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A HOMILY OF GREGORY THE GREAT AND MARY MAGDALENE

Mary Magdalene has attracted a great deal of modern myth-making, mostly from the USA, mostly in a feminist direction. A few weeks ago I discovered that the reputation of St Mary Magdalene as a penitent prostitute was supposedly the result of a decree by Pope Gregory the Great in 1591 (!) or 591, in homily 23 or 33.

This all sounded a bit loose to me, and the lack of a specific reference suggested that this might be hearsay. The matter is worth a little investigation.

Firstly the homily is number 33 of his *Homilies on the Gospels*, CPL 1711. The Latin text may be found in Gregory the Great, Homilia 33, in *Homiliarum in evangelia*, Lib. II, in the *Patrologia Latina* vol. 76, col. 1239A, which reprints the Maurist edition. This of course may easily be found online. There is an English translation, by Dom David Hurst, *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, in: *Cistercian Studies* 123 (1990), although I have not seen it.

But fortunately there is a website, the Patristic Bible Commentary site, where some kind gentleman has placed a complete English translation of the homily, [here](#). I will make so bold as to reproduce the whole thing in a moment. I suspect that it is the Hurst translation – it is certainly a little stiff at places.

Obviously a sermon is not a decree. The sermon itself is simply an ordinary piece of preaching, mainly concerned with the Pharisee who looked down upon her. No doubt it was much read in the Middle Ages, like so much of Gregory's work. I have not found a source that actually traces the development of her cult during that period, so I cannot say whether his words were really definitive,

Curiously it is never mentioned in most of the web sites that Gregory is mainly warning against Pharisaical behaviour.

None other than the Smithsonian Magazine in its 2006 article by James Carroll, "Who was Mary Magdalene" talks in these loaded terms:

Pope Gregory I (c. 540-604) was born an aristocrat and served as the prefect of the city of Rome. ... His pontificate marked a solidifying of discipline and thought, a time of reform and invention both. But it all occurred against the backdrop of the plague, a doom-laden circumstance in which the abjectly repentant Mary Magdalene, warding off the spiritual plague of damnation, could come into her own. With Gregory's help, she did.

Known as Gregory the Great, he remains one of the most influential figures ever to serve as pope, and in a famous series of sermons on Mary Magdalene, given in Rome in about the year 591, he put the seal on what until then had been a common but unsanctioned reading of her story. With that, Mary's conflicted image was, in the words of Susan Haskins, author of *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, "finally settled...for nearly fourteen hundred years."

It all went back to those Gospel texts. Cutting through the exegetes' careful distinctions—the various Marys, the sinful women—that had made a bald combining of the figures difficult to sustain, Gregory, standing on his own authority, offered his decoding of the relevant Gospel texts.

Those who rewrite history themselves will rarely hesitate to ascribe the same vice to those that they dislike.

After all that nonsense, let us instead hear what Gregory actually preached.

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HOMILY 33

Delivered to the congregation in the basilica of St. Clement, [something unintelligible about September]^[1]

The reading from the holy gospel of St Luke, 7:36-50.

At that time, a Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him. Jesus entered the house of the Pharisee and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman who was a sinner in the city, having heard that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee, brought an alabaster vase full of perfume, and standing behind him at her feet, she he began to water them with his tears and to wipe them with the hair of his head; and they kissed them and spread perfume.

Seeing this, the Pharisee who had invited him said to himself: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what species is the woman who touches him, and that it is a sinner." But taking Jesus said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Speak, Master," said the latter. "A creditor had two debtors. One owed five hundred, the other fifty. Since they did not have enough to pay their debts, he did not care about them. Which one, then, will love him more? "Simon answered," He, I think, to whom he has blessed more. "And Jesus said to him," You have judged well."

And turning to the woman, "Do you see this woman? he said to Simon. I entered your house, and you did not pour water on my feet; she, on the contrary, watered my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss; she, on the contrary, since she came in, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not pour oil on my head; she, on the contrary, has spread perfume on my feet. Because of that, I tell you, her many sins are given her because she loved so much. But he who is given less loves less. "Then he said to the woman," Your sins are given to you. "And those who were at table with him began to say in themselves," What is this who even remits sins? "But he said to the woman," Your faith has saved you! Go in peace."

