"The Apostle of the Apostles," Prostitute or Penitent? A Typology of Mary Magdalene in the Homilies of Gregory the Great

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Abstract: Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned on the pages of the Gospels twelve times, is regarded as one of the most famous and stirring strong emotions women of the New Testament. In some religious circles to this day, one can still hear claims that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute. Others argue that Magdalene is the "Apostle of the Apostles" (*Apostola Apostolorum*) because she was the first person to bear witness to the risen Lord (e.g. Hippolytus of Rome, Jerome of Stridon). Pope Gregory the Great, on the other hand, combined three evangelical women into one figure in his two homilies: the nameless sinful woman (cf. Luke 7:37), Mary Magdalene (cf. Luke 8:2), and Mary mentioned in John 20:11 – into a single figure. Thus, Mary of Magdala was regarded as a prostitute. Gregory the Great's theory became prevalent in Western Christianity over the next fifteen centuries. This paper aims to analyse homilies XXV and XXXIII by Gregory the Great and attempt to address the question of whether, for the pope-commentator, Mary Magdalene is exclusively and mainly a symbol of the "convert prostitute?" This paper adopted the philological method. It concludes that perhaps the pope himself would have been astonished that for so many centuries, the most enduring legacy of his two aforementioned homilies is the image of Magdalene as a "convert prostitute" rather than the moral teaching he wanted to convey. After all, the commentator also juxtaposed Magdalene with the Shulamite from the Song of Songs, Eve, Simon the Pharisee, Peter, Zacchaeus and Dismas, and saw in her a "type" of a Christian of every era.

Keywords: typology, Gregory the Great, homilies, Apostle of the Apostles, Mary Magdalene

The woman called by the name Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή is mentioned by the Evangelists twelve times (cf. Morgenthaler 1958, 118). In the Synoptics, she is mentioned nine times (Matt 27:56; 27:61; 28:1; Mark 15:40; 15:47; 16:1; 16:9; Luke 8:2; 24:10), while in the Gospel of John, her name appears three times (19:25; 20:1 and 20:18), where we learn about her only in the narrative of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. Authors of some lexicons or concordances also include here John 20:11, 16, where the figure of Mary Magdalene appears under the name Μαρία (John 20:11) and Μαριάμ (John 20:16) (cf. e.g. Rigato 2011, 98; Schmoller 1989, 324).

Mary Magdalene has fascinated and intrigued scholars for many centuries. Although many monographs and scholarly articles have been written on this biblical woman (cf. Kucharski 2021, 14–19), Pope Gregory the Great's testimony concerning Magdalene, which he included in his two homilies concerning John 20:11–18 (cf. Gregorius Magnus, *Homilia* XXV, 1–10) and Luke 7:36–50 (cf. Gregorius Magnus, *Homilia* XXXIII, 1–8), continues to be a *terra incognita* for Polish and international

scholars alike. Of course, Gregory's homilies on the Gospels have survived to be translated into selected modern languages, such as French (cf. Grégoire le Grand 2005, 2008) or Polish (cf. Św. Grzegorz Wielki 1998), but there are no papers addressing the question of Mary Magdalene in Gregory the Great's homilies.

Hence, this article examines these two homilies and seeks an answer to the question: is it really the case that, in the opinion of the pope-commentator, Mary Magdalene was primarily a "type" of a convert prostitute? This question appears to be of great interest, as from the sixth century onwards, echoes of this theory still resound in some circles today.

1. Mary Magdalene – A Brief Etymology of the Name

All too often, the exegetical writings of the Fathers of the Church are concerned with deriving the etymology of proper names found in the texts they comment on. The fascination with the etymology of names was reinforced by the conviction that the names used in the Bible contained a hidden meaning, as Saint Augustine of Hippo maintained (cf. *De doctrina christiana* II, 38, 56–57). It is no different in the case of the woman known as Mary Magdalene. While this enigmatic figure is familiar from several biblical scenes, the etymology of her name is unclear and raises some questions, thus offering a wide range of interpretations.

The first part of the name, i.e. Μαρία/Μαριάμ, with Flavius Josephus providing further alternatives: Μαριάμη, Μαριάμμη and Μαριάμμνη (cf. Tronina 1990, 127–28), is derived from the Hebrew מרים, the etymology of which has been and continues to be widely debated in the scholarly world. For example, Jerome of Stridon (fourth/fifth century) was the first of the Latin writers to deal with the derivation of the etymology of names appearing in the Bible. In his *Liber de nominibus hebraicis* (cf. PL 23, 771–858; CCSL 72, 57–161), he offers several possible interpretations of Mary's name. Indeed, he explains that some commentators have interpreted the name as *illuminant me isti* ("they enlighten me") / *illuminatrix* ("enlightener") or *smyrna maris* ("myrrh of the sea"). He believes that the name Mary is better translated as *stella maris* ("star of the sea"), *amarum mare* ("bitter sea") or *domina* ("lady") based on Syriac (PL 23, 842; cf. Jóźwiak 2021, 163–66).

