

Saint Mary Magdalen

The Great Penitent. Feast Day, July 22.

By Monsignor John T. McMahon, M.A., Ph.D.

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The Church celebrates the Feast of Saint Mary Magdalen on July 22nd. In this attempt to give a picture of Mary, it is taken for granted that she is one person, not two or three, as has been suggested and as the Greek Church and some others still believe. As far as the New Testament goes, the evidence is not conclusive. But constant and living tradition down the years has identified these three women as one, in the person of Mary Magdalen, and in the liturgy of the Latin Church, it is just about taken for granted.

The sinner who anointed the feet of Christ in the house of Simon the Pharisee; the sister of Martha and Lazarus in Bethany; and finally the person all the world knows as Mary Magdalen who stood beneath the Cross of the dying Christ and was the first recorded witness of the Resurrection — these three characters are assumed to be one and the same person.

For the singular grace of being the first to see the Risen Christ and to have been commanded by Him to announce His Resurrection to the disciples, the Church orders the Creed to be said on her feast-day as in the Masses of the Apostles.

In this story of a public sinner becoming a saint, Our Blessed Lord shows Himself in a tender light, and the beauty of His understanding and sympathetic character has never been seen in a more touching form than in His attitude towards this sinner.

There is in this conversion a moral beauty, so winningly human yet so tenderly Divine, so utterly Christ-like in its pity and clemency, that it not only proves the authenticity of the story itself, but even now, after two thousand years, it moves and melts our hearts.

WHO WAS MARY MAGDALEN?

At the southern end of the beautiful little plain of Genesareth was the small but fashionable town of Magdala. It lay conveniently half-way between Capharnaum to the north and Tiberias to the south. From Capharnaum and its poor, hard-working fisher folk it could obtain both provisions and domestic help; from Tiberias would come the leisured classes, Romans and Jews alike, who fancied a villa by the sea. It was a gay town. The ordinary people of the country around and of the fishing villages did not give Magdala a good name.

Anyone coming on foot from Tiberias, or south from Capharnaum, must pass through Magdala, for the only road clings to the side of the lake. It would, therefore, be a road well known to Christ, Who would often pass through this town of the rich and luxury class. As the Friend of sinners, it is likely enough that He often stopped there and was heard speak by not a few.

Magdala enjoyed its air of religious broad-mindedness. Fashionable, luxurious, self-satisfied and conscienceless Magdala possessed what is called an open mind. It smiled at the crude fanaticism of the fishing villages, and shrugged its shoulders at the harsh intolerance of Jerusalem. Mary Magdalen, so called because she came from Magdala, was the daughter of one of the important Sadducean families, with a country house on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and a town residence at Bethany, near the gates of Jerusalem. Martha was her sister, and Lazarus was her brother. Her family, fortunate and powerful, followed the fashions and tastes of the day, and accepted the religious outlook of happy Magdala. Young Mary was brought up in Greek style. At the age of fourteen, already radiantly beautiful and completely developed, as women are in those lands, Mary lived like the spoiled daughter of a well-to-do family.

Saint Luke introduces Mary Magdalen to us as “a woman that was in the city, a sinner” (7:37), in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Later he mentions her again as one of the band of holy women who travelled about with Christ and His Apostles, and ministered to their needs. Some of these had been cured by Christ of illnesses, and others had been exorcized. Chief among the latter was Mary, “called Magdalen, out of whom seven devils were gone forth” (Saint Luke 8:2).

People possessed by demons were not necessarily sinners, but there can hardly be a doubt that the Magdalen was a notorious sinner.

Saint Luke mentions “Joanna the wife of Chusa, Herod’s steward,” in the palace at Tiberias not far from Magdala. He also names “Susanna, and many others who ministered unto Him of their substance” (Saint Luke 8:3). It is possible that these good women, the first Women’s Guild in the Church, may have spoken to Mary Magdalen of Jesus and brought her to hear Him speak, also to witness His healing power and to feel His sympathy with the sinner and the afflicted. This would prepare her for her public act of reparation, which Saint Luke narrates. (Saint Luke 7:36-50).

THE DINNER OF SIMON THE PHARISEE.

Saint Luke alone gives us the account of the dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee. Saint Luke does not indicate the time or place. A Pharisee, named Simon, invited Jesus to a meal. A woman, known as a bad character, came into the room. She carried an alabaster box of ointment. She came behind Jesus Who was reclining on a couch, and began to bathe His feet with her tears, and she wiped them by using her flowing hair as a towel. She kept kissing the sacred feet and she anointed them with the oil.