1. When I think of Mary's repentance, I feel more like crying than saying something. Indeed, what heart, even if it were of stone, would not be moved by the example of penance that the tears of this sinner give us? She considered what she had done, and did not want to limit what she was going to do. Here she is introduced among the guests: she comes uninvited, and at the feast, she offers her tears [in show]. Learn what pain this woman is burning, she who does not blush to cry even in the middle of a feast.

The one that Luke calls a sinner, and that John names Mary (see John 11: 2), we believe that she is that Mary of whom, according to Mark, the Lord has cast out seven demons (cf Mk 16: 9). And what are these seven demons, if not the universality of all vices? Since seven days suffice to embrace the whole of time, the number seven rightly represents universality.

Mary had seven demons in her, for she was full of all vices. But now, having seen the stains that dishonored her, she ran to wash herself at the source of mercy, without blushing in the presence of the guests. So great was her shame inside that she could not see anything outside to blush.

What must we admire most, my brothers: Mary who comes, or the Lord who welcomes him? Do I have to say that he welcomes her, or that he attracts her? I will say even better: he attracts and welcomes him, for it is the very person who draws him from within by his mercy and welcomes him out of his sweetness.

But let us now see, through the text of the Holy Gospel, the very order it observes to come to its cure.

2. “She brought an alabaster vase full of perfume, and standing behind Jesus at her feet, she began to water them with her tears and to wipe them with the hair of her head; and they kissed them, and sprinkled them with perfume. “It is very evident, my brethren, that this woman, formerly addicted to forbidden deeds, had used perfume to give her flesh a pleasant odor. What she had shamefully granted to herself, she now offered to God in a manner worthy of praise. She had desired the things of the earth by her eyes, but now mortifying them with penance, she was crying. She had emphasized the beauty of her hair to adorn her face, but she was now using it to wipe away her tears. Her mouth had uttered words of pride, but now, kissing the feet of the Lord, she was staring at that mouth in the footsteps of her Redeemer. Thus, all that she had in it of attractions to charm, she found there material to sacrifice. She turned her crimes into so many virtues, that all that in her had despised God in sin was put to the service of God in penance.

3. However, at the sight of such actions, the Pharisee conceives contempt, and he not only blames the sinner woman who comes, but also the Lord who welcomes him, saying to himself: “If this man were prophet, he would know who and what species is the woman who touches him, and that he is a sinner.” See this Pharisee, with this true pride and false justice in him: he blames the sick person for his illness and the Doctor of his care, while he himself is ill, without knowing it, of the wound of the child. The Doctor was there between two patients. But one of these sick, feverish, kept full consciousness, while the other, also a fever in his flesh, had lost consciousness in his mind. The woman was crying what she had done; the Pharisee, swollen with his false justice, made his disease even more virulent. In his illness, he had also lost consciousness, he who did not even know that he was far from health.

But a groan comes here to force us to cast our eyes on certain bishops: does it happen by chance that they have, in the exercise of their priestly functions, performed some externally good, even insignificant, action, and here they are? who look down upon their flock with contempt, to disdain all the sinners who meet in the people, to refuse to sympathize with those who confess their faults to them, and finally, like the Pharisee, not to be touched by the sinful woman. For if this woman had come to the feet of the Pharisee, he would certainly have pushed her away from her shoe for her to go away. He would have thought [if not] to defile himself with the sin of others. But because he was not filled with true justice, he was sick from the injury of others. Therefore, when we see sinners, their misfortune must always make us cry first about ourselves, since we may have fallen into similar faults, or if we have not already fallen we could fall there.

And if the severity of the superior must always pursue vices in the name of discipline, we must, however, observe that we must be severe for vices, but compassionate for nature. If it is indeed necessary to punish the sinner, we must watch over the formation of the neighbor.

Now, as soon as our neighbor punishes himself for his past deeds, he is no longer a sinner: united to the justice of God, he stands up against himself and corrects in himself what this the same justice finds it reprehensible.