On the question of Jerome's interpretation of Mary's name as "star of the sea," opinions among scholars are divided, as theorised that the author of the Vulgate interpreted the name as *stilla maris* ("drop of the sea") rather than *stella maris*, which would correspond to some extent with the Hebrew word מר ("mote," "drop," "speck"; cf. *HALOT* 629) and ים ("sea," lake," "open sea"; cf. *HALOT* 413–14). Subsequently, the copyist then confused or deliberately changed the vowel "i" to "e" in the Latin word, i.e. putting down *stella* rather than *stilla*, as intuitively, this version might have

seemed more likely to him since *stilla* is a rather rare biblical word and only occurs in the singular nominative form in Isa 40:15 (cf. Sabatier 1751, 581). In fact, the noun *stilla* appears only seven times in the Bible in the following forms: *stilla* (Deut 40:15); *stillae* (Deut 32:2; Jer 3:3; Mic 5:7); *stillam* (Job 26:14); *stillas* (Job 36:27; Job 38:28). Furthermore, in textual criticism, there are analogous *exempla*, namely the use of *stella* instead of *stilla* or vice versa (cf. Bardenhewer 1895, 69–73; Jóźwiak 2021, 168–70). This "error" or deliberate alteration by the copyist has become a permanent feature of history, since already in the Middle Ages, the interpretation of the name Mary as "star of the sea" was widespread in the Latin Church and echoes to this day, not only in so-called popular piety but also in papal documents:

> With a hymn composed in the eighth or ninth century, thus for over a thousand years, the Church has greeted Mary, the Mother of God, as "Star of the Sea": *Ave maris stella*. Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by – people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? (*SpS* 49)

On the other hand, the last etymology proposed by Saint Jerome for Mary's name derives it from the Aramaic noun מרה ("lady") (cf. Davidson 1974, 513; Rosenthal 1961, 89), which appears – in our view – highly probable. Setting aside the language behind the phrase *sermone syro* in Saint Jerome's biblical commentaries. After all, we know that Syriac is part of the Aramaic branch of the Semitic languages, and the *vir trilinguis* quite freely and interchangeably uses the names of Syriac/Aramaic or Chaldean languages.

Elsewhere in *Liber de nominibus hebraicis* (cf. Hieronymus; PL 23, 848, 851), the author of the Vulgate adds to the enumerated interpretations of the name in question *illuminans* ("the enlightening") and *illuminata* ("the enlightened"). We do not list these etymologies as distinct because these, like *illuminatrix/illuminant me isti*, were derived from the verb "to light up," "make light"; cf. Lewis and Short 1891, 887): *illuminatrix/illuminant me isti – illuminans – illuminata – illuminare*. When analysing the interpretations of names proposed by early Christian authors, it is, of course, necessary to bear in mind that patristic etymologies are somewhat "loose" scientifically and rely on the juxtaposition of similar-sounding words. Etymologies are built on connotations (cf. Jóźwiak 2021, 164).

Furthermore, Bertram Otto Bardenhewer, a late nineteenth/early twentieth-century German patrologist, offers several etymologies of the name Mary (cf. Bardenhewer 1895). According to Antoni Tronina, there are more than 60 hypotheses

(cf. Tronina 1990, 127), while in the opinion of Aleksy Klawek, there are 80 (cf. Klawek 1951, 56–58). According to our calculations, Bardenhewer provides about 65 theories. Of course, these explanations do not constantly oscillate around scientific etymology. They are based on the actual state of knowledge of Semitic linguistics, but certainly, the accumulation of etymologies on one biblical name impresses the reader (cf. Jóźwiak 2021, 162).

In Aramaic, on the other hand, the name in question was מרים (*Maryam*), and this form can most likely be derived from the word מריר ("bitter"; cf. Zorell 1964, 474), although this etymology is also highly questionable.

The second part of the name, i.e. ἡ Μαγδαληνή is understood by most scholars as a deadjectival noun, indicating the person›s origin from a particular locality, i.e. a woman of Magdala. This position is held, among others, by Richard Atwood (cf. 1993, 26) and Esther De Boer (cf. 2000, 32). Maria-Luisa Rigato (cf. 2011, 101) takes a different stance, claiming that ἡ Μαγδαληνή has no connection with her place of birth or residence but was instead a cognomen she received from Luke the Evangelist (cf. Luke 8:2). If ἡ Μαγδαληνή were a cognomen, it is most likely that the word must be derived from Hebrew מגדל ("tower"; cf. Zorell 1964, 407). Jerome of Strydon also offers this etymology in his *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum* (cf. PL 23, 842), except that he believes that it is better to derive the etymology not from the noun (*turris*) but from the adjective (*turrensis*).

The town of Magdalene's origin itself is the subject of archaeological research. Since the 1970s, such works have been led by Virgilio Canio Corbo (cf. 1974, 5–37), Stanislao Loffreda (from 1971 to 1977; cf. Loffreda 1976, 133–35) and Stefano De Luca (since 2007; De Luca 2009, 343–562). It is worth noting that Israeli archaeologists Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar (2009–) have also been involved in the excavation of Magdala. A team of Mexican archaeologists led by Marcela Zapata-Meza (2010–; cf. Kucharski 2021, 111–38) also participated in this research.