Simon looked on with horrified amazement, saying to himself that if Jesus really was a prophet He would know that the woman was a public sinner. Jesus read the Pharisee’s thoughts and answered them kindly by speaking to Simon directly. Having invited Him to his home, Simon had shown scant respect, omitting all the courtesies given to a guest by eastern hospitality — water for the feet, the kiss of welcome, oil for the hair. Evidently, Simon thought that Jesus was unworthy of such a welcome. But the woman had made up for the bad manners of the host, by bathing His feet with tears and using her tresses as a towel; she had kissed and anointed His feet with an expensive, perfumed ointment. Evidently, she thought of her great debt for sin and she was confident that He would forgive that debt because of her great love. The Pharisee would not admit that he had committed grave sins, and because he had so little to be pardoned, loved Jesus but little, if at all. Then Jesus said to the woman: “Your sins are forgiven you.” Those at table began to ask themselves: “Who is this that even forgives sins?” Jesus finished His absolution with the words: “Go in peace.”

Those are the bare facts as narrated by Saint Luke. But we may, in imagination, fill in details, which will bring the scene home to us.

Simon the Pharisee must have been a wealthy man, for the dinner was an elaborate one and the guests were the very important people of the town. Simon had heard many things about Jesus, all of them in His favour, and the latest news of His raising the widow's son from death the other day at Naim, across the valley, convinced him that this Man was worth meeting, so let us have Him home to dinner. Of course, it must be remembered that He was only a carpenter from Nazareth, of all places. He was bound to be rough, uncouth in manners, and ill at ease in such high society. The invitation was sent and Jesus accepted. Jesus was received politely by Simon, but he passed over the washing of the feet at the door, the formal embrace inside, and no oil was given for His hair. Of course, He was unaccustomed to these things and would not miss them. From the beginning, Jesus was put in His place by Simon and his guests. Jesus did not seem to notice the condescension. With the rest, He reclined in the place allotted to Him. He spoke when spoken to. The dinner was falling flat, and his friends were not having the interesting evening He promised them.

MARY'S DRAMATIC ENTRANCE.

On a sudden, a strange thing happened. The dining hall was open on all sides; anyone could look in at the tables and guests. Suddenly, on the verandah, stood a woman. She was fashionably dressed, flashing rings on her fingers, golden bracelets on her bare arms, and her hair was long and flowing loose over her shoulders. Her face was beautiful yet strong and commanding. She was no ordinary woman; she was born to be great in either good or evil. She stood there unsmiling, scanning the guests, her eyes searching for someone.

She carried a little alabaster box, the well-known box of precious ointment.

As she stood there, the chatter was hushed. The guests nudged each other as if to ask: "Do you see what I see?"

Lips were curled, eyebrows arched as they looked with scorn upon her for such an outrageous intrusion. She continued to search the faces, until at length her eyes met those of Jesus. He did not repel her, alone in that room He was calm, His glance was responsive, and spoke to her that He fully understood.

Instantly she rushed across the room. Before a hand could restrain her, she was standing at the feet of Jesus, stretched out upon the couch. Then down upon her knees she went; in a torrent, the tears began to flow; they fell on those feet, her eager hands seized them as she spread the water of her tears over them, washing away the dust that was there. As she stooped, her mass of hair fell forward. She wrapped His feet in it, wiped them with it, and kissed them. Then taking her alabaster box of ointment, she crushed it between finger and thumb, and instantly the room was filled with the richest odour. She poured the ointment out, every drop of it, upon those precious feet; again, with caressing hands she spread it over them. Again, she kissed His feet, laid her head upon them, and let her flowing hair cover them like a veil.

All the time He reclined there and allowed it. He moved not a muscle, but let her have her way to the uttermost. Quietly He leaned against the cushion. He was grateful for this homage, and His sympathy, pity and love for this woman at His feet was felt by all.

No one could mistake who the woman was. She was known to every man present, in fact, some of them may have been her accomplices in sin.

Even in happy Magdala, she was notorious. Such a woman, the Law declared, must be avoided, for it was a legal defilement to be touched by a notorious sinner. That she should intrude into this company was incredible, and that she should be received as Jesus received her was an insult to everyone present, and put this new prophet in a very unfavourable light. Were He what He professed to be, He would never allow this woman to touch Him. They had caught Him out at last. The guests had ample time for such thoughts as the scene before them was protracted, and Jesus showed no sign of wishing it to end.

