

WILL THE REAL MARY OF MAGDALA PLEASE STAND UP?

by **Rose Gordy**

“Saint Mary Magdalene: in her, the capacity for great ‘sinfulness’ was the capacity for great saintliness. Also in everybody else.”

— Thomas Merton (14 September 1939)

My friendship across time and space with Mary of Magdala is intimately bound up with my friendship with Thomas Merton of Gethsemani, “Louie” as I affectionately call him since his name in religion was Father Louis. On July 20, 1947 he noted in *The Sign of Jonas*: “The day after tomorrow is the feast of Saint Mary Magdalen to whom I pray with fervor and pleasure because she is one of the few people who ever had any sense” (p. 58). The next year on October 10, he wrote: “And perhaps if Saint Francis will pray for me, and Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Mary Magdalen, I’ll slide down off my high horse now and begin being the last and least in everything” (p. 123). Needless to say, Mary of Magdala meant a lot to him.

Four years ago one of my close Jewish friends became “My Link to Louie” as I describe her in a poem by the same title. As we were driving over the Shenandoah River on our way home from a one floor school house she owns where she paints huge nature canvases, Betty announced: “Oh, over there is the abbey where my Rabbi does the Seder for the monks every year!” Without hesitation, I made a U-turn at the end of the bridge and visited Holy Cross Abbey at Berryville, Virginia, for the first time. Months later on the first of my many retreats there since then, as I walked from Mass in the Main Chapel back to the Guest House, these words came to me: “Be at peace and wait on the Lord.” What reassuring words, possibly from “Louie” himself, which have helped me through many difficult times!

Over these past few years I’ve gotten to know “Louie” as a personal friend even though unfortunately I never actually met him. I described the beginning of our friendship this way in the first line of a poem about it, “In the year of my menopause I fell in love with a dead Trappist monk named Thomas Merton.” Our relationship has led me to visit “his” Abbey at Gethsemani several times, talk to him at his grave site and in his hermitage, become friends with two of his former scholastics, give workshops for The International Thomas Merton Society and facilitate monthly discussions about his life and writings for the past four years at my parish. Significantly, my three teenage sons talk about him as though he were their uncle.

On a kind of intuitive level I “know” “Louie” and Mary

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ST. MARY MAGDALEN
DRAWING BY THOMAS MERTON

Magdalen and I are meant to be friends across time and space. As a result when I left a copy of his *Asian Journal* in the Poets' House at New Harmony, Indiana after a writing grant there several summers ago, I signed the front page "From Louie and Mary and Rose."

I have a sense of Mary of Magdala on a number of levels: as a woman pulled in opposite directions because of her love of the man Jesus and her knowledge that their "affair" was not to be of this world; as an "other world type woman," one before her time; as a woman in a patriarchal society who faced major misunderstandings and misinterpretations both in her lifetime as well as throughout the ages. I feel particularly connected to her because of her abiding love for Jesus, a love which was not to be fulfilled in this world. It parallels Merton's love of his nurse friend and of mine for a priest friend I met over twenty-five years ago in graduate school. The oxymorons of our three love "affairs" connect us: to have yet have not; to love but to be restrained from ever expressing it completely in the true human way; to accept whether we like it or not that fulfillment is only to come in the after world. For me Mary of Magdala is a model of one who faced an unrequited physical love, a love that must not only be fulfilled beyond this earth, a love platonic in body but certainly passionate in spirit, various novels and short stories about her, especially recently, to the contrary. They, of course, only perpetuate the myths about her.

A poem I wrote thirty years ago expressed this point:

Waiting is for ever,
but once ever is past,
fulfillment is for eternity
for Love alone will last.

My friendship with Mary of Magdala has evolved from a series of dialogues with her a la Ira Progoff and his Intensive Journal Writing Workshop which I took in the summer of 1986. It was during this week, by the way, that I began to be moved to go to a Trappist Abbey. In fact, one of my friends recently told me that she thinks I've become a channel for Mary Magdalen as well as for "Louis." Certainly I pray to her and honor her as he did. Furthermore, I consider her one of my real friends and both continue to bring encouragement and grace and love to my life.

I have a special sense of who Mary of Magdala was, of Who and what she literally stood for at the foot of the Cross as well as what she metaphorically stands for today across the ages for all of us but especially for women. As I have a personal love for her Man Jesus, I also love her and "Louie" and my graduate school friend.

In an archetypal sense Mary of Magdala represents a part of me and of EVERYWOMAN. Derided, disbelieved, disavowed, dishonored, misunderstood, and scorned, through it all she stood at the Cross with Him whom she loved deeply. She stood tall beneath that Cross though derided, I am sure, by the guards for being a fool to have such a loser for a friend. More significantly, three days later she was the first person to whom Jesus showed Himself after his Resurrection so that she could spread the word of His triumph over denigration and death.

