

THE NEW PREFACE OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

With the Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on 3 June 2016 the celebration of Saint Mary Magdalene was elevated to the rank of Feast in the Roman Calendar and, given this special status, has been enriched by a proper preface to be inserted into the *Missale Romanum* on 22 June.

While as from the tenth century “Saint Mary Magdalene the Perfume bearer” was celebrated on this day in Constantinople, western tradition following the interpretation of Saint Gregory the Great has generally united in one person Mary of Magdala, the penitent woman forgiven by Jesus and Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Thus she began to be commemorated liturgically in the West on 22 July from the eleventh century in Rome, spreading everywhere else during the twelfth century. We know of the existence of some medieval prefaces; Hispanic, Ambrosian and Frankish in origin, that present the memory of Saint Mary Magdalene in the light of the three women mentioned in the Gospels (cf. *Corpus praefationum*, CCSL 161, nn. 164, 609, 1154, 1281, 1573, 1585). The reform of the liturgical books after Vatican II, however, kept the memorial of 22 July solely to Mary of Magdala, reviewing the readings, prayers and antiphons of the Mass and Liturgy of the Hours in the process.

A preface in honour of the Magdalene – unifying the three figures – is attested to in the Ambrosian tradition (cf. n. 609 of the *Corpus praefationum*), where up until the post-conciliar reform it was found in the *Missale Ambrosianum* on 22 July together with the prescription to recite the Creed during the Mass which Schuster explained thus: “The Greeks gave Mary of Magdala the glorious title of *isapóstolos*, because she was the first who announced to the world, even to the Apostles themselves, the resurrection of the Lord. For this reason the *Credo* is recited in today’s Mass” (*Liber sacramentorum*, vol. VIII, Torino 1927, p.94). Today, the *Missale Ambrosianum* (Mediolani 1981, n. 349/6, p. 681) has changed the text of the preface in order to harmonise it with the memory solely of Mary of Magdala.

The new preface in the *Missale Romanum* is also framed within the actual physiognomy of the Feast and illuminated by the Gospel passage of John 20: 1-2, 11-18 (the *Missale* of 1962 uses the passage of the penitent woman from Luke 7: 36-50). Today in fact one listens to the account of the apparition of the Risen Lord and of his gradual self-revelation to Mary of Magdala who is given the particular mandate to go and announce the Mystery she has just experienced to the Apostles. Here is the text: “Vere dignum et iustum est, aequum et salutare, nos te, Pater omnipotens, cuius non minor est misericordia quam potestas, in omnibus praedicare per Christum Dominum nostrum. Qui in horto manifestus apparuit Mariae Magdalenaе, quippe quae eum dilexerat viventem, in cruce viderat morientem, quaesierat in sepulcro iacentem, ac prima adoraverat a mortuis resurgentem, et eam apostolatus officio coram apostolis honoravit ut bonum novae vitae nuntium ad mundi fines perveniret. Unde et nos, Domine, cum Angelis et Sanctis universis tibi confitemur, in exultatione dicentes: Sanctus”. (Unofficial translation: “It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, to glorify you in all things, almighty Father, whose mercy is no less than your power, through Christ our Lord. He appeared in the garden and revealed himself to Mary Magdalene, for she had loved him while he was alive, seen him dying on the Cross, sought him as he lay in the tomb, and was the first to adore him newly risen from the dead. He honoured her with the task of being Apostle to the Apostles, so that the good news of new life might reach the ends of the earth. And so, Lord, with all the Angels and Saints, we, too, give you thanks, as in exultation we acclaim: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts...”).

Nestled within the initial protocol is the beautiful expression which praises the all-powerful Father, “cuius non minor est misericordia quam potestas”, drawn from the *Missale Gothicum* Vat. Reg. lat. 317 (edited by L.C. Mohlberg, Herder Roma, n. 70, p.21).

