

### *Mary Magdalene— From Sinner to Saint*

The following text is drawn from the out of print book, *The Gospel in Art*, by Edward Albert Bailey (Pilgrim Press, 1916, Boston), in which the author describes a painting depicting Mary Magdalene as she is often traditionally shown in her “reformed” later life. Because the Gospel of St. John records that Mary was the first person to see Christ after His resurrection and was directed by Him to take to the brethren the news of His approaching Ascension, she is called in the Catholic liturgy the “Apostle of the Apostles.”

**T**HIS PICTURE [to the right] is based on a late legend that identifies Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany. When the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1 arose, their enemies put Mary, Martha and Lazarus in an open boat, without oar, sail, rudder or provisions, expecting that they would speedily perish. But a kindly Providence blew them the whole length of the Mediterranean to Marseilles in France. They were rudely treated by the pagans at first, but Mary preached to them with such wondrous effect that Christianity was securely planted among them and Lazarus became the first Bishop of Marseilles.

Mary thereupon retired to the wilderness, where she did penance for thirty years, and though never seen by mortals was nourished by angels and visions. It happened that a holy hermit wandered into the neighborhood of her cell just in time to see her soul carried to heaven by angels. In the thirteenth century her supposed remains were discovered at St. Maximin, a little village twenty miles north of Toulon. Thereafter her fame became extraordinary in southern France. A convent to her memory was erected on the traditional scene of her penance—a wild spot between Toulon and



Painting, 1508, Timoteo Viti (or Vite), 1469-1523. Palazzo Ducale, Urbino

#### *Magdalene in the Desert*

*Legend relates that she from whom Christ Jesus cast out seven devils lived the ascetic life of an eremite for thirty years. She is here shown with an alabaster vase, symbol of her deed of love, a stone representing the punishment for adultery from which she was rescued, a book, emblematic of her devotion to contemplation, and a scourge, representing penance.*

Marseilles—which survived till the beginning of the French Revolution, when it and its treasures of relics were destroyed. The church of the Madeleine, erected to her memory in Paris, is one of the finest shrines in Europe and the most costly memorial to her in the world.

Mary Magdalene is the type and patron saint of the repentant sinner. Pictures like this of Viti first became popular in the sixteenth century and were at the height of favor in the seventeenth. Mary is always distinguished from the other saints by her alabaster vase, symbol of her deed of love, though she may have also a book to show her devotion to contemplation, a crucifix as an emblem of faith, a skull for mortality and a scourge for penance. Viti gives us the vase and the book. He pictures for us the cave in the rocks that for thirty years was her home.

Mary is clad in a long robe, crimson [in the original] in token of Jesus' statement that "she loved much." Her hair is quite unbound—as the Magdalene's hair always is for no reason but tradition—and in this case it reaches to her feet beneath her mantle. Her hands are closed in prayer. Her pose and the look upon her face speak of meditation. She has an appearance almost of girlish innocence.

It is hard to identify her with the passionate Mary of Scripture, or with the fiery preacher who converted the city of Marseilles. Surely her long penance has accomplished more than the salvation of her soul; it has transformed her very nature, put out the fires of youth, extinguished desire itself and left a pensive saint who waits in patience for whatever visions of bliss God may vouchsafe her.

This is a conception of sainthood quite foreign to our thinking but very much in vogue in the middle age—as it is today in some parts of the world. Asceticism has always had its votaries. The great Indian epics that date a thousand years before Christ show us forests filled with hermits, who by their austerities were able to work miracles and even to control the gods.

The Jews of our Lord's time had their sect of the Essenes in the region of the Dead Sea. Asceticism became a passion in the early Christian centuries, so that the desert cliffs of Judea were honeycombed with caves by the tens of thousands, and the Thebaïd in Egypt reckoned its hermits by the hundred thousand. Sometimes the austerities took unbelievable forms; as when St. Simeon Stylites lived for thirty-seven years on the top of a pillar a yard square, his neck loaded with an iron chain, his lips moving in continual prayer, his body wasted

with continual fasting. The fame of his sanctity brought crowds to see him from the ends of the earth and made many converts.

The history of sainthood throughout the middle age is filled with similar examples. Such a life was thought to atone for the sins of the past; and privations and bodily sufferings were meritorious in the sight of God and often brought a direct vision of Him. It is no wonder that the logic of such beliefs should lead Mary to an anchorite's cell. As her body had been the home of seven demons, so now, purified by self-mortification, it should be the abode of angels. As she had sinned beyond others in the days of her youth, so beyond others should her declining years bear witness to the genuineness of her repentance. There is both logic and poetic justice here. Granted only the views of life that the middle age held and we could think of Mary in no other terms.

But has this picture any message for us?—for us pampered children of the steam-heated house, the full table and the upholstered church? for us who are so tolerant of other men's beliefs and sins that we have snuffed out hell and given the sinner a college education? Do we believe that sin is deadly and must be atoned for by somebody? That the love that cannot immolate itself is worthless? That the plucking out of an eye may fill the whole body with light?

Certainly we may hold these beliefs—indeed we should hold them. But it will do no good to snuff out hell unless we strenuously win heaven. No atonement for sin was ever made by self-flagellation, but rather by trying to live the Christ-life. Self-sacrifice for its own sake is suicide, but losing one's life for Christ's sake and the gospel's is finding it.

The nobly ascetic life is not necessarily a life of privations, but rather a life surcharged with positive interests. Given the dominance of an imperious ideal, all the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life will shrivel and die. Christ never denied himself—he was too busy; and the modern Christian can do no better than follow his Lord. We must therefore look upon Viti's picture as an allegory, or at best a half-truth that needs to be subsumed in a larger vision. □