As a lay woman Eucharistic Minister at my parish for the past decade or so, I am able to perform more ministerial duties today that I was permitted to do when I used to be a teaching nun in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. These include distributing Communion under both species, blessing throats, and giving ashes among others. Thus, I feel further linked to Mary of Magdala as a fellow minister. She continued in Jesus' footsteps, personally tutored and loved and ordained by Him, and despite some envy supported and ultimately honored by His Apostles. There is no doubt in my mind that she was THE FIRST WOMAN PRIEST.

For all these personal reasons, it's no wonder that when Susan Haskins' book *Mary Magdalen Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1993) came out, I was quite anxious to buy it. As I read and reread it, the same questions continued to circle round and round in my mind.

WHO WAS THE REAL MARY MAGDALEN?
WILL THE REAL MARY OF MAGDALA PLEASE STAND UP?

Throughout her book Haskins offers us a highly informative and interesting study of Mary Magdalen as a woman and as a Saint misunderstood, misconstrued and romanticized over the ages. She points out the book's major objective: "to discover why in the western tradition she has been seen as a repentant prostitute, and what this means in the context of women's place within that tradition." She further points out that because Mary of Magdala was

confused with other female characters from the gospels, some of who are explicitly described as sinners; and one who from her story, appears to have been a prostitute . . . Mary Magdalen, chief female disciple, first apostle and beloved friend of Christ, would become transformed into a penitent whore. (p. 15)

It is significant that the publication of this book comes toward the end of the century as women jockey for more credibility and acceptance in a continuing patriarchal society. Mary Magdalen is certainly a metaphor for the struggle of all women to be heard, loved, appreciated and honored for their numerous ongoing sacrifices, dedication and spirit. There is no doubt in my mind that the REAL MARY OF MAGDALA who lived two thousand years ago in a very different though similar world to ours is truly a role model for modern women. Haskins notes beautifully in the closing lines of the final chapter that the more accurate picture which she has tried to present of Mary of Magdala

will have greater relevance and resonance for the majority of women looking for active roles both within and outside the Church. The true Mary Magdalen has much to offer when freed from the restrictions which gender bias has imposed upon her. Symbolism has done her an injustice but modern scholarship has made restitution possible. If there is still need for symbolism would not the true Mary Magdalen, the disciple by the Cross and herald of new life, no less beautiful than her mythical person, and far more edifying as a figure of independence, courage, action, faith, and love, serve women better as a symbol for today? Nietzsche wrote that every culture needed myth and was impoverished when it lost or lacked myth. In losing the myth of Mary Magdalen, however, has not our culture not only nothing to lose but also everything to gain? (p. 400)

In the final analysis, then, perhaps the greatest good a book like Haskins' can do is raise the consciousness of many more women and men to the reality of Mary Magdalen's place today as a model of a dedicated woman, though unaccepted and disavowed at times in history. As a metaphor for women today as we continue our struggle to be heard, taken seriously, and ultimately welcomed into the church as participating members in all the sacraments including holy orders. Mary of Magdala stood up to the patriarchy of the first apostles when they refused to believe she had seen the risen Christ. Did that stop her? Did they keep her from continuing her mission to do the work of Christ? Certainly not! She persisted and was heard and did serve, I believe, as the first woman priest "ordained" by Christ Himself. She stood up for what she believed, especially for Him she believed in and, more importantly, for Him whom she loved. As a result she had to face and withstand the prejudices of the patriarchy of the first Apostles particularly Peter's which she did in no uncertain terms. Such a woman can only be a preeminent model and solace and source of strength to women today. With and like Merton, because Mary of Magdala "makes sense," I pray to her "with fervor and pleasure" to make it possible for women to follow in her footsteps:

Dear Mary of Magdala,

Lover of the Man Jesus, witness of His Death and most importantly His Resurrection, and first woman priest, give us women of the late twentieth century the strength of our convictions, the stamina to face rejection and misunderstanding, and the love of Jesus to help us serve the poor in whatever forms we meet them in our lives. We need your protection and support across time and space today more than ever. We pray that you help us to follow in your footsteps as lovers of Christ, as witness to His Resurrection in our daily lives, and one day also as priests in the fullness of Holy Orders.

Amen.

Finally, I ask once more, “WILL THE REAL MARY OF MAGDALA PLEASE STAND UP?”

And the answer comes to me: “She has done just that in the most compelling and meaningful way to date through Susan Haskins’ provocative study of her life across the centuries.”