

MARY MAGDALENE: AN ICON OF INCLUSIVE DISCIPLESHIP IN THE TRAUMATIZED JOHANNINE COMMUNITY AND FOR CHRISTIANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

NICETA M. VARGAS

Through the narrative characterization of Mary Magdalene in the Fourth Gospel, this paper posits that Mary Magdalene is an icon of discipleship of equals in the traumatized Johannine community and for Christians in the 21st century. There are three parts: first, the introduction; second, the characterization of Mary Magdalene which comes in three sections: 1) the literary analysis of the text and context of the Mary Magdalene passages in John (19:25-27 and 20:1-18), considering what she said and did, and what others said about her; 2) the development of her character and her response to the person and message of Jesus through character analysis; and 3) the significance of Mary Magdalene to the disciples of Jesus in the 21st century; and lastly, the conclusion.

The result of the study gives evidence that Mary Magdalene, like the Beloved Disciple, was a beloved disciple-apostle of Jesus during the earthly ministry of Jesus and at the Resurrection. She was a witness of the passion and death of Jesus, so that she experienced the trauma of the crucifixion together with the Johannine community. She was, however, not incapacitated by the darkness she went through since her love for the Teacher went beyond the cross and the grave. In her encounter with the Risen Lord, Love called her by name and empowered her to be the leader and evangelizer to her traumatized Johannine community. She was given the commission by the Risen Jesus to go and break the darkness that enveloped the followers of Jesus by announcing the good news of the resurrection to the male disciples and the pristine Christian community so that she became known as the "Apostle to the Apostles." In the gospel

tradition, therefore, Jesus empowered both men and women to be his disciples-apostles. And Mary Magdalene is an embodiment and symbol of discipleship of equals in the early Christian community. This conclusion can firm up the role and function of women in the community of disciples so that in the Roman Catholic Church of the 21st century, men and women together are witnesses, leaders, and evangelizers of the life, love, and joy of the Risen Jesus.

Keywords: Mary Magdalene, Resurrection, discipleship of equals, inclusive discipleship, trauma, witness, synodality

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

INTRODUCTION

On 13 May 2016, the International Union of Superior General (UISG), headed by Sr. Carmen Sammut, then president, together with some 900 leaders of women congregations had a closed-door meeting with Pope Francis in Rome. The superiors asked the Pope questions regarding the need for more women in positions of leadership in the Church.¹ The Pope admitted that “the feminine genius is necessary in all expressions of the life of the Church and society” and yet “the integration of women in the decision-making processes of the Church is very weak.” He identified some offices in the curia where women could be leaders, in offices where ordination is not necessary. He warned, however, that there are two attitudes that do harm to the Church, namely, the “feminist” position of wanting to be leaders because they are women, and secondly, the problem of “clericalism.” In the

¹ See “The Pope Meets with Superiors General: Service Not Servitude, Participation in Decision-Making and Study of the Female Diaconate,” *Holy See Press Office: Summary of Bulletin*, May 13, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/05/13/160513c.html>.

question-and-answer forum, when he was asked about the role of the religious women who are often forgotten and not included in the assembly of the Sacred Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Pope said that the work of the consecrated women is service. However, he qualified, “Very often I find women consecrated who perform a labor of servitude and not of service...[which] demeans their life and dignity.”² In the UISG’s 2019 meeting with Pope Francis, he recognized the work of consecrated women especially in the peripheries. What then is the leadership role of women in the Catholic church today? We can probably gain an insight into the role of Mary Magdalene in the pristine Johannine community.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the four gospels, the named disciples, also called the twelve apostles, are all men. Mark enumerates the twelve (12) men Jesus appointed to be with him (Mk 3:13-19). Matthew lists twelve (12) men disciples whom he also identifies as the twelve apostles (Mt 10:1-4). Luke counts twelve (12) men whom he named apostles, from among his disciples (Lk 6:12-16). John gives a list of seven disciples, five with male names, but two are unnamed (Jn 21:2). There is no name of a woman in the list of appointed disciples or apostles.

There are, however, in the gospel of Luke descriptions of women who followed Jesus from Galilee whom Jesus healed and who provided for his [their] needs out of their means (Lk 8:2-3). They were traveling companions of Jesus together with the twelve disciples (Lk 8:1-2). These women were identified as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and many others. Moreover, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee were present in the

² See “Pope Meets with Superiors.”

crucifixion—they stood at a distance (Lk 23:49), followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid (Lk 23:55). Mark also mentions some women from Galilee who followed and ministered to Jesus, namely, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome, together with many other women present during the crucifixion, looking on from afar (Mk 15:40-41). Matthew, likewise, writes of many women at the crucifixion, looking on from afar who followed Jesus from Galilee, and ministered to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Mt 27:55-56). In the gospel of John, the women were standing by the cross of Jesus. They were identified as the mother of Jesus, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene (Jn 19:25-27). Two women were unnamed, namely the mother of Jesus and her sister, while the other two women were named, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene.

The four gospels narrate that women were witnesses of the empty tomb (Mk 16:1-8; Mt 28:1-10; Lk 24:1-11; Jn 20: 1-2, 11-18). The same women who were present at the crucifixion of Jesus came to the tomb on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection. Did the gospel writers imply that women were also disciples of Jesus even though no woman is mentioned in the lists of Jesus' disciples in the four gospels?