JESUS TELLS A PARABLE.

Jesus saw their thoughts clearly, but He deigned to help Simon, for Simon was not so prejudiced as the others. The anointing finished, Mary remained at His feet, content to remain there. She had not been repulsed: she knew that she was welcome, and that was enough for her. Jesus had won the woman and through this sinful woman, He might win Simon. He turned towards Simon, and spoke with the voice of authority, yet His Words were gentle and winning.

“Simon, I have something to say to you.” The rest of the company was ignored. Simon recognised the friendliness of His tone and words, and in like manner replied: “Master, say it.” The guests grew silent, eager to hear His defence. Jesus knew that Simon was a wealthy man with the influence that money brings. Jesus spoke to this man in a language He would understand.

“A certain man had two debtors. The one owed five hundred pence, the other fifty. And whereas they had not where-with to pay, He forgave them both. Which therefore of the two loves him most?”

A curious question surely to a business magnate, mixing up trade with love.

Simon was cautious in his reply. “He, I suppose, to whom he forgave more.” Jesus took him up at once. “You have answered rightly.”

Jesus had three things to do. First, He must show Simon how badly he failed as a host, yet must He do it with kindness. He must reinstate the sinner before Him; leaving no doubt in the minds of all that He knew what manner of woman she was. Thirdly, He must defend His own sinless honour. How beautifully He did all three!

He pointed to the woman lying at His feet and invited the Pharisee to look upon her.

“Do you see this woman?
I entered into your house.
You gave me no water for my feet.
But she with her tears has washed my feet;
And with her hair has wiped them.
You gave me no kiss.
But she, since she came in,
Has not ceased to kiss my feet.
My head with oil you did not anoint.
But she with ointment
Has anointed my feet.”

“Because she has loved much”.

He paused to let the words sink in. Simon was rebuked, but not in anger, and the unfortunate woman at His feet was preferred before him. Simon admitted his error, took it well, and hung his head in acknowledgement. Jesus saw the sorrow in his heart and seized the opportunity to teach His lesson. The woman had made up for the neglect of the host, but she had done it because she loved Jesus. Sinner she had been but greater than her sin was her love. Because she loved more, she should be given more. She should receive the true reward of love, namely, to be forgiven all, she should be given love for love. Here is the truth that is at the root of Christianity, the personal love of Jesus Christ.

Again He spoke, a little louder that everyone should hear Him.

“Wherefore I say to you Many sins are forgiven her, Because she has loved much. But to whom less is forgiven, He loves less.”

He leaned forward to the woman lying at His feet. Hitherto not a word had He spoken to her, or she to Him. Her actions were more expressive of her love than any words could be. Deeds, not words, prove the sincerity of love. He gave Himself to her as if she alone remained in the room. He spoke to her gently, almost in a whisper, but in the tense silence, His words carried throughout the room. In a few little words, He lifted from her the whole of her weary burden.

“Your sins are forgiven you.”

The poor woman at His feet heard them and felt herself a new woman. She had not expected this. She had learned to love this Man, and now that she had shown it in public, she was content to go away and take her burden of sins with her. Slowly she raised her head and looked up at Him, shaking the hanging hair from her eyes. His eyes were upon her, loving eyes, all understanding eyes, all-assuring eyes, eyes whose forgiveness and forgetfulness could never be doubted. She saw it all written there; she saw more. This Man she had begun to love as never before was more than Man. He had forgiven her the sins of her life and her love for Him filled her with ecstasy. But He brought her back to life, as He wished to conclude the scene. With a confidence that their love would endure, He said: “Your faith has made you safe. Go in peace.”

Instantly she rose from the ground. It was easy to go now. She walked through the room not seeing those present. Let them scorn her, and draw aside their robes as she passed. Let them have their way; her heart was beyond it all, it had gone to Him Who had made her His friend. The rest mattered nothing at all. The woman in the city, a sinner, was the happiest woman in the world.

MARY'S GREAT SPIRIT.

It took a great soul, a heroic spirit, to do what Mary did that day in Simon's house. It took courage to face Christ, knowing what she herself was. She knew Him to be God. She had heard and seen enough to convince her that He was no impostor but what He claimed to be, and she knew that He asserted His right to be acclaimed as the Messias (Messiah), and the Messias was God. Else, she would not have cared, or dared, to ask forgiveness of sin from Him. It did arouse the ire of the crowd that heard Christ speak her forgiveness that He should arrogate to Himself the pardoning power; Mary had no qualms about it at all, she took it for granted and why not? The Master that she saw at Naim raise the widow's son to life, could be no less than the God He claimed He was.