2. "The Apostle of the Apostles," Prostitute or Penitent?

Mary Magdalene, precisely because she was an eyewitness of the Risen Christ, was also the first person to bear witness to it before the apostles, thus becoming the *Apostola Apostolorum*. The first of the Christian writers to give her this title was Hippolytus of Rome (second/third century) in his commentary on the Song of Songs, as Julian R. Backes, among others, reports in his article:

> And after this with a cry the synagogue expresses a good testimony for us through the women, those who were made apostles to the apostles, having been sent by Christ: those to whom first the angels said, "Go and announce to the disciples. He has gone before you into Galilee. There

you shall see him" (Mk 16:7). But in order that the apostles might not doubt [that they were sent] from the angels, Christ himself met with the apostles, in order that the women might become apostles of Christ and might complete through obedience the failure of old Eve. For this reason [she] listens obediently that she may be revealed as perfect. (Backes 2017, 67)

Jerome of Stridon confirms this information (cf. *Commentarii in Sophoniam*, *Prologus*; PL 25, 1338). Pope Gregory the Great (sixth century), on the other hand, in his two homilies (cf. *Homilia* XXV, 1–10; *Homilia* XXXIII, 1–8), merged the three evangelical women – the nameless sinner (cf. Luke 7:37) who anointed Jesus' feet with fragrant oil in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus freed from seven demons (cf. Luke 8:2), and Mary mentioned in John 20:11 – into a single figure. Thus, Mary of Magdala became a symbol of the adulteress. Gregory the Great's theory became prevalent in Western Christianity over the next fifteen centuries. However, it appears the pope himself was not at all confident of its validity. Because in the crucial argument, when he combines the figures, he employs the vital word that seems to have all too often vanished from later interpretations – *credimus* ("we believe," "we think," "we suppose"). Indeed, it might appear that this term does not imply doubt but expresses a conviction.[1] However, it must be remembered that when Gregory uses the term *credimus*, it is an assessment not based on proper arguments derived directly from the Bible and the teaching of earlier commentators: "Hanc vero quam Lucas peccatricem mulierem, Iohannes Mariam nominat, illam esse Mariam credimus de qua Marcus septem daemonia eiecta fuisse testatur" (*Homilia* XXXIII, 1; CCSL 141, 288; "Indeed she whom Luke calls the female sinner, and John calls Mary, we believe that she is the Mary of whom Mark attests that seven demons were [expelled] from her" [my own translation]).

This is all the more so because the reference for reflection in patristic literature was the Bible. The Fathers of the Church and Christian writers "thought," as it were, with Scripture. We can also translate *credimus* as "we recognise" or "we have a conviction," (cf. *credere*) (Lewis and Short 1891, 479) but it does not convey absolute certainty as to our opinion. Moreover, the pope-commentator adds that the seven demons that Christ cast out of the woman represent general vices ("universa vitia"), for in Gregory the Great's view, the number seven contains the universe ("septenario numero universitas figuratur" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 1; CCSL 141, 288]).

Conversely, by looking at Gregory's idea from a broader perspective, the main conclusion is that the combination of the three women from different Gospel pericopes is a symbol of sorts and contains a deeper meaning. Mary Magdalene, as an example of the prostitute (*peccatrix*), is for Gregory the Great, an example of the path leading to Christ. This sinner then becomes the symbol of the penitent, whose love

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1 Cf. also: https://twojahistoria.pl/2019/02/19/biblijna-maria-magdalena-wcale-nie-byla-nierzadnica-skad-
-wlasciwie-wzielo-sie-to-przekonanie/.

for the Lord is so fervent it can be described as "burning" even, as the pope repeatedly emphasises in his homily: "Maria Magdalene, quae fuerat in civitate peccatrix, amando veritatem, lavat lacrimis maculas criminis, et vox Veritatis impletur qua dicitur: 'Dimissa ei sunt peccata multa, quia dilexit multum'. Quae enim prius frigida peccando remanserat, postmodum amando fortiter ardebat" (*Homilia* XXV, 1; CCSL 141, 205; "Mary Magdalene, who was a sinner in the town, loving the truth, washed the stains of [her] transgression with her tears, and was filled with the voice of Truth, by which it was said: 'Her many sins were forgiven her because she loved much.' For she was icy at first because of sin, but later, loving much, she burned [with the flame] of love" [my own translation]). Commenting on John 20:11: "But Mary was standing outside the tomb, weeping," Gregory emphasises that such a great power of love ignited Magdalene's thought ("huius mulieris mentem quanta vis amoris accenderat") that she did not leave the tomb, even though all the disciples had fled. Inflamed by the fire of her love, though weeping, she searches further ("flebat inquirendo, et amoris sui igne succensa"). Hence, the commentator ultimately shifts the emphasis from the sinner (*peccatrix*) to the one who loved greatly ("amoris sui igne succensa" [*Homilia* XXV, 1; CCSL 141, 205]).

