

[St Mary Magdalene -First woman mystic and ascetic](#)



Saint Mary Magdalene –One of the first women mystics and ascetics of the Church

-The sinner turned extraordinary Saint

St Mary Magdalene---what an extraordinary saint! In the beginning she was the woman of great wealth, the sister of Martha and Lazarus with friends at the palace of Herod in Tiberias and more notoriously she was "*the sinner from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons*" (Mark 16:9). She then turned into the repentant sinner who anoints the feet of Jesus with costly perfume and bitter tears, and wipes them dry with her long hair, thus becoming the converted sinner and disciple who accompanies Jesus from Magdala in Galilee to Bethany in Judea, and later the faithful disciple who follows Jesus to Calvary, who remains steadfast at the foot of the Cross, is at the tomb during Jesus' burial, and the last one to leave after. Above all, she is the chosen one to whom the risen Christ first appears on Easter Sunday, ***making her the "apostle to the apostles"***. She is the messenger that Christ has conquered death, the Good News that became the very basis of Christian belief.

From the lips of Mary Magdalene came the most wondrous news of all time that would ring throughout Christendom in all the centuries to come: "***Christ is risen!***" and add to this the fact that she is mentioned 11 times in the four Gospels in connection with the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, and from this we can see that with Mary Magdalene we have a case of an exceptional woman because of the prominence she is given in the Gospels.

Jesus made a great sinner the symbol of hope for all sinners. Who then could ever despair when recalling Jesus' love for Mary Magdalene? Gathered together in the person of Mary Magdalene, we find all the reasons for believing in the goodness of God, who sent His Son to rescue those who are lost. She became and remains the perfect symbol of the sinner who finds Christ and is transformed by His love.

Through the Gospel, we discover her extraordinary presence in the life of Christ, and the elevated place that He reserved for her in the heart of His Church. After she had anointed His feet, Jesus said "***I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.***" (Matt 26:13) Thus, she is venerated even to this day. Her love was exceedingly great and pleasing to Christ, and like a heavenly luminary, it continues to be the beacon of hope of those who have sinned and strayed from God.

Her remarkable life after the Resurrection of Jesus

What is often not brought out about Mary Magdalene is her life after Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension into heaven and in particular her remarkable mystical life as revealed in the tradition of the Church as presented in early Church documents. The life of Mary Magdalene, as reflected in the Gospels, needs no embellishment, dramatization or glorification. The beauty, the drama, the dignity and grandeur are all

there, ennobled with the divinity of Christ's presence.

Church tradition, legend and the historical record need not add anything to this already extraordinary life of repentance, conversion and love. The Gospels reveal that she had been given a mission, namely to announce the Good News; that she had seen Christ risen from the dead. As the first eyewitness to this greatest event in Christian history, Mary Magdalene could not and would not keep this wondrous news to herself. Her mission did not begin and end as the Apostle to the Apostles. She was a woman of fervor and courage and total devotion to Christ. Such great love must find expression.

When the first persecutions scattered the little Church of Jerusalem, those who were scattered went everywhere, preaching the word of Christ. Thus the persecuted Christians went about numerous ports around the Mediterranean basin that included Greece, Italy, Spain, France, and many other countries within the Roman Empire. France was then called Gaul; and the new life of Mary Magdalene begins there, on its Mediterranean coast. The area which cradles her tradition is known as “La Sainte Baume”.

The tradition that tells of the arrival of Mary Magdalene and her companions on the coast of Gaul (France), goes back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. Her flight from the persecutions in Palestine is set at the year 42, the same year that James the Greater was executed in Jerusalem.



Accompanied by Martha, Lazarus, Mary Salome and Mary Jacoby, the disciples Maximin and Sidonius [two of the 70 disciples referred to in the Gospels], with Marcella their servant, Mary Magdalene embarked [or were forced onto?] a small boat, crossed the Mediterranean, and arrived near the city of Marseilles [France], then known as Massilia. The small port where they came ashore was called Rha that later became known as Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer (Holy Marys of the Sea). Tradition maintains that the boat with its eight passengers docked safely, and that it had neither oars, sails, nor steering device. It could have run into a storm that destroyed its gear, or it could have been pushed out to sea in that unstable condition by their persecutors; whatever the actual cause of the crippling of their boat, they all set foot in Rha.