Robert Karris suggests that “when readers read of ‘disciples’ in Luke 8:2-3–23:54 they should include women in that group. These faithful women are witnesses of what Jesus has done in Galilee, on the road to Jerusalem, even at the Last Supper.”³ The women who had followed Jesus from Galilee do not only refer to “geographical following, but to the following of discipleship.”⁴ Moreover, Karris opines that in the resurrection narrative, Luke

³ Robert Karris, “The Gospel According to Luke,” *NIBC* 1990, 697.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 720.

insists on the important role of women as the first proclaimers of Easter faith.⁵

In this paper, I will present Mary Magdalene as the icon of inclusive discipleship in the traumatized Johannine Community and for Christians in the 21st century.⁶ When we say that Mary Magdalene is an icon of inclusive discipleship, we refer to her as a widely admired and venerated figure in Christian history who embodied and actualized discipleship of equals during the earthly Jesus' community of disciples amidst the trauma of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. She is an image or symbol of a woman disciple who is at par with a leader of the Johannine community, the Beloved Disciple.⁷

METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE CRITICISM WITH FOCUS ON CHARACTERIZATION

For more than 25 years now, I have had a special interest in characterization of Johannine figures. In our Johannine class in 1988, Prof. Dr. Raymond Collins presented the characters in the Fourth Gospel as representative figures of different responses to the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ An icon is defined as a person widely admired, especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere. An icon is a representation of a sacred event or a sacred individual used as an object of veneration or a tool of instruction. An icon is a visible representation of something abstract (as a quality). See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/icon>.

⁷ In research, there are many candidates suggested to who the Beloved Disciple was. Traditionally, it has been believed that the Beloved Disciple is John, the son of Zebedee, who is also the Evangelist. The historical critical method, however, has put a question to the identification of the disciple John with the evangelist John. The following have been identified as the Beloved Disciple: John, the son of Zebedee, a disciple of the John, the son of Zebedee, the author of the Gospel, Nathanael, Thomas, or Lazarus. Sandra Schneiders in "Because of the Woman's Testimony...Reexamining the Issue of Authorship in the Fourth Gospel," 534, suggests that the textual alter ego of the author [the Beloved Disciple] is the figure of the Samaritan woman. See my *Word and Witness*, 12-13.

person of Jesus and his message. As I progressed in my exegetical journey, I studied R. A. Culpepper's book, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospels* (1983), which introduced me to narrative criticism as applied to the Fourth Gospel, and thus the concept of character and characterization. During the research fellowship I took in 2004, I came across Semeia 63 (1993) which featured the Society of Biblical Literature's (SBL) convention sessions on "Characterization in Biblical Literature." This literature encouraged me to embark on my own concept and approach of characterization which I used in my book *Word and Witness* (2013, p. 69) and popularized in my teaching. Lately, I have been enriched in my approach with the works of Cornelis Bennema, namely, "A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature (2009),⁸ "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John (2013),⁹ and "Character Reconstruction in the New Testament: The Theory (2016).¹⁰

The steps that I will employ in the characterization of Mary Magdalene include the following:

1. Focus on the Text and Context with an analysis of what she says and does, and what others say about her in the passages where she appears (Jn 19:25-27 and 20:1-18)
2. The development of her character and her response to the person and message of Jesus through character analysis
3. Significance of Mary Magdalene to the readers and to disciples of Jesus in the 21st century

⁸ See *Biblical Interpretation* 17.4 (2009) 275-421.

⁹ In C. W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (LNTS 461; New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 36-58.

¹⁰ *Expository Times* (2016).

CHARACTERIZATION OF MARY MAGDALENE

We posit that Mary Magdalene was a historical figure who was one of the women who followed the earthly Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. We differentiate her from the other Mary's in the gospels, namely, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Jn 11:2), Mary, wife of Clopas (19:25), and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Lk 2:5).

Mary Magdalene has been depicted as a sinner, a woman of the city or a prostitute in the history of interpretation and in art and literature for the past centuries, even until the present. This has happened because of the assimilation of the account of Luke 7:36-50 with 8:1-3;¹¹ likewise Luke 7:36-50 with John 11:2 and Mark 16:9. In the biblical interpretation of Mary Magdalene, for example, Pope Gregory the Great, in his sermon delivered on September 14, 591 CE at the Basilica of St. Clemente in Rome identified the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, described as a sinner, a woman of the city, as the Mary in John 11:2 and the Mary Magdalene in Mark 16:9.¹² Since then, Mary Magdalene had a

¹¹ "She was known to be a "great sinner," a woman of the streets who heard Jesus speak of the mercy and forgiveness of God and changed her life completely. Her matter-of-fact witness to the Resurrection moved Peter and John to go and see for themselves: "I have seen the Lord and these things he said to me." Jesus had chosen her to bring the news to them and she simply told them what had happened...She has always been the example of great love and great forgiveness, one of those close to Jesus who grasped the truth of God's love for human beings and spent her life bearing witness to that love." Excerpted from *The One Year Book of Saints* by Rev. Clifford Stevens. <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/calendar/day.cfm?date=2021-07-22>.

¹² See Richard J. Hooper, "IV. The Reinvention of Mary," in *The Crucifixion of Mary Magdalene: The Historical Tradition of the First Apostle and the Ancient Church's Campaign to Suppress It* (Sedona, AZ: Sanctuary Publications, Inc, 2005), 69-84. On p.79-81, he cites Gregory's sermon, "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary for whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume

colorful journey in the history of New Testament interpretation.¹³ Recently, however, the teachings of the Church have put Mary Magdalene in her proper place. Saint John Paul II paid special emphasis on the particular role of Mary Magdalene as the first witness who saw the risen Christ, and as the first messenger who announced the Lord's resurrection to the Apostles (*Mulieris dignitatem* n. 16). Pope Francis affirms that Mary Magdalene was an eyewitness of the Risen Christ. She was also the first to witness to Christ's resurrection before the apostles. She was commissioned to announce the Risen Jesus: "Go to my brothers and tell them.... Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord' and then reported what he told her" (Jn 20:17-18). She went to the brothers to proclaim the good news of the resurrection of the Lord, because she announced to the apostles what they, in their turn, would proclaim throughout the entire world. Pope Francis elevated the memory of Mary Magdalene to the status of Festivity on July 22, 2016 to stress the importance of this faithful disciple of Christ.¹⁴

her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt."