In Homily XXXIII, Gregory repeatedly emphasises that the penitent sinner Magdalene is a kind of paradigm and should be an example for every believer to follow ("paenitentem peccatricem mulierem in exemplum vobis imitationis anteferte") as one who experienced the immensity of God's mercy ("considerate apertum vobis misericordiae gremium"): "Videte tantae pietatis sinum, considerate apertum vobis misericordiae gremium. […] Ad vos igitur, fratres carissimi, ad vos oculos mentis reducite, et paenitentem peccatricem mulierem in exemplum vobis imitationis anteferte" (*Homilia* XXXIII, 8; CCSL 141, 298; "See the embrace of such immense grace; perceive the depths of mercy open to you. […] Turn the eyes of your hearts, dearest brethren, towards one another, and follow the example of a repentant female sinner" [my own translation]).

3. Other Typologies of Mary Magdalene in Gregory's Homilies

Although Gregory the Great sees Mary of Magdala as a sinner (*peccatrix*) in his homilies, it must be remembered that this is neither the only nor the most important, but one of many typologies of this figure. This Doctor of the Church, as was the custom of early Christian authors, does not stop at individual symbolism, as he skilfully juxtaposes Mary Magdalene also with the Shulamite from the Song of Songs, Eve, Simon the Pharisee, Peter, the tax collector Zacchaeus or the "Good Thief." Each of these characters has followed "their" own path to *metanoia*, and they are examples of people of hope and conversion.

3.1. Mary Magdalene vs the Shulamite from the Song of Songs

Currently, in biblical studies, one of the main theories about John's pericope, which describes Magdalene's encounter with the Risen Christ, is that of an intertextual relationship between John 20:11–18 and Song 3:1–4. In one of his articles, Adam Kubiś writes:

> Many commentators believe that John's description of the encounter between the risen Lord and Mary Magdalene contains allusions to the Song of Songs and thus to the marriage metaphor. French exegete Michel Cambe has suggested that Song 3:1–4 is the background to the entire narrative of John 20:1–18. Despite the lack of apparent lexical links between the two texts, the similarity of scenes (*parallélisme de situations*) is noticeable. Indeed, both scenes speak of a woman searching for a man she loves. Both searches take place in the Holy City. This search unfolds at night (Song 3:1 – ἐν νυξίν) or at the end of the night (Song 20:1 – πρωῒ σκοτίας ἔτι οὔσης). In both scenes, the search for the beloved is at first fruitless (Song 3:2; John 20:2). This is followed by a conversation, in which a question is asked (Song 3:2; John 20:12–13). The Song of Songs features watchers (οἱ τηροῦντες) who find the woman, and she asks them the question, "Have you seen him whom my soul loves" (Song 3:3). In John, the watchers are replaced by angels, to whom Mary Magdalene answers their question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" (20:13). The encounter is followed by the finding of the beloved (Song 3:4; John 20:14–16). Having found the one she loves, the woman is unwilling to let him go: ἐκράτησα αὐτὸν καὶ οὐκ ἀφήσω αὐτόν – "I held him, and would not release him" (Song 3:4); μή μου ἅπτου – "Do not cling to me" or "Do not hold on to me" (John 20:17). (Kubiś 2018, 50–51)

In light of these considerations, it is worth noting that the phrase μή μου ἅπτου (John 20:17), which biblical scholars usually translate as "Do not stop me" (e.g. Biblia Tysiąclecia [Millenium Bible], 5th ed.) is not a literal translation of the original text since Greek ἅπτου in this verse is the negative imperative of the verb ἅπτω, which in the context of this sentence would have to be interpreted as "to touch," "to take hold of," "to hold," or "to make close contact") (cf. BDAG, 126). Thus μή μου ἅπτου literally means "do not touch me." In the discussed passage, as commentators on John's writings suggest, this "touch" would refer to an attempt to embrace the risen Lord, dismissing contact entailing patting his back or shaking his hand. Some scholars try to prove that the imperative μή μου ἅπτου has to be rendered as "stop touching me" or "stop holding me," suggesting Mary Magdalene's persistent attachment to Christ, which alludes to the emotional nature of the risen Lord's encounter with the women in Matt 28:9–10. Next, scholars present various proposals for explaining the prohibition against "touching" Jesus. For example, one interpretation is based on the analogy of the biblical prohibition against touching holy places during the theophany (cf. Exod 19:12–13). In contrast, other scholars suggest that Jesus' warning to

Magdalene not to touch him before his ascension refers to a concept that appears in the *Apocalypse of Moses* (cf. *Apoc. Mos.* 31:3–4). Namely, touching the body in a certain state endangers the one who touches and the one who is touched. In the opinion of Craig S. Keener, the idea that Jesus' body is forbidden to be touched because of the nature of his resurrected body, as well as before Christ's ascension, is unlikely. In this commentator's view, Jesus temporarily limits Magdalene's "embrace" or her desire to "embrace" the risen Lord since he must ascend to the Father soon. Kenner also believes that Jesus may be warning Mary Magdalene not to become too attached to his physical presence, for "It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh does not offer anything of benefit" (John 6:63), and his spirit will remain with her and all his followers forever (cf. John 20:22) (Keener 2003, 1192–94).