Mary Salome, Mary Jacoby and Marcella remained in Rha while the others made their way overland to Massilia. Arriving in Massilia was like entering any other Roman-occupied city with its paved streets, shops, villas, gardens, pools, a stadium or theater, and inns. It was an important commercial port. Whether its people were familiar with the news concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not known.

In any event, it is said that the small group began to preach near the temples where the pagan Gods were worshipped. Statues of these Roman deities-Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Diana, Venus, Mars, Apollo and others -adorned the temples, and religious ceremonies were held at the altars dedicated to them.

Mary Magdalene and her companions denounced the false Gods, and told them the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They converted many. Some time later, Martha leaves them to go to Tarascon, a place roughly 25 miles northwest of Massilia, Maximin goes to Aix, 20 miles north of Massilia, while Mary Magdalene, Lazarus and Sidonius continue to preach in the city.

After some months, Mary Magdalene and the disciple Sidonius leave Lazarus in Massilia, where he becomes its first bishop, and travel northward, following the Huveaune river until they reach its source in the hills that would become known as La Sainte Baume. The immense natural cave they discover in the rocks, the size of a large house, becomes the new home of Mary Magdalene. Some miles down the valley was the village bearing the Roman name of Villalata that in centuries to come would be known as Saint-Maximin-La-Sainte-Baume.

Her extraordinary mystical life and mystical graces

The magnificent cave-grotto must have been even more out of the way then it is to the pilgrim of today. It is here in this hermitage that Mary Magdalene spends the next 30 years of her life in solitude, in meditation and contemplation. But her solitude is only that of the world, for seven times a day angels came down to the cave and took her to the top of the hill where she is given the grace to hear the music and songs that are the sounds of heaven. From this height, the view stretches as far as the Mediterranean, and overlooks the surrounding forest, hills and valleys. On a clear day, one can visualize right across the sea, the coast of Africa; and further east, Palestine. It is presumed that she is here often drawn into ecstasy, although details of which are not in the written record. The record does state however that she neither ate nor drank for the thirty years that she lived in the grotto. It is also presumed that during her 30 years as a hermitess in the cave of La-Sainte-Baume, she suffered and sacrificed in reparation not only for her own sins, but also as a soul victim for others, and that the early Church benefitted greatly from her sacrificial life of penances and mortifications, offered in union with her beloved Jesus, for the sake of His Church.

Following 30 years spent in prayer and longing to be reunited with Jesus, the day came when Jesus enlightened her that death was approaching, and He guided her down the hill toward the village of Villalata. On the way there (and a pillar still marks the place), she was met by Maximin who had been divinely inspired to go to meet her and lead her to his church. Once there, having received holy communion from his hand, she falls lifeless before the altar. The date was July 22, around the year 72 A.D.



St Maximin ordered her body to be interred with great dignity and pomp, and commanded that he himself be buried near her tomb after his death. And such was her beauty in the eyes of the Lord that during seven days the oratory was filled with the holy perfume of her sanctity.

One of the earliest documents on the life of Mary Magdalene after the death of Christ is a text in Latin, by an anonymous author. It dates back to the fifth or sixth century. In part, it reads as follows:

“After the glory of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the triumph of his Ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the word of God was spread far and wide, and the number of the faithful grew day by day. But the Priests of the Jews, the Pharisees and Scribes, kindled the fire of persecution, and chased most of Jesus’ witnesses out of Judea. During the terrible persecutions, the disciples traveled to different places of the world to announce the Good News to the Gentiles.”

One of the 70 disciples was Maximin, known for his perfection in moral integrity, illustrious through his doctrine, and honored for the gift he had been granted to perform miracles.

In the same manner as the Blessed Mother was placed in the care of John, so Mary Magdalene was placed in the care of Maximin, attentive to his religious guidance.