So, to Him she must go, and to Him she did go; but at what cost of self-conquest! She knew herself then, and despised what she knew. She felt all the agony of self-reproach that the repentant sinner must always feel when he is driven to contrast his vileness with the perfect sanctity and holiness of

the God he has offended. Mary felt all of that to the full. She loved now in a fashion that cast a revealing light on her former facile loves and showed her what they were in truth, as God saw them. She was horrified with herself, disgusted too, realized that she was soiled and tainted mightily. So her mind was made up, and, as she walked towards Simon's house, the thought that He might scorn her tormented her, but failed to arrest her walk. She answered Satan's final argument by assuring herself that the Master could scarcely outdo in scorn what Mary felt for herself then. And then came a strange confidence that He would never spurn her.

Mary made her way to Christ and there, in the presence of all her little world, she made her great act of submission and humility. One thing and only one mattered, namely, that she make public reparation for the sin she had done in public. She must show the world that Mary the sinner would be sinner no more, but Mary the penitent, no longer the plaything of any man but a repentant and humble follower of Jesus, Whose love for her was great and noble enough to pierce through the filth to find and rescue the real Mary Magdalen.

HER HEROIC COURAGE.

This was just the beginning of her courage, however, just the first act of will that she must maintain during the rest of her life. It took great courage to face her own soul. It was all easy enough now when she was keyed up to her great profession of faith and gratitude in her repentance; that was once in the face of the world that knew her otherwise. But what of those long days and longer nights when she was alone with her conscience, alone with her memories? How they must have burned and seared; how those tears of repentance and regret must have scalded her! As she looked into the past, and saw her own soul as it had been, no measure of self-reproach would be too great. But she had only to recall, in that hour of direst need, the Sacred Face in which she had read pardon and tolerance and kindness, and the sun shone again, and she knew that vile though she had been by her own action, she was worthy and fine once more through Christ's action. The past, lamentable as it had been, was forever past; henceforth she need only love, and that she did with all the intensity of her passionate soul. It solved all the problems, lent all the strength that was needed for those silent hours when Christ was not at hand to console and to reassure. It is no wonder she spent all possible minutes at His feet when He came to the home in Bethany. She had chosen the better part, truly.

Another anxiety filled her heart. Would she compromise Christ before the public? After all, she knew her Jews. She knew, too, that no man dared accuse Christ of anything that involved His perfect purity of soul. Other things, yes, they presumed to charge Him with; He ate with sinners, He was a wine bibber, He stirred up rebellion, He refused to pay taxes, and a lot of other things they did say of Him, and some of the charges were believed. But lack of or failure in purity, well, that was just too absurd for even His enemies ever to attempt.

Yet, here He was, associating in friendship with a reformed courtesan. All well and good to pardon, certainly; that was what He came to do, to save sinners and reform them. But certainly it was going to undreamed limits to make a friend of the erstwhile harlot, to frequent her home, to eat with her, to be beholden to her and her family for hospitality and service. What would the carping old world think of that, asked Mary's reproachful heart? It was a painful consideration, but again, there was no room for doubt about the Master's love for her, and that was the one thing that mattered. She loved, and was loved in return, and all the critics and the Pharisees could not change that one stupendous

thing, and so far from her association with Him doing Him harm in the eyes of the people, it would but show them His great forbearance and tolerance in His forgiving the scarlet woman of the town.

THE SECOND ANOINTING BY MARY.

The Gospel narrative says:

“Mary therefore when He was at meat, took an alabaster box of precious ointment, a pound of right spikenard, of great price.

And breaking the alabaster box, she poured it out upon His Head as He was at table, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair.

And the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.”

Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, he that was about to betray Him, enraged at such extravagance, protested and said: “Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?”

The Evangelist significantly adds: “Now he said this, not because he cared for the poor but because he was a thief and having the purse carried the things that were put therein.”

Jesus, knowing well what Judas would do within a few days, dealt very gently with him, saying: “Let her alone. Why do you trouble this woman? For she has wrought a good work upon me. For the poor you have always with you and whosoever you will you may do them good. But Me you have not always. She has done what she could. For in pouring this ointment upon My Body she is come beforehand to anoint My Body for the burial.”