The body of the preface then focuses our attention on two actions of Christ: “apparuit Mariae Magdalenaе... et honoravit eam apostolatus officio”. Above all it says that after having been taken for someone he is not, Christ manifests himself clearly to Mary in the garden beside the

empty tomb, guiding her to remember the past in light of the present experience, summed up in four verbs – “dilexerat, viderat, quaesierat, adoraverat” - having as their object the One whom she had loved while he was alive, whom she had seen die on the cross, whom she had then seen laid in the sepulchre and whom now she adored risen from the dead. Nor should we omit to mention the references in the rhymed scansion “viventem, morientem, iacentem, resurgentem”. The source for this sequence, with the new addition of the last word, is a passage from *De vita beatae Mariae Magdalенаe*, attributed to Rabanus Maurus but datable to the twelfth century (he unites the three Marys as one), and who describes the believing gaze of the Magdalene thus: «crediditque indubianter, quem videbat Christum Filium Dei, verum esse Deum, quem dilexerat viventem, vere a mortuis resurrexisse, quem viderat morientem; vere Deo Patri esse aequalem, quem quaesierat in sepulcro iacentem» (cap. XXVI, PL 112, 1474).

The fact that Mary was the “first” to see the Risen Lord is attested to by the Gospel of John. This datum did not escape the notice of liturgical tradition: it is recorded, for example, by the above mentioned prefaces n. 1154: “primum se beatae Mariae Magdalенаe vivum exhibuit” and n. 1585: “quem prima resurrexisse nuntiavit a mortuis Iesum Christum Dominum nostrum”, and also the hymn *ad Laudes*: “tu prima vivi ab inferis es testis atque nuntia” (*Liturgia Horarum*, die 22 iulii); John Paul II also recalls this fact in *Mulieris dignitatem* n. 16.

In second place, the preface says that Christ “eam apostolatus officio coram apostolis honoravit”. This expression is also owed to the already mentioned *Vita* attributed to Rabanus Maurus, in which we read that Mary: “apostolatus officio quo honorata fuit fungi non distulit...” (cap. XXVII, PL 112, 1475). If the Apostles were to ensure that “bonum novae vitae nuntium ad mundi fines perveniret”, it was Mary’s task to bear them the gospel of the Living Christ. Saint Gregory the Great recalls this fact: “Tantumque apud eum locum gratiae invenit, ut hunc ipsis quoque apostolis, eius videlicet nuntiis, ipsa nuntiaret” (*Homiliae in Evangelia*, Hom. XXV: CCSL CXLI p. 215).

Indeed this “apostolatus officium” received from the Lord himself also earned her the title “apostolorum apostola” from Saint Thomas Aquinas (*In Ioannem Evangelistam expositio*, c. XXX, L III, 6), an eloquent appellation that has been used as the title for the new preface. The same pseudo-Rabanus Maurus observed that “Salvator... ascensionis suae eam ad apostolos instituit apostolam, digna mercede gratiae et gloriae, primoque et praecipue honoris privilegio, digne pro meritis omnium ministrarum suarum remunerans signiferam, quam ante modicum instituerat resurrectionis evangelistam, et ait illi ‘Vade ad fratres meos, et dic eis’” (cap. XXVII, PL 112, 1474).

Finally, in recalling that Christ “in horto manifestus apparuit Mariae Magdalенаe” the preface evokes, by way of contrast, the garden of paradise in which Eve was the harbinger of death. Such a connection did not escape the notice of Saint Gregory the Great who observed: “Ecce humani generis culpa ibi absciditur unde processit. Quia in paradiso mulier viro propinavit mortem, a sepulcro mulier viris annuntiat vitam, et dicta sui vivificatoris narrat, quae mortiferi serpentis verba narraverat. Ac si humano generi non verbis Dominus, sed rebus dicat: De qua manu vobis illatus est potus mortis, de ipsa suscipite poculum vitae” (*Homiliae in Evangelia*, Hom. XXV: CCSL CXLI p. 212).

The final protocol is taken from the *praefatio II de Sanctis* of the *Missale Romanum*.

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of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments