

Mary Magdalene

The following text has been excerpted intact from the book by A.G. Sertillanges, **What Jesus Saw from the Cross**, published and copyright in 1996 by Sophia Institute Press, Box 5284, Manchester, NH 03108, (1-800-888-9344). It is reproduced here by permission. A review of **What Jesus Saw from the Cross** appears in the book review section of this issue of the **Rays**. Accompanying the text are three watercolors produced by J. James Tissot, part of a series of 365 paintings of New Testament incidents, first exhibited in Paris in 1895, after Tissot had spent ten years in Palestine becoming familiar with the culture and researching his subject. His aim was thoroughly devout: "To be moved directly by the life of the Master, passing through the same places, looking at the same scenes." Tissot desired to portray Jesus as he appeared in his own day, in authentic clothing and in an environment faithfully rendered. His images are marked by vivid realism and erudition.

THESE COMPASSIONATE souls [at the foot of the Cross], at once daughters, friends, and—to some extent also—mothers, are there and weeping bitterly.

They strive with their glance to give courage to the Master, and invite Him to share His human weakness with them. At the same time, by confessing Him to be their God and Redeemer, they call down a grace upon themselves: their reward is the commission to tend His burial. Already this body is theirs. One of their number has embalmed it in advance, and soon all will go hastening before the Sabbath dawns to buy spices, that they may envelop in sweet odors the stony couch of Jesus.

And where is she, she who embalmed her Savior in advance, she who anticipated her sisters and poured the first spikenard, provided the first shroud—her own hair—to wrap around the feet that she



Watercolor, J. James Tissot (1836-1902), Brooklyn Museum of Art

Sorrowful Mother (*Mater Dolorosa*)

Mary Magdalene embraces the foot of her Lord's cross as she earlier embraced and anointed his feet. Now the blood of her crucified Redeemer anoints her submitted form and blesses her loving grief.

had bathed in sweet smelling oil and in her tears?

We cannot conceive her otherwise than as prostrate at the foot of the Cross, embracing it with her arms, making herself one with it, and welcoming the blood that flows from it, bedewing her head. In art she will always be depicted thus, unless it be as supporting the blessed Virgin in her moments of direst agony.



Gouache, J. James Tissot (1836-1902), Brooklyn Museum of Art

Mary Magdalene's Box of Very Precious Ointment

She says nothing; what words could express what she feels? She is not even thinking, not even suffering; it is Jesus who thinks and suffers in her. She dares not speak of the oppression in her heart, for she has no heart of her own. In her breast she feels the great palpitations which fitfully convulse the breast of the Martyr. She has no more blood, for the blood of Jesus is flowing; she has no more will, for she has surrendered it to His. For her also "it is consummated," and now she can only weep.

Mary stands at the foot of the Cross; but Magdalene has not this obligation. Magdalene is not the Co-Redemptress; she is only a loving and suffering soul, plunged in the sorrow of her Beloved and striving to equal His with her own. The scene which took place in Simon's house is re-enacted, but now its significance is apparent, for there is none of the outward glory that before had veiled it.

What a deed that was, and what amazement it aroused in those who failed to perceive its heart-rending symbolism! The meal is in full progress, the Master is in deep conversation with His host, when—availing herself, it is true, of a recognized custom, but one surely forbidden for a sinful

woman! —she enters the room carrying a precious vessel. She places herself behind Jesus, who is reclining at the table in the oriental fashion, and there, alone with her love, ignoring the crowd that watches her, she begins to bathe the head of the guest with spikenard and to anoint His feet with scents. Then letting down the tresses of her hair, she wipes from the sacred feet her perfume and her tears with them.

Perhaps we can understand her action and what impelled her to so bold a deed. She has been raised up from her unworthy life. Her "seven devils" have fled, leaving her with the soul of a child, save that it is

more ardent and filled with a boundless understanding. Through Jesus she has at last come to know true happiness. Through Him she has learned not to desecrate love, and the love in her, now cleansed from defilement, wells up the stronger because it has so many mad follies to redeem.

After her blatant sins, must she not show a blatant sorrow? Having in all else braved the eyes of the world, she will brave them now in humility, in greatness of soul, and in faith. So magnificent will she be in her role that she will become a symbol of spiritual resurrection, a patroness of repentant sinners.

But there is another motive that decides her. Jesus is going to die, and she knows it; the intuition of one who loves has revealed to her what is hidden from nearly all others. At the tomb of Lazarus the attitude of Jesus' enemies did not escape her. She who then said confidently, "If Thou hadst been here, my brother would not have died," might now have said at the foot of the Cross, "Had it not been for me, had I not forced Your tender love, perhaps You, my adorable Master, perhaps You might not have died!"

