

Homily celebrates life of Mary Magdalene

Alice Popovici | Jul. 30, 2012

Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a priest with the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests, wrote the following homily for the celebration of Mary Magdalene's feast day, and read it during a July 18 mass for Call to Action at the Maple Grove United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio:

Sisters and brothers in Christ: There is much to say about Mary Magdalene and much connecting to do with her life then and our present reality now. (This evening I'll begin with an 'unsettling' story.)

In 1981 Women Church Convergence held a gathering in Chicago. Women of all faiths participated, including some of the Episcopal women priests who were ordained in the late '70s. This is where I met Dominican Sister Marge Tuite, who became a mentor on my journey to the priesthood. 'Make the connections,' she said, 'between sexism and racism, sexism and militarism, sexism and nationalism, sexism and capitalism?' Today we would include homophobia.

The next day as a group we marched outside in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in El Salvador, where our government's support of their armies with our hard-earned taxpayer money caused suffering and death. It was good for my feet to hit the ground, touching the sweet earth of which we are made. I had a hint of the connection Sr. Marge was talking about.

Then we gathered in small groups at tables in a huge conference room. I walked in and found myself sitting at a table labeled 'ABUSE' in all capital letters. A woman began to speak. Her presence, appearance and what she said are still fresh in my mind.

She was like an apparition: in a long soft blue suede Indian dress wearing a striking ethnic necklace and sandals on her feet. Her hair was braided down to her waist and her face, the most weathered I've ever seen in a woman.

She was a nun who had been working for more than 25 years in Lima, Peru, teaching secretarial skills to women who had no other way to make a living other than prostitution. She said distinctly and with the strength of voice that comes from years-in-the-making: 'You think you know the oldest profession in the world?' She paused while our minds processed the familiar answer. Then she continued: 'The domination of women by men.'

I gulped. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and the shock still reverberates with me today.

A few days ago I read about the Syrian women who were being raped by the opposing forces. We know that throughout history rape is a weapon of war.

Yesterday I heard on the BBC radio the story of two Syrians, a soldier and his commander. They were driving down the street in Damascus and saw a lovely young woman student from the university. The reporter who interviewed the men said they discussed 'having her.' They then pushed her into the car

with them, took her to a vacant building and each raped her. Then they killed her.

Several of us have participated in the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN. In our statement we are making the connections between oppression of women within their religion and violence toward women in the world.

“Christian voices are important, even in a predominantly Muslim country,” said Catholic theologian Dorothy Irvin. “Syria is the place where Mary Magdalene preached and died, and the earliest scrap of her gospel is in Syriac. She knew about rape as a weapon of the Roman wars of conquest. Muslim women, as we have learned at the UN, want Christian support.”

Jesus is said to have cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. I don’t believe they were sins but rather deep emotional wounds from living under patriarchy which not only can damage and destroy women’s souls and bodies but also those of our brothers, sons, fathers, uncles and grandpas as well as male priests.

What were the demons of patriarchy that possessed Mary Magdalene?

1st demon: You are born to wait on others to the point of not knowing who you are. (The message: Don’t take care of yourself.)

2nd demon: You are inferior by nature of your body which bleeds and secretes fluids. (Don’t think of your menses as natural. They’re a curse; the end of your cycle is a curse.)

3rd demon: You are of an inferior intellect and must be ruled over. (Don’t study, or give your opinion.)

4th demon: You are not an image of the Living God. (You can have no spiritual authority.)

5th demon: You are not to be believed as your testimony is unworthy and flawed. (Don’t trust yourself.)

6th demon: Your body is a temptation to men so it must be covered. (Men can use and abuse you.)

7th demon: You are unworthy unless you bear children. (Other kinds of creation don’t matter.)

Perhaps Mary Magdalene experienced rape from a Roman soldier and became lifeless or anxiety-ridden from PTSD, which more women suffer from than men.

We know that those possessed by demons were thought to have a mental illness.

When Jesus healed her, perhaps he said: “Arise, healed and whole, loving daughter of God, in whom I place my trust. Your faith has saved you.”

In today’s Gospel, Mary recognized the resurrected Jesus when he said her name. She responded by saying “Teacher.” Jesus says her name in a way that helps her recognize who she is—who God has created her to be. He taught her what to replace her demons with:

1 Take care of yourself so that you can take care of others.

2 The blood of life comes from your body.

3 Use your mind to learn and spread the gospel.

4 You image God in an intimate way.

5 Trust yourself because you know me (Jesus).

6 Men must respect you the way that I do.

7 Use your gifts to create beauty in the world—dance, music, gardens—new life from giving birth to children and giving birth to beautiful things like poetry and art.

Imagine her tears of joy and relief. Imagine how she grew with the support of Jesus to trust herself, to see herself as an image of the living God, deserving of Jesus’ love, gentleness and thoughtfulness. Is it any wonder that death could not even separate her from him? She was the only apostle with such faithfulness.

We know in the Gnostic gospels that Mary Magdalene was the apostle who knew the All. That she constantly asked Jesus questions to understand ? so much so that Peter got angry and complained to the Savior. We know in the Apocrypha that Jesus often kissed her on the mouth.

We know that 98 percent of Jewish men were married and had a wife and children. Mary Magdalene the Holy Grail?who like Jesus calls us to return to the joy, gentleness, wisdom and connection that a life in touch with our soul brings. Like Jesus, Mary is the non-violent one.

What if Mary Magdalene was so transformed into her own divine humanity that she indeed became the divine feminine and the wife of Jesus? Would not our world be a gentler place? What is she saying to you and me today? Are there any demons that need to leave and be replaced by the authentic person that God knows you to be?

Mary Magdalene is a great teacher and she is with us in spirit. She is the closest to Jesus next to his Mother Mary, and we are delighted at this transformation of our consciousness in how we perceive her today. Yes, the Holy Spirit?s dance is evident.

Mary Magdalene, sister of wisdom, teacher of the spirit, companion of Jesus who empowers and liberates and calls us to friendship. We women and men still suffer from the demons of domination and subordination, so we pray: Give us the words, show us the way to counter evil and violence. Help us to drive out the demons of patriarchy ? even today ? and recognize the kin-dom which is our joy, our hope and our work. Amen.

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