

Saint Mary Magdalene

An Interview with Michael Fuller

Fr. Baima: Welcome to Speaking of Theology. I'm your host, Father Tom Baima. Greetings from Mundelein Seminary. Today we want to continue a conversation we have been having on previous programs of Speaking of Theology on the popular book, *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown. Last month on the show, Fr. Robert Barron and I discussed the book, which is making quite an impact. It's been on the cover of *Newsweek*; there has been an ABC Special Report about it. But more importantly, as priests who serve in the parishes of the Archdiocese [of Chicago] each weekend, we have been hearing from parishioners a real question, say more about this book. Many people are reading it. As I said last month, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which is a trade publication for colleges and universities, has identified it as the number two best seller on college campuses. So, lots of people are talking about this book.

There is a problem with the book, though. It makes a villain out of the Catholic Church and attacks a number of elements of the Christian faith at their core. So what we thought we would do this time is use this program, *Speaking of Theology*, to examine one particular part of *the DaVinci Code*, and that's the figure and person of Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene figures very prominently in the book. The author contends that she is the Holy Grail that people have sought for centuries, and that knowledge of this secret was suppressed as a great conspiracy by the Catholic Church. There is another view of Mary Magdalene, however, one that knows her as Saint Mary Magdalene. She is called by various church fathers as the "apostle to the Apostles." So I thought it would be good to use this edition of *Speaking of Theology* to examine the other side and hear just who Mary Magdalene really was in Christian history and how she fits into the Christian tradition. To help us

do that, I have invited one of the faculty members of Mundelein Seminary, Father Michael Fuller, to join us for *Speaking of Theology*.

Father Fuller is an instructor of spiritual theology in the Department of Christian Life. He is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome. His book, *The Virgin Martyrs*, is due to be published soon by Hillenbrand Books. And he is a priest of the Diocese of Rockford. I'm very happy to have him here today. Father Fuller, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

Fr. Fuller: Thank you very much, Father Baima.

Fr. Baima: Let's start at the very beginning and this afternoon look at the figure of Mary Magdalene. Who is she? What do we actually know about her?

Fr. Fuller: Mary Magdalene is actually one of my favorite saints precisely because of all these image problems she's been having over the past 2000 years. Traditionally, Mary Magdalene [as we know her from the Scriptures] is the "apostle to the Apostles". This is a title given her by Saint Ambrose and others. She is the first witness to the resurrection, as told us in the Gospel of John.

Fr. Baima: And that is why she is given that particular title, "the apostle to the Apostles." The word "apostle" merely means "messenger" so this is saying that she brought the message of the Resurrection to Peter and the other apostles.

Fr. Fuller: Precisely. So, she is the messenger to the messengers who would go out to the world. This is a very prominent place in the Church and in the whole scheme of Christian life.

Fr. Baima: What we know about her comes from the Scriptures, particularly the Gospel of Luke.

Fr. Fuller: Actually she is mentioned in all four gospels. The earliest is the Gospel of Luke, earliest not in time of writing but in terms of the story from the Tradition. Luke mentions her earliest on in his gospel. And basically, Mary was one of the women who traveled with Jesus. In fact, some people today believe she was one of the financial backers of Jesus, helping him in his ministry. She was also, we are told, healed by Jesus. Jesus cast seven demons out of her. Remember this point as it will become significant later. How the figure of seven demons is interpreted becomes important with the later history of how her story is told.

Fr. Baima: Both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark speak of the exorcism of the seven demons.

Fr. Fuller: Then in John we have the most prominent role of Mary Magdalene, that of witness to the resurrection. She is the first to see Jesus after he rises from the dead. And she is sent out [by Jesus] to tell the apostles about it.

Fr. Baima: For the sake of our listeners who may not be familiar with the text, this is the situation where early in the morning on the first day of the week, Mary goes to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus, as was the custom.

Fr. Fuller: And those oils were very important to the story as we will see. They contribute to the confusion.

Fr. Baima: So, she goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus, but the tomb is empty. Grief stricken, she is wandering around the garden where the tomb was and she encounters the Resurrected Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him.

Fr. Fuller: No, at first she thinks that he is the gardener. And she asks him "Where did you take the body of Christ. Finally, she realizes [who it is] and sees Jesus as he says her name. Her response is "Rabboni" [Hebrew for] Teacher, Lord. And she discovers that Christ is no longer dead.

