

MARY MAGDALEN, FRANCISCAN IDEAL : A THEOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS OF THE FRESCOES IN THE MAGDALEN CHAPEL  
IN THE BASILICA OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Stefanie B. (Duffy) Lott.

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*Mary Magdalen, Franciscan Ideal:  
A Theological Analysis of the Frescoes  
in the Magdalen Chapel  
in the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi*

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## **Abstract**

In the small town of Assisi in Italy, there is a chapel dedicated to Mary Magdalen. This well known figure from the New Testament Gospels is an anomaly. To many she is the prostitute turned disciple: to others she is a key witness to the resurrection. The frescoes show this Magdalen, but they also show her in strange scenes not found in the Bible.

The Gospels tell us that Mary Magdalen was with Jesus in his ministry, at the crucifixion and at the resurrection. Early church fathers picked up on this and linked her with other unnamed women in the Gospels to develop an ideal model of discipleship. From there, legends developed this conflated Magdalen into the embodiment of chastity, penitence and devotion. As such, she became the focus of one of the greatest cult followings of the Middle Ages and her relics were at the heart of the fourth most visited pilgrimage site in Christendom.

In the thirteenth century, a young man, Francis of Assisi helped to revolutionise and revive the life of the Church by his personal example of poverty, benevolence and pure devotion; virtues embodied by the Magdalen. It is then understandable that a chapel dedicated to her should be found in the basilica built to honour Francis.

However, the reasons behind the chapel's existence and location also have a great deal to do with the power and influence of the secular (Angevin) and religious establishment of the time as well as the controversies burgeoning within the Franciscan Order including the roles of second order women and the influence of the two factions of Franciscanism, Spirituals and Conventuals.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that the Magdalen chapel, a means of theological and political dogma, was also a very tangible and real visual sermon to the masses of pilgrims who flocked to visit the shrine of Francis. This project is an attempt to uncover the identity of the woman in and the meaning of the Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Church of the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi.

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## Introduction

*No other biblical figure—including Judas, and perhaps even Jesus—has had such a vivid and bizarre post biblical life in the human imagination, in legend and in art.”<sup>1</sup>*

In his book, *Tradition & Imagination*, David Brown begins his penultimate chapter with the statement “[s]o used are theologians to engaging with the written word that it is all too easy for them to forget that for most of Christian history, with the great mass of the population illiterate, most Christians’ primary experience of their faith will have visual...” Brown goes on to explain that “the access of the written word remained a privilege of the few, and so, though sermons in the vernacular no doubt played their part, it was the visual which had the decisive role.”<sup>2</sup> The focus of this dissertation is to explore how visual depictions of one biblical figure, Mary Magdalen, in a chapel nestled off of the nave of the Lower Church, or the church that pilgrims visited, in the great basilica in Assisi did just this. In pursuit of our goal we will consider the development of the figure of Mary Magdalen in Christian tradition, with specific reference to the frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Church of the Basilica of St Francis at Assisi. Mary Magdalen is one of the most well known figures of the bible, despite only being mentioned a handful of times. This might give one pause to consider that, while most of us know the name of Mary Magdalen and most of us have a fairly well constructed conception of Mary Magdalen, is the figure of our imagination, the authentic Magdalen?

A recent trend in contemporary media is to depict Mary Magdalen as a foil to the claims of traditional Christianity. In recent fictional representations, such as *The DaVinci Code* (novel)<sup>3</sup> and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (novel and film)<sup>4</sup>, she is featured as a harlot who falls in love with Jesus who, in turn, falls romantically in love with her. While this characterisation is nothing new (the same kind of story is offered in the second century Gnostic Gospels<sup>5</sup>), it is an aberration of what appears in the

<sup>1</sup> Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalen: Legends, Apocrypha and the Christian Testament* (New York, London: Continuum, 2002), 68.

<sup>2</sup> David Brown, *Tradition & Imagination: Revelation & Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Nikos Kazantzakes, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, (Faber and Faber, 2001); *The Last Temptation of Christ*, dir. Martin Scorsese (Hollywood: Universal Studios, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977).

Gospel narratives. And indeed this recent fictional portrayal has caused many to question, even dismiss the claims of biblical Christianity based on the imaginative retelling of a 2,000 year-old story.

For centuries Mary Magdalen was seen as the embodiment of chastity, penitence and asexual devotion and as such came to be the focus of one of the greatest cult followings of the Middle Ages. The church which claimed to house her relics became the fourth most visited pilgrimage site in Christendom. And she was honoured as one of only two women who were given a feast day on which the credo was read (the Virgin Mary was the other).<sup>6</sup> The thirteenth century hagiographic work, *The Golden Legend*, has pages of legends about her and from the fourteenth century she has been widely depicted in fresco, sculpture and stained glass windows throughout Europe indicating that her popularity remained constant. It might seem odd that so much was made out of a woman so infrequently mentioned in the Gospel narratives and not at all in the rest of the New Testament writings. Yet, it was precisely this relative anonymity combined with her presence at key points in Jesus' ministry that enabled the mediaeval imagination to generate such a dynamic hagiography of Mary Magdalen.

This dissertation is neither inspired by, nor intends to reclaim, the authentic Mary Magdalen from contemporary trends; rather it has come out of curiosity of paintings created more than 600 years ago in a small chapel in Assisi. The questions that prompted this study were: who is that woman in red? What is this chapel saying about her? Do these frescoes say anything about the theology and culture of the time? To uncover the identity of this Mary Magdalen of the Assisi chapel we shall begin by unpacking the origins and development of the figure of Mary Magdalen in the early Christian European tradition. Our task will start with the Gospel texts, including those that explicitly name Mary Magdalen and those traditionally associated with her as found in the writings of early church fathers through to Gregory the Great. Each of the writings of the church fathers that we will examine confuse, conflate and re-appropriate other unnamed women from the Gospel narratives into the persona of 'the Magdalen.' In our contemporary view, this confusion and conflation may seem a gross injustice to the actual person of Mary Magdalen. Feminist scholars have argued

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Ludwig Jansen, "Maria Magdalena: Apostolorum Apostola," *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1998), 75 (henceforth *MMAA*).

that the injustices have spread from Mary Magdalen to women in general.<sup>7</sup> However, we are reminded by an early Magdalen scholar, Helen Garth, that since the mediaeval mind did not view facts as particularly relevant in the exhortative or hagiographic tradition, the conflation may not have been a harmful thing.<sup>8</sup> David Brown concurs pointing out that in the case of Mary Magdalen, the conflation by Gregory the Great actually catapulted her into the centre of cult worship and adoration for much of the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

In chapter two we deal specifically with the emergent legends and cult of the Magdalen in the later mediaeval period.<sup>10</sup> We consider how a woman who lived in late Antique Jerusalem made her way to Gaul and, consequently converted all of what is modern-day France. We trace the legendary discovery of the Magdalen's relics to her shrine in Vézelay which became the fourth most important pilgrimage destination in Christendom for nearly two centuries. Finally, we see how the demise of the cult at Vézelay figured into a second 'discovery' of the Magdalen's relics in Provence by a young Angevin prince and how she was then re-appropriated as the patron saint of the Angevin empire thus establishing the dynasty in Italy.

In chapter three, we turn to consider the context of the Magdalen Chapel in the basilica at Assisi and in doing so we include the artistic, religious and political background surrounding the chapel. We begin by exploring the Renaissance and Mendicant revolutions of the trecento; the former attributed to Giotto di Bondone, the latter due largely to Francis of Assisi. Both Giotto and Francis were instrumental in revolutionising the way those in the mediaeval world experienced life. For example, as Francis sought to love the physical world that God created, Giotto, largely influenced by Francis, sought to paint this physical world realistically. One sought to find the true dimension of each of God's creatures and the other painted the world in dimension and truth. Francis brought the virtues of penitence and poverty to Europe:

<sup>7</sup> Schaberg; Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell, *The Women around Jesus: Reflections on Authentic Personhood*, trans. John Bowden, First British ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1982); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Helen Meredith Garth, *Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1950), 9. Many of the early church fathers were dedicated apologetics and concerned with the factual reliability and authenticity of the Gospel and doctrinal claims regarding the faith. The fathers did not seem to think that those figures not relevant to the particular apologetic of their focus did not require the same rigorous treatment as figures involved in doctrinal issues. By the time Gregory the Great became Pope, the need for precise apologetics paled in favour of exhortative preaching.

<sup>9</sup> David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36.

<sup>10</sup> I will often use the term "the Magdalen" to differentiate the conflated, cult figure of Mary Magdalen, from the Mary Magdalen of the Gospel accounts.

Giotto brought weight, perspective and realism to art. Both men were, in part, responsible for beckoning Europe out of the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. The images on the wall of the chapel regardless of whose hand painted them are certainly indebted to Giotto's breakthrough in realism in painting.<sup>11</sup> These frescoes display compelling stories which both helped to establish what was to become the canon of Magdalen figurative painting and also to show the remarkable innovation in painting, including the technically mediocre but conceptually ingenious first-known narrative painting, *Voyage to Marseilles*. The basilica in which our chapel is housed is referred to as the cradle of the Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> We can safely say that our chapel is then situated in the early canon of Renaissance paintings.

Another aspect that influenced the Magdalen Chapel is the struggle and scheming for power that was alive and well in the midst of this re-birth of conscience and culture. Political, Church and Franciscan leaders all faced battles within their own domains as well as with one another. This chapter brings together the agendas of all three of these factions and suggests the patron of the Magdalen Chapel, Teobaldo Pontano, was a touch point for this intersection for when Pontano came to Assisi as Bishop after serving twelve years in Naples near the centre of the Angevin kings. This move threw him into the heart of Franciscan quarrels between Conventuals and Spirituals at the height of the Inquisition in Italy. The chapel images not only provide interesting artistic appeal, but they also offer a good look at Pontano's politics and diplomatic savvy.

In our final chapter, we turn to the frescoes themselves to analysis and understand the meanings within the images of the Magdalen Chapel. We begin by looking at the physical context of the chapel including the basilica's Upper and Lower Church, specifically the images on the immediate exterior of the chapel. In the chapel itself, we will focus on the technical aspects of one of the main frescoes, before we fully engage with the content and theological import of each of the seven main frescoes, the two frescoes of the patron, and two additional frescoes on the first register. To do so, we will consider the patron's Angevin loyalties, church authority

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<sup>11</sup> Most Italian scholars attribute the chapel to Giotto and his workshop while healthy skepticism reigns in scholarships outside of Italy. See Luciano Bellosi, *Giotto at Assisi* (Assisi: DACA Publication, 1989); Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: The Phaidon Press, 1952); Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bruce Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting 1280-1375* (New York, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> Alastair Smart, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 3.

and the elements favouring the Conventuals over that of the Spirituals (this despite the fact that Spirituals regularly looked to the Magdalen as a model of their beliefs including those on which the intra-Order controversy rested; the privilege of *usus pauper*).

In addition, we see how the chapel promotes a particular lifestyle for women seeking a holy life including fairly universal themes of the Church, those of devotion and penitence, as well as more particular themes to religious women, those of submission to Church authority, enclaustration and silence. We shall see that these themes emerge from come from intra-Order troubles with mystical teaching of women that heavily influenced Franciscan friars. As such, the content of the frescoes prescribe a call for women involved in mystical contemplation to follow in the footsteps of Mary Magdalen (consequently Mary of Egypt and Margaret of Cortona) and remain cloistered and silent, wholly dependant on God for provisions and the Bishop for entry into heaven.

The Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Church at Assisi is a quiet, harmonious world. While perhaps falling short of the master skill of many of the other frescoes of the larger project of the basilica, these images work together to tell us the story of the Magdalen as developed over centuries. They also work together to instruct the viewer on Franciscan piety and acceptable ways of living and being within the Franciscan world. A person who walked into the chapel today may only be able to appreciate the artistry, and wonder at the strange images and figures. But for the mediaeval world, a world so tuned to a visual conception of the world, there is a whole sermon, a whole way of life on these walls. Now, let us turn to our starting point to find out how the name of Mary Magdalen became associated with these images of the red-cloaked, golden haired penitent.

## Chapter I. Origins and development of the legend of Mary Magdalen

### The Magdalen, a Garden and This

By Kathleen O'Toole

She who is known by myth and association  
as sinful, penitent, voluptuous perhaps...  
but faithful to the last and then beyond.

A disciple for sure, confused often with Mary,  
sister of Lazarus, or the woman caught  
in adultery, or she who angered the men

by anointing Jesus with expensive oils.  
She was the one from whom he cast out seven  
demons—she's named in that account.

Strip all else away and we know only  
that she was grateful, that she found her way  
to the cross, and that she returned

to the tomb, to the garden nearby, and there,  
weeping at her loss, was recognized,  
became known in the tender invocation

of her name. *Mary*: breathed by one  
whom she mistook for the gardener, he  
who in an instant brought her back to herself—

gave her in two syllables a life beloved,  
gave me the only sure thing I'll believe  
of heaven, that if it be, it will consist

in this: the one unmistakable  
rendering of your name.<sup>13</sup>

## 1. Mary Magdalen and the Gospels

### 1.1. Distinguishing between figures

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the woman seen throughout the images of the Magdalen Chapel in Assisi. In reading the New Testament, we can recognise the scene entitled *Noli me Tangere* from John 20, but the other frescoes depict the same woman in other scenes not found in the Gospels. To begin we will look at the Gospel accounts involving a woman called Mary of Magdala or Mary Magdalen, and

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<sup>13</sup> Kathleen O'Toole, "The Magdalen, a Garden and This" *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, Vol 186 No 11 (1 April 2002).

then we will explore those anonymous women who were eventually conflated into the composite persona of Mary Magdalen. We can first identify Mary of Magdala (in the chronology of the life of Jesus within the four Gospels taken as a whole) in Luke 8:1–3:

<sup>1</sup>Soon afterwards, He [Jesus] began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup>and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalen) from whom seven demons had come out; <sup>3</sup>Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Here a woman named Mary is identified with the town Magdala which becomes her surname and which, along with the mention that she had been healed of seven demons,<sup>14</sup> differentiates her from any other women named Mary in the Gospel narratives.

Matthew, Mark and John do not mention Mary Magdalen until the crucifixion and then she is in the company of Mary, the mother of James and Joses, the mother of Zebedee's sons (Matthew 27:56), Salome (Mark 15:40), and Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25). And in Matthew and Mark she is named as a witness to Jesus death, deposition, and burial in the tomb.<sup>15</sup> Mary Magdalen is perhaps most identified with the accounts of the resurrection since all four Gospels place her there as a witness and so a review of these accounts in each of the Gospel narratives is appropriate.

In Matthew's resurrection scene (28:1–10), Mary Magdalen and "the other Mary" approach the tomb and an earthquake causes the stone to roll away from the entrance. Instead of seeing the wrapped body of Jesus as they expected, the two women see a dazzling angel inside who tells them that Jesus has risen (28:5–6). The angel promises the women they will see Jesus in Galilee (28:7), but first, they are to run back and tell the disciples what has happened. However, before they go, Jesus appears to them saying: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (28:10).

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 35. He offers several perspectives on this and concludes that whether her demons were from sexual sin or from psychological trauma as Carla Ricci in *Mary Magdalene and Many Others* (London: Burns & Oates, 1994), 135–137, suggests, the biblical text leaves the point ambiguous.

<sup>15</sup> Both of these accounts include Mary Magdalen along with "the other Mary the mother of Joses," but Mary, the mother of Jesus is not mentioned in either Matthew or Mark (Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47).

Mark's account differs slightly. According to Mark, Mary Magdalen and Mary, the mother of James, are joined by Salome. Just after sunrise, the three women go to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. They arrive to find the stone rolled away and an angel who tells them that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee. Like Matthew, Mark's angel urges them to go tell Peter and the disciples, but they are too afraid to say anything (Mark 16:1–5). In verses 9–20, somewhat controversial verses because they do not appear in the most reliable early manuscripts, Mark adds to his narrative of the morning's events. In these verses, Jesus appears "first to Mary Magdalen, out of whom he had driven seven demons," and she, in turn, runs to tell the disciples who do not believe her.

Luke's account (23:1–12) is the only one who does not specifically name Mary Magdalen at the tomb of the resurrection. Instead he tells of "women" who take spices to prepare the tomb on the first day of the week (23:1–2). When they get there, the tombstone is rolled away and two angels appear asking: "Why do you look for the living among the dead" (23:5)? The frightened women return to the disciples and only then are named as "Mary Magdalen, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them" (23:10). As in Mark, the men doubt the women's story, though Peter runs to the tomb to see for himself (23:11–12).

In Chapter 20 of John, the last of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, Mary Magdalen is singled out as having a special role in the resurrection narrative. In it, John describes Mary as the lone visitor at the tomb, under cover of the morning darkness (20:1). She arrives to find the tomb open and empty, and terrified, she returns to tell the others that someone has taken Jesus' body (20:2). The disciples go to see the empty tomb for themselves, then leave Mary there to grieve alone. So, it is to her alone that Jesus appears, and John then lingers over every detail of the extraordinary meeting.

Altogether, Mary Magdalen is only named thirteen times in the New Testament, and all but one, are at pivotal times of the Gospel story. From this handful of mentions we can conclude a number of things about Mary Magdalen. For example, she was healed of seven demons, had the freedom and means to help support Jesus' ministry, and was in the company of other significant women around Jesus, including his mother. We can also conclude that she was a devoted enough follower to remain with him through the horrific events of the crucifixion and attend him to the tomb, even while the (male) disciples fled in fear. Her devotion to Jesus was so great, that

she returned at least once within the next 48 hours to prepare him for burial. Upon her return, she discovered that Jesus' body was gone and instead she met with an angel who told her that Jesus was raised and she would see him in Galilee. The angel then sends her off to give the 'good news' to the disciples. But before she can carry out this mission, she encounters Jesus, who was very much alive. First, she mistakes him for the gardener, but when she recognises him, and he sends her to tell the others that his is alive.

While Peter and the other disciples were too afraid to go to the tomb, Mary Magdalen was not. Whereas the disciples doubt her word, Jesus and the angel(s) trust her with the words that would become Christendom's most important message. Whether it was her character, her devotion, her integrity, or something else entirely, Jesus chose to appear to her first, which seems to indicate that she was somehow special. It also establishes a significant and intimate link between Jesus and this relatively obscure woman called Mary Magdalen.

## 1.2. John: methods and means

It is obvious that each Gospel writer gives different accounts of Mary Magdalen at the resurrection scene, and it is equally obvious that John gives Mary Magdalen the most play. John differs from the Synoptics in the following ways: 1) Mary Magdalen is alone in her discovery of the empty tomb (20:1); 2) Mary Magdalen is the first to tell the male disciples the tomb is empty (20:2); 3) after the male disciples leave the empty tomb, Mary alone remains behind (20:10); 4) Mary sees Jesus and mistakes him for the gardener (20:10); 5) Jesus calls Mary by name and after which she recognises him and calls him Rabboni (20:15); 6) Jesus and Mary then have a conversation (20:15–16);<sup>16</sup> 7) Mary then reaches for Jesus, but he tells her not to hold on to him for he must return to his Father (20:17); 8) finally, Jesus sends Mary Magdalen back to tell the disciples she has witnessed his resurrection (20:18).

The differences seen here in John may appear to conflict with the accounts from the other Gospels which do not include most of this narrative. One may ask how we can accept seemingly conflicting versions of the resurrection scene as true if they vary in such significant ways. And why does John write so much more about Mary

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<sup>16</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, Revised Edition*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1995), 730. He argues that this conversation is a key factor in convincing those in the early church that the event actually occurred.

Magdalen? CK Barrett, in his classic work on the Gospel of John, offers an explanation for this: "... that the oldest traditions of the resurrection were probably richer and more varied than those which have come down to us, and once more it is quite possible that John is using traditional materials, but presenting it in his own way. There is no doubt that the present passage shows dramatic writing of great skill and individuality."<sup>17</sup> A similar perspective is given by Leon Morris who says that John is simply telling the resurrection in his own way, leaving out some stories the others tell and telling a different set of stories that are "peculiar to himself."<sup>18</sup> Neither of these Johanine scholars seems bothered by the differences between the four Gospel resurrection narratives. Instead they see John's differences to be offering a richer more comprehensive perspective of the event adding to the fullness of the story rather than contradicting the other accounts.

Another Johanine scholar, Craig Keener, offers another insight into John's resurrection narrative, that of the historical reliability of the work. "The Fourth Gospel's genre invites us to investigate for the reliability of its historical claims, to whatever degree such an investigation is possible."<sup>19</sup> Keener does this by looking at some of the relevant traditions, the Pagan origins, and Jewish influences and conceptions of the idea of resurrection and concludes that "[a]lthough external corroboration for most details may no longer remain extant, strong evidence appears to favour the substantial picture of the resurrection appearances."<sup>20</sup>

The method of discovery employed by Keener is what John Ashton, in his work *The Interpretation of John*, would call the historical critical method. Ashton suggests three ways modern scholars approach John specifically and biblical studies in general. Citing the influence of Rudolph Bultmann, Ashton suggests that the first approach, Keener's approach, is to consider historical context, origins, and content—in short asking where John stands in the development of the early church. A second approach is to tease out relevant issues within the composition itself and a third way is to focusing on the central theological insight of a particular text.

<sup>17</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text* (London: SPCK, 1955, 1973, ninth impression), 466.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, 731. He goes on to say that it is the multiplicity of witnesses that give credence to the resurrection story in the early church. The more witnesses to the event, the more likely it was to have happened.

<sup>19</sup> Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: a commentary* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1167.

<sup>20</sup> Keener, 1167.

Leon Morris, while engaging in the historical critical method, also gives us an example of the second method of discovery in his commentary on John. Here we learn that the composition of John is generally assumed to have happened after the Synoptics perhaps to correct some things or amplify others things, though some, such as Barrett (see above), suggest that the author of John may have had Mark before him and others claim that John is completely independent of the Synoptics.<sup>21</sup> Morris uses the Synoptic comparison (among other methods) to establish that John's theological purpose is an apologetic intended "to show that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and by writing in this strain to persuade people to believe in him and so to enter into life."<sup>22</sup>

Discerning the theology of John 20 is likely to figure in the scholarship of most scholars of the Gospels. Barrett is clear that the "narrative is permeated with the theological themes of a Johanne kind: seeing and believing, and the ascent of Jesus to the Father."<sup>23</sup> Keener understands John's theology focusing on the importance of personal witness and testimony of the resurrection of Jesus. Morris looks to the historical context of the composition to talk about John's theological use of story to talk about the apologetic of the text. However helpful and insightful these contemporary methods are, they are just that—contemporary methods. They are not necessarily the methods of the early church fathers, the ones who, as we shall, see seem to pick and choose from the Gospel narratives to argue a very different sort of theology.

An example of this difference of the medieval mind is the way Pope Gregory the Great conceives of Mary Magdalen in the sixth century. Gregory readily fuses several unrelated women together, all from different Gospels to make a composite figure of Mary Magdalen. It is as if he put Luke's unnamed sinner (8:37–51), Mark's Mary from Magdala, freed of the seven demons (16:9) and John's Mary of Bethany (12:1) into a bag and voila! We have a new sort of woman.<sup>24</sup> Instead of looking at each Gospel separately, trying to understand the historical context, the theological intent of the author or the textual implications of each of these passages, Gregory fuses the texts together for their own purposes. He completely ignores the fact that these women might have all had completely individual identities and stories and

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<sup>21</sup> Morris, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Barrett, 466.

