

Transcript of “ On the Strength of Her Testimony ”

presented on July 22, 2015 by
Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P.

Dr. Jane Regan :

Now it's my honor , really , to introduce Sister Mary Catherine Hilkert who is a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace. She's Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame where she teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses on theological anthropology, Christology, fundamental theology, and feminist and intercultural theologies.

It's clear that Notre Dame has very much appreciated the work that she does. And she was honored with the Joyce Award for excellence in undergrad teaching in 2009 and the Kane Award for

Authority: Catherine of Siena and the V
Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schi
articles on theology, preaching, and spiritual
currently working on a book entitled Words

Former president of the Catholic Theologica
also received a number of prestigious nation
Theological Union Sophia Award for Theolo
Barry University's Yves Congar Award for
the Ann O'Hara Graf Award by the Wome
Theological Society of America for her c
theology.

She is a speaker who is much in demand—
and lectured in Ireland, the Netherlands, So
States and Canada. Sister Hilkert is rea
speaking, and scholarship. We are really de
extending a warm welcome to Sister Mary C

Sr. Hilkert:

Thank you, Jane, for that warm welcome

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of Mary Magdalene I'd like to return to his earlier Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel." His call there for all baptized Christians to serve as missionary disciples included the invitation to the entire Church to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. I want to suggest if we're serious about that, ~~we need to take a hard look at the~~

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tradition. As we turn to each narrative in turn, you might ask yourself what insights can we glean from the story about the strength of this woman's testimony, and what might that mean for women today who are also beloved disciples and missionaries sent to proclaim the truth that we have seen and heard.

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point for Photini's embrace of her true identity as well. Like the other disciples earlier in the Gospel, she leaves behind her livelihood, in her case the water jar, to embrace a mission of announcing the Good News to her people. In words that echo Jesus' earlier call to his disciples and their summons to others, she invites her townspeople to "come and see." Her personal encounter with Jesus shaped the authenticity of her preaching.

Likewise, her living witness to what she had experienced in faith had the power to change the lives of others who heard her testimony. Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman, on the strength of her testimony. The Greek expression for the word of the woman witnessing used here is the same expression Jesus uses in his farewell prayer for his other disciples at the Last Supper in chapter 17 as he prays for them and their apostolic mission: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their words." Same expression. No wonder Francis singled out this Samaritan woman in his discussion of the joy of the Gospel that is incarnate in a people of many faces. Highlighting the importance of hearing the Gospel proclaimed as it has been experienced in the richness of diverse cultures, Pope Francis remarks, "In this way the Holy Spirit shows the Church new aspects of revelation and gives the Church a new face."

One of the new aspects of revelation which the Holy Spirit reveals in this new face of Photini is that

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Her first appearance in chapter 11 of the Gospel of John is when she and her sister Mary send word to Jesus from their home in Bethany about their brother and Jesus' friend, Lazarus: "Lord, the one you love is sick." The two sisters' description of Lazarus as "the one you love" is frequently noted. It's even led some to suggest perhaps he was the mysterious and unnamed figure who takes that pride of place in the Fourth Gospel, the

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Perhaps most significant for our focus today on Magdalene the preacher, however, is that this mass of crimes of which she was guilty included not only her vanity and forbidden acts of the flesh but also the fact that she had spoken proud things with her mouth. Gregory explicitly commends Mary for repenting of that bold speech as well, symbolized by her act of planting her mouth on the redeemer's feet. Although Gregory's portrait of Mary Magdalene has had a powerful hold on the Christian imagination, and it's been reinforced by artists, authors, and film makers throughout two millennia of Christian history, the biblical portraits of Mary Magdalene offer quite a different vision of a missionary disciple.

A prominent Jewish disciple of Jesus from the town of Magdala on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, she participated in the ministry of Jesus. (I'm going to move to that one before I was ready for it. Just can't leave that other one up there as I'm speaking about this missionary disciple.) She participated in the ministry of Jesus, following him and ministering to him. She's the one disciple identified in all four Gospels as witness to both the death and resurrection of Jesus. In John's Gospel she's the one to discover the open tomb early in the morning on the first day while it was still dark. She's also the first one to encounter the Risen Jesus and be commissioned by him to announce the Good News to her brothers and sisters when we hear the full story in the Lamentationary, thank you. There is no question in this Gospel that Mary Magdalene is the Apostle to the Apostles, the first commissioned to preach the Gospel. Once again we might ask of the narrative, what was the source of the power of this woman's testimony? The dynamics of her encounter with Jesus are more developed than in either of the other two women's stories. Although many discussions of the Easter experience of the disciples, even in fairly contemporary theology texts—I hate to admit even in the texts of Edward Schillebeeckx—and many homilies, still speak of all the disciples as having abandoned Jesus and later been forgiven by the Risen Christ as Peter was.

That is not the story of Mary Magdalene, who kept vigil at the foot of the cross. Rather, her conversion, and it is equally a radical conversion, begins not with bitter tears of regret after betrayal but rather with tears of grief, loss, and confusion. Standing by an empty tomb, not even being able to locate the dead body of her beloved friend, she is a woman once again facing impasse. Fitzgerald described impasse as a situation in which there is no way out, no way around, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities. In impasse, the new vision that is needed, the alternative that can open up a

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The dispute escalates when Mary asks Peter if he thinks she is lying about her experience. Levi, however, intervenes with the comment about Peter's hot temper and the judgment and calls attention to her deep relationship with Jesus as the basis for her speech. "If the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Lord knew her very well. That is why he loved her more than us." In that text, which was not included in the biblical canon, the disciples take Mary Magdalene's teaching as a source of encouragement for their own mission to preach.

But in the centuries that followed, authoritative texts explicitly prohibited women's preaching. The third century Didascalia Apostolorum, the teaching of the apostles, and the fourth century Apostolic Constitutions mention Mary Magdalene,

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A man is more likely to have understanding than a woman. Second, preachers occupy a superior position, and women are of an inferior status.

Third, if a woman were to preach, her appearance would inspire lustful thoughts in the minds of men. And finally, as a reminder of the foolishness of the first woman, of whom St. Bernard says, "She taught once and wrecked the whole world."

Nevertheless, nevertheless, in that climate, alright, the image of Mary of Magdala as preacher and apostle continued to flourish in the popular imagination. In spite of efforts to deny her commission to preach and her apostolic role, to minimize it, to describe it as an exception, all of which Katherine Ludwig Jansen has documented in her wonderful book *The Making of the Magdalen*, Mary Magdalene's preaching ministry and her title *Apostle of the Apostles*, remained popular in liturgy, sermons, art, drama, popular devotion. In addition, the precedent of Mary Magdalene's being the first commissioned to preach by the Risen Christ continued to be cited, not only in defense of women's preaching but more broadly in defense of women's speech. So, for example, Christine de Pizan cites that.

One of those who drew inspiration from the witness of Mary Magdalene as a preacher commissioned by Jesus himself was the fourteenth century uneducated, young laywoman, Catherine of Siena. Her encounter with Christ in mystical prayer led her to embrace a life of contemplation in action, including a vocation to preach. Like Mary Magdalene, she came to embrace a mission that was not of her making, not even within her imagination. Amid the dreaded bubonic plague and wars between Italian city-states and through Marin.3(in.6007 Tw 1.-2.4(n5w)10.7(ith)12.3(in)12.4(J -0.006 Tc 0.014 T.7(ith)-7.4(n)5.4(is)7(ti -5(t).)8(SJ 0

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about me? She does not think such things but only how she could find and follow her master.
She knew the path to holiness so well she has become our spiritual maestra—master.

Time does not permit further explanation of the source of this fourteenth

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