Jesus concluded with this loving tribute to gratitude. “Amen, I say to you. Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, that also which she has done shall be told for a memorial of her.”

HER ACT OF LOVE AND GRATITUDE.

Saint Augustine assures us that there were two anointings, one in the home of Simon the Pharisee and the other in the home of Simon the Leper, but there was only one woman, Mary Magdalen. Mary’s first anointing was a public act of repentance and sorrow, her second anointing was her parting act of love and gratitude before His death which she felt was near at hand.

For this anointing, Mary selected the best and richest spikenard, such as few possessed even in well-to-do Bethania (as the Romans called Bethany). Its price was equal to a year’s wages for a labourer. It was made from a rare plant that grew on the Himalayas. It was kept in an alabaster box that it might not evaporate; to pour it out the box had to be broken.

Mary entered the banquet hall of Simon: she saw Jesus and ran towards Him as He reclined at table. She stood above Him, all eyes upon her, and a deathly silence in the hall. Then came the sound of something breaking in her fingers, a little oil flowed out upon His hair, instantly the room was filled with a delicious aroma, one of the secrets of the East. Then with the memory of that other banquet in her heart she fell at His feet; that was her right place, and there she would stay. Tenderly she grasped those feet; not now with the tears of that day, but with the oil that still lingered in her hands she anointed them; lastly, as she had done then, so now, she loosened her hair and wrapped those feet in its folds.

Jesus was gentle with Judas. He would not blame him though He knew what another short week would reveal. What Mary had done, extravagant as it may seem to all present, she had done because she loved Him. Mary put no limits to her gifts. The Apostles may not understand now, but one day they would, and then they would vie with one another in preserving her name and what she had done that day. Of all the men and women who came into His life none should be better known to posterity, none should be more cherished, than Mary Magdalen.

THE TWO MARYS.

Mary, the sinless Mother of God followed the example of Her Divine Son by openly accepting Mary of Magdala as a sister. This made the Magdalen all the more grateful for Christ's pardon, that Mary, His spotless Mother, should have opened her arms and her heart to the other Mary who had been so far from spotless. What a scene imagination can paint when first the Virgin Mother welcomed Mary Magdalen to her own company and that of her Divine Son! But the Mother of Christ did more than just deign to receive the reformed harlot; she made a companion and intimate of her, called her friend and sister, loved her as such, just as Christ did. Humbling that association must have been for Magdalen as she contrasted her past with that of the Great Mother of them all. It did not disturb her, however, but only made her love Him more. There was room in the Sacred Heart for both Marys, the spotless and the reclaimed. Humbly grateful she loved all the more.

The two Marys were together that day on Calvary as on many another day. Their love of Him brought them to the place of crucifixion. There was no fear of any sort great enough to keep Mary Magdalen from the foot of the Cross that day.

The One she loved, the only One she loved then, was dying; where else should one look for a lover like Mary Magdalen than just as close to the Cross as she could manage to get? Her passionate and emotional nature had not changed since she had given all her soul to Christ; it was passionate and emotional still; and so there were storms of grief, passionate sorrow, as she felt her heart turn to stone within her at the loss of her love.

Mary the Virgin, with her deeper and nobler soul, suffered even more; but she suffered in silence that agony which won for her the title of Queen of Martyrs. The Magdalen could show her grief, and what cared she for the howling, mocking, spitting mob that milled about the cross as she clung to it in the agony of her grief! They meant less than nothing; death would have been a welcome relief; she longed to die with Christ, just as His Mother did, and was equally denied that relief.

“MARY!” “RABBONI!”

Early on Easter morn Mary and the other women came to anoint the Body and finding the tomb empty they returned to tell the Apostles. Saint Peter and Saint John came and went, but Mary returned alone, unable to stay away from the tomb. There she stayed weeping her heart out at His loss. Someone approached her Whom she knew not, but took for the gardener. She made her pathetic plea to be shown where they had put the Body, and then Jesus, surely with a smile, said to her just one word: “Mary!” Something there was in the tone of that voice, or the look that accompanied it, that spoke to the inmost heart of the loving woman and she knew her Lord instantly. Impetuous and impulsive as always she rushed to Him, only to hear Him speak: “Do not keep clinging to Me for I am not going to run away.” It is with a loving smile that He restrains her, as He bade her to carry the news of His Resurrection to the Apostles in the city. What more He said to her is treasured up in her heart of hearts, triumphant now, though it had been down in the depths of grief a minute before.