This is how, during the dispersion, Mary Magdalene left all her possessions and traveled to the sea, where in the company of Maximin, she boarded a vessel and safely arrived near the port of Marseille [France].

There, inspired by the Lord, they made their way to the town of Aix, and by their fasting, prayers, and through the spreading of the divine message, they attracted people to the cult of God, even though many were at first incredulous and not yet reborn through the waters of baptism.

Maximin governed the Church of Aix for numerous years, preaching the Word of God, chasing demons, anointing the dying, curing the blind and the crippled, and healing all manner of sickness.

When the time came for Mary Magdalene to be freed of her earthly body, she saw Christ who came to call her to the glory of the heavenly Kingdom. He came to give the substance of eternal life to the one who had so faithfully given of her substance when he walked the earth.

She died on the eleventh day before the Kalends of August, namely on July 22, amidst great rejoicing of the angels in heaven. Maximin embalmed her most holy body with many aromatic herbs, and placed it in an honorable tomb, over which he elevated a most beautiful church. There can be seen her white marble sarcophagus with sculptures that represent her story as to how she came to find the Lord at the house of Simon, and so obtained forgiveness of her sins, and the devout duties she carried out for the Savior's entombment."

Like many other ancient writings and works of art, this document has no signature. However, it indicates that the tradition of La-Sainte-Baume goes back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. Later in the 9th century, the martyrologist of King Alfred the Great of England, compiled all the known traditions and legends into a liturgical document. It contained some precisions on Mary Magdalene that confirmed the earlier Latin document, as seen by the following extracts:

*"July 22 is the Feastday of Mary of Magdala, who had previously been a sinner plagued by seven demons. She came to see our Lord whilst he was at table in the house of a Jewish Pharisee, carrying a vase of precious perfumed ointment. And the Lord said to her: **'Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.'***

Later she was chosen by Christ to witness his apparition at the Resurrection, the first of all mortals, and to announce his Resurrection to the Apostles.

After the Ascension, being torn with such terrible grief at his absence, she withdrew to a barren land where she remained for thirty years. Never in need of nourishment, God's angels came down seven times a day and transported her up to where she could hear the celestial music of heaven, and then carried her back to her grotto carved in the rock. It is for this reason that she was never hungry or thirsty.

And so it came to pass that after thirty years, a priest went to meet her in the desert and led her to his church. He gave her holy communion, whereafter she rendered her spirit to God, and the priest buried her. And many miracles took place at her tomb."

The two previous documents are historically important because of their description of the arrival of Mary

Magdalene in ancient Gaul and the thirty years she spent in the cave grotto. The first was written before the Saracen invasion of France, and the second during the time the tomb and holy remains were concealed in the Church of Saint Maximin.

There were other documents relating to the life of Mary Magdalene in the Grotto of La-Sainte-Baume, but the most important ones that finally and definitely affirmed that the holy remains of Mary Magdalene were in Saint-Maximin, were the Bulls of Pope Boniface VIII, in 1295.



The miraculous events surrounding the rediscovery of the tomb of her holy remains

In the year 710, the Monks of the monastery of St Maximin were forced to flee their Monastery because of the invading Saracens (Moslem tribes from Arabia). They knew that they could not leave the holy remains of St Mary Magdalene for the invaders to destroy, so they devised a plan to move her remains into a more humble tomb next to the original as a disguise, and then bury the entire Chapel with earth and sand so that no part was visible.

Finally, the Arab occupation came to an end in the 10th century, but while the citizens remembered the events surrounding the burial of the Chapel and the tombs, the exact location was not known.

In 1279, Prince Charles II of Salerno, nephew of King Louis IX of France, resolved to find the tomb of Mary Magdalene. Under the direction of a number of Church dignitaries and nobles, the search began in earnest, and workmen began the excavation work inside the church of Saint-Maximin and the land surrounding it.

The search continued for many days, and the prince himself joined in with the laborers removing mountains of earth. At last, they came upon a crypt that dated back to the 1st century.