<sup>24</sup> Gregory, *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), Homily 25, 269.

instead blends them to create an amalgamate woman, and thus a more compelling picture of a single woman all for the purpose of a better homiletical device. Where Ashton looks to the historical context to argue for a theology of recognition, revelation and mission,<sup>25</sup> Barrett looks to previous sources to help define a Johanne distinctive of witness, and Morris looks to the compositional text and finds a John's intention of apologetics, Gregory focused on the needs of his church and let that determine the content of his muddled exegesis. Gregory takes the liberty of confusing the distinctiveness of the individual Gospels and women to provide a model that his church could relate to in order to rally them back to repentance and Christian devotion. Gregory was not interested in the specifics of John's Mary Magdalen or John's theological treatment of the resurrection; rather he was interested in motivating his wayward Church toward reform.<sup>26</sup>

Contemporary theologian, David Brown, takes a cue from Gregory and the early church fathers in his first chapter of his book *Discipleship and Imagination*.<sup>27</sup> Here Brown seeks to legitimise this early mediaeval method by employing a conflated figure of Mary Magdalen for his own project. He begins by looking at Mary's role in John 20 and compares it to the role of the Beloved Disciple. From this Brown concludes that the purpose of the chapter is discipleship; and as such Mary Magdalen offers a more realistic kind of discipleship than the Beloved Disciple. Next, Brown takes his idea of discipleship and applies it to three passages concerning anointings. However Brown does not limit himself to mentions of Mary Magdalen, the Gospel of John, or even to Gospel figures called Mary. Instead he draws on three separate women in three of the four Gospels all of whom anoint Jesus in some way: Luke's unnamed woman (7:36–50); Mark's anonymous woman from Bethany (14:3–9); and John's Mary of Bethany (12:1–8). Brown suggests that it is unlikely that there would be so many stories of anointings (he counts up to five in all four Gospels) in Jesus' short ministry and since each Gospel writer interpreted what were likely to be the same events in their own way, these women can be seen to have been included for a similar theological reason: discipleship. In combining these three passages, Brown argues that it is a legitimate project to work all three stories together to offer a comprehensive and much stronger model of discipleship.

<sup>25</sup> John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Clarendon Paperbacks: Oxford, 1991), 509.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory, *Homily 25*, 269.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 31–61.

Brown demonstrates this argument by separating the anointings into two types: anointings of perfume (nard), which pre-figuring the burial of Jesus and anointings of tears, which demonstrate pure love and devotion, and both kinds of anointings are associated with Mary Magdalen. First, she went to the tomb with fragrant spices to anoint Jesus for burial in John's resurrection scene and second she was crying out of love and devotion. In this act, Brown argues, John shows that Mary Magdalen is the most devoted of Jesus' followers; she has previously demonstrated her anointing of perfume and anointing of tears and she is doing it again. The re-appropriation of these other women of Luke, Mark and John who anointed Jesus show that Mary Magdalen demonstrates a more comprehensive model of love, devotion and so he through them Jesus death is foretold. Brown is engaging in Gregory's hermeneutical style which focuses not on the distinctiveness of the Gospel writers, but rather teaches a more important lesson. By blending several women together around a common theme—anointing—Brown offers a composite figure with the more comprehensive purpose of establishing this Magdalen throughout the Gospels as a realistic model of discipleship.<sup>28</sup>

Brown's liberties might make some contemporaries baulk, and his lack of concern with factual accuracy could serve to invalidate his conclusions for some. However, he is aware of this potential criticism and appeals to his overarching project to justify his actions. "Whether John intended such a link or not, it was this imaginative connection that in effect justified the linking of anointings and resurrection appearance." He goes on to say that as the Bible itself laid the groundwork for this imaginative effort and as "this basic structure was developed... it was utilized to enable at times a more effective identification with Christ than even the Gospels themselves provide...."<sup>29</sup> Helen Garth, an early modern scholar of Mary Magdalen, affirms Brown's project by explaining that the mediaeval mind was not really interested in facts, but rather in the impact of the story. So when it came to stories of saints, facts and the need for precise apologetics paled in favour of exhortative preaching.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 40–43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Helen Meredith Garth, *Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1950), 9. While much of the work of the early church fathers were dedicated apologetics concerning the authenticity of the Gospel and doctrinal claims regarding the faith, those figures not relevant to the particular apologetic did not require the same rigorous treatment as figures involved in doctrinal issues.

Benedicta Ward concurs recognising that the early church fathers used the Bible to exhort, encourage and teach fundamental truths in a way that their audience could understand. This did not always mean historical details and facts were correct, but that the aim was to develop and instil a greater spiritual awareness. In doing this “the influence of the Fathers of the Church, both within and outside the liturgy, condition[ed] the reading of the Bible in such a way that their spiritual interpretations were taken literally.”<sup>31</sup> She goes on to say “in the sermons of Augustine, and the commentaries of Bede, . . . as with Gregory, the spiritual and moral application of the text was the main concern and not the historical sense at all.”<sup>32</sup> This phenomenon among the early church fathers built upon the work of the Gospel writers who, despite having much of the same material, all focused on different details, chronologies and sometimes different stories altogether. This leaves us to recognise that the question of historical detail was not a high priority for the Gospel writers.

The teaching Ward refers to helps to lay the groundwork for the legendary material of the mediaeval church which functioned to illustrate moral and spiritual applications beyond that of what *might have been* the intent of the Gospel writers. Because this is the groundwork for the legends which inspired the paintings of Mary Magdalen in our frescoes, we must understand this mentality and material and be willing to employ this sort of thinking to our task.

So while contemporary scholars help us to understand the historicity, theological intent and purpose, by using the historical evidence surrounding an ancient text, the early and mediaeval church had a different agenda: to defend the faith; exhort the faithful; and offer people realistic models of spiritual and moral discipleship. In order to better understand the purpose of the frescoes in question, perhaps it might help to suspend twenty-first century exegetical and hermeneutical methods to some to degree and allow the early and mediaeval church to speak to us in their language—a language full of legend, morality, mystery, and images.

## 2. Filling in gaps

Contemporary popular notions of Mary Magdalen tend to include the Gospel narratives of the woman named Mary from Magdala, but they also include stories of some other women in the Gospels who are either unnamed, such as the woman in

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<sup>31</sup> Benedicta Ward, SLG. *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 12–13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Luke 7:36–50 or who are named Mary, but are from different towns such as Mary of Bethany. Paintings from the mediaeval to contemporary period show Mary Magdalen in a variety of roles which are not strictly true to the Gospel accounts of the woman named Mary Magdalen. Instead, mediaeval images often tell stories of a Mary Magdalen who is a penitential beauty and a temptress. Sometimes she is dressed in elaborate clothing. At other times she is depicted as an old toothless woman wrapped in nothing but her long shaggy hair.<sup>33</sup> And she is regularly portrayed as a prostitute and a great sinner saved by the redemptive message of Jesus. Yet none of the Gospel verses that we have discussed actually name her as a great beauty, a temptress, a prostitute or an old woman. So then, where did these images come from? To answer this we might begin by looking at the verses immediately preceding the first mention of Mary Magdalen in the chronology of the Gospels in Luke 8.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.1. Women of the conflation

Luke 7:36–50 tells the story about an unnamed ‘sinful’ woman who enters a house owned by a Pharisee in which Jesus is dining. Weeping, she falls to the ground and begins washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her unbound hair and anointing them with perfume.<sup>35</sup> The other guests, appalled that Jesus would allow himself to be touched by such a woman try but cannot shame Jesus. Instead they are the ones shamed by Jesus’ sermon on penitence, love and forgiveness, suggesting that this woman’s need for forgiveness is directly linked with the depth of her love and devotion, and thus outshines the sentiments of the host and his guests. This unnamed woman in Luke is just one of the women commonly conflated into the figure of Mary Magdalen, which has spurred debate about just how many women were conflated and what happened to the identity of each of them. Whether the conflation is harmful or helpful, Augustine seems to identify the Magdalen with at least three separate women of the Gospel narratives,<sup>36</sup> Gregory the Great conflates up to four different women

<sup>33</sup> Donatello, *La Maddellena*, Musee della Opera, Florence, circa 1450.

<sup>34</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 318–319. Green says of the woman in Luke 7: 36–50: “She is a sinner in the city—that is, a woman known in the city as a sinner. Undoubtedly, this characterization marks her a prostitute by vocation, a whore by social status, contagious in her impurity, and one who fraternizes with Gentiles for economic purposes,” 309. In the next section dealing with Luke 8, he uses similar to indicate that these were the kind of women Jesus wanted to have around him and Green assures us that the culture would have regarded women following any teacher as “shameless” and “illicitly sexual.”

<sup>35</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990), 6. According to Mazo, unbound hair was a sign of an immoral woman.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *St Augustin: Sermon on the Mount Harmony of the Gospels Homilies on the Gospels, The*

into her persona,<sup>37</sup> and some scholars suggest that, over time, at least eight women have been assumed into the identity of Mary Magdalen.<sup>38</sup> How and when did this controversial figure develop from the Gospel accounts?

From the first century onward, the conflation and subsequent hagiography concerning the figure of the Magdalen emerged slowly and eventually became dogma. It is arguable that each of the unnamed and named women involved seems to have found a stronger identity as a part of the Magdalen persona, and though not every Magdalen composite involves all the women who are elsewhere conflated, each woman was at different times and for different reasons incorporated into her identity for the purpose of providing exhortations toward personal and corporate piety and devotion.<sup>39</sup> The women of the New Testament that interest us are: 1) the unnamed sinner who cleansed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50); 2) an unnamed woman who anointed Jesus' head with expensive perfume (Mark 14:3–9);<sup>40</sup> 3) an anonymous figure who anointed Jesus in Bethany just before he was betrayed by Judas (Matthew 26:6–10); 4a) Mary who sat devotedly at Jesus' feet while her sister-in-law, Martha, complained about not having any help (Luke 10:38–43); 4b) Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and (the soon to be resurrected) Lazarus (John 11:1–44); 4c) Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anointed Jesus' head with costly nard (John 12:3–9);<sup>41</sup> 5) Martha the sister of Mary and Lazarus; 6) the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–42); 7) the woman taken in adultery in John 7:53–8:11; and 8) the bride at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1–11).<sup>42</sup>

## 2.2. Hippolytus' confusion

The first time the conflation of the Magdalen occurs in the written record was in the writings of the second century Christian apologist, Hippolytus in his commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles* about Solomon and his beloved Shulamite maiden.<sup>43</sup> In it he draws a parallel between the Shulamite maiden, who seeks her beloved in the *Song of Songs*, and Mary Magdalen, who searches the garden tomb for

*Nicene and Post-Nicene Father of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. VI (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), 271.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory, *Homily 25*, 269.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 120; Moltmann-Wendell, 51–89.

<sup>39</sup> I will more fully address the conflation of these women in the next section.

<sup>40</sup> Linked to Judas' betrayal of Jesus in the verse immediately following.

<sup>41</sup> Or perfume.

<sup>42</sup> Moltmann-Wendell, 61–90.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Haskins, *Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 63.

her lord, Jesus. For Hippolytus, both women are examples of the Church and his reason for employing them is to urge the Church to pursue Jesus with the same dogged devotion. To make his point, he combines the characteristics of Mary Magdalen and Martha into the single person of the Magdalen.