Yet she realizes that for this death there are

wider reasons. She may have provided the occasion, but what of the cause? Jesus is the victim, not only of the Jewish leaders, not only of the friends by granting whose requests He called down upon Himself the anger of His enemies. Jesus is the victim of all human souls.

Yes, Jesus is the victim of every human soul in the measure of the sins of each. This is a further anguish for Magdalene. What horror overcomes her at the thought of her sins! What a sense of her eternal responsibility! It is for her sins that Jesus is paying the price, and if her love comes to her all bleeding, will she not go out to meet it?

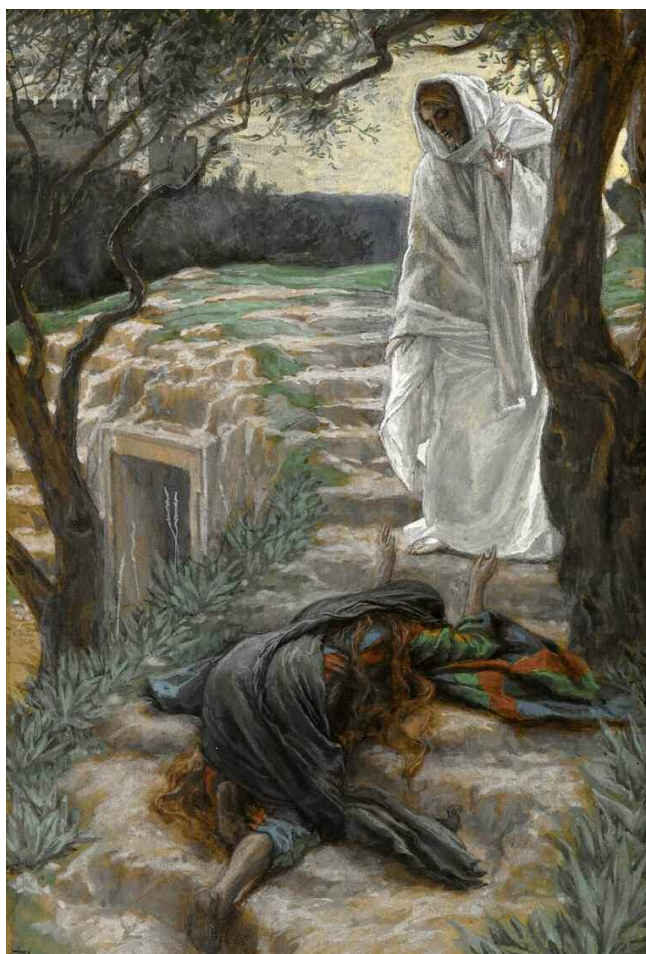
And so she makes her entry into the Passion. She anticipates events; she joins Jesus in His knowledge of what is to come, although His knowledge is eternal; she submits; she humbles herself; she weeps; she gives thanks—and between the two is a sort of secret complicity, of which Jesus gives only a hint for the instruction of His host: “She hath done what she could: she is come beforehand to anoint my body for the burial.”

And as a result the perfume poured out there will embalm the world, as the Body risen from the tomb will fill it. As Jesus says, “Amen, I say to you, wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, that also which she hath done, shall be told for a memorial of her.”

The house of Simon that day was like the ante-room of the new sepulcher which is set apart for funeral anointings, and the heart of Mary Magdalene, after that of the Blessed Virgin, was the first tomb. Magdalene mourns Jesus in advance; she mourns Him as one would a newborn baby. For her He is newly born, having just been born in her.

And her vessel? What of the vessel of fine alabaster with the slender neck? She breaks it, for it must serve no other use. Not even for Him will it serve again, for He will die. If only she might cast it into the sepulcher! In the tombs of Canaan we frequently find vessels and other objects broken in homage to the dead.

But since He is to die, and to die for her, will she remain behind? She cannot imitate the Hindu spouse who mounts the funeral pyre of her lord, to mingle her ashes with his. But she does better: by penance, by a total self-surrender, she buries her-



Watercolor, J. James Tissot (1836-1902), Brooklyn Museum of Art

Touch Me Not (Noli me tangere)

Upon hearing her name spoken by the risen Saviour, Mary is moved to the very depths of her soul. Seized by joy she flings herself down, thinking to resume her old place at the feet of Jesus and to embrace them as she had done on Calvary.

self as she has buried her Lord, and she submits to death in Him.

At the foot of the Cross she renews her gift, and it is herself, more than her tears and her heart's blood, that she pours at the feet of her suffering Beloved.

At one time she had sat at His feet to hear His words; this was her “part” which was not taken away from her. She rose from His feet only to anoint them in the house of Simon. Now she embraces those feet on the Cross. Tomorrow she will cast herself at those feet again. She cannot leave them, for there she recognizes her own place; there she can give vent to her passion of humility and love. Magdalene is ever prostrate, ever lowly, because love has taken hold of her, and her own life is no more. □