Sabine van den Eynde, among others, contested the theory of an intertextual relationship between the two texts (cf. 2007, 905–6). Ultimately, Kubiś concludes that this criticism is unfounded, considering that by juxtaposing Song 3:1–4 with John 20:11–18, it is possible to distinguish a significant number of similarities regarding vocabulary, motifs, or identical sequences of given elements occurring in both texts (cf. Kubiś 2018, 52–53).

Gregory the Great noted this intertextuality already in the sixth century, though not to the same extent as modern Bible scholars, hence his comparison of Mary Magdalene with the Shulamite in Song 3:1. The pontiff emphasises the fact that it is the "force of love" that pushes Mary of Magdala to seek the risen Lord and intensifies the desire to search for him ("vis amoris intentionem multiplicat inquisitionis"). She makes many attempts, and in the end, she finds the one whom her "soul loves" like the Shulamite in the Song of Songs, roaming around the house in search of the Bridegroom: "Sed amanti semel aspexisse non sufficit, quia vis amoris intentionem multiplicat inquisitionis. […] Hinc est enim quod de eodem sponso Ecclesia in Canticis canticorum dicit: «In lectulo per noctes quaesivi quem diligit anima mea; quaesivi illum et non inveni. Surgam et circuibo civitatem per vicos et plateas, et quaeram quem diligit anima mea»" (*Homilia* XXV, 2; CCSL 141, 206; "But it is not enough for those in love to have seen each other once because the power of love multiplies the desire to seek each other out. [...] For this reason, the Church says of this bridegroom in the Song of Songs: 'On my bed, during the night I sought [him] whom my soul loves. I sought him and did not find him. I will arise and roam about the city, in the streets and in the squares, and I will seek [him] whom my soul loves.'" [my own translation]).

3.2. Mary Magdalene vs Eve

For Gregory the Great, Magdalene is also a type of Eve from Genesis. Just as the first woman brought sin upon humanity by her fall, so now Mary of Magdala – a "convert sinner" – brings the news of redemption, for it is through her that the apostles learn of

Christ's resurrection. Thus, she becomes the "Apostle of the Apostles" (*Apostola Apostolorum*). The pope emphasises that, as Eve once brought death upon her husband in paradise ("in paradiso mulier viro propinavit mortem"), so now Magdalene brought life to men, or apostles ("a sepulcro mulier viris annuntiat vitam"). One proclaims the words of the one who brings life ("dicta sui vivificatoris narrat"), while the other proclaims the words of the deadly serpent ("moriferi serpentis verba narraverat"). Eve holds in her hand the "cup of death" (*potus mortis*), while Magdalene holds the "cup of life" (*poculum vitae*) (cf. *Homilia* XXV, 6; CCSL 141, 212). And this appears to be the right key to understanding the whole idea behind Gregory the Great's construct of combining the three women into one (cf. Luke 7:37; 8:2; John 20:11).

3.3. Mary Magdalene vs Simon the Pharisee

Another interesting comparison that Gregory presents is the juxtaposition of Mary Magdalene with the Pharisee, hospitably receiving Jesus at his house (cf. Luke 7:36–50). Although Simon's attitude is not entirely clear because, on the one hand, he cannot be accused of lack of openness towards Christ and his teachings (the Pharisee, which was rare, invited him into his house), on the other hand, it was a hospitality full of reserve because he did not fulfil the honours of a host towards an important guest (giving water to his feet, a kiss of welcome or anointing his head with oil). Moreover, the scene between Jesus and the "sinful woman" so appalled the Pharisee that, in his pride, he judged them harshly in spirit and questioned Jesus' "prophecy," thus confirming his earlier prejudice against the Teacher of Nazareth, which of course did not escape the attention of the pope-commentator. Commenting on this pericope, Gregory the Great emphasises in his *Homilia* XXV that Magdalene is a witness to divine mercy ("testis divinae misericordiae"), while Simon the Pharisee is the one who wanted to obscure this source of mercy ("Pharisaeus dum pietatis fontem vellet obstruere"), which, of course, was Jesus: "Then he said to her: 'Your sins are forgiven you'" (Luke 7:48). Then the commentator, reading the Bible in the light of the Bible, refers to John's pericope 20:11–18 and adds that she who sought the dead clung to the living ("viventi adhaeserat, mortuum quaerebat"), and found the living when she sought him as dead ("viventem reperit, quem mortuum quaesivit").