4. Now let us listen to the judgment that will confound this Pharisee full of pride and arrogance. The Lord retorts to him the parable of the two debtors, one of which owes less and the other more; he asks him which of the two debtors is going to love more than the one who has handed over their debt to them both. To which the Pharisee responds at once: "He loves more, to whom we forgive the most." It must be noted here that when the Pharisee provides by his own judgment what will confuse him, he acts like the fool who brings the rope for the link. The Lord then enumerates to him the good deeds of the sinner and her bad deeds just wrong: "I entered your house, and you did not pour water on my feet; she, on the contrary, watered my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss; she, on the contrary, since she came in, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not pour oil on my head; it, on the contrary, has sprinkled perfume on my feet. "To this enumeration, the Lord adds a sentence:" Because of this, I tell you, her numerous sins are given to her, because she loved very much. What do we think is love, my brothers, if not a fire? And the fault, if not rust? This is why the Lord declares, "His many sins are given to him, because he loved very much." It is as if he clearly said, "She has completely consumed in her the rust of sin, because that it is all burning with the fire of love. "For the rust of sin is all the better consumed as the heart of the sinner burns with the great fire of charity.

Here is healed the one who had come to suffer from her Physician; but others are suffering because of his healing. The guests who ate with the Lord were indeed indignant and said to themselves, "Who is this, who forgives even sins?" But the heavenly Doctor does not despise the sick even though he sees their condition worsening on the occasion of his care.

As for the one he healed, he strengthened it by this kindly judgment: "Your faith has saved you! Go in peace. "Faith indeed saved her, since she did not doubt that she could get what she wanted. But she held the certainty of her hope of him to whom hope made her ask for salvation. She receives the order to go in peace, so as to no longer deviate from the road of truth in a path of scandal. It is in this sense that Zechariah says, "To direct our steps on the path of peace" (Lk 1, 79). For we are leading our steps on the path of peace when the path followed by our actions does not take us away from the grace of our Creator.

5. We have, dear brothers, traveled this gospel following the historical course of events; we will now, if you please, examine it in its symbolic sense. What is the Pharisee who presumes his false justice, if not the Jewish people? And what of the sinful woman who throws herself at the feet of the Lord crying, if not the converted pagans? She came with her alabaster vase, she spread the perfume, she stood behind the Lord, at her feet, watered them with her tears and wiped her hair, and those same feet she was watering and wiped, she never stopped kissing them. It is therefore very well that this woman represents us, so long as we return with all our heart to the Lord after having sinned and that we imitate the tears of his penance. As for perfume, what does it express, if not the smell of a good reputation? Hence the word of Paul: "We are in every place for God the good odor of Christ" (2 Cor 2: 15). If, therefore, we do good works, which imbue the Church with a good odor by making it speak good, what are we doing but pouring perfume on the body of the Lord?

The woman stands near the feet of Jesus. We stood against the feet of the Lord when we opposed His ways by the sins where we dwelt. But if, after these sins, we operate a true conversion, we stand back from his feet, since we follow in the footsteps of the man we had fought.

The woman sprinkles Jesus' feet with her tears: this is what we also do in truth if a feeling of compassion inclines us to all members of the Lord, whoever they may be, if we sympathize with the tribulations endured by his saints and if we make ours their sadness.

The woman wipes her hair off the feet she has watered. But the hair is for the body a superfluous superfluity. And what better image to find of an excessive possession of the things of the earth than the hair, which superabundates far beyond what is necessary and which is cut without even being felt?

We therefore wipe the Lord's feet with our hair, when to his saints, to whom charity makes us compassionate, we also show pity through our superfluity, so that if our spirit suffers compassion for them, our hand also shows by his generosity the suffering we experience. For he sprinkles the feet of the Redeemer with his tears, but does not wipe them with his hair, the one who, while sympathizing with the grief of his relatives, does not show them his pity by means of his superfluity. He weeps, but does not wipe [the feet of the Lord], the one who gives [to his neighbor] words of compassion for his suffering, but without diminishing the intensity of this suffering by providing for what [him] lack.

The woman kisses the feet that she wipes: that is what we do too fully if we show our eagerness to love those whom we support with our largesse, for fear, if not, that the necessity of the next it does not seem heavy to us, that the indigence to which we are endowed becomes a burden for us, and that at the moment when our hand furnishes what is necessary, our soul begins to become numbed away from love.