¹³ Mary in Jn 11:2 is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, not Mary of Magdala. The Mary of Mk 16:9 is Mary of Magdala as is identified by Lk 8:2 as a woman from whom Jesus healed from evil spirits and infirmities, who had seven demons. Mk 16:9 is the beginning of the longer ending of Mark, which is deemed by many authors as a redactional addition to the original ending Mk 16:8. Thus, the unnamed woman in Lk 7:36-50, who is described a sinner and a woman of the city cannot be definitively equated with Mary of Bethany or Mary Magdalene.

¹⁴ "Saint Mary Magdalene," *Vatican News*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/liturgical-holidays/saint-mary-magdalene.html>.

For him, Mary Magdalene is also an apostle of transformation and of hope, a fitting companion in the 2025 Jubilee of Hope.¹⁵

TEXT AND CONTEXT

We shall now focus our study on the characterization of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John from its text and context in John 19:25-27 and John 20:1-18. Mary Magdalene only appears in the Book of Glory,¹⁶ specifically in the passion, death and resurrection narratives in John's gospel.

The Text: John 19:25-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (NRSV)

In this short narrative, Mary Magdalene is presented standing near the cross of Jesus, (Εἰστήκεισαν δὲ παρὰ τῷ σταυρῷ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, Jn 19:25), together with his mother, his aunt, Mary of Clopas, and the Beloved Disciple. She stood with the family of Jesus at the most trying moment in Jesus' and his family's life, during the crucifixion. She stood near the cross of Jesus just

¹⁵ Wimmer, A.C. "In Powerful Jubilee Message, Pope Points to Mary Magdalene's Transformative Trust." *National Catholic Reporter*, February 1, 2025, <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/in-powerful-jubilee-message-pope-points-to-mary-magdalene-s-transformative-trust>.

¹⁶ Raymond Brown, *John I*, divides the gospel of John into two parts: The Book of Signs (1:19 to 12:50) and the Book of Glory (13:1 to 20:31).

like the beloved disciple who stood (τὸν μαθητὴν παρεστῶτα ὄν ἡγάπα, 19:26) beside Jesus' mother. She did not speak a word, but her presence at the cross spoke distinctly of her courageous character. Despite the danger of being identified with the crucified one, she stood by his side.

Mary's presence near the cross also tells of her loyalty to her teacher. She did not leave him alone, contrary to the male disciples who fled during the trial and the crucifixion of Jesus. Judas betrayed him (Jn 12:4; 13:26-30), Peter, the leader of the disciples even denied him before the servant of the high priest (Jn 18:25-27).

Standing near the cross, one can imagine that she witnessed the excruciating pain and suffering of the Teacher as he was put up on the cross until he breathed his last and declared, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). She saw the blood and water that went out of his pierced heart (Jn 19:34), symbols of his physical body and spirit emptied on the cross. She witnessed him surrendering his life to God—his physical body and spirit—to the end (Jn 13:1).

The description of the narrator depicts the closeness of Mary Magdalene to Jesus and his family. She was like family to them. Likewise, the presence of the Beloved Disciple by the cross, suggests that she was a disciple herself since they were put together equally, in the same location, at the most critical moment of Jesus' life. The narrator implies that these characters at the foot of the cross were closely, intimately related to Jesus. They were biological family and eschatological family of Jesus. Jesus' person and preaching must have touched Mary Magdalene's life so deeply that she accompanied Jesus in his pain and suffering on the way to the cross and united herself with the suffering of his biological and eschatological family in the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. And now, Mary Magdalene will have an important role at Jesus' resurrection.

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^a into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him

away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (NRSV)

“WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK”

When the Sabbath fast ended, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus. The description of darkness envelopes Mary Magdalene. There could be a double meaning here as is characteristic of the style of the author. Dark can refer to the dark environment because morning has not yet broken, but it can also signify that Mary Magdalene’s heart (inner being/spirit) was in the dark. After all that she had experienced in the passion and death of Jesus, she went to the tomb with a pierced heart. After the burial, her heart was in the deep of sorrow and grief.

Mary Magdalene’s sorrow and grief must have been the common experience of the Johannine Christians. This was the first trauma of the Johannine community – that the person they were putting their faith and hope as the expected Jewish Messiah, was crucified and died an ignominious death like a criminal. Their hope was totally gone.¹⁷ They were left in a common shock. The

¹⁷ Pruszinski (2023): “Much of the past fifty years of scholarship on the Gospel of John, shaped significantly by J. L. Martyn’s *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Martyn 1979), has suggested that some kind of traumatic experience contributed to the formation of the Johannine community, and by extension, the production of the Gospel itself (e.g., Brown 1979; Culpepper 1983; Ashton 2007; Marcus 2009; Frey 2018, etc.). At this point we can say with some confidence that there are at least four major traumatic events which likely lie behind the Gospel of John: (1) Jesus’ death and (post-resurrection) physical

community of believers, moreover, mourned the departure and absence of Jesus among them who said, “where I am going, you cannot come,” (13:33); “where I am going you cannot follow me now (13:36).”

THE SEARCH: τίνα ζητεῖς;

She ran to the tomb while it was still dark to probably to give respects to the dead and express her loyalty and devotion to the Teacher. But to her consternation, the body of Jesus was not there. The tomb was empty. She then ran to inform Peter and the Beloved Disciple, that the Lord had been taken away.¹⁸ Mary Magdalene’s shock of the cross and burial intensified. That began her search for the lost Master. Three times, she repeated that the Lord had been taken away:

20:2 Mary said to Peter and the Beloved Disciple
 “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,
 and we do not know where they have laid
 him.”

departure/inaccessibility, (2) the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple/general destruction of the Jewish War, (3) the Johannine community’s excommunication from the synagogue and disruption of related relationships, and (4) the loss of the Beloved Disciple.”