> Adest testis divinae misericordiae haec ipsa de qua loquimur Maria, de qua pharisaeus dum pietatis fontem vellet obstruere, dicebat: "Hic si esset propheta sciret utique quae et qualis est mulier quae tangit eum, quia peccatrix est." Sed lavit lacrimis maculas cordis et corporis, et Redemptoris sui vestigia tetigit, quae sua itinera prava dereliquit. Sedebat ad pedes verbumque de ore illius audiebat. Viventi adhaeserat, mortuum quaerebat. Viventem reperit, quem mortuum quaesivit (*Homilia* XXV, 10; CCSL 141, 215; "She is a witness of divine mercy; the same Mary whom we are discussing, and of whom the Pharisee, as he wished to obscure the source of mercy, said: 'If he had been a prophet, he would certainly

have known who, and what kind of woman she is who touches him, that she is a sinner.' But she washed the stains of her heart and body with her tears and touched the foot of her Saviour [she] who had forsaken her wicked ways. She sat at his feet and listened to the words from his mouth. She clung to the living one, [though] she sought [him] as dead. She found the living one whom she sought as dead" [my own translation]).

Then, in *Homilia XXXIII*, the pope stresses the pride of Simon the Pharisee and singles out three characters throughout the story, seeing in them the following symbolism: the Pharisee and the woman are symbolic of the sick (*aegri*), while Jesus is the physician ("inter duos autem aegros medicus aderat"). In Gregory's view, the difference between "these sick" is that the woman is aware of her illness, whereas the Pharisee's pride makes him oblivious to his illness ("aegram reprehendit de aegritudine, […] qui ipse quoque de elationis vulnere aegrotabat et ignorabat"). Pride clouds his ability to see, and showing his superiority and contempt, he rebukes not only the sinful woman but also his guest ("non solum venientem peccatricem mulierem, sed etiam suscipientem Dominum reprehendit" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 3; CCSL 141, 289]).

The pope-commentator goes on to point out that one sick retained her mental faculties, while the other lost his ability to think logically ("unus aeger […] integrum sensum tenebat, alter vero […] sensum perdiderat mentis"). For the woman shed tears because of her "illness," while the Pharisee, haughty in his false righteousness, revealed the severity of his weakness ("vim suae invaletudinis exaggerabat") and lost his capacity for logical judgement and did not know that he was far from being healthy ("a salute longe esset ignorabat" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 3; CCSL 141, 289–90]).

Gregory also indicates that Christ ate a real meal at Simon's house ("ad pharisaei prandium Dominus discumbebat"), while in the attitude of the penitent woman, he delighted in the "food" of her heart ("apud paenitentem mulierem mentis epulis delectabatur"). Jesus the Truth had a physical meal with the Pharisee ("apud pharisaeum Veritas pascebatur foras"), while with the convert sinner, he had a spiritual meal ("apud peccatricem mulierem, sed conversam, pascebatur intus" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 7; CCSL 141, 295]).

Presenting a mystical interpretation, the commentator writes that the Pharisee is symbolic of the Jewish people (*pharisaeus – iudaicus populus*), while the sinful woman symbolises the converted gentiles (*peccatrix mulier – conversa gentilitas*) (*Homilia* XXXIII, 5; CCSL 141, 292). For example, commenting on Luke 7:45, the ancient exegete explains to the reader that a kiss is a symbol of love and that this faithless nation, i.e. the Jewish people, did not give God a kiss because they did not want to worship him out of love but served him out of fear ("ex caritate eum amare noluit, cui ex timore servivit"). In contrast, the "called gentiles" do not stop kissing the Saviour's feet, as they breathe his love without ceasing ("vestigia osculari non cessat, quia in eius continuo amore suspirat" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 6; CCSL 141, 294]).

According to the commentator, Christ presents to the Pharisee, being a "type" of the faithless Jewish people ("pharisaeus […] perfidus ille populus ostendatur"), the deeds of a woman (including the kiss) as one of the goods of the gentiles, for the Magdalene could symbolise them ("Redemptor noster facta ei mulieris quasi bona gentilitatis enumerat" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 6; CCSL 141, 293]).

Finally, in one passage, the Doctor of the Church instructs us that both Simon the Pharisee and Mary Magdalene were presented to us as paradigms ("De duobus quippe ei debitoribus paradigma opponitur"), which Gregory asserts more than once. Some "blame" is attributed to both. One of the wrongdoers is less at fault, the other more so ("quorum unus minus, alius amplius debet" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 4; CCSL 141, 290]). However, the key in this passage is the noun *paradigma* ("an example," "paradigm"; cf. Lewis and Short 1891, 1300).

3.4. Mary Magdalene vs Peter, Dismas and Zacchaeus

It must be remembered that Gregory the Great examines specific biblical figures not so much to evaluate for the sake of evaluation but to derive moral-ascetic teaching from their life stories. The Italic monk usually comments on the Bible based on the well-known concept of the threefold meaning of the biblical text: historical (*historia*), typological (*significatio typica*) and moral (*moralitas*). In the first meaning, the commentator explains things in a literal sense; in the second, he looks for some symbolism and allegory; while in the third meaning, which can also be understood as beyond the literal, he seeks to translate a particular biblical text into an ascetic or moral life.

