

If this argument holds, then Mary Magdalene, the penitent woman, and Mary of Bethany are the same. Granted, we are still left with a little mystery. Nevertheless, I personally agree with Pope St. Gregory, who concluded, "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary [of Bethany] we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark" (*Homilies on the Gospels*). St. Mary Magdalene, the repentant sinner, who found both forgiveness and friendship with our Lord, who stood faithfully at the foot of the cross, and who saw the risen Lord, is a powerful example for each believer.

As far as *The Da Vinci Code* is concerned, what one cannot construe is some of the misconceptions they erroneously present: for instance, that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, the mother of Jesus' child, a participant at the Last Supper, His prophetic successor and a priestess. Such conclusions, despite the best efforts of historical revisionists who distort the Gospel to meet their political objectives, have no foundation in sacred Scripture, sacred tradition or factual history.

While the revisionists cite the "gnostic gospels," these were rejected from the official canon of sacred Scripture because they lacked apostolic authorship, were heretical and contained fictitious stories. One cannot counter Church tradition with

spurious evidence from the gnostic gospels.

Lastly, the book cites several individuals who have accused the Church of "a smear campaign" to discredit Mary Magdalene so as to disempower a powerful woman. Oh please! What greater honor could the Church grant than by recognizing Mary Magdalene as a saint and a model for every sincere Christian who struggles for holiness? Pope St. Gregory realized Mary Magdalene's beautiful example: a woman who found new life in Christ, not a woman who found a self-empowered political agenda. Frankly, more people ought to spend their time reading the Bible, the fathers of the Church and the *Catechism* instead of such bogus print as *The Da Vinci Code*.

Copyright © Arlington Catholic Herald, Inc.  
All rights reserved. Used with permission  
Printed with ecclesiastical approval

**Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists**  
P.O. Box 5584, Bakersfield, California 93388  
e-mail: [info@pjpiisoe.org](mailto:info@pjpiisoe.org) Phone: 661 393-3239

[www.pjpiisoe.org](http://www.pjpiisoe.org)

Donation Welcome and Appreciated  
Pamphlet 138

## Who Was Mary Magdalene?

Fr. William P. Saunders, PhD

**I had a discussion with a friend of mine who read *The Da Vinci Code* who said that St. Mary Magdalene was neither a sinner nor a prostitute. Instead the Church made up that story to discredit her. What can I say to her?**

Controversy over the identity of St. Mary Magdalene has continued since the early Church. In the Gospels, there are three particular "characters" involved in the controversy: Mary Magdalene, a follower of our Lord (Jn 20:11-18); the anonymous penitent woman (Lk 7:36-50); and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Lk 10:38-42). In the West, particularly since the time of Pope St. Gregory the Great, the three characters have all been identified as St. Mary Magdalene. However, in the East, the three characters have remained separate, with St. Mary Magdalene and "St. Mary of Bethany" having separate feast days. St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas all refrained from making a final decision.

So, why would Pope St. Gregory fuse the three "characters" together? First, we need to examine the specific references to the woman named "Mary Magdalene" recorded in the Gospels. She was one of the women who accompanied Jesus and

the Apostles: "The Twelve accompanied Him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and maladies: Mary called the Magdalene, from whom seven devils had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who were assisting them out of their means" (Lk 8:1-3). (The Gospel of St. Mark confirms that our Lord had expelled seven demons from Mary Magdalene (16:9).)

Mary Magdalene also stood at the foot of the cross during the crucifixion (confer Mk 15:40, Mt 27:56 and Jn 19:25). She also witnessed Christ's burial, and on Easter was the first to discover the empty tomb and then the first to see the risen Lord (confer Jn 20:1-18).

Given the specific references to "Mary Magdalene," the second step is to examine whether Mary Magdalene may also be the penitent woman found in the Gospel of St. Luke (7:36-50). Remember the penitent woman entered the home of Simon the Pharisee. She wept, and her tears fell upon our Lord's feet. She anointed His feet with perfumed oil and dried them with her hair. Simon the Pharisee said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, He would know who and what sort of woman this is that touches Him — that she is a sinner," an obvious reference to her being "untouchable" because of such a serious sin as adultery, fornication, or promiscuity. In the end, Jesus forgives the penitent woman.

This scene is part of Jesus' ministry in the area of the Sea of Galilee. Also, right after the declaration of forgiveness in the seventh chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name as a follower of Jesus and identified as the one "from whom seven devils had gone out" (Lk 9:1-3). Keep in mind that Magdalene is derived from Magdala. Magdala, located along the Sea of Galilee near Tiberias, was a wealthy city known for its prosperous fisheries. The Romans destroyed the town because of its moral depravity and its participation in the Jewish revolt. Interestingly, in the Talmud, from the word Magdalene is derived the expression "curling women's hair," which means "adulteress." Even though the penitent woman of Luke 7 is not specifically identified as the Mary Magdalene "from whom seven devils had gone out" of Luke 8, one could easily draw the conclusion, as did Pope St. Gregory. Moreover, the early Church tradition has also upheld this connection.

The third and more difficult step to the investigation is to see if Mary Magdalene could indeed be Mary of Bethany. Following Luke 8, the gospel in the ninth and 10th chapters relates such stories as the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, the Transfiguration, the exorcism of a possessed boy and teachings about discipleship. Our Lord then traveled to "a village" (i.e. Bethany, although not specified by Luke) to the home of Martha, who "had a sister named Mary" (confer Lk

10:38-42). There Martha prepared a meal for our Lord.

While the Gospel of St. Luke does not specifically identify Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the Gospel of St. John helps resolve the issue. In John 12:1-11, Jesus arrived at Bethany, "the village of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead." Martha served a meal. Mary anointed our Lord's feet with perfume and dried his feet with her hair. Keep in mind this is a different scene than the anointing by the penitent woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7; nevertheless, the same kind of action in both scenes helps suggest the same actor, namely Mary Magdalene.

Moreover, in John 11, the earlier scene where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Gospel reads, "There was a certain man named Lazarus who was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary whose brother Lazarus was sick was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and dried His feet with her hair" (Jn 11:1-2). Here Mary is identified as "the one who anointed the Lord." While some speculate that this identification in John 11 refers to the subsequent anointing in John 12, why would John need to make such a reference when the story of John 11 flows right into the story of John 12? More likely, the identification refers to a previous action, namely the story at the home of Simon the Pharisee.