‘By night, I sought him whom my soul loveth’: See how this is fulfilled in Martha and Mary. In *their* figure, zealous Synagogue sought the dead Christ... For *she* teaches us and tells us: By night, I sought him whom my soul loveth. It is told in a gospel: ‘The women came by night to see the sepulchre.’ ‘I sought him and found him not,’ *she* says.<sup>44</sup>

In this passage, Hippolytus first conflates Martha and Mary—represented by the word *their* (my italics)—into a single woman—represented by the word *she* (again my italics). These two women, Martha and Mary then become one. He goes on to write of ‘The women’ who look for the ‘dead Christ’ at the sepulchre. Here he presumably refers to the two women in Mark 16, the two Marys in Matthew 23 and the three unnamed women in Luke 28. As such, all of these women become the singular woman, Mary Magdalen of John’s Gospel, who said, ‘I sought him and found him not.’<sup>45</sup> One explanation of what may appear to be sloppy biblical scholarship on Hippolytus’ part comes from Jansen who accounts for the conflation by recognising that these Gospel figures, especially as women, were important to demonstrate moral issues of faith. Since these women were peripheral characters, unlike Peter or the Beloved Disciple, it was easier to conflate them into a single figure for action or character for exhortation purposes.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.2.1. Eve as apostle

Elsewhere in an exposition on the resurrection, Hippolytus expounds on the encounter of Mary and the risen Jesus, a move which gives the conflated Magdalen figure a significant role in the early church.

...so the apostles did not doubt the angels, Christ himself appeared to them, so that the *women* are Christ’s *apostles*, and compensate through their obedience for the sin of the first Eve... Eve has become apostle... So that the women did not appear liars but bringers of the truth, Christ

<sup>44</sup> My italics. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28; Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination* 54, remarks that the term “apostle to the apostle” was readily used by Hippolytus as suggested by Haskins, who states that it was “clearly used by Bernard of Clairvaux, (*Sermons on the Song of Song*, 74 III, 8) and would go on to be used as Mary Magdalen’s title in *The Alternative Service Book: with Liturgical Psalter*, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 65.

<sup>45</sup> Haskins, 64; Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 28–31.

<sup>46</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 29.

appeared to the apostles and said to them: It is truly I who appeared to these *women* and who desired to send them to you as *apostles*.<sup>47</sup>

It would seem that with the first, second and final use of the word, Hippolytus attributes the title ‘*apostles*’ (one sent out) to the *women* (two Marys of Matthew’s Gospel) who first encountered the angel and then encountered Jesus at the tomb. In the fourth use of ‘*apostles*’ the context suggests that Hippolytus means the male disciples to whom the women were instructed to go tell of the resurrection. So Hippolytus is plainly calling the women, as well as the men, apostles; and one of these women is Mary Magdalen. Why Hippolytus takes the time to make this point it is difficult to say. Perhaps he was responding to concerns that women were unreliable witnesses. Since (as we shall later see) it would at that time be dubious to build a case on the word of a woman, relying on the eyewitness of a woman could make the Gospel accounts suspect.<sup>48</sup> Hippolytus might have linked the women and Mary Magdalen with the male disciples to demonstrate that the women’s witness was as valid as a man’s witness. In this case, Hippolytus meets any challenge head on by clearly re-asserting Mary Magdalen’s her as a primary and important witness.

Another early church father, Origen, addresses this challenge in his apology *Against Celsus*. Chapters LIX–LXX address claims made in which Celsus questions the emotional and moral state of the women involved as witnesses in the resurrection accounts. Origen defends the scriptural accounts of the witness and character of Mary Magdalen (by name), and goes on to argue for Jesus’ divine right to choose to appear to whomever, whenever and wherever he pleased. Besides, he points out that Jesus’ resurrected body was not only witnessed by the women, but also by the disciples and others later on.<sup>49</sup>

We have addressed all but one use of the word ‘*apostle*’ in the preceding quotation Hippolytus claims that Eve has become apostle thus clearly linking Mary

<sup>47</sup> Paul-Marie Guillaume, “Marie -Madeleine” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite, Ascetique et Mystique, Doctrine et Histoire*, (DS), 16 vols, ed. M. Viller et al, (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–94), vol.10 (1980) cols. 559–75, as translated in Haskins, 65. The citation is also found translated from the Latin text *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* vol. 264 (1965), 43–49, in Jansen, “*MMAA*”, 58. Latin in notes, 81. My italics.

<sup>48</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Origen, *Origen Contra Celsum*, trans. Frederick Crombie, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. XXIII (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), 74. Origen is arguing against damning claims made by Celsus who attempted to discredit Jesus as being merely human and secretive.

Magdalen with Eve in a way that actually seems to compensate for, even redeem, the sin of Eve. One authority says:

As the old Eve had forfeited her right to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, Mary Magdalen/Martha–Mary now clung passionately to Christ having found him, the Tree of Life, in the Easter garden where life resides anew. In Genesis, man had been put in the Garden of Eden to ‘tend’ it; there Satan had betrayed him, through the agency of Eve’s temptation, to everlasting death. In John’s garden, Satan, in the form of Judas, again attempts to betray man but fails. Mary Magdalen mistakes Christ for the gardener, and then recognizes him, thereby repairing Eve’s fault.<sup>50</sup>

Here, the apostle Mary Magdalen, as the first to make known Christ’s resurrection and thus the hope of eternal life, compensates for the first Eve’s sin that resulted in death, and as the New Eve, she becomes the “Apostle to the Apostles,” a theme later picked up by Gregory the Great.<sup>51</sup> For Hippolytus, Mary Magdalen’s presence at the resurrection in some way righted the wrong attributed to Eve’s tempting of Adam with the forbidden fruit, which resulted in sin and death. As such, Mary Magdalen is a type of reparative Eve, and here with Hippolytus may be the groundwork from which future conflation arose. This is a topic we shall return to in a later discussion of Eve, Mary Magdalen, and the Virgin Mary. For now let us finish the discussion of the conflated Magdalen figure in the early church fathers.

### 2.2.2 Other early church fathers

Other early church fathers that allude to Mary Magdalen include Tertullian, Irenaeus and Augustine.<sup>52</sup> Tertullian apparently refers to Luke’s unnamed sinner in his defence of the corporeal body of Jesus by arguing that he touched “the woman that was a sinner,” and this was the woman to whom he revealed himself in resurrected form; thus he conflates Mary Magdalen from John’s Gospel (20) and the unnamed sinner from Luke (7).<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Augustine combines Luke’s unnamed sinner and Mary of Bethany with the Magdalen (considered a “mistake” in the notes of the

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<sup>50</sup> Haskins, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory, Homily 25, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Schaberg, 84–85.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 85; Tertullianus, *Tertullianus Against Marcion*, trans. Peter Holmes, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. VII (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), 4.18, 2502–51.

*Nicene and Post-Nicene Father of the Christian Church* translation of his work.)<sup>54</sup> Irenaeus seems to imply, if not explicitly name, Mary Magdalen in making a similar point about Jesus' risen body from John 20:11–18.<sup>55</sup>

### 2.3. The Gnostic Gospels

At this point it is important to look at extra-biblical accounts about Mary Magdalen that, if not condoned by the Church, were certainly circulating in, known by, and in the Christian consciousness in late antiquity: the *Gnostic Gospels*, all of which were written circa second-third century AD. Of these, three are of particular interest to our study: *The Gospel of Mary Magdalen* (the only one named for a woman), *The Gospel of Philip* and the *Pistis Sophia*, all of which were lost until the twentieth century when they were rediscovered in Egypt and compiled in the form of *The Nag Hammadi Library*.<sup>56</sup>

In the *Gospel of Mary Magdalen*, Mary Magdalen is plainly described as a prophet, preacher, apostle, devoted disciple of Jesus and 'moral conscience of the disciples.'<sup>57</sup> On one account, Mary Magdalen preaches to the disciples, calling them to the constancy of faith she herself embodies. Peter, reminded of his repeated denial of Jesus, takes her exhortation as a personal rebuke and threat to his position among the disciples and first century believers. He (joined by Andrew) denies Mary's privileged relationship with Jesus and rejects her role as witness to the resurrection. Mary, broken-hearted over Peter's rebuke, breaks down in tears and Levi (Matthew)

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, 271. The footnote reads: "Luke vii, 37–47. Augustine is mistaken here, although his error has been followed by many ancient writer and some in more recent times. The time, place and circumstances make it impossible for the incident here referred to, to be the same as that which took place in Bethany immediately before our Lord's crucifixion. On that last occasion only was it Lazarus' sister, Mary, who anointed Jesus. Luke here speaks only of a woman that was a sinner, and there is little evidence to connect her with any of the other women in the Gospels, even with Mary of Magdala as is often done, and who is first mentioned by Luke in a different connection in the following chapter (viii, 2)." This footnote demonstrates the contemporary value of the historically accurate exegesis of contemporary scholars over the more homiletical method of the early church fathers.

<sup>55</sup> Irenaeus, *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Hautenville Rambaut, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), 5.7.1; 70–71; 5.31.1, 140.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson, ed, 471–474. The texts were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in Egypt in 1945; *Pistis Sophia*, (London; New York, Toronto: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Co., 1924). This text was brought to the attention of authorities in 1785, vii. Fiorenza, 50–51. Fiorenza claims that anyone who claimed a closer relationship to Jesus than Peter, the recognised founder of the Church, especially a woman, would not only have been unwelcome, but quickly discredited.

<sup>57</sup> "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene," *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. George W. Macrae and R. Mc L. Wilson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 472, 473. Mary Magdalen is also mentioned in a similar capacity in "The Gospel of Thomas" and "The Gospel of the Egyptians" both found in the compiled writings in *The Nag Hammadi Library*.

comes to her defence arguing that if she was good enough for Jesus, then she should be good enough for the disciples.

The *Pistis Sophia* depicts the resurrected Jesus singles out Mary Magdalen when speaking to the disciples. Jesus praises her devotion and tells her he will answer any question she may have, much to the envy of the others.<sup>58</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* shows Jesus and Mary Magdalen, his ‘favourite, [sharing] the holy kiss of *gnosis*,’ again, much to the consternation and envy of the male disciples.<sup>59</sup> Both of these works portray a recognition that Jesus sees in Mary Magdalen the unique attribute of divine *gnosis*, or the full understanding of the mysteries of faith and spirituality. A trait that, according to one scholar, causes jealousy and envy among the male disciples.<sup>60</sup>

These writings of the *Nag Hammadi Library* do not shed much light on the conflation of the persona of the Magdalen, but they introduce us to themes that are later included in the mediaeval legendary material of Mary Magdalen. These themes are of Mary as apostle, prophet, and example of perfect devotion. Yet, as we have seen in Hippolytus, these are also themes prevalent in the writings of the early church fathers. But it is worth noting that the characteristics displayed in them, like those of the early church fathers, are attributed to Mary Magdalen in mediaeval legends which depict her as a preacher, evangelist, and mystic and a unique disciple of Jesus. Now let us move to another figure in the life of the Church who had significant influence in the Church’s development and direction, Gregory the Great.

### 3. The Magdala and the early Middle Ages

On 21 September 591, Pope Gregory the Great preached a sermon in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. Like many of his sermons, this one exhorted his flock toward piety and holy living; yet it had another lasting effect. Speaking from Luke 7:36–50, Gregory stated: “This woman, whom Luke calls a sinner, John names Mary [of Bethany]. I believe that she is the same Mary of whom Mark says that seven

<sup>58</sup> *Pistis Sophia*, 94.