“Mary!” “Rabboni!” The two salutations spoke volumes, and out of the interview Mary garnered faith and trust and confidence to last her the rest of her years, the years she was to survive the Ascension, years she was to spend with her memories and her love, as she did penance for her sinful past, all now cancelled for the one supreme reason that she had loved much. She loved, and loving truly, loved on to the close, always the same impetuous, passionate, loving woman who once had been a harlot, but had come to love not men, not even a man, but God Himself, and in that love found healing and salvation.

HER RICH REWARDS.

How richly the Lord rewarded Mary Magdalen even in this life! Her public act of reparation in the house of Simon, her sincere repentance and her great love won for her the companionship and friendship of Christ. Her home at Bethany became His home. Because of her, He raises Lazarus from the dead. She sits at His feet, her heart filled with love and gratitude, and He will not heed Martha’s complaint that she is idle. No, she has chosen the better part.

Mary the spotless opens her immaculate heart to her and cherishes her as one of her closest friends. It is at Mary’s invitation that the Magdalen accompanies her to Calvary and remains with her to the bitter end. Returning from Calvary it is to Bethany Mary goes as to her own home to be with His dearest friends. The first recorded appearance of Christ after the Resurrection is to Mary Magdalen. He calls her by name and commands her to announce His Resurrection to the Apostles.

During the years that she lived after the Ascension she kept herself in the Presence of Jesus, Who filled her thoughts and gave her an inner peace of soul, and joy in living that was better and more satisfying than her passing joys as a sinner.

Let us invite Mary Magdalen to make the Stations of the Cross with us, helping us to see all that happened through her eyes. We shall learn from her on the Way of the Cross two great lessons, how He hates sin, and how He loves the repentant sinner. The Way of the Cross is the price of sin. If sin costs so much, surely it is the greatest evil man can commit. What must have been Mary’s thoughts as the soldiers dragged the cloak, stuck to His Wounds, off His Body! That, with the scourging, is the terrible payment for the sins of the flesh. What an embarrassment it must have been to Mary to see the Son of God exposed to that mocking rabble! The nails that pierced His feet and hands must have brought home to Mary how her own feet had walked in sin and her hands had been so polluted with lust.

On Calvary, she knelt at His feet pouring forth her tears of love and sorrow. She saw the broken Body laid in His Mother’s lap, emptied of Blood. It lay there desecrated, mauled, cut and torn, the pale victim of sin. No wonder her eyes are streaming when she remembers her sins.

And then the width and depth and height of His love comes to her. If He had not loved so much, He could not have suffered so much. She recalls His own words: “Greater love than this no man has, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

Let us ask Mary Magdalen to share her love with us, and to convince us that love is the best reparation for sin. “Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved much.”

HER LAST DAYS IN FRANCE.

Mary Magdalen and her family were especially hated by the Pharisees because their home always had an open door for Christ and His disciples. After the miracle of Lazarus, their lives were in

danger, but were saved because of the family position and influence among the top Jewish aristocracy. We also get an impression of extreme prudence and reserve surrounding this family, which was so dear to Jesus. The Evangelists Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, and Saint Luke scarcely mention it and are careful not to identify it; they allude to it as one might talk about people, who, under a totalitarian regime, are exposed to immediate reprisals. Whereas, Saint John, who wrote after the fall of Jerusalem, does not seem at all bound by the same prudence. In his account of the banquet in the home of Simon the Leper at Bethania he mentions Mary by name, and also Lazarus as one of the guests.

One day, sometime after the Ascension, the Jews laid hands upon the whole family of Bethania and loaded it on a ship without sail or rudder, and launched it at the mercy of wind and waves. The hand of God brought this ship to the shore of Provence, in Gaul. Lazarus founded the Church of Marseilles, Maximin, his brother, the church at Aix, Martha lived on the shores of the River Rhone, and Mary Magdalen ended her life in the solitude of La Sainte Baume.

Mary spent her days in a cavern on the side of the mountain, where she hung a Cross, praying fervently for all sinners, feeding her soul on the memory of her Lord Whose feet she never leaves, still faithful and constant in penitent love.

There is a tradition that seven times daily the angels who were her dear companions carried her to the summit of the mountain to pray. On the last day of her earthly life, she went down towards the plain. Maximin came to meet her and gave her Christ's Body in the Eucharist. She is released from the prison of the body and admitted at last to embrace His feet in everlasting glory. Her body awaits its glorious resurrection in the crypt of the Church, which today bears the name of Saint Maximin.