6. The feet can also symbolize the mystery of the Incarnation, through which God touched the earth by assuming our flesh: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). We therefore kiss the feet of the Redeemer when we love with all our heart the mystery of his Incarnation. We spread perfume on his feet when we preach the power of his humanity with all the good that the Holy Scripture says.

The Pharisee sees the woman do this and is jealous of it because because of the malice that dwells in it, the Jewish people are eaten up with envy, observing that the Gentiles preach [the true] God. But our Redeemer enumerates the acts of this woman, as he could do the good deeds of the Gentiles, so that the Jewish people will recognize the evil where it lies. Through the reprobate Pharisee, it is, as we have said, the incredulous Jewish people who are represented.

"I came into your house, and you did not pour water on my feet; she, on the contrary, has watered my feet with her tears. "If the water is for us something external, the tears are inside us; Thus, even his external goods, the unfaithful Jewish people never granted them to the Lord, whereas the converted pagans did not content themselves with sacrificing their property to him, but even shed their blood for him.

"You did not give me a kiss; she, on the contrary, since she came in, has not stopped kissing my feet. "The kiss is a sign of love. And the unfaithful Jewish people did not give God a kiss, since he did not want to love for charity the one he served for fear. On the contrary, the heathen, called to salvation, never stop kissing the feet of their Redeemer, for they sigh with love for him continually. What makes the wife of the Song of Songs say about his Redeemer: "Let him kiss me with a kiss from his mouth." (Ct 1, 2). It is right that the wife desires the kiss of her Redeemer when she prepares to obey him for love.

"Thou hast not sprinkled oil on my head." If we consider that the feet of the Lord represent the mystery of His Incarnation, His head is an appropriate symbol of His divinity. Hence the

word of Paul: "The head of Christ is God."

(1 Cor 11: 3). It is indeed in God and not in themselves, mere humans, that the Jews profess to believe. But the Lord said to the Pharisee, "You have not sprinkled oil on my head," because the Jewish people have neglected to preach by worthy praise the very power of the divinity in which they pledged themselves to believe. . "She, on the contrary, poured perfume on my feet," since by their faith in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Lord, the Gentiles preached by very high praise even that which he had from below.

Our Redeemer concludes his enumeration of good deeds when he adds this sentence: "Because of this, I tell you, his many sins are given to him, because she loved very much." It is as if he said clearly: "Even though the thing to be burnt is very tough, the fire of love is overflowing, yet it consumes even that which is tough."

7. It is a pleasure to consider in all this so much merciful goodness. In what esteem must the Truth hold the works of this sinful but penitent woman, to enumerate them to her adversary with such a luxury of precision! The Lord was at the table of the Pharisee, but reveled in the nourishment of the soul with the penitent woman. At the Pharisee's, he took an outdoor food, but at the sinner's wife and nevertheless converted, an inner food. That is why the holy Church, who seeks her Lord in the form of the little deer, asks her in the Song of Songs: "Tell me, O my love, where you feed, where you rest at noon. "(Ct 1, 7). The Lord is called the little deer, who, by virtue of the flesh he has assumed, is the son of the ancient Fathers. At noon, the heat of the heat wave is more hot, and the little fawn looks for a shady place, sheltered from heat-inflamed attacks. The Lord therefore rests in hearts that are neither burned by the love of the present century, nor consumed by the desires of the flesh, nor parched with anxiety by the burning of the lusts of this world. Thus Mary heard herself declare: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35). If the little way looks for a shady place to graze at noon, it is because the Lord chooses to be there grazed souls tempered by the shadow of grace, who are no longer burned by the fire of bodily desires. The penitent woman, therefore, nourished the Lord within, with a more substantial nourishment than that provided by the Pharisee outside: as a little way, our Redeemer, moving away from the carnal burning, came to take refuge in it. the soul of this sinner, who, after having burned fire with vices, had found the freshness in the shadow of penance.