Fr. Baima: And at that point he gives her the mission to go and tell the disciples

Fr. Fuller: Go and tell Peter and the others that I have risen and that I will meet them in Galilee . . .”¹

Fr. Baima: That is the sense in which she is the first witness to the resurrection. She is given the mandate to bring the message to the apostles.

Fr. Fuller: This is very important to note. One reason for all the interest in *the Da Vinci Code* is that it employs a very feminist view of history and Christianity. I think Father Barron mentioned this point on your last show. It is important for our audience to know both that the book has this bias and the church has never denied the prominent role of messenger which Mary Magdalene has in the scriptures. She is the apostle to the apostles and the first witness of the resurrection. So, the claim that her role in the group of disciples was covered up is not true. Her story is read publicly each year in the Easter Gospels.

Fr. Baima: And from an historical perspective, the prominence that Mary Magdalene has in the gospel texts themselves is quite counter-cultural for the first century.

Fr. Fuller: Right. Why would that position, as first witness to the resurrection, be given to a woman, in a society that was all male dominated? That is a reversal of what would have been socially acceptable. It's the same case in the

¹ Matthew 28:1-7 reads: Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Mag'dalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." John 20:17-18 says: Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Mag'dalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (RSV)

gospels where the genealogies of Christ mention not only men in the lineage, but also several women.

Fr. Baima: So, the fact is that the canonical writings honor women in a way that the dominant society would not have done.

Fr. Fuller: Yes, exactly. But that is ignored by some people when you bring the topic up.

Fr. Baima: In the book, Dan Brown tells his in a way that seems like historical fiction. Historical fiction is a genre where you take an historical story and then write a piece of fiction using the characters out of history. I happen to like that kind of story . . .

Fr. Fuller: It makes history interesting.

Fr. Baima: The problem in the case of the DaVinci Code, is that it really isn't historical fiction. This is not a case of an author taking an historical story and writing fiction by using characters of the actual events. Rather, it is pure fiction, using historical figures in ways which bear no relationship to actual history. The result that I am finding by talking to parishioners out in the parishes, is that since they are not aware of the ancient history, the way we who have studied theology would be, is that they are not able to separate the facts of history from the fiction of the story. This is causing confusion. So, maybe, we can take a look at the real facts. In the book, Dan Brown makes the contention that there was a plot to cover up Mary Magdalene's true role. He says that one of the pieces of evidence of this plot is that the Church labeled her as a prostitute, as a way of degrading her position. Now, it is true that there is some confusion between Mary and the woman caught in adultery. Could we go right to the heart of the matter and unpack the facts? Where was the confusion over these two women on the part of the church even at the highest levels? How do the facts shake out if you study it?

Fr. Fuller: A little background first. Traditionally, Mary Magdalene has been described in hagiography, in the stories of the saints, as a reformed prostitute, as a lady who was healed of this by Christ and who went on to be a follower of Christ. So, traditionally in art and iconography, she is always depicted with the skull, the sign of a penitent. She is reformed, but she is always remembering her sins and how Christ has forgiven her.

Fr. Baima: The role that such images had in Christian art was to depict the tremendous power that Christ had to elevate the sinner [to sanctity].

Fr. Fuller: The idea is that if God could save this prostitute, he can save any of us.

Fr. Baima: What was the source of the confusion?

Fr. Fuller: Most people who support this idea claim that Pope Gregory the Great announced that Mary Magdalene was the prostitute who reformed. That's simply not the case. Gregory the Great did make a huge mistake. What he did was to confuse the three different women named Mary. The first Mary is Mary Magdalene. All we know about her is that Christ cast seven demons out of her and that she became a disciple. What those demons were, or what the sin was, we don't know. A lot of people equate the mention of demons with illness. We just don't know.

Fr. Baima: Sometimes, it was also a psychological disturbance.

Fr. Fuller: Right. Then there is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha which gives us the whole famous Martha and Mary story. Now the problem comes with the Gospel of John, where the [evangelist] clearly identifies a woman that Luke does not name who comes to Jesus and anoints his feet with oil and cleans his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair. The Gospel of John says that woman is Mary of Bethany. The mistake that Gregory the Great made was in two homilies, at two different times, when he equated all

three people: the sinner, the woman who anointed Jesus feet, (Mary of Bethany) and Mary Magdalene. Now, it's easy to get confused and you can see why. In those times the texts of the scriptures themselves were not readily available; they were rare objects. So, a lot of the preaching was done from memory. What Gregory seems to have done was to equate all three Mary's as one person.