<sup>59</sup> “*The Gospel of Philip*,” *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. Wesley Isenberg (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1977), 138; Jansen, “*MMAA*,” 25–26. There is further discussion in Jansen of the lore that developed around the stories of Jesus and Mary kissing. She argues that contemporary scholarship has taken these stories and developed a sexually explicit relationship between the two. However, there is little evidence that the Gnostic accounts were ever interpreted by the early church as sexual encounters.

<sup>60</sup> Fiorenza, 51.

demons had been cast out.”<sup>61</sup> To this point, the identity of the Magdalen had been somewhat muddled; various women in the Gospels associated with the name Magdalen at different times. Yet, with this single sentence, Gregory formalized the conflation of three individuals into one persona, Mary Magdalen, and thus her conflated identity spread throughout Christendom and henceforth she became accepted as the penitent sinner (Luke 7) in search of redemption who devoted her life to Jesus. She would hereafter be imagined at his feet, anointing him, contemplating his teachings, weeping at the cross, and worshipping him at the resurrection. Elsewhere Gregory conflates the unnamed sinner in Luke 7, Mary sister of Bethany, and Mary Magdalen in John’s resurrection scene. Citing Luke 7: 47 he writes (to Gregoria, Lady of the Bedchamber):

And how they were forgiven is shewn also by what follows afterwards; that she sat at the Lord’s feet, and heard the word from His mouth (Luke 10: 39) For, being wrapt in the contemplative, she had transcended the active life, which Martha her sister still pursued. She also sought earnestly her buried Lord, and, stooping over the sepulchre, found not His body. But, even when the disciples went away, she remained standing before the door of the sepulchre, and whom she sought as dead, Him she counted worthy to see alive, and announced to the disciples the He had risen again.<sup>62</sup>

But why would Gregory tamper with the figures of the Gospels just to make a homiletical point? Jansen suggests that Gregory used this homily to respond to the confusion surrounding the Magdalen identity. Since there were so many unnamed women in the Gospels and so many others called Mary, Jansen supposes that Gregory collapsed them into the woman who had appeared at many of the critical moments of Christ’s life and ministry. Not only was this helpful in keeping these women straight for his largely illiterate listeners, but it named many nameless women by assembling them into one compelling figure.<sup>63</sup>

The imaginative teaching of mediaeval sermons and illustrations often associated the Magdalen with a life of harlotry in which she was used to epitomize woman as deceiver and temptress out for sexual destruction of men.<sup>64</sup> We have seen that the mediaeval mind was and was not as interested in developing a historically

<sup>61</sup> Gregory, *Homily 25*, 269.

<sup>62</sup> *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Father of the Christian Church, Second Series*, Vol. XIII, *Gregory the Great—Part II*, trans. James Barmby, D.D. (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1898), col. 1, 219.

<sup>63</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 64.

accurate biographical description of saint, as they were interested in creating figures that may have been real.<sup>65</sup> This being so, it is easy to see how it could the Magdalen could be merged with Luke's sinner with the result that she was given a sexually sinful past on par with the worst of temptresses. This made her the epitome of fallen womanhood.<sup>66</sup> But Gregory's intentions were to demonstrate that it was only because of the depths of her sin that she could receive such overwhelming forgiveness. It is this penitent devotion that gave her a place of honour before Jesus and this relationship serves to suggest more about the depth and power of the Jesus' forgiveness then it does about the sinful past of this woman. Through the healing she received from Jesus (Luke 8:2) coupled with his great forgiveness (Luke 7:50), the Magdalen now became the ideal redeemed, the epitome of the penitent.

### 3.1. Feminists and the Magdalen

A number of feminist scholars have taken issue with the conflation of Mary Magdalen, her association with Eve, and the ensuing legendary material and we might now pause to consider their viewpoints. The main arguments tend to situate on the following three issues. First, Mary Magdalen did, said and became what men wanted, giving her no choice about her own identity, history, or future. As such, any such associations should be treated as hostile because women did not actually have a voice to speak for themselves, men spoke for them. Second, that this attribution was a way to discredit any associations of power, authority, or leadership represented by Mary of Magdala and to downplay the special relationship Mary Magdalen had with Jesus, thus denying any of these roles to women. Third, the Magdalen was modelled into a prostitute and from there, into a type of Everywoman with the result that Mary Magdalen specifically, and women in general, were degraded and blamed for the heinous sin of sexual lust and thus the root of the original sin of Eve. These allegations are important when engaging in any scholarship regarding Mary Magdalen. Therefore, we ought to address them in our attempt to understand how the mediaeval world experienced Mary Magdalen.

In a chapter entitled *Silence, Conflation, Distortion, Legends*, Jane Schaberg addresses the lack of women's voices in history and legends including that of Mary Magdalen. She says of the Magdalen that "she preaches and teaches; but what she

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<sup>65</sup> Garth, 9–10.

<sup>66</sup> Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 121.

says—if anything is given her to say—simply repeats what men say.”<sup>67</sup> It is true that women were not prominent among those speaking, teaching and writing in the Gospels and in the early church. As such, any teaching about the Magdalen was done by men. But whatever the story, Mary Magdalen was known for one thing which superseded any other—she was the mouthpiece of the Church spreading the news of the resurrection; a role and a voice which was arguably the most important of the entire New Testament.

Relying on a woman as the first witness was risky for the early church, especially when we realise that the Romans thought a woman’s testimony to be highly suspect, and the Palestinian Jews thought even less of it.<sup>68</sup> Keener suggests that we might consider that Mary Magdalen would have been aware of this prejudice against a woman’s testimony. Yet according to John, the man who wrote her story, she trusted Jesus and Jesus’ decision to send her. So, though she was a woman, she went ahead and acted as first apostle, as Hippolytus demonstrated, telling the disciples Jesus had risen again.<sup>69</sup>

The other Gospel writers and the leaders of the early church had ample opportunity to subvert the narratives of a female witness and then given the role of witness to the Beloved Disciple or perhaps Peter. But this was not done. These men stuck to their original stories, even though it cast doubt on the resurrection from the very beginning and Karen King, a feminist contemporary of Schaberg’s admits that “[Mary Magdalen] was spoken of primarily as an important witness to the resurrection.”<sup>70</sup> King’s concession appears to conflict with Schaberg’s claims that in the second half of the first century, Mary Magdalen’s role as witness was being “disputed or ignored or perhaps unknown.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed Mary Magdalen’s role as witness was disputed, but by those outside the church who used it to deny the resurrection. As we have seen, it was the early church father’s, led by Hippolytus, who came to her defence. Others, such as Tertullian, Augustine, and Gregory, all set about to legitimise her role as a witness to the resurrection, a move that might have damaged the message of the resurrection. Nevertheless, they remained faithful to the story of Mary Magdalen as the first witness.

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<sup>67</sup> Schaberg, 112.

<sup>68</sup> Keener, 1192.

<sup>69</sup> Keener 1196.

<sup>70</sup> Karen L. King. “Canonization and Marginalization: Mary of Magdala,” in *Women’s Sacred Scriptures*. Kwok Pui-Lan and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, eds. London: SCM Press, 1998, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Schaberg, 67.

When we move into the Middle Ages we see a large amount of legendary material surrounding Mary Magdalen emerge. These materials will be examined more fully later on, but for now, it is important to consider some of them in light of the claims of unfair treatment of the Magdalen figure. Schaberg disputes this material saying it unfairly turned the Magdalen into a silent recluse and pushed her outside of human society.<sup>72</sup> Yet, the legendary material that Schaberg complains about actually gives the Magdalen a very powerful voice of authority as preacher, teacher, and apostle responsible for conversion of all of Gaul.<sup>73</sup> Yes, these legends were written by men, all with their own agendas, as we shall see, but it is interesting that virtually no male leaders in Gaul dispute the conversion of their kingdom to the Magdalen, giving a woman this apostolic voice.<sup>74</sup>

Before we leave this point it is important to note that there is some pictorial evidence suggesting that not all preferred to see the Magdalen in such an authoritative light and the images in the Magdalen Chapel in Assisi can perhaps be claimed among them. In fact, I later use a similar argument to do what Schaberg claims. The Magdalen Chapel frescoes address the fact that, like Francis, the Magdalen retired to a meditative life in the wilds. Perhaps the question is then, why and from what was she was retiring? It could have been that she was retiring to contemplate her love of Jesus after the weighty experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. Or perhaps she was had tired of public life as apostle and preacher. Others might suggest that since men created the legends, the Magdalen was purposely isolated in public images which in effect, kept her from speaking at all. This is a valid point; images could have served to keep the Magdalen silent, taking away her right and ability to speak by shutting her up in the wilds. Yet, retiring into the wilds as a hermit was a popular thing in the Middle Ages for both men and women. Francis himself was known to have gone often to his wilderness grotto for contemplation. This particular point is more fully addressed later in the context of our discussion about the individual frescoes in the Magdalen Chapel. Suffice to say, that some men were certainly interested in what holy women had to say, and some men were not. Schaberg's point is well-taken.

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<sup>72</sup> Schaberg, 112. In the legendary material of Schaberg's concern, the Magdalen becomes a desert penitent, but as a role model for spirituality for men and women alike, including St Francis.

<sup>73</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*, trans. William Caxton, vol. I, VI vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1900), 78.

<sup>74</sup> See Garth, 53. She writes that as a result: "Mary's mission of 'apostless' was fulfilled.

Next, we turn to the claim the conflation of Magdalen was in essence denying a woman power and authority. King argues that “Patriarchal exegetes invented this [conflated and sexually-loaded] role for Mary of Magdala because they wanted to discredit the theology associated with her name and to undermine her significance as a model for the legitimacy of women’s leadership.” She says elsewhere: “In short [Gregory’s] portrait of the repentant sinner was inverted to counter an earlier and very powerful portrait of Mary as visionary prophet, exemplary disciple and apostolic leader.” However, the portrait she is referring to is in the writings of both the early church fathers and the Gnostic Gospels, as we have already seen. In the Gnostics, Mary Magdalen does preach and teach the other disciples, but she is not wholly authoritative and powerful as perhaps King might suppose. When Mary preaches to the other disciples in the *Gospel of Mary Magdalen*, Peter gets upset, confronts her and instead of standing up for herself, she dissolves into tears and turns to a man to come to her defence. This Gnostic text does depict a special relationship between Mary Magdalen and Jesus, but when compared to her conflated role as the first apostle with a matchless relationship with Jesus as found in the early church fathers. The Gnostic text is only a variation on a theme already fully imbedded into the Gospels, the writings of the early church, and later in the mediaeval legendary material.<sup>75</sup>

This seems at odds with Schaberg’s concern that “the later Magdalen legends respond to the desire to downgrade her and deny her authority, as well as the desire to attach to female sexuality the notions of evil, repentance, and male mercy.”<sup>76</sup> Another female scholar writing about the history of sexuality argues that “sexuality for the Middle Ages constituted a woman’s life... The prostitute could stand for Everywoman. Sexuality defined the woman and it defined her sin.”<sup>77</sup> In this view, the Magdalen, as the prostitute, stood for Everywoman. Yet, what she actually stood for was life *after* sin not life *stuck* in sin. Here it might be helpful to hear Brown’s caution that “[the] extent to which stress has been laid upon her [the Magdalen’s] sexual sin has been greatly exaggerated.”<sup>78</sup> He goes on to remind us that the evocative sexual associations only began to emerge in the sixteenth century, well after the time of (both

<sup>75</sup> The Magdalen of legend soon becomes the epi-centre of one of Christendom’s largest cult followings for both women *and* men, something we will later address detail.

<sup>76</sup> Schaberg, 80.

<sup>77</sup> Karras, 32.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 46.

Schaberg's and) our focus. In the Middle Ages, notions of evil and repentance were attached to all sins, including heresy, robbery and yes, inappropriate sexuality. But we must be careful not to read Puritan piety into mediaeval legends.