¹⁸ Peter and the Beloved Disciples are mentioned in the Fourth Gospel side by side in four instances: 1) in the last supper event (Jn 13:21-25); 2) on the day of the resurrection (Jn 20:2-10); 3) in the appearance of the risen Jesus by the sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:4-8); and 4) after Peter’s avowal of love for Jesus (Jn 21:20-23). Raymond Brown *John XIII-XXI*, 1006-1007, states: Peter is not the special hero of the Johannine writer. The Beloved Disciple has that role; and the writer takes special interest in showing the Beloved Disciple’s ‘primacy of love.’ J. Louis Martyn suggests that the Beloved Disciple was identified as a leader of the Johannine community whose relationship with other Christian groups became a problem. The other Christian communities regarded Peter as their apostolic authority. With this conflict, the Johannine community recognized the apostolic leadership of Peter, yet maintained their loyalty to the tradition of the superiority of the Beloved Disciples. See *Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community*, 90-121.

20:13 Mary said to the two angels at the tomb
“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not
know where they have laid him.”

20:15 Mary said to Jesus
“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me
where you have laid him, and I will take him
away.”

Repetition is a stylistic characteristic of the author of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁹ The repetition emphasized the intensity of the search of Mary Magdalene for the dead Teacher and Master. In 20:2, she spoke in a general statement “they have taken the Lord out of the tomb” and that “we do not know where they have laid him.”²⁰ In 20:13, her statement became personal—“my Lord” and “I” do not know... She was personally involved in the loss of the Lord—the dead body belonged to her. In Jn 20:15, she was even willing to go and personally take the body of the Master away.

Mary Magdalene is depicted as searching for the Master who was no longer found in the tomb. She knew he was dead since she stood by the cross and witnessed the Lord’s moment of death at close range. Although not mentioned in the text, Mary Magdalene most probably also witnessed the burial of Jesus at a

¹⁹ Vargas, *Word and Witness* (2013), 46; See Van Belle, “Johannine Style Characteristics” in the *Signs Source in the Fourth Gospel*, BETL 116 (Leuven: Peeters, 1994), 405-420.

²⁰ The resurrection narrative in the Fourth Gospel begins with Mary Magdalene going out early in the morning to the tomb alone (Jn 20:1). But when she reports to Peter and the Beloved Disciple the loss of Jesus, she said “we do not know where they laid him.” Is the “we” referring to the other women with Mary as reported in the Synoptic Gospels which harmonizes the story of Mary Magdalene in John and in the Synoptics (see., Mk 16:1-2)? Or is “we” an “authorial we,” so that she speaks of herself in a formal way?

nearby garden, in a new tomb, since she was together with the family of Jesus (Jn 19:25; see also Mt 27:61).

She was confused and perplexed that he had been lost, and suggested that the body of the crucified Lord had been stolen. The Risen Jesus asked her: τίνα ζητεῖς; (Jn 20:15), “Whom do you seek?”

Her search is similar to the search of the woman in love for her Beloved in the Song of Songs (3:1-4) in the following details of the story: the night atmosphere, the triple search, and the taking hold.

Three Points of Comparison	John 20:11-18	Song of Songs
1. By night/ dark atmosphere; They both lost their Beloved.	While still dark, early in the morning of the first week: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”	Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not.
2. They searched for their Beloved, but did not find him.	“Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”	I called him, but he gave no answer. “I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves.” I sought him, but found him not.

3. They still did not find their Beloved, but in a short while they found their Beloved and held on to him.	“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew “Rabbouni.” Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...”	The watchmen found me, as they went about the city. “Have you seen him my soul loves?” Scarcely had I passed them, When I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go.
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There is, however, a difference in the results of the search of the two women. In the Song of Songs, when the lover found her beloved, she held him and would not let him go which suggests covenant love and union of the bride and the bridegroom. In John, Mary Magdalene held on to Jesus but he prohibited her; instead he told her to go to announce to the brethren that he is ascending to the Father. At this point, Mary received a revelation from Jesus: “my Father and your Father, my God and your God” (Jn 20:17). Mary and the disciples are children of God, their Father (Jn 1:12). She was sent to the disciples to announce the good news of the resurrection: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:18).

Sabine van den Eynde who made an inter-textual reading of these two texts states that John 20 “creates an interspace in which emotions are given an explicit place. Passionate love drives the woman in love” ... What drives Mary Magdalene to go to the grave and stay there, even when the tomb is open and proves to be empty?

The intertextual reading of the two narratives “brings the relationship between Mary and the deceased Jesus to the foreground. Jesus is dear to her and he is her Lord and Rabbouni.”²¹

The Johannine theme of love underlies the search of Mary Magdalene. In the Farewell Discourses, the love of Jesus for his disciples was described εἰς τέλος (Jn 13:1), which means that he loved until his death on the cross and completely until he had nothing more to give. The love of Mary Magdalene for Jesus was expressed in her loyal and devoted accompaniment of the Teacher until his death on the cross and even beyond, in his grave. Because of her love for the Master, she searched earnestly for his dead body, so that in the process of sincere searching she found him, not dead but alive. She had a face-to-face encounter with the risen Lord that strengthened and empowered her to give witness of the resurrection to Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and the early Christian community. Because of her personal experience of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, she became a confident witness to proclaim the good news that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, is the Risen Lord. She had a journey of faith that passed from the darkness of faith to the light of full faith in the resurrection.²² Her search was the fulfillment of the search of the two disciples following Jesus in Jn 1:38 who were asked by Jesus τί ζητεῖτε; (Jn 1:38). They were looking for the Rabbi, they found the Messiah. Though Mary Magdalene was searching for the dead Master, she found the Risen Lord.

²¹ Sabine van den Eynde, “Do Not Hold on to Me. A Plea for an Intertextual Interpretation of Mary Magdalene,” in *Noli me tangere. Mary Magdalene: One Person, Many Images* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 11.

²² Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 527.

THE WEeping MARY²³

After informing the two leaders of the community of the loss of Jesus, Mary went back to the tomb. The narrator describes that she stood weeping (κλαίουσα Jn 20:11) outside the tomb and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. Later two angels asked her “Why are you weeping?” Was she weeping because the dead body of Jesus, her Teacher, was lost? Then, Jesus also asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Four times in five verses (20:11-15) the word “weep” is used to describe the action of Mary Magdalene. Why was she weeping? Could it be that she was troubled and confused that the same Lord who went through the passion and ignominious death was lost and that now she had lost her Teacher permanently?

When Jesus asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping,” Mary turned around to see him face-to-face but she did not recognize Jesus. She thought him to be the gardener. How is it that she could not recognize the one she was looking for? Is it because her eyes were filled with tears so that she could not see clearly? Or could it be because she was expecting to find a dead man so that she could not think that Jesus could be alive? She was yet deep in her darkness.

THE TURNING

When Jesus called her by name, however, Mary turned around for the second time and recognized him at once as her

²³ Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe*, presents Jn 20:11-18 in this structure: 20:11-15, Weeping scene; 20:16, Turning scene and 20:17-18, Announcing scene. In my *Word and Witness*, I follow the following structure: 20:11-15, Searching scene; 20:16, Finding scene; 20:17-18, Announcing scene. Shelly Rambo in “Between Death and Life: Trauma, Divine Love and the Witness of Mary Magdalene” (2005) shows the following structure: Tears, 20:11; Turning, 20:14-15; Naming, 20:16.

“Rabbouni.” The darkness that enveloped her turned into light. The recognition was not based on seeing but on hearing her name. She must have felt a sudden surge of joy in finding out that the dead Teacher was alive. She was searching for the dead, but she found the living One, the Risen Jesus. Or better, she was found by the Risen One. In being called by her name, she heard the familiar voice of the Teacher. Mary Magdalene can be compared with the sheep who recognized the voice of her shepherd, who called each sheep by name (Jn 10:3). She was truly Jesus’ disciple because he called her by name and she, in turn, recognized her Shepherd’s voice. (see Jn 10:4).

The turning of Mary Magdalene to face Jesus suggests her change of heart—her conversion from the belief that Jesus was dead to the amazement of recognition that he is alive—“the Lord is alive. He is risen.”

THE JOY OF FINDING AND ANNOUNCING

Recognizing the Risen Lord, Mary Magdalene held on to Jesus, which the latter prohibited (μή μου ἅπτου, Jn 20:17). She thought she had lost the Teacher forever, only to find out that he continued to be with her and with the community of disciples. Thus, to great surprise, she held on to him. But Jesus made her understand that she did not have to hold on to her old knowledge and relationship with the earthly Teacher because a new knowledge and relationship was taking place. The earthly Jesus is the Risen Lord. Instead of holding on, Jesus told her to go to the disciples (πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου, Jn 20:17) to tell them “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). Reimund Bieringer proposes that “Jesus diverts Mary Magdalene’s attention from himself to the believing community of

disciples.”²⁴ Jesus revealed to Mary Magdalene that his Father is also her Father and that his God is also her God. Mary Magdalene, thus, is the sister of Jesus and the daughter of God, so that disciples are brothers and sisters of Jesus and children of God.²⁵ Those who believe in Jesus, the Risen One, will have the power to become children of God (Jn 1:12).

Mary Magdalene, then, did as she was told: She went and announced (ἀγγέλλουσα τοῖς μαθηταῖς, Jn 20:18) to the disciples “I have seen the Lord.” She encountered the Risen Christ! She, thus, became the first witness of the Christophany, the manifestation of the Risen Christ and brought the good news to the troubled disciples of Jesus, and to the Christian community to whom the gospel author writes for. She was a disciple according to the Pauline criteria of an apostle – one who was an eyewitness of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus (see 1 Cor 9:1). That is why the early Church called her “the Apostle to the Apostles.”

In Mary Magdalene’s journey of faith in Jesus, she experienced the darkness of the cross. Nevertheless, she did not remain in the dark of the cross and death, for she was drawn to the light of the resurrection. As the Prologue asserted, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome the light” (1:5). The transformation from death to life happened to her because of the call of Love which she has reciprocated with love.

In encountering the Risen Lord, Mary Magdalene had an experience of fullness of joy. In the gospel of John, fullness of joy is the gift of believing in Jesus (15:11). Joy is described in terms of giving birth (Jn 16:21). It is the experience of the pain and suffering that a woman experiences when she gives birth to her child. But

²⁴ Bieringer, “Noli me Tangere and the New Testament. An Exegetical Approach,” in *Noli me tangere. Mary Magdalene: One Person, Many Images* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 26.

²⁵ Mary Magdalene is one of three women who receives a direct revelation from Jesus. The other two are the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:26) and Martha (11:25).

once she has delivered, she will have the joy that a child is born into the world. It is the experience of pain and suffering—death—transforming into life, as in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection brings fullness of joy.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHARACTER OF MARY MAGDALENE AND HER RESPONSE TO THE PERSON OF JESUS AND HIS MESSAGE

There are four angles of character development that surface in the analysis of the text and its context. First, Mary Magdalene demonstrated a deepening involvement in the person of Jesus and his message. Whereas in 19:25-27, she was portrayed as a silent loving, loyal presence though active participant, inwardly traumatized by the events of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, in 20:1-18, she was the first one to go to the tomb. She was not incapacitated by the trauma of the cross. Rather, her search of the dead body of the Lord demonstrated her love, devotion and loyalty to the Teacher. She was no longer a silent devotee, instead, she acted by reporting the loss of the dead Master to Peter and the Beloved Disciples, the leaders of the community. Her love was also expressed in her determined search for the dead, until she found the Risen Jesus. Her love was also shown in doing the task given to her by Jesus to go and announce what she had seen and heard, commanded what she was to say to the disciples. She was a disciple who truly loved the Teacher and who was sent by the Risen Jesus as a witness and evangelizer of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus (Jn 19:25-27; 20:1-18).