8. Let us measure the immense goodness which impels him not only to admit the sinner to him, but also to offer him his feet to touch. Consider the grace of the God of mercy, and condemn the multitude of our faults. Here we sin: He sees it and supports it. Here we resist him: he tolerates it and continues none the less in his goodness to call us every day by his Gospel. It only requires our confession of a pure heart, and it forgives all that we have done wrong. He softens for us the severity of the Law by His mercy as Redeemer. Was it not written in this Law: if anyone does this or that, he will die punished with death; if someone does this or that thing, they will stone it (see Lv 20)? Our Creator and Redeemer having appeared in the flesh, it is no longer the punishment, but the life which he promises to the confession of sins: he welcomes the woman who confessed her wounds, and sends her healed. He therefore inflects the hardness of the Law in the sense of mercy: those whom the Law condemns in his justice, he himself delivers them into his mercy.

So it is written very aptly in the Law: "As the hands of Moses were heavy, having taken a stone, they put it under him. He sat on it, and at the same time Aaron and Hur supported his hands "(Ex 17:12). Moses sat on a stone when the Law came to rest in the Church. But this same law was heavy, because it did not bear sinners with mercy, but struck them with great

severity. But the name of Aaron means "mountain of strength", and that of Hur, "fire." What, then, does this mountain of strength symbolize, save our Redeemer, of whom it is said by the prophet, "It shall come to pass at the end of days, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established on the top of the mountains." (Is 2, 2). And what is the fire, if not the Holy Spirit, whose Redeemer declares: "I came to cast fire on the earth" (Lk 12:49). Thus, Aaron and Hur support the heavy hands of Moses and make them, therefore, lighter, since the Mediator between God and men, coming with the fire of the Holy Spirit, has shown that if the heavy commandments of the Law could not be worn as long as they were observed according to the flesh, they became tolerable to us when we understood them in the spiritual sense. For he made Moses' hands light, so to speak, by changing the weight of the commandments of the law into a force of confession. To us who use this strength, he promises mercy when he says through the prophet, "I do not want the death of the sinner, but to convert and live" (Ezek 33:11).

He still says on this subject to each of our sinful souls, represented by Judea: "If a man has left his wife and that this one, once part, became the wife of another, [the first man] will he come back to her again? Will not this woman have been profaned and defiled? But you, you indulged in debauchery with many lovers! However, return to me, says the Lord "(Jer 3: 1). See this parable of the shameless woman that God has given us. He shows us that her husband can not take her back after her disorders. But he exceeds by his mercy the very parable that he has proposed to us, since while saying that the woman who has indulged in debauchery can not be taken back at all, he is still waiting to take back the soul that has delivered to debauchery. Consider, my brethren, the excess of this goodness: he says that one can not do such a thing, and yet shows oneself ready to accomplish it, against the normal course of things. See how he calls the very people whose defilement he denounces, and seeks to embrace the very ones he complains of having been abandoned.

Let no one lose the moment favorable to such mercy. Let no one reject the remedies offered by divine goodness. Behold, the benevolent love of God invites us to return when we turn away, and prepare the bosom of his goodness for our return. Let each one measure what debt he owes, when God waits for him without being exasperated at being disdained. Whoever refused to persevere, let him come back. The one who has neglected to stand, that he gets up at least after his fall. Our Creator makes us seize the immense love with which he is waiting for us, when he says through the mouth of the prophet: "I paid attention and listened: no one speaks as it should; there is none who refines his thoughts in his heart and says, 'What have I done there?' "(Jer 8: 6). We should never have had perverse thoughts; but since we did not want to have righteous thoughts, here is God still waiting, to allow us to amend our thoughts. See that bosom of kindness so full of tenderness, and consider what a lap of mercy is open to you: those who had perverse thoughts were lost to God, but he searches for them when their thoughts turn to good.

So bring back the eyes of your mind on you, dear brothers, yes, on you, and propose to imitate the example of this penitent sinner. Cry all the faults you remember to have committed both in your adolescence and in your youth; wash by your tears the stains of your manners and works. Let us now love the feet of our Redeemer, whom we have despised by sinning. Behold, as we have said, the bosom of heavenly mercy opens to receive us without contempt for our corrupt life. By conceiving of horror for our defilements, we agree with inner purity. The Lord embraces us with tenderness when we return to him, because he can no longer judge the life of sinners unworthy of him, since it is washed by tears, in Christ Jesus our Lord, who, being God lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

1. ^[1]Lit. feria sexta Quatuor temporum Septembris↵