The crypt was filled with earth and sand and they began removing this. On December 9, 1279, as Prince Charles was displacing the earth from the middle of the Crypt, the workmen digging on his right discovered a marble tomb buried deep in the sand. It was the sarcophagus-tomb of Sidonius, the one into which the holy remains of Mary Magdalene had been placed prior to the Monks fleeing in 710.

Before they were able to open it, a most marvelous fragrance rose up from the tomb that made all those present believe they had not found the treasure they were searching for.

On December 18, a number of Bishops, including the Archbishop of Arles and the Archbishop of Aix, came to Saint-Maximin, and in the name of the Church, officially witnessed the opening of the tomb. The body was found to be complete except for a bone of the jaw that was missing. Among the dust particles at the bottom of the tomb, a small piece of cork was found. Inside it was a message written on parchment. It read:

"Year of the nativity of our Lord, 710, this sixth day of the month of December, under the reign of (not legible) and during the ravages of the Saracen nation, in fear of the Saracens, the body of the well-loved and venerable Mary Magdalene has been transferred, to be better concealed, from the alabaster tomb to the one in marble, out of which the body of Sidonius has been removed."

The prince, overjoyed at having found the holy remains of Mary Magdalene, called together on May 5, 1280, in the town of Saint-Maximin, the prelates and a great number of religious of Provence and of France, together with the counts, barons, knights and persons of high rank in his kingdom and the nobles attached to his court, in order to proceed to the solemn elevation and translation of the relics.

The prelates having come to the tomb to remove the holy body, and while in the process of performing this venerable task, discovered a small ball of wax that contained a piece of bark. On it was a message more ancient than the parchment, and hardly legible. Written in Latin, it read:

"Hic requiescit corpus Mariae Magdalенаe" (Here lies the body of Mary Magdalene)

The finding of this second testimonial caused great rejoicing among all those present and also the vast number of people outside who had come from many parts to assist at this solemn occasion.

There were several signs that were remarkable considering the body had been buried since the 1st century. It was found that the tongue still adhered to the mouth cavity, and from it had grown an aromatic plant. On seeing this marvel, the prince burst out into loud sobs. And overcome by deep emotion, he wept openly, bringing on the tears of many of those present.

The most remarkable sign of all was the small piece of skin that was found to be attached to the brow. It was smooth, clear, and lighter than the remainder of the body, and was the size of two fingertips. As it resembled live skin, it was subsequently named the "Noli me tangere" (Do not touch me)-the words spoken by Christ to Mary Magdalene at the Resurrection; **it was believed to have been the touch of the risen Lord on the brow of Mary Magdalene.**

This small particle of skin remained unchanged for another five hundred years, and no suitable explanation was ever found for the phenomenon. Five centuries after its discovery, it finally detached itself from the brow, and was placed in a separate reliquary.

And so we have in Mary Magdalene one of the first (if not *the* first) women mystics and hermits of the Church. Her cave-grotto with its remarkable view is now a large Chapel where Mass is celebrated each day. It houses an extraordinary reliquary containing part of her tibia bone and also the chapel boasts several beautiful statues and a beautiful altar. The Basilica of Saint Mary Magdalen in nearby Saint Maximin, Vézelay, France contains the tomb and the blessed remains of Saint Mary Magdalen. Since the 11th century the Basilica of St Mary Magdalen (known in French as Basilique Ste-Madeleine) in Vézelay has been one of the greatest European pilgrimage locations, especially during the middle ages. It is a large Basilica, only a few yards shorter than the great Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris.

~St Mary Magdalene, pray for us!

"It is presumed that during her 30 years as a hermitess in the cave of La-Sainte-Baume, she suffered and sacrificed in reparation not only for her own sins, but also as a soul victim for others, and that the early Church benefitted greatly from her sacrificial life of penances and mortifications, offered in union with her beloved Jesus, for the sake of His Church."

- See more at: <http://www.mysticsofthechurch.com/2010/04/st-mary-magdalen-first-woman-mystic.html#sthash.uNZHdfOM.dpuf>