Second, Mary Magdalene's witness as a disciple at the cross is confirmed by her testimony of the resurrection. She was a true witness like John (the Witness), whose testimony brought people to believe in Jesus, the Messiah (Jn 10:40-42). Her response to the death and resurrection of Jesus is her personal belief in Jesus, the

Teacher, as the Christ, the Son of God, the Risen Lord: “I have seen the Lord.” She exemplifies the early Christians’ description of an apostle of Jesus, one who preaches the crucified one, as written in the Pauline epistles (1 Cor 1:23; Gal 6:14; Rom 6:6). Mary Magdalene witnessed the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus; she was told to go and she went to announce the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples, considered as family by the Risen Jesus.

Third, Mary Magdalene is put side by side the Beloved Disciple. In Jn 19:25-27, the two disciples did not speak, but their presence was evident in their being close to the family of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple, however, appears to be more favored by the narrator because he is described as “the one whom Jesus loved,” and that Jesus entrusted his mother to him. Yet their equal presence by the cross definitely showed they were both beloved of Jesus. In Jn 20:1-2, Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple are again found in the same scene. Mary reported the loss of the dead Jesus to Peter and to him. The Beloved Disciple ran to find out the veracity of the report and when he saw the empty tomb, he believed. Mary Magdalene, however, did not understand yet the sign of the empty tomb.²⁶ She needed a face-to-face revelation to believe in the risen Christ. It is as if to say, that the faith of Mary in Jesus as the Christ, was yet to be full so that Jesus had to personally appear, for her to believe. Bieringer states that “‘Rabbouni’ might actually be an expression of her faith in the resurrection.”²⁷ Mary Magdalene was in the same category of discipleship with the Beloved Disciple. She was a beloved disciple herself, who believed the resurrection.

²⁶ A sign in the Fourth Gospel is ambivalent. Some characters are led to faith in the Messiah by the signs that Jesus performed. The signs testify to the glory, humanity, divinity and unity of Jesus with the Father. Some saw the signs of Jesus but refuse to believe. Instead, their hearts were hardened (Jn 6:66). See my *Word and Witness*, 99.

²⁷ Bieringer, 26.

Fourth, Mary Magdalene's trauma of the passion and death of Jesus on the cross was transformed into life and joy because of the love of Jesus εἰς τέλος (Jn 13:1) which she reciprocated herself – she loved the Teacher in his death and resurrection. Though he is not an exegete, the reflections of Hans Urs Von Balthasar on the death and resurrection of Jesus seems to elucidate the Johannine theme of love. He states that in the cross “immeasurable emptiness (not solitude) streams forth from the hanging body...there is nothing more but nothingness itself...the world is dead. Love is dead. God is dead.”²⁸ In the resurrection, Mary Magdalene “observed a movement in the darkness.” She did not know how to make sense of what was happening. From this reflection, we can say that Love emerged from the space of death. Love called her name. Love empowered and recreated her to a new person as a witness and evangelizer of the resurrection, and called her to “a new understanding of who she really is.” She no longer grieved. “Life breaks onto the scene of death as the figure of Love.”²⁹

SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY MAGDALENE TO THE READER AND TO CHRISTIANS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

As mentioned earlier, all the canonical gospels, and especially in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene was one woman disciple who was the first witness of the resurrection of Jesus (Mk 16:1; Mk 28:1; Lk 24:1-10; Jn 20:1). As seen in the biblical text written by the gospel author for the Johannine community, after the event of the passion, death and resurrection, men and women were considered both disciples and witnesses of the life and mission

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, 150; quoted by Rambo, “Between Death and Life...,” 15.

²⁹ An adaptation of the ideas of Hans Baltazar as quoted by Rambo, based on my own reading of John.

of Jesus. While the Risen Jesus commanded Mary Magdalene to announce to the ἀδελφούς (literally, “brothers,” Jn 20:17), she went to tell “I have seen the Lord” to the community of disciples (μαθηταῖς, Jn 20:18). It is these community of disciples who also met the Risen Jesus, were given the Holy Spirit, and later on echoed and witnessed to Thomas that “We have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:19-25).

When one considers that this is the community of disciples who are now witnesses of the Risen Jesus, one may surmise that those who have seen the Lord include the other women who have encountered, known, and followed Jesus in his ministry in the Gospel of John. These women played significant roles in the Johannine community. For example, the mother of Jesus introduced Jesus to his public ministry (Jn 2:1-12). The Samaritan Woman, after encountering Jesus became the gospel’s first evangelizer to her fellow Samaritans (Jn 4:1-42). Mary of Bethany anointed the feet of Jesus in preparation for his passion and death (Jn 12:1-8). Martha became the spokesperson of the confession of faith of the Johannine community similar to Peter’s role in the Synoptic Gospels (Jn 11:17-27). When these women were considered as part of the community to whom the Risen Jesus gave his peace and bestowed his Holy Spirit, then they could have been considered as significant disciples by the early Christian community.³⁰

Meeting the Risen Jesus reframes their earlier encounter with him in the Book of Signs and now in the Book of Glory. The examples of Mary Magdalene and these other women, as narrated in the Fourth Gospel, encourage present-day women to become

³⁰ See “Word and Witness” on characterization of these women figures in the Fourth Gospel. See also Sandra Schneiders “Inclusive Discipleship (John 4:1-42)” p. 147, who demonstrated with the use of feminist hermeneutics: “The interpretation of the John 4 passage initiates the reader into a world essentially characterized by an astonishing, even shocking, inclusiveness.”

disciples of the Risen Lord as well. From the characterization of Mary Magdalene, one can infer that in the whole Johannine gospel, Jesus regarded women and men as equal disciples in his community. As Jesus had theological discussions with men (Nicodemus in Jn 3, the disciples in the Farewell Discourses, Jn 14 and 16), he also had theological discourses with women (Samaritan Woman in Jn 4, Martha in Jn 11). As Jesus revealed himself to a woman (Jn 20) as the Risen Christ, he also showed himself to the men during his resurrection appearances (Jn 21).