Fr. Baima: And no one at this period of history has a surname. Surnames have not yet been invented.

Fr. Fuller: Right, Mary Magdalene is really Mary of Magdala, which is the name of the town she came from. So, Gregory the Great said, we have this woman who is Lazarus' sister, who anointed Jesus' feet and this is where this confusion begins. A further problem, though, is that people think that Gregory said that she was a prostitute. What happened there was in the Gospel of Luke, where the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus was called a great sinner. Indeed she was a woman who had a bad name in town. That's how the Jerusalem Bible translated it. What does that mean? We don't know. But a bad name in town would mean she was a bad character, someone who walked around and did things which are associated with bad people. Gregory the Great never said that she was a prostitute, just a sinner. Someone else later figured she was a prostitute and linked the two. What seems to have happened is at the same time that Gregory was preaching about Mary another saint's story was in vogue, that was Mary of Egypt. Mary of Egypt was a woman of Alexandria who was a prostitute. She was a Christian, raised in a Christian family who fell into the life of disrepute. She heard about people going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and venerating the Cross. She wanted to go, but didn't have any money so she sold her body to the sailors so that she could get passage to Jerusalem. But in Jerusalem when she tried to enter the church where the Holy Cross was, she was barred by an invisible force. As she tried to go in the door, it's just like in the movies, she bounces back. She can't get in. So she wonders to herself, how can this be? So she prays to Mary the Mother of God that she can change her life and with that conversion, she is able to enter the church. Once she venerates the Cross, she receives a message from the Lord to go into the desert

and become a hermit. Mary of Egypt becomes one of the original mothers of the desert. Out there she reforms her life and spends thirty or forty years as a hermit. A priest comes and finds her, not knowing who she was, brings her communion and shortly later she dies. This story was very popular right at the same time that Gregory the Great was preaching on Mary Magdalene. So with yet another Mary added to the mix, in a totally oral culture, confusion resulted. In the popular piety, it all just became one story. That's how, I believe, Mary Magdalene was labeled a prostitute. It is nothing that Gregory the Great actually said, but the mixture of the several Marys in the popular piety brought about that result.

Fr. Baima: Did Gregory write his homilies down, or like many of the early preachers were they copied by others?

Fr. Fuller: I don't know for sure, but often homilies were copied. . .

Fr. Baima: I can imagine what my homilies would look like if someone copied them out in the pews.

Fr. Fuller: I don't recommend it. The other thing to remember is that Gregory the Great's homilies were very, very popular. They were circulated as a very good source of theology. So they were one the few things that people read and listened to their teachers talk about.

Fr. Baima: Then the confusion in Gregory's homilies created a confusion in the popular mind of the day.

I'd like to go on to one of Dan Brown's points in *the DaVinci Code*, that there was a cover up of Mary's true identity. Can you talk a little bit about the so called cover up?

Fr. Fuller: Confusion is not cover up. You had the homilies where Gregory clearly which say that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany and the lady who

was a sinner and anointed Jesus' feet are all the same person. This was propagated outward by people reading and quoting his sermons. Confusion is far different from the Church announcing that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. It is a difference between church pronouncement and popular religiosity.

Fr. Baima: All this occurred during a period of history where everything is transacted orally. So the oral tradition, which we see in the lives of the saints could sometimes mix up the details. We see this often in the accounts of the lives of the saints, where details from one story find their way into another.

Fr. Fuller: It's the telephone game all over.

Fr. Baima: The church tried to address this officially during the time of the Second Vatican Council. It was Pope Paul VI, was it not, who tried to correct the errors and confusions that had crept into the accounts of the lives of the saints?

Fr. Fuller: Exactly, in 1969 came the publication of the final revision of the Roman Calendar, which removed saints, like Christopher, whose legends are not historically accurate, but composites of elements of other saints' lives. Mary Magdalene was clearly established as the woman of the resurrection gospels and given a feast day distinct from Mary of Egypt and Mary of Bethany. This was the official response or clarification. Unfortunately, the popular notions of piety just continued on. What we need to remember is that any changes that Gregory the Great made in the story of Mary wasn't for reasons of patriarchy, as some feminist theologians and especially Dan Brown suggest. Gregory was trying to make a theological point about Jesus Christ's ability to forgive everyone. The point of the narrative is to show that Christ could save even the worst of sinners and bring her to the most prominent point of being first witness of the resurrection. There is hope for us all.