Thus, the pope considers episodes from the life of Peter the Apostle, looks at the "Good Thief," examines the tax collector Zacchaeus, looks at Mary Magdalene and sees in them "examples of hope and repentance placed before our eyes" ("et nihil in his aliud video, nisi ante nostros oculos posita spei et paenitentiae exempla" [*Homilia* XXV, 10; CCSL 141, 215]).

In a detailed argument, the ancient commentator explains that Peter the Apostle is the perfect example for people whose faith has faltered ("fortasse enim in fide lapsus est aliquis, aspiciat Petrum"). Although Peter denied Christ three times and dissociated himself radically from him, using the usual formula that the rabbis used as anathema at the time: "I do not know this man" (Matt 26:74), his weeping, as Gregory points out, saved him ("qui amare flevit, quod timide negaverat").

He continues by placing before the reader of his homilies the "Good Thief," whose name, according to the tradition, was Dismas. This thief, in Gregory's view, is the example to follow for people who are cruel in their dealings with their neighbours ("alius contra proximum suum in malitia crudelitatis exarsit, aspiciat latronem"). Such a person, if he shows remorse, even at the last moment of his life, can receive an eternal reward like the "Good Thief" ("qui et in ipso mortis articulo ad

vitae praemia paenitendo pervenit"): "This day you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

On the other hand, those who steal from others because of their greed and desire for profit should, in the opinion of the commentator, look at the tax collector Zacchaeus ("alius avaritiae aestibus anhelans aliena diripuit, aspiciat Zacchaeum"), who gave back fourfold to everyone whom he robbed ("qui si quid alicui abstulit, quadruplum reddidit"): "Behold, Lord, one half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone in any matter, I will repay him fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Thus, Zacchaeus symbolises the plunderer who can always repent, provided he is willing to repair the material damage he has done.

And finally, Mary Magdalene, who, in this passage, is for Gregory the Great, the paradigm of a woman inflamed by lust for carnal pleasures ("alius libidinis igne succensus, carnis munditiam perdidit, aspiciat Mariam"), ultimately burning with love for Christ, burned up carnal love within herself ("quae in se amorem carnis igne divini amoris excoxit").

Hence, in the opinion of the pope-commentator, Magdalene the prostitute, Peter the one who denied Christ, Dismas the evil-doer and Zacchaeus the thief, represent for Christians certain paradigms on the path to *metanoia* towards full Christian perfection. Indeed, God, in the conviction of the Doctor of the Church, has placed before our eyes people whom we should emulate, and they represent examples of his mercy ("Deus ubique oculis nostris quos imitari debeamus obicit, ubique exempla suae misericordiae opponit"). They all experienced the mercy of the Creator and, repenting of their transgressions, were saved.

Fortasse enim in fide lapsus est aliquis, aspiciat Petrum, qui amare flevit, quod timide negaverat. Alius contra proximum suum in malitia crudelitatis exarsit, aspiciat latronem, qui et in ipso mortis articulo ad vitae praemia paenitendo pervenit. Alius avaritiae aestibus anhelans aliena diripuit, aspiciat Zacchaeum, qui si quid alicui abstulit, quadruplum reddidit. Alius libidinis igne succensus carnis munditiam perdidit, aspiciat Mariam, quae in se amorem carnis igne divini amoris excoxit. Ecce omnipotens Deus ubique oculis nostris quos imitari debeamus obicit, ubique exempla suae misericordiae opponit (*Homilia* XXV, 10; CCSL 141, 215–216; "For perhaps someone has fallen in faith, let him look at Peter, who wept bitterly because he fearfully denied [Christ]. Whoever was inflamed with the sin of cruelty against his neighbour, let him look at the thief, who, showing remorse, attained the reward of [eternal] life at the very moment of death. Whoever, [while] breathing greed and desire for gain, has plundered another, let him look at Zacchaeus, who, having taken something from someone, gave back [to everyone] fourfold. [Finally,] he who [is] inflamed by the fire of carnal lust and has lost the purity of the flesh, let him look at Mary, who [burning] with the fire of divine love, burned in herself the love of the flesh. Indeed, the almighty God sets before our eyes from every side [those] whom we should emulate, everywhere he presents examples of his mercy" [my own translation]).

3.5. Mary Magdalene vs Christian of Any Era

Turning finally to allegorical interpretation, Gregory, in *Homilia* XXXIII, points out that Mary Magdalene symbolises every Christian ("nos ergo, nos illa mulier expressit"). She sprinkled the Saviour's feet with precious oil (cf. Luke 7:46), and every Christian – in Gregory's view – is "the sweet fragrance of Christ for God" (cf. 2 Cor 2:15). If we do righteous works, we sprinkle the Church with the fragrance of good opinion ("quibus opinionis bonae odore Ecclesiam respergamus") and, like Magdalene, we pour the precious oil on the Lord's body ("quid in Domini corpore nisi unguentum fundimus" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 5; CCSL 141, 292]).