Mary Magdalene was given the big responsibility by Jesus to go and announce the news of the Resurrection, the becoming family of God, which is the greatest cornerstone of the Christian faith for “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). Mary Magdalene, as the first evangelist of the resurrection event, acted as one of the leaders in the Johannine community, like Peter and the Beloved Disciple. This is beautifully expressed in the Bulletin of the Holy See as of 2016:

“Precisely since she was an eyewitness to the Risen Christ, she was also the first to testify before the apostles. She fulfills the mandate the Risen Christ gives her: ‘go to my brothers and say to them ... Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.’ In this way she becomes, as is already known, an evangelist, or rather a messenger who announces the good news of the resurrection of the Lord; or, as Rabano Mauro and St. Thomas Aquinas said, ‘apostolorum apostola,’ as she announces to the apostles what they in turn will announce to all the world.”³¹

³¹ “Mary Magdalene, Apostle of the Apostles,” Bulletin, Holy See Press Office (10.06.2016).

In both the gospel traditions, especially in the Johannine text, and the contemporary acknowledgment of Mary Magdalene as a witness and apostle of the Resurrected Jesus, as part of the community of disciples and one of its leaders, so women discipleship and leadership in the Church can be understood. In their journey of following and knowing Jesus, both in the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory, Mary Magdalene and the other women in the Fourth Gospel took initiatives in advancing the mission of Jesus.

In contrast, however, to the biblical texts, the leadership of women is still very weak in the Catholic Church. The praxis of the Catholic Church needs to be more thoughtful and deliberate in taking the active participation of women from the parish level to the Roman Curia. In John 20:18, “I have seen the Lord” encapsulated the encounter of Mary Magdalene with the Risen Lord, the reframing or transformation of her experience as to who Jesus is now risen. The same message is echoed by the community of disciples in Jn 20:25, they who have been given the Holy Spirit and who are now sent, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21-22). From this faithful echoing of the good news that Mary Magdalene proclaimed, the community of disciples now learned to become family of the Risen Lord, with one Father and God (Jn 20:17). In this learning of how to be brothers and sisters, Mary Magdalene had an important leadership role.

In the briefing of Day 10 of the just concluded Synod on Synodality, it has been acknowledged that the forming of community, especially in decision-making process, in formation, and in evangelization, women need to have more active roles.³² These aspects of Christian community life are areas of trauma for

³² Christopher Wells, “Synod Briefing – Day 10: Synod Focuses on Decision-Making,” *Vatican News*, October 14, 2024, 10, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-10/synod-briefing-day-10-synod-focuses-on-decision-making.html>.

consecrated women, lay professors in Theology and women working in the parishes, local dioceses and the universal Church where they are not treated equally side by side priests, bishops and other men lay partners in the Church. Leadership of women in the Church here, does not exclude the ordained ministry, which is still closed for women in the Catholic Church.³³ Leadership roles may be shared with women where they can actively participate, with equal privileges, in the service of the People of God, especially in the peripheries (e.g., Social Action Center of the Diocese, in migration ministry, pastoral service), in the formation of the clergy and the religious (in the seminary), in the liturgical life of the community (as Deacons, Acolytes, Homilists, and facilitators of Para-liturgical services), in education (as school heads in parish and diocesan schools), especially in the organization of Basic Ecclesial Communities, and in actions for the integrity of creation.³⁴ The Church would do well to recognize the leadership of women not only in the beautiful statements and pronouncements of the Pope and other male ordained ministers but in giving more and more spaces for women to concretely participate in decision-making processes in the Church and addressing of clericalism. In the final document of the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis underlined that clericalism is

³³ See, for example, Susan Rakoczy, "The Ordination of Catholic Women as Deacons: The State of the Question," *HTS Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5965>; Cindy Wooden, "Synod Publishes Final Report and Votes: Calls for More Discussion on Synodality, Women Deacons and More," *America Magazine*, October 28, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/10/28/synod-synodality-final-report-246392>; Laura Wilson, "The Need for an Historical Theology of Women Deacons in the Early Church," *Religion Compass* 18, no. 3 (2024): e12488, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12488>; Phyllis Zagano, "Women Deacons and the Synod: What Happens Now?," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 101, no. 1 (2024): 3–19.

³⁴ See also the "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (May 5, 2022).

understood as the use of power to one's own advantage and the distortion of the authority of the Church that is at the service of the People of God. This expresses itself above all in forms of abuse, be they sexual or economic, the abuse of conscience and of power, by ministers of the Church. 'Clericalism, whether fostered by Priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today' (Francis, Letter to the People of God, 20 August 2018).³⁵

Given these contemporary challenges in the Church, the gospel tradition of women disciples and leaders in the early Christian community as manifested in the Gospel of John should be reclaimed by the Church of the 21st century. Women and men as co-equal in discipleship of Jesus, of being members of the family of God, could be once again a more inclusive paradigm for women's service of leadership in the Catholic Church. Women and men could exercise leadership in the Church in all the spectrum of its organization, from the parish to the diocese, to the national, regional, and the international spheres. Pope Francis shared to UISG superiors in 2016, his own experience in Buenos Aires, where the priest's council had a group of religious and lay women: "it was greatly enriched, and this helped the decision by offering a complimentary vision. This is necessary!"³⁶

In liturgically elevating July 22 from being an obligatory memorial to a feast of St. Mary Magdalene, Archbishop Arthur Roche, the secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and

³⁵ Pope Francis, "XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission" (Synod.va, October 24, 2024), par. 74, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG--Documento-finale.pdf.

