts. So Mary's successors had little -- if any -- input to the papacy's day-to-day business. For sure, they were pretty much shut out.

So what would she have seen and heard?

Bring Mary Magdalene to Rome just as Gregory is going to preach. Picture her as she somehow snuck into the back of the church or the basilica, or wherever that 50-year-old successor to St. Peter was speaking that day. Sit next to her and hear him say, "It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts."

Whoa! Did he say that? I always thought the perfume -- the jar of nard -- was all she owned. I always thought it was what she had for her own burial. I mean, it never occurred to me she used it for, shall we say, business transactions. In fact, it never occurred to me that -- Mary Magdalene or not -- the woman was a prostitute at all. If the current penalty for adultery or prostitution in lands not far from Magdala is death by stoning, I can't see how Luke's Mary made it through life, let alone through the door to be near Jesus.

So, yes, see Mary Magdalene sitting there, listening to the indictments read against her. Would she have recognized herself? Doubtful. Would she have been able to answer? No. Would she be troubled? You betcha.

So what's her situation? She has been unfairly accused. Her actions (and probably her words) have been taken out of context. She has been publicly excoriated by the highest church authority. And she is essentially helpless.

Is she in tears? Can she sleep? How can she defend herself against lies? How can she recover from assault, from abuse, at the hands of the pope (and, not incidentally, his minions through the ages)?

Can we detect a pattern here?

Public excoriation seems to be a favorite indoor sport in the winding halls and storied walls where mostly clerics serve the pope. And, as if today's pope does not produce enough words on his own, there's now a traditionalist rumor afloat that every burp from every Vatican congregation or commission flows directly from the boss' mind. It's as if the whole crowd of them were sitting on some funhouse Chair of Peter.

Once upon a time, Rome's message-control department only needed wax for the papal seal. Now, things have gotten out of hand, and everybody is claiming papal authority directly or indirectly. It's just plain silly. Think schoolyard children: "My boss is bigger than your boss."

There's a zinger for everyone: sisters, nuns, married women, working women. OK, not quite everyone, just the female everyones. You know the litany: the LCWR thing, the birth control thing, the "radical feminist" thing. From here, it looks like half the church has been labeled reborn Magdalenes, locked out of papal offices with no way to respond, no way to react, no way out.

That is the sadness in the church today. It took almost a millennium and a half for Pope Paul VI, in 1969, to indirectly disconnect Mary Magdalene from the slur his predecessor levied on her. We are all Magdalenes. How long will it take for the rest of us?

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