

"Women's Voices in the Church"

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by Sharon Spiller

with an introduction by Fr. Brian Joyce

A Brief Introduction to Mary Magdalen by Father Brian Joyce

In talking about today's saint, Mary Magdalen, one scholar has described the problem as "a muddle of Marys." There are at least three Marys at the foot of the cross. There is the public sinner who dries the feet of Jesus with her hair. There is the woman caught in adultery whom Mel Gibson portrays as Mary Magdalen. There is the woman out of whom Jesus casts seven demons, and there is the Mary who meets the risen Christ and is sent to tell the apostles.

The early Church and the Eastern Church always celebrated two different feasts for two different women. At least one Pope and certainly many artists and novelists have confused the tearful prostitute who dries the feet of Jesus with her hair with Mary Magdalen. But that's not she!

To make matters worse, the best-selling novel, "The Da Vinci Code," has tried to promote Mary to the right hand of Jesus at the Last Supper, ousting John, the Beloved Disciple, and making Mary Magdalen into "Mrs. Jesus" which is neither true nor much of an honor to someone as strong and significant as Mary Magdalen is on her own.

Actually she was, much to the embarrassment of the frightened and scattered apostles, one of the few who remained at the side of Christ at Calvary to the bitter end, fearless and faithful. She was the first to meet the Risen Christ at the empty tomb and to be sent to announce the good news of resurrection to the apostles who were in mourning and hiding!

She is often pictured carrying or standing by a container of oil since she braved Easter Sunday morning to visit the tomb with the intention of anointing the body of Jesus. She is also often shown holding an egg as a sign of resurrection and new life. In fact our environment committee kids about it, but on standing orders from Margo Schorno, they still faithfully place a very large egg in front of the pulpit during the Easter season, as a reminder of resurrection and of Mary Magdalen.

My favorite image of Mary Magdalen shows a strong, independent and well-to-do Hebrew woman. We know this because she was able to support Jesus and his ministry out of her own resources. She was not named after her father, husband, or son as was the custom of the culture, but after the town

of Magdalen where she was a leading citizen. And the early Church, for all its reservations about the leadership role of women, named her an apostle, in fact, "the Apostle to the Apostles."

Women's Voices in the Church **by Sharon Spiller**

We gather here today to celebrate the Feast of Mary Magdalen. Now, much has been said about Mary Magdalen, but the primary idea I would like to talk about today is that she is one of the strongest examples in the New Testament of the Feminine Face of God. Now, that sounds obvious because yes, of course, she is a woman. But what qualities does the Feminine Face of God exemplify?

As we have heard over the past years, Mary Magdalen was not a prostitute! She was a woman of deep faith in Jesus and his message of compassion and love. She was an extremely courageous woman who overcame many life afflictions, in the form of seven demons. And, most importantly, she was one of Jesus's first disciples. As such, she was entrusted by Jesus to go out into the world and spread his teachings.

In our time, there have been many other women who have emulated Mary Magdalen's example. The one I would like to quote from today is Joan Chittister. Joan Chittister, as many of you know, is a Benedictine nun who to me exemplifies many facets of the Feminine Face of God. I would like to read a very small portion of a speech that Joan Chittister gave at a Call to Action Conference back in 1998. This passage outlines some basic components of what I am calling the Feminine Face of God.

She said: "...We are all surrounded by the presence of God in one another. And, if we are all words of God, then each of us, all of us, have something to say. We are all a message to the rest of the world of the nature and mind of God. We are all expressions of Divine presence, of Divine hope, of Divine truth. We are all meant to be word to one another..."

So, one facet of the Feminine Face of God is that it is Relational. (We are surrounded by the presence of God in one another.) Look around! This 8 a.m. Mass is such a good example of what Joan Chittister is saying here. The people at this mass are like a family to one another. You are in relationship to one another!

Father Joyce said something Tuesday night that really made an impression on me. (The example of Quark, the smallest particle in the Universe wanting to be in relation with other Quarks.)

Joan Chittister goes on to say: "Feminism speaks from the other mountain, from the Mount of the Beatitudes, not from Sinai, from the mount of compassion over control, of feeling over reason, of empowerment for all rather than power for the powerful."

Therefore, a second facet of the Feminine Face of God is that it is Compassionate and Loving.

We are called as a people of God, as a Catholic Christian people, to go out like Mary Magdalen and be disciples to the poor, the disenfranchised, the sick, and the hopeless. We are called to be active not only in our faith in God but to manifest Jesus' message of compassion and love through action. Now, I know that many of you here today are doing just that. In fact, I always feel like I am "preaching to the Choir" at this mass, but I know that for me this area has been a real struggle. I have spent the past year, really taking time to discern what it is that God is calling me to do. In fact, I am taking a class next week at GTU called, "I'd Say Yes God, If I Knew What You Wanted." So, not only is it important to act on our faith, but it is important to take time to discern God's call. In fact, there are many people right now talking about the importance of what they are calling "Contemplative Action" or "Spiritual Activism." It is their belief that social justice work is stronger and more focused when it is integrated in spiritual discernment practices.

....Which brings me to the final facet of the Feminine Face of God, which is Courage. Now, it's true that courage isn't necessarily thought of as just a feminine quality. However, the courage that I speak of here is a Courage that comes from our hearts. It is the courage to speak our truth even when we know that our view is not the popular view, but deep in our heart we know that it is the "right" thing to do, based on our beliefs in a loving and compassionate God. Mary Magdalen was definitely courageous, and we can be as well.

I would like to close with a passage from Paulo Coelho's book, *The Valkries*. In this novel, another strong courageous woman named Valhalla says....

"Have courage," Valhalla's voice rang out clearly and strongly. Open your heart, and listen to what your dreams tell you. Follow those dreams, because only a person who is not ashamed can manifest the Glory of God." ...

"There is no sin but the lack of love," Valhalla continued. "Have courage, be capable of loving, even if love appears to be a treacherous and terrible thing. Be happy in love. Be joyful in victory. Follow the dictates of your heart."

"That's impossible," someone in the crowd said. People have obligations We have children. We have husbands and wives." "People have to earn a living," another person said.

"Well, meet your obligations, But obligations never prevented anyone from following their dreams. Remember that you are a manifestation of the absolute and do only those things in your lives that are worth the effort.

Only those who do that will understand the great transformations that are yet to be seen." It is their belief that social justice work is stronger and more focused when it is integrated in spiritual discernment practices.