There is no denying that the Magdalen was interpreted through a prostitute's past, but a different view of that prostitute is offered by another female scholar Benedicta Ward who sees it in a different light.

I suggest that her identification as a prostitute lies deeper, in the imagery of sin throughout the whole of scriptures. Mary Magdalene takes to herself the image of unfaithful Israel, so graphically described by the prophets as a prostitute in relation to God. The image was transferred by the New Testament writers to the whole humanity in the new covenant, and therefore each soul in sin can be described as a prostitute, as unfaithful to the covenant of love between God and man. It is in this profoundly illuminating sense that Mary of Magdala assumes the character of prostitute, not because lust is a specially terrible sin but because she is all sinners insofar as all sin is unfaithfulness to the covenant of love.... which is the name of God.<sup>79</sup>

Ward's suggestion is not that Mary Magdalen only became Everywoman, but that she then became every human, *Everyman*—in effect, the whole of the Christian Church. In the obvious connection with the Old Testament images of Israel as prostitute, Ward moves the image of the Magdalen into a different realm. The Magdalen becomes the identity of Israel reconciled. The old covenant once broken is now made whole in the image of the Magdalen. Though Israel fled God's loving pursuit, the Church, in the guise of Mary Magdalen, remains constant and waits in the Garden. She is the restored vehicle for the whole of the Church to be reconciled.

If we take Ward's comments on board, far from downplaying her role and denying a portrait of a woman's authority, the mediaeval understanding of the Magdalen elevated her well beyond even the Popes. While there may have been an effort to use the Magdalen to achieve their own means, it is quite possible that medieval church leaders spent their time try to contain the cult following that surged around such a charismatic figure of the Magdalen— a woman who became a diving rod to energise the mediaeval Church to a personal and collective piety. The Magdalen led the way to the Christian life.

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<sup>79</sup> Ward, 14–15. Ward uses an alternative spelling of Mary Magdalene. To clarify, she also uses the term Mary of Magdala.

Finally, in response to the argument that the conflated Magdalen figure was intended to defame the female character, it cannot be denied that Mary Magdalen was conflated with other women of scripture with the result that she “becomes represented by and represents prostitutes.”<sup>80</sup> While I am not suggesting that Hippolytus viewed the Magdalen or Eve as a prostitute, it is true that Hippolytus clearly links the Magdalen with Eve and this laid the foundation for more imaginative possibilities for others to expand on the theme—which we have seen definitely occurred. Irenaeus and Augustine conflated Mary Magdalen with the unnamed sinner accused of promiscuity in Luke 7, making this Magdalen a sexually immoral woman and Gregory took it a step further. King argues that through Gregory, “Mary lost semblance of the devoted disciple and visionary. She became a model for women to immolate themselves for their crimes of sexuality, vanity and bold speech.”<sup>81</sup> However, Gregory’s intent as Brown’s project advocates, was in fact very different.

The sixth century Pope was looking for a way to rally his wayward sheep toward a life of Christian goodness and piety. He was instrumental in the conversion of England and the Bible being translated into Latin.<sup>82</sup> A genuine man of faith and a popular preacher, his sermons, letters and homilies greatly influenced listeners and readers towards new levels of piety and religious devotion. Repentance was among Gregory’s favourite themes and his conflated Magdalen was a perfect symbol to drive home the virtues of conversion and repentance.<sup>83</sup> So far from turning a perfectly good woman into a prostitute and causing women to beat themselves up over their sexuality, Gregory actually offered the Magdalen as a means for women (and men for that matter) to accept and repent for their sins—any sins, including lying, greed, lust, and hatred. Gregory’s Magdalen represented hope that an individual leave off from a sinful lifestyle or behaviour, one that hurt themselves and possibly their communities. In leaving their sin behind, they could find forgiveness. Just as the repentant Magdalen was welcome into Jesus heart, the common sinner would also be welcome. It was not about being ashamed for *who one was* (a prostitute, a liar, or a cheat), as King suggests. On the contrary, it was about recognizing harmful behaviour (adultery, lying, stealing), asking forgiveness and *knowing* that you were forgiven.

<sup>80</sup> Schaberg, 112.

<sup>81</sup> King, 31.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 110–117.

<sup>83</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 33–34.

As for her identification with Eve, let us now take a moment to explore this link.

### 3.2. The Virgin and the harlot

One Mary in the Gospel accounts the Magdalen would never be confused with is Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Virgin Mary, as she came to be known, held a very specific role in the narratives and consequently she became a figure larger than life in the Church. Yet, while Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary were never confused with one another, they did share a very special, if bizarre, relationship in the dogma of the early and mediaeval church.

Though her role in the Gospels is somewhat limited to a handful of references after the birth of Christ, Mary, as the virgin mother of Christ, came to play a significant role in the life of the Western Christian Church, and this persona developed into a primary religious figure from the second century.<sup>84</sup> When faced with opposition denying of the dual nature of Christ, apologists of the early church wrote expansively to establish the dual nature of Jesus, as both human and divine. In their apologetic zeal, they elevated Mary to the status of Virgin Queen of Heaven. In 381, the First Council of Constantinople declared that at the time of Jesus' birth, Mary had never been involved in sexual relations with a man and since God could not have united with a sinful being. Augustine took it a step further arguing that Jesus' divinity relied upon a chaste, non-sexual conception by God and since he reasoned that original sin was transmitted by sexual intercourse,<sup>85</sup> and Jesus was not in the slightest tainted with original sin, his mother could not, and did not have sexual intercourse.<sup>86</sup> The Council of Ephesus (431) declared Jesus' mother to be the *theotokos* ('God carrier'),<sup>87</sup> and the Council of Chalcedon (451) deemed her *Aeiparthenos* (ever-virgin)<sup>88</sup> claiming that not only was she herself wholly chaste, but she was wholly sin-

<sup>84</sup> At the wedding of Cana (John 2), questioning his sanity (among the disciples Mark 3:21), with Mary Magdalen at the foot of the cross (John 19:25–27), and in the company of the disciples (Acts 1:14).

<sup>85</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950) Book XIV 10, 457.

<sup>86</sup> Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writing on Women* (London: Dartman Longman and Todd, 1995), 177.

<sup>87</sup> Pronounced by the Council of Ephesus in 431, and again at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Mark Elliott, Trevor A. Hart, ed., *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002) 123–124; Giovanni Miegge, *The Virgin Mary: The Roman Catholic Marian Doctrine*, trans. Waldo Smith (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), 54, 56.

<sup>88</sup> Council of Chalcedon in 451; at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 her 'perpetual virginity' was established and then dogmatized at the First Lateran Council (649). Mariana Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1985), 65–66.

free as well.<sup>89</sup> All of this eventually developed into the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception which states that Mary's mother, Anne was also visited by the Spirit of God and thus Mary was conceived not by human sexual relations, but by God. This got around the problem of Augustine's claim that original sin was passed through sexual intercourse, for if Mary was sin-free, then she could not have been conceived by sexual relations.

In the psyche of the early Church then, the Virgin Mary was a sinless, virginal vessel that carried the God incarnate. As such, she was a fitting for a type of new Eve that would balance Jesus' role as the new Adam. Yet as her following grew, the Virgin Mary was gradually imputed with a mystical, non-human, sexless persona, one who could never be capable of sin, and therefore unable to tempt another human being to sin especially sexually. Yet, according to much of the commentary of the emergent church the first Eve did precisely that—tempted Adam sexually.<sup>90</sup> So if the Virgin Mary were the new redeemed Eve, there was a break in continuity. Eve fell from innocence through sin. The Virgin Mary was, in effect, beyond sin, and retained innocence—she maintained an 'unfallen' purity as Eve should have but did not.

So, this sinless Mary was the earthly vessel of the sinless Jesus. While the New Testament scriptures never address whether or not Mary, in her sinless state, ever faced temptation, it clearly shows that her son, the last Adam, did. Jesus faced the struggle of temptation by Satan in the desert (Matt 4:1–11), though through his perseverance, he did not fall to the temptation (John 16:3). The ultimate victory came through his resurrection in conquering death, thus nullifying the consequence of sin (Romans 8:1–2). Through this ultimate victory humanity participates in his purity (I John 5:4) and can be reconciled with God.

On the other hand, the early church portrayed the Magdalen as a woman who was tempted and fell to that temptation. Not only that, but, like Eve, she had sexually tempted men who, like Adam, fell to the temptation. Gregory the Great helped to take this fallen figure and show that in Jesus' mercy, her penitent faith and single-minded devotion, she was redeemed. Augustine made a similar claim in an Easter sermon offering a somewhat radical view of the redemption of women, but he did so by linking the Magdalen with the Virgin Mary. He writes: "[H]umanity's fall was

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<sup>89</sup> This doctrine, though it had among its advocates (incl Bernard of Clairvaux and Duns Scotus), was not made dogma until the nineteenth century by Pope Pius IX. Miegge, 110–127.

<sup>90</sup> Discussed at length in *Ibid.*, 110–14; Warner, 60–67.

occasioned by womankind; humanity's restoration was accomplished through womankind, since a virgin brought forth Christ and a woman announced that he had risen from the dead."<sup>91</sup> In combining the Virgin and the Magdalen together, Jansen suggests that Augustine saw these two women as *co-redeemers* of a kind, both bearers of the Word: one through her womb, the other through her message.<sup>92</sup> In a corroborating passage, Ambrose (c. 339–97) writes: "Mary [Magdalen] worshipped Christ, and so was sent to the apostles as the first herald of the resurrection, dissolving the hereditary link of the female sex and immense sin."<sup>93</sup> For Augustine and Ambrose, both formative theologians in the life of the early church, we are offered the concept that together, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen shared a pivotal role in salvation history for women.

A thorough discussion of this claim can be found in Kim Power's study on Augustine's perspective on women. In it, she argues that Augustine "render[ed] the *imago [Dei]* intrinsically masculine. As the female bodily form was at odds with the masculine *imago*, women lacked the constitutional integrity of mind and body which characterised men." She continues saying that then Augustine had to find a representative figure for women to be restored, so he combined the Virgin's womb and humility with the Magdalen's message and pure devotion to bring the mind and body of the feminine to a spiritually masculine form. Power's goes on to demonstrate that Augustine argued that the Virgin and the Magdalen, by virtue of their chosen roles as Christ-bearer and apostolic witness to the resurrection, offered a comprehensive model and means to bring women to a place of redemption.<sup>94</sup>

To summarise, the early church's viewed the Virgin Mary as the perfect woman who never fell. She had a body, but it was purely for the purpose of bringing into the world Christ, after which it retained innocence and was never used in a sensual manner. Mary Magdalen, when conflated with the sinful women of Luke 7, was the sinful woman who began fallen. She used her body for the purpose of temptation, but this body was fully redeemed and became the means for carrying the message of Jesus new life to the world. Eve symbolised female wantonness, the temptress, who used her sexuality and her body to cause the downfall of Adam, and

<sup>91</sup> Augustine, 271.

<sup>92</sup> Jansen, *MMAA*, 58.

<sup>93</sup> Cited in Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 32, from Ambrose, "De spiritu sancto" Lib III *CSEL* 79 (1964), 181.

<sup>94</sup> Power, 286.

thus man.<sup>95</sup> The Magdalen then offered a more symmetrical type of new Eve. Eve was innocent, then fallen—right gone wrong. The Virgin Mary was innocent, and remained innocent—right stayed right. Mary Magdalen was fallen, then redeemed—wrong made right. Unlike the Virgin, the Magdalen served to reverse the fallenness of Eve.