Fr. Baima: So historically it was the opposite of what Brown asserts. The purpose of the sermons, (even granting that he confused the two Marys), was not to reduce the figure of Mary Magdalene to that of a sinner, but to take the figure

of the sinner, and elevate her to the position of Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the resurrection.

Let me change topics now, and ask you, what is the conspiracy about the bloodline? Where does that come from?

Fr. Fuller: Where? I guess I'd have to say from all over the place. There are legends after legends. I think at the root of it is the idea that we are always constantly trying to mold Christ into our image rather the opposite. The way it should be is that we are molded into Christ's image. So, to follow out the logic, the fact that Christ was celibate just doesn't seem right. Most people get married. It's the natural thing to do. So, if we use our experience as the starting point, it would seem to be natural for Christ to get married. If it were logical for Christ to have married, continuing this line of reasoning, then the next question would be who would he have married? In the gospels, Mary is the most prevalent name, she was close to Christ. In fact, the Gnostic Gospels, exploit that closeness saying that Mary was the recipient of the special revelation because she was so close to Christ. But again those gospels, have been rejected by the church.

Fr. Baima: These so-called gospels came out of the very heresies which denied the full divinity and the full humanity of Christ. All of the confusion about Christ comes from trying to make more either of his divinity or his humanity, not allowing both to exist fully.

Fr. Fuller: And if you want to stress the Afull human@ part, then he has got to get married. That is the logical conclusion based on human experience. But as anyone who has taken Logic 101 knows, something can be logical and not the least bit true. Just because something is logical, doesn't make it true. So there are lots of weird stories that are attached to these legends about a bloodline. One of my favorites is that Mary was with child from Jesus at the time of the crucifixion, after the crucifixion she fled to Egypt where her child was born and her child was named Sarah. And then the two of them went off to Europe. In a

strange twist of logic, because Sarah was born in Egypt they have a feeling she is the source for the Black Madonna. This icon is really a painting of Mary the Mother of God.

Fr. Baima: So, the confusion in one legend leads to confusion in another.

Fr. Fuller: The logic of that particular one just escapes me. To be born in Egypt does not make a person black, especially if the parents were Jewish. The confusion gets really out there. Regarding the conspiracy, it goes something like this: obviously Mary Magdalene must have been really close to Christ and how could they have not fallen in love, and so that is where those legends started and they have always been rejected by the Church. Their rejection by the Church gives the conspiracy theorists what they need to claim a cover up.

Fr. Baima: But, these particular legends emerge hundreds of year after the first gospel accounts.

Fr. Fuller: The legends are much later than even the Gnostic Gospels. They really don't emerge until we are approaching the time of the Reformation.

Fr. Baima: So we are talking 1500-1600 years after the event in question. There is no historical evidence prior to that.

Fr. Fuller: None that I can find. There are places in the Gnostic Gospels, which say that Mary Magdalene kissed Jesus on the mouth. These texts were written in the 120's or 130's.

Fr. Baima: So that is 90-100 years after the events that they are writing about.

Fr. Fuller: That is the closest. None of them, as far as I can tell, actually say that Mary Magdalene married Christ or even had a child. The most they say is that Mary kissed him on the mouth. So, even if you take the source as it is, you don't arrive at the conclusion that Jesus married Mary Magdalene. Actually,

there is a greater legend from the early church that Mary Magdalene was betrothed to John the Evangelist. As this legend goes, John met Christ and decided to break off his marriage to Mary Magdalene. As a result, again according to the legend, it was because of that breakup she fell into a life of prostitution.

Fr. Baima: That must come with a later period. So, yet another confusion, another tale or legend.

Fr. Fuller: There are hundreds and thousands of these little legends out there which are just not accurate. The only thing we can say about Mary Magdalene is that she was this witness to the resurrection.

Fr. Baima: And clearly, Mary Magdalene was in the inner circle of Christ's followers. She had a prominent place in the community of disciples, and is a Saint of the Church. And, with that, we will have to end.

Thank you, Father Fuller, for joining me for *Speaking of Theology*. Thank you to our listeners as well. *Speaking of Theology* is a monthly program brought to you by the University of Saint Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary. If you would like to contact the program we are on the web speakingoftheology@usml.edu. Thank you for listening. I'm Father Tom Baima and this has been *Speaking of Theology*.