³⁶ See "Pope Meets with Superiors."

the Discipline of the Sacraments, expounded that this decree makes sure to “enable Mary Magdalene to be ‘celebrated’ liturgically like the rest of the apostles.”³⁷ He continued that

The decision is situated in the current ecclesial context, which calls upon us to reflect more deeply on the dignity of women, the new evangelisation and the greatness of the mystery of divine mercy. It was St. John Paul II who dedicated great attention not only to the importance of women in the very mission of Christ and the Church, but also, and with special emphasis, to the peculiar function of St. Mary Magdalene as the first witness of the Risen Christ and the first messenger who announced to the apostles the resurrection of the Lord. This importance remains in today’s Church – as shown by the current commitment to a new evangelisation – which seeks to welcome, without distinction, men and women of any race, people, language and nation, to proclaim to them the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to accompany them on their earthly pilgrimage and to offer them the wonders of God’s salvation. St. Mary Magdalene is an example of true and authentic evangelisation, that is, an evangeliser who proclaims the joyful central message of Easter.”³⁸

Clearly, as this liturgical decree shows, the recent official Church statements rehabilitate the traditional image of Mary Magdalene as a woman who was possessed by demons, a sinner, or

³⁷ “Mary Magdalene, Apostle of the Apostles,” *Holy See Press Office: Summary of Bulletin*, June 10, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/06/10/160610c.html>.

³⁸ See “Mary Magdalene, Apostle of the Apostles,” *Holy See Press Office: Summary of Bulletin*, June 10, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/06/10/160610c.html>.

a prostitute into a witness of the cross and an evangelizer who proclaimed the joyful message of Easter.

CONCLUSION

This narrative reading of the Johannine Mary Magdalene texts, through characterization, challenges the Roman Catholic Church today to put into practice what we have discovered in the gospel as an inclusive discipleship, where both men and women are called to share the responsibility of leading and guiding the community of disciples, the family of Jesus.

That there was one woman, Mary Magdalene, who followed Jesus and was uniquely given the role to be a witness of the passion and death and the resurrection of Jesus in the gospels, more particularly as announcer and evangelizer to the community disciples in the Johannine community, convinces us that the gospel tradition recognized women as disciples and apostles of Jesus. The characterization of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John gives evidence that Jesus empowered a woman, especially in the Resurrection, to be a leader and apostle in the community of disciples, just like the Beloved Disciple. Therefore, Mary Magdalene can be called an icon of inclusive discipleship in the early Christian community because she, together with the male disciples, experienced both the trauma of the death and crucifixion of Jesus, and the joy of the resurrection. From the darkness of death, the Risen Jesus called her to become the announcer and evangelizer of the Resurrection to the Christian community. As one who loved his friends to the end (Jn 15:13), the Risen Jesus empowered and recreated Mary Magdalene to understand herself in relation to the mission Jesus called her to do. She, thus, found fullness of life and joy in the Risen Jesus.

The narrative reading and the characterization of Mary Magdalene in John's gospel could enlighten contemporary believers

and the Catholic Church toward the firm conviction that Mary Magdalene was the embodiment and symbol of inclusive discipleship in the early Christian community, that discipleship of men and women was the way of life in the community of disciples and the early Christian community. This conclusion can strengthen the role and function of women in the community of disciples so that in the Church, both men and women can be witnesses, leaders, and evangelizers of the life, love and joy of the Risen Jesus.

As Mary Magdalene was called by the Risen Jesus by name to empower and recreate her into a new person as witness and evangelizer, so the Risen Jesus calls the Church to transform the anxieties and sufferings of women in the Church perpetrated by clericalism which bring darkness and death to them. The transformative encounter between Mary Magdalene and the Risen Jesus is a move toward the light of the resurrection, empowering them to a new understanding of themselves as witnesses and evangelizers of the Risen Jesus in the Church. This insight is a work in progress in the contemporary Catholic Church. For example, since his 2016 audience with the UISG religious in Rome, Pope Francis has initiated the appointment of women in the Vatican offices. On 5 January 2025,³⁹ Vatican News reported that Pope Francis appointed Sr. Simona Brambilla as the first ever female Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, along with Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime as Pro-Prefect. This appointment is a follow-up to the 2019 designation of the Pope for the first time as well of seven women as members of the said Dicastery, with Sr. Brambilla serving as its secretary. Brambilla was the second female secretary of a Vatican

³⁹ See “Pope Appoints Sr. Simona Brambilla as Vatican’s First Female Prefect,” *Vatican News*, January 6, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-01/vatican-first-female-prefect-simona-brambilla-consecrated-life.html>

office, following the 2021 assignation of Sr. Alessandra Smerilli as secretary to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Other female Undersecretaries in the Vatican include Gabriella Gambino and Lina Ghisoni at the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life and Sr. Carmen Ros Nortes at the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Moreover, there is also Emilce Cuda, the Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America; Nataša Govekar, the head of the theological-pastoral department of the Dicastery for Communication; Cristiane Murray, the Deputy Director of the Holy See Press Office; and Charlotte Kreuter-Kirchof, the Deputy Coordinator of the Council for the Economy. The General Secretariat of the Synod on Synodality also has a female Undersecretary, French-born Sister Nathalie Becquart who was appointed by the Pontiff in 2021. These audacious decisions of Pope Francis suggest that putting into practice the discipleship of women and men in the Church of the 21st century is being faithful to the gospel traditions of the first century.

Niceta M. Vargas, OSA, SThD, Ph.D.
La Consolacion University Philippines
Catmon, Malolos, Bulacan 3000
nicetvargas1@gmail.com