The evangelical heroine stood back at Jesus' feet (cf. Luke 7:38). In the view of the Doctor of the Church, each one of us stands at the feet of Christ ("contra pedes Domini") when persisting in sin, we have opposed his ways ("cum in peccatis positi eius itineribus renitebamur"). But if we do penance for our sins ("si ad veram paenitentiam post peccata convertimur"), we again stand back at the feet of Jesus ("iam retro secus pedes") because we follow in his footsteps (*Homilia* XXXIII, 5; CCSL 141, 292).

Magdalene shed tears at the Lord's feet (cf. Luke 7:38). Every Christian does so by showing compassion towards neighbours ("per compassionis affectum inclinemur"), by sympathising with the saints in tribulation ("si sanctis eius in tribulatione compatimur") and by treating their sorrow as our own ("si eorum tristitiam nostram putamus" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 5; CCSL 141, 292]).

Moreover, the woman used her hair to wipe Christ's feet (cf. Luke 7:38). In the belief of the ancient commentator, we wipe the feet of the Lord with our hair when we compassionately suffer with his saints ("quando sanctis eius, quibus ex caritate compatimur"), when we share with other people the things we have plenty ("etiam ex his quae nobis superfluunt miseremur"), for as reason feels pain through compassion, so a generous hand indicates a feeling of compassion. And he sheds tears at the Saviour's feet but does not wipe them with his hair ("sed capillis suis non tergit, qui utcumque proximorum dolori compatitur"), who, though united in pain with his neighbour, yet does not share with him the things he has plenty ("sed tamen eis ex his quae sibi superfluunt non miseretur"). It can also be the case, as the pope-commentator emphasises, that someone weeps with a neighbour and does not wipe his feet with his hair, when he has only offered words of compassion to the other ("plorat et non tergit, qui verba quidem doloris tribuit"), which has not lessened the intensity of the neighbour's pain ("quae vim doloris minime abscidit" [*Homilia* XXXIII, 5; CCSL 141, 292–93]).

And finally, the woman kissed the Lord's feet (cf. Luke 7:38). Explaining this action, Gregory instructs that we do likewise if we love those we support generously ("si studiose diligimus quos ex largitate continemus"). He goes on to state that we should take care that the needs of others do not become burdensome to us ("ne gravis

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nobis sit necessitas proximi") and that when the hand has offered what is necessary, the spirit should not be ossified ("cum manus necessaria tribuit, animus a dilectione torpescat"), concludes the commentator (*Homilia* XXXIII, 5; CCSL 141, 293).

Conclusion

After analysing both Gregory's homilies, the following conclusions arise:

1. In the detailed argument on the matter, the commentator, by combining into one three evangelical women – the nameless sinner (cf. Luke 7:37), Mary Magdalene (cf. Luke 8:2) and Mary (cf. John 20:11) – uses the verb form *credimus* (cf. *Homilia* XXXIII, 1; CCSL 141, 288), which in the context of the whole passage should be translated as "we believe," "we think," "we suppose," and which appears to have been often overlooked by later commentators. This key verb does not imply a judgement or conviction based on sound arguments, nor does it contain absolute certainty as to one's opinion.

2. In the case of Gregory's interpretation of Mary Magdalene, perhaps the pope himself would have been astonished that, for fifteen centuries, the most enduring legacy of his two homilies on the biblical figure in question was the symbol of Magdalene as a "convert prostitute," rather than the moral teaching that Gregory the Great wished to impart to the reader. After all, the commentator still juxtaposed Magdalene with the Shulamite from the Song of Songs, Eve, Simon the Pharisee, Peter, Zacchaeus and Dismas, and saw in her a "type" of Christian of every era.

3. In both homilies, the pope repeatedly emphasises that the penitent sinner Magdalene (*paenitens peccatrix mulier*) is a paradigm (*paradigma*) and example (*exemplum*) of sorts. Moreover, she should be an example for every believer to follow as one who has experienced the immensity of God's mercy.

4. All the biblical figures (the Shulamite from the Song of Songs, Eve, Simon the Pharisee, Peter, Zacchaeus, the "Good Thief") with whom the pope juxtaposes Mary Magdalene are, for Gregory, examples of people of hope who followed their own path to conversion.

5. Although Gregory the Great notes that Mary of Magdala is a sinner (*peccatrix*) in his homilies, it must be remembered that this is neither the only nor the most important, but one of many typologies of this figure. Moreover, in the commentator's view, this sinner ultimately becomes one who "burns" with love for the Lord (*amando fortiter ardebat*).

6. Finally, it is important to bear in mind the interpretation conventions of biblical texts by the Fathers of the Church and early Christian writers, who usually offered the reader, *per allegoriam*, multiple proposals for interpreting a single

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image. Doubtless, this tendency to trace a supraliteral meaning in almost every biblical verse, as the Origenian spirit still lingers in Gregory the Great due to the reading of his later followers, is a rich source of moral, spiritual and ascetic reflection.

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