When seen in this light, the conflated Magdalen offers, not the self-punishing, ineffective, and diminished female figure that Schaberg and King claim. Instead, the Magdala served as an ideal—an obtainable ideal model of discipleship. She was the archetype of penitence, devotion and humility. She was also a model of the Mendicant preacher, apostle and redemptrix. Unlike the Virgin Mary, she was a woman at the heart of the Gospel message that people could identify with and pattern their life after. She was the Christian Church. As Ward puts it:

Mary Magdalen, for the evangelists and for the Fathers, is not just a historical character or characters; she is the new Eve, the first sign of the reversal of the fall of Adam, She is also, because of her great love, the woman in the Song of Songs, and she is, for the same reason, the Church as well as the individual soul redeemed from sin.<sup>96</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

We have seen that by the early Middle Ages, Mary of Magdala had travelled far from her origins in the Gospels. To the early church fathers, she was a bit of a vague entity, significant because of her role as a witness to the resurrection. Then when she was united with both the Virgin Mary and Eve, the Magdalen became a significant figure in the restoration of women, if not humanity. At a time when the cult of saints was on the rise,<sup>97</sup> Gregory saw a church lacking in piety and in need of reform and appropriated her for the betterment of the church, albeit in a confused form. During his papacy, Rome was overwhelmed by famine, plague and war, and his sermons on Mary Magdalen were meant to encourage his listeners to stop focusing on the overwhelming pain and suffering of the world around them, and concentrate instead upon their own sins, their own need of salvation and changes that could happen within themselves. The Mary Magdalen Gregory preached provided an ideal example for

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<sup>95</sup> Therefore every woman born of Eve was assessed with this faculty of causing the sexual fall of men in general, Haskins, 144–145; Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 120.

<sup>96</sup> Ward, 15

<sup>97</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 1.

such penance, devotion and contemplation. The result was that from the end of the sixth century her popularity dramatically increased and a cult following exploded. Gregory's sermons about the Magdalen circulated and were assimilated into the liturgies developed to honour Holy Week, and liturgies to celebrate the triumph of the resurrection.<sup>98</sup>

By the early Middle Ages, some particulars about Mary Magdalen mentioned in the New Testament were accounted for in the Gospels, but a full depiction of her life was left undone. This raw material provided by the Gospels gave Church leaders the opportunity to recreate the *vitas* to suit their own purposes. The legendary and hagiographic material of the mediaeval period was never intended to give accurate historical representations as in modern biblical and theological scholarship.<sup>99</sup> Rather, mediaeval leaders took it upon themselves to fill in a historical figure's life story, regardless of the facts. They used the New Testament as a basis to build upon to create a more full depiction of the lives of saints to suit their own purposes.<sup>100</sup> So, "the more we discover about the mediaeval ways of thought the less we shall discover about the historical Magdalen."<sup>101</sup> For the purposes of this paper, our concern is not the factual accuracy of the hagiography material on Mary Magdalen. Rather, we shall use the legendary material as a means to interpret the popular mindset regarding Mary Magdalen which would have influenced the Magdalen Chapel's patron and artist. In this way we can hope to uncover the meanings and stories depicted in the chapel in Assisi. In doing so, we can assume that much of the legendary material developed not from fact but as a means to an end: a moral lesson given authority because it was linked to a saint.

Therefore it is indeed arguable that these sermons and legendary stories, regardless of historical accuracy, provided (and continue to provide) people with an identifiable and empathetic character to compel them toward a life of holiness and devotion. Speaking of the Magdalen, Brown says: "the imagination has functioned in the history of religion, and within Christianity in particular, as a means of generating new insights, insights which the Christian may legitimately regard as revelation, not

<sup>98</sup> Many of the liturgies developed at or before the time of Gregory are still used in some. Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: Benzinger, 1950), 47, claims that some Medievals argued for the recitation of the Credo on her feast day because of her designation as *apostolorum apostola*.

<sup>99</sup> Garth, 9–10. See also Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 29–31.

<sup>100</sup> Garth, 10.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

merely human responses but divinely motivated.”<sup>102</sup> It was to this mediaeval culture that Gregory the Great preached. With the freedom to alter history to suit the religious devotion and fervour of the time, perhaps there was no great evil in claiming a connection to the historical Jesus, if even through unlikely means. Brown continues: “[t]hough what emerged [concerning the Magdalen] was less than loyal to history, it embodied the more important truth, one which very effectively engaged the imagination of believers over the centuries in establishing and deepening their relation with Christ.”<sup>103</sup>

One with a firm grasp of historical accuracy might be wary of saying there is more truth in this fabrication about the Magdalen than we can identify in the actual facts of her life. However, Brown seems to understand the purpose of the early fathers as Ward sees it: “the spiritual and moral application of the text was the main concern.”<sup>104</sup> Images of the conflated Magdalen with a prostitute's past that was presented by the early church fathers offered a point of intersection for the normal, less-than-perfect, and illiterate everyman/woman. It was an entrance into the story offering the potential to develop a deeper relationship with Jesus.

The Magdalen Chapel is located in the Lower Church, the Pilgrim's church in Assisi. People went on pilgrimage for all sorts of reasons, some of which we later explore. Whatever the reason, the frescoes of the Chapel offered these pilgrims a visual spiritual engagement. They offered a truth that said a woman who was a prostitute was welcome at the feet of Jesus, at the cross, at the resurrection. It told a pilgrim that such a woman was readily given a place in the love of Jesus and a home as a devoted disciple. It also offered hope that even though a person may have been a terrible sinner, they could still become deeply devoted to Jesus and he to them.

In this chapter, we have seen how the figure of the Magdalen emerged from a few mentions in the Gospels to Gregory's sermons which launched her into the public consciousness of the Church. This brings us one step closer to understanding the stories behind some of the figures in the frescoes in the Magdalen Chapel at Assisi. We now can understand why she is depicted at the feet of Jesus in *Supper at the House of the Pharisee* and *The Raising of Lazarus*, as well as in the *Noli me Tangere*, even though the New Testament does not explicitly put a woman named

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<sup>102</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 32.

<sup>104</sup> Ward, 13.

Mary Magdalen in these scenes. Yet, we are still left wondering about the stories in the other four main frescoes. We still do not know the significance of any of the other figures depicted in the chapel. Let us turn to discover these stories by following the Magdalen to Gaul where she is said to have preached and converted a nation.

## Chapter II. The mediaeval cult of the Magdalen

### Marie Magdalene

by George Herbert

WHEN blessed Marie wip'd her Saviours feet,  
 (Whose precepts she had trampled on before)  
 And wore them for a jewell on her head,  
     Shewing his steps should be the street,  
     Wherein she thenceforth evermore

With pensive humbleness would live and tread :  
 She being stain'd herself, why did she strive  
 To make him clean, who could not be defil'd?  
 Why kept she not her tears for her own faults,  
     And not his feet? Though we could dive  
     In tears like seas, our sinnes are pil'd  
 Deeper than they, in words, and works, and thoughts.

Deare soul, she knew who did vouchsafe and deigne  
 To bear her filth ; and that her sinnes did dash  
 Ev'n God himself ; wherefore she was not loth,  
     As she had brought wherewith to stain,  
     So to bring in wherewith to wash :  
 And yet in washing one, she washed both.<sup>105</sup>

### 1. The cult at Vézelay

In the ninth century, the Benedictine monks near the little town of Vézelay in Burgundy were in need of help.<sup>106</sup> They were neglecting their vows and it fell to nearby monastery of Cluny to put things right.<sup>107</sup> Embassies were sent from Cluny to Vézelay to assess the problem and in 1037 a Cluniac cleric, Geoffrey, was appointed the new abbot of Vézelay to bring the order back to its religious commitment. Within a few years of Geoffrey's appointment, the abbey was a reformed and thriving community, indisputably due to the reforming influence of Cluniac monasticism and

<sup>105</sup> George Herbert, *The Poetical Works of George Herbert* (New York: D Appleton and Co., 1857), 221–222.

<sup>106</sup> Material in this section derives from several sources that overlap in content. Jansen, *Making of Magdalen* ; Haskins; Ricci; Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975); and Barbara Abou-El-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Specific references will be noted where applicable.

<sup>107</sup> A model of monasticism due to the work of the Benedictine reformer St. Odo. See John of Salerno, *St. Odo of Cluny: being the Life of St. Odo of Cluny*, trans. Gerard Sitwell (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958); D. Verhelst W. Lourdaux, ed., *Benedictine Culture: 750–1050* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998).

Geoffrey's personal charisma and piety. Yet, there was another significant factor. A shrewd observer of his brothers, Geoffrey recognized they needed a focus, a rallying point to bring them back to their vows: in other words, he needed a strong patron saint. But from the ever-increasing list of possible saints, who could it be? In time, the good abbot of Vézelay settled on the great penitent saint, Mary Magdalen—or rather she settled on them.

### 1.1. Humble beginnings and Abbot Geoffrey

Trained at Cluny, Geoffrey would undoubtedly have heard the sermon 'In veneratione Sanctae Mariae Magdalena' read annually and attributed to the great Cluniac reformer, St Odo.<sup>108</sup> The sermon tells how in the face of scandal and mockery, the Magdalen had sought Jesus' forgiveness and dramatically turned from her life of debauchery to follow her Lord. As such, she became the ultimate "model of zealous devotion."<sup>109</sup> It is not hard to imagine that Geoffrey, in recognizing the overwhelming need for repentance among his monks, would see the Magdalen as the saint who could rally his brothers back to their monastic calling.

The abbey had been established in the ninth century under the patronage of the Virgin Mary and Saints Peter and Paul.<sup>110</sup> Up to the time of Geoffrey's appointment, there seems to be no evidence at all of any Magdalen influence in or around Vézelay. Yet in 1050, thirteen years after the arrival of Geoffrey, Leo IX issued a papal bull making Mary Magdalen the sole patron of the abbey at Vézelay, and in effect, unseating the three former patrons. Eight years later, another pope, Stephen IX, confirmed the authenticity of her relics at the Vézelay abbey thus launching the cult of the Magdalen.<sup>111</sup> It might seem odd that the bones of a woman who lived in first century Israel would turn up more than 1,000 miles away, nearly 1,000 years later; but as Garth assures us, miracles of this nature were not only possible in the Middle Ages, but they were expected.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>108</sup> J.-P. Migne, ed., *In Veneratione Sanctae Mariae Magdalena*, vol. 133 (Paris: Garnier, 1844–1965) in Jansen, "MMAA," 63. Jansen maintains that this sermon is crucial to the cult of the Magdalen in Europe because it is one of "the first texts used for the saint's office and one of the first to stitch together all the scriptural passages about her life into one seamless narrative fabric." It is from Odo that we learn she was from a noble wealthy family and that because of her great wealth she had succumbed to temptations of sin.

<sup>109</sup> Haskins, 114, citing J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patologia cursus completus*, 221 vols. (Paris: 1857–1866), Odo, CXXXI, cols 713–721.

<sup>110</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 36. Haskins, 114.

<sup>111</sup> Abou-El-Haj, 22. Abou-El-Haj puts the date of the official papal bull recognizing the relics at 1060.

<sup>112</sup> Garth, 10.

