

Homily on Mary Magdalene

by Henri-Dominique de Spéville, OP

«Woman, why are you crying?»

As it appears in Chapter 20 of the Gospel according to John, Mary Magdalene is more than just a character : she is the chosen example. Each of us can recognize something of ourselves in her. She is a figure of the Church, and a figure of humanity. She is the symbol of humanity renewed by the grace of the Risen One. On this Easter morning there is a scent of new creation.

St. John, usually so careful to situate the events of the life of Jesus according to Jewish days or according to the chronology of the previous days, starts anew. «On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb.» Many other clues lead us to the first pages of Genesis : the angels are there, Mary Magdalene is called twice «Woman,» and especially the so-called misunderstanding about the man who stands near her : she thought he was the Gardener. There was no misunderstanding at all, rather deep theological insight! Adam, placed by God in the garden to cultivate and care for it, is the figure of Christ, the Gardener of our souls. He is the New Adam restoring humanity to its original condition. In this outlook, Mary Magdalene is the antithesis of Eve, she is the exact opposite. Eve, deceived by the devil because she listened to evil words and because she had no confidence in the Word of God, was banished from the Garden of Eden whose access was forbidden and guarded by the cherubim.

On the contrary, Mary Magdalene was delivered from seven demons (Luke 8, 2), she was purified of all sins by the mercy of God through her tears and her great love (Luke 7). The Gospel says she was sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his word, choosing the better part. She was sanctified by the blood of Jesus when she saw Him dying on the Cross, which is the Tree of Life (Jn 19:25). On this new day, on this Easter morning, something new happened : Mary Magdalene died to sin with Christ as she bent over into the tomb, and then, as she turned to Jesus, as she converted, she was introduced into the beauty of grace and renewal. Access to paradise had been opened by the New Adam, and the Angels led her into this new and everlasting life. The blessed Dominican painter, blessed Fra Angelico, painted this scene in a virginal and fenced garden. There is a scent of spring and new life! With Jesus, a new life starts for us also, whatever we have done. God can make us new, like a reborn person !

But the path of our great saint does not stop there. In this 20th Chapter of the Gospel according to John, the Song of Songs shines through as a watermark. The first reading for the feast of Mary Magdalene is taken from the Song of Songs. Mary Magdalene is also the beloved one looking for her beloved. She had kept her spikenard for Him (Song 4, 14 rare word also in John 12, 3). But on this Easter morning, she is helpless, «he disappeared» (Song 5:6). «I sought him but did not find him !» «The guards found me, those who make their rounds of the city : have you seen the one my heart loves ? I had hardly left them when I found him whom my heart loves. I took hold of him and would not let him go»(Song 3, 2-4). But now

Jesus does not want to be held anymore ! «I am not yet ascended to the Father, He explained, but go to my brothers and tell them, I'm going to my Father and your Father.» There are three conversions of Mary Magdalene, from sin to grace, from death to life, and from this world down here to the world that is to come.

As she recognizes her Rabboni, but is not allowed to hold him at this time, she understands that she has to renounce finding Jesus by touching or seeing him. Now Jesus may be apprehended only by faith and love. And she will find him in the mission of proclaiming the Good News. In this mission, she will find whom her heart loves. Where is He ? «He feeds his flock» as it is said in the Song of Solomon (Song 6:3). The mystical union with Jesus had reached such a high level that Mary Magdalene was willing to do great things for God, and first of all she wanted Jesus to be known and loved. The question «Have you seen Him whom my heart loves ?» is not only an expression of personal quest, it is a beckoning to all who are far from Jesus to seek Him and find Him, who alone can satisfy the human heart.

As first witness of Jesus risen from the dead, Mary Magdalene is an example of what Jesus wants to do for every sinful soul. Mary Magdalene is the masterpiece of grace, a sign of hope given to those who are struggling with sin, despair, the devil or addictions. Jesus loves each of us, Jesus asks us to love Him with all the love in our heart. Whatever evil we have done in the past, today Jesus only sees the love we have for Him now, in a humble, contrite, and confident heart.

After reporting the resurrection of Jesus to the disciples, and praying with the Apostles in anticipation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 14), we lose the footsteps of Mary Magdalene in the Holy Scriptures. According to a very ancient Tradition, Mary Magdalene came from the Holy Land to France, in Provence, to preach the Gospel all around the place, and afterwards she retired for penance and prayer in a cave on a rocky mountain, la Sainte-Baume, where she is known to be the patroness of penitents, preachers and mystics. Sainte-Baume is this hollow cliff where, like a dove (Song 2:14), Mary Magdalene still lets her voice be heard and reveals her face to those who are willing to put their confidence in Jesus, the Lord.

Today, we are given a special grace of touching the bones of this woman who has touched Jesus, who has been touched by Him. These relics were kept for ages in the Basilica of Saint Mary Magdalene in the village of Saint-Maximin, in Provence, South of France, not far from Sainte-Baume, where, according to the Tradition, Mary Magdalene was buried. The skull of Mary Magdalene, and other relics are venerated there. This piece of her shin bone (tibia) is usually kept in the cave of Sainte-Baume.

Why do we venerate relics of saints ? Because saints are not fiction, they are real, historical people. Certainly, the soul of Mary Magdalene is in Heaven with Christ, but the presence of this piece of bone is a kind of presence of the saint. Her example of faith, her devout love for Jesus, her intercession for us sinners, strongly encourages us to imitate her.

So, let us ask Jesus to make all things new in our lives exactly as He did for saint Mary Magdalene !