## 1.2. Relics

The mediaevals were a people of the miracle and miracles were widely known to occur in the vicinity of relics, since relics were believed to have a mystical connection to God with the power to heal, exorcise, bless and give direct access to the heavens.<sup>113</sup> The faithful would travel on pilgrimage for years in search of such miracles.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps Abbot Geoffrey saw that since it would take a miracle to reform his unruly charges, then it would take the relics of a well-known penitent to do the trick. It is also conceivable that Geoffrey observed the holy masses passing nearby Vézelay on pilgrimage to Compostela in Santiago to the shrine of Saint James built in the ninth century, and was aware of the many benefits of establishing a shrine worthy of pilgrimage.<sup>115</sup> Pilgrims were always in search of miracles and miracles happened where relics were. Since a shrine “was only as important as its last miracle,” relics were necessary to establish a shrine, which was likely to become a pilgrimage site.<sup>116</sup>

So Geoffrey had two reasons for needing relics: the reform of his misdirected charges and the establishment of pilgrimage to Vézelay. But where could he get them? The relics market had been thriving since the ninth century supplying relics for the newly formed abbeys of Europe, such as the relics of James for Santiago at Compostela.<sup>117</sup> By the eleventh century many shrines were already well established with relics of the most well-known European saints and martyrs, and relics were in short supply. In the zeal to procure these valuable holy objects, heated squabbles and even thefts of relics occurred. One such disagreement was over the relics of the Greco-Italian saint, Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (ca mid 11<sup>th</sup> c). In this case, the monks of Bari had procured the relics from Myra by *furta sacra*, or holy robbery. The monks of Bari justified the robbery of the relics by claiming that

<sup>113</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the culture of miracles in the Middle Ages see: Rosalind and Christopher Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages: Western Europe 1000–1300* (Thames and Hudson, 1984); Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*. Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1982, 1987).

<sup>114</sup> Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 4.

<sup>115</sup> Abou-El-Haj, 22. She maintains that Vézelay as pilgrimage destination did not get under way for another 20–30 years.

<sup>116</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 40. Geoffrey himself is said to have attributed to the saint several miracles, both large and small, which enabled him to reform the abbey and make it a great centre of penitence and spiritual devotion.

<sup>117</sup> Sumption, 32. He demonstrates the vigour and widespread impact of the trade including that of a Roman deacon named Duesdona (ca. 825) who travelled to Aix to sell relics “looted from the Roman catacombs to churchmen at the court of Louis the Pious.” Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 9.

Nicholas was dissatisfied with the veneration he received at Myra and so preferred Bari as the site of his following.<sup>118</sup>

Geoffrey knew that the kind of saint his wayward monks needed had to be one that inspired a life of reform, but in a way that the Virgin Mary could not and indeed had not. Also the closer a saint had been to Jesus, the better, and it would not be too fantastic to suggest that Geoffrey would, again, take his cue from Compostela and settle on a contemporary of Jesus who had not yet been claimed. And with precedent set by James' relics interred at Compostela, it was plausible that the saint for Vézelay could have also travelled from the Holy Land to Europe. The relics of Mary Magdalen had not yet been claimed and validated by the Pope and better still, there was little evidence of her life after the resurrection scene, so there would be no major sources to contradict any new stories about the Magdalen. And indeed, in the middle of the eleventh century legends began to surface out of Vézelay regarding the Magdalen's journey to Gaul.<sup>119</sup>

### 1.3. Legends

#### 1.3.1. From Jerusalem to Marseilles

The Dominican archbishop of the thirteenth century (1230–1298), Jacobus de Voragine, was one of the few hagiographers to compile an extensive compendium of the legendary accounts of the lives of the saints still in circulation today called *The Golden Legend*.<sup>120</sup> In seven volumes, William Caxton translated Voragine's tales into English. This compilation of legendary material helps to show how hagiography developed and how the people of the Middle Ages understood saints in general and the Magdalen in particular.

<sup>118</sup> Sumption, 33. With situations like this becoming the norm, and the trade thriving as a result, the Church eventually recognised the need to take significant measures to suppress it. This was done at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (which we will address later on) the only Council in the history of the Church to deal with the subject of relics. Adriaan H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages: The Relations between Religion, Church and Society*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma, 1st English ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 159. For more on the subject, see Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>119</sup> These legends were eventually compiled in 1275 by the Benedictine Bishop of Genoa, Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*, trans. William Caxton, vol. I, VI vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1900).

<sup>120</sup> Unless otherwise noted the legends in this remainder of this section are based on those found in Voragine.

As one legend goes, the Roman civic leaders became nervous about the influence of the followers of Jesus so to get rid of them and avoid the possibility of the forming of any more cults around the Christian martyrs, the Romans piled Mary Magdalen, her brother Lazarus, her sister Martha, a handmaid for Martha (Martelle), and Maximinius, one of the seventy-two disciples, into a rudderless boat and cast them adrift on the sea, leaving them to their fate.<sup>121</sup> Because of its holy cargo, two angels guided the little ship through torrential seas eventually to land on the coast of Marseilles. Once ashore, the five passengers sheltered under the porch of a local temple. In Caxton we read: "And when Mary Magdalen saw the people assembled at this temple for to do sacrifice to the idols, she arose up peaceably with a glad visage, a discreet tongue and well speaking, and began to preach the faith and law of Jesu Christ..."<sup>122</sup> Upon hearing Mary's preaching, the pagans of Provence were converted and so Mary began her extensive preaching ministry, the result of which was the conversion of Gaul.<sup>123</sup>

As with most legends, a number of conflicting versions of the Magdalen's journey from Jerusalem circulated. One explains that the group left Jerusalem on their own accord out of fear of Jewish persecution.<sup>124</sup> Another claims that the Magdalen actually died in Jerusalem, but a man was mystically compelled by God to carry her remains to France.

### 1.3.2. From Egypt

The Magdalen was also associated with the legends of the fourth century penitent, Mary of Egypt who had made a name for herself as a charming prostitute.<sup>125</sup> Mary of Egypt had heard about Jesus and miracles done in his name, and wanted to learn more. So she joined a ship of pilgrims headed to Jerusalem and to pay her

<sup>121</sup> Luke 10:1–17. Maximinius is not specifically named in Luke, though there was a Bishop Maximinius of Tiers in Gaul, ca. 349. Most likely this is the Maximinius incorporated into the legend. For additional reading see Mary-Ann Stouck, ed., *Medieval Saints: A Reader* (Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd., 1999).

<sup>122</sup> Voragine, 78.

<sup>123</sup> Garth, 53. She writes that as a result: "Mary's mission of 'apostless' was fulfilled." Haskins, 118. She argues that the monks began issuing stories of the journey to Marseilles in the thirteenth century only after rumours circulated that there, in fact, were no relics at Vézelay, at least not in the eleventh century.

<sup>124</sup> Haskins, 119.

<sup>125</sup> Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross, ed., *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography* (Co. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996). Jansen credits the journey of the story of Mary of Egypt to Byzantine monks fleeing to southern Italy from the Eastern iconoclasm controversy. Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 65.

passage, she convinced the passengers to employ her in her trade. Once she arrived, Mary of Egypt approached a holy site only to be barred by the Virgin Mary who told her she could not enter until she repented of her sinful ways. She did so and entered the site, only to be immediately consumed by the presence of Jesus. Upon her return to Egypt, Mary went into the desert to contemplate the great mercy of her new Lord taking with her only three loaves of bread to live on for the next seventeen years. Once the bread was gone, Mary lived another thirty years feeding on the mysteries of the risen Lord. Toward the end of her days, a young monk, Zozimus, also went out into the desert in pursuit of a life of solitude and contemplation. He happened upon the penitent clothed only in her hair and well weathered by the sun. At first he took for an animal, but quickly realised who she was.<sup>126</sup> Upon learning he was a monk, Mary of Egypt begged him to come back on the next holy day and bring her the Eucharist. Sadly, by the time Zosimus returned, Mary had died.<sup>127</sup>

This story was eventually grafted onto the persona of the Magdalen in the Middle Ages. And so after the Magdalen sailed to France she retired into the wilderness for a life of solitude, leaving the preaching and converting to Lazarus and Maximinius.<sup>128</sup> This story fed into her fame of being the great contemplative penitent (Mary of Bethany) who turned her back on the world so as to be only in the presence of her Lord in the wilds of Gaul. In the wilds, the Magdalen did not die, however, until she received her final communion, and the story is told of a friar Zozimus who found her cloak and decided take the cloak and go out and find her. Zosimus did find the old and weathered Magdalen and, in accordance with her wishes, led her to Maximinius, now Bishop who gave administered her final communion.<sup>129</sup>

### 1.3.3. From nobility to weeping penitent

In another of Voragine's stories, Mary, Martha and Lazarus were children of a wealthy landowner with great homes (or castles) in both Bethany and Magdala. When their parents died, they left the castles to their children: the one in Magdala to Mary, the castle in Bethany to Lazarus, and holdings in Jerusalem to Martha, though when

<sup>126</sup> Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 64.

<sup>127</sup> In a slightly different version, Zozimus gives her the Eucharist, then returns a year later to find her dead. *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>128</sup> Haskins, 120.

<sup>129</sup> Jansen credits the journey of the story of Mary of Egypt to Byzantine monks fleeing to southern Italy from the Eastern iconoclasm controversy. Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 65.

Lazarus became a knight, Martha took over the responsibility of running of the household in Bethany (and so further developed her skills of hospitality). The young, beautiful, and now very rich Mary gave herself over to the depravity of her beauty and turned to a life of hedonistic sexuality making a name for herself by seducing men and destroying reputations. Somewhere along the way, Mary learned of Jesus and after hearing him preach, she realised the gravity of her sinful ways, repented and sought him out as he dined at the house of the Pharisee, Simon. There, Mary fell at his feet in penitence and devotion. The eyes, once painted to corrupt men, now dropped tears of penitence to cleanse his feet; her voluptuous hair once seductively adorned, now wiped clean his feet; the mouth that once spoke lustfully to her lovers, now showered his feet with kisses.<sup>130</sup> In this action, each of her wicked ways was redeemed at the feet of her Lord and she became the pure, devoted penitent.

Some legends maintained that, because of her noble lineage, she could not by nature be sexually motivated by money, instead she simply delighted in the art of seduction as her predecessor Eve did; for if she had been a common lady-of-the-evening, she certainly would not have had the character to realize her wickedness, and she would not then have been able to enter into so close a relationship with Jesus.<sup>131</sup> Other legends told the story that her wealth did not come from her parents, but that when they died, Lazarus found employment as a knight, Martha stayed home and took care of the modest home in Bethany, and Mary became rich through prostitution. Once she repented, she then used the money to support Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:3). This version provided a good sermon illustration to encourage those who had made money made through sinful ways, to follow Mary's example and give their tainted money to the Church.<sup>132</sup>

#### 1.3.4. From bride to devoted disciple

Another variation on the legend makes Mary Magdalen the bride at the wedding in Cana in John 2.<sup>133</sup> In this legend, the bridegroom was himself John, the beloved disciple and at the wedding, Jesus was so taken with the purity and gentleness of John that he called him to be a disciple. In heeding Jesus' call, John left his bride to

<sup>130</sup> Voragine, vol IV, 73-75.

<sup>131</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 69.

<sup>132</sup> Garth, 33.

<sup>133</sup> Voragine, 87-88.

follow his new Lord before the marriage was consummated. Distraught and embittered, the jilted bride turned to a life of harlotry in a desperate attempt to recover the love she lost when John abandoned her. It was only later, after Mary heard Jesus preach that she took the money earned from her whoring and first bought perfume to anoint Jesus, then used the rest to support him and his disciples. The legend also ends well for Mary and John, as they were then united, but this time as the most beloved, devoted disciples of Jesus. For the brothers at Vézelay, and both men and women who had embraced the monastic life, this kind of story might inspire them to the kind of relationship Mary and John shared—one of holiness and purity, much better than that of a common marriage.<sup>134</sup>

As the Magdalen legends emerged, they caught like wildfire throughout the region and the stage was set. Abbott Geoffrey, like Gregory the Great, saw that in a figure of such spiritual proportions as the legendary Magdalen, the purposes of the Church and his abbey could be well served. These stories could be moulded into a poignant lesson of morality and piety to rebuke, instruct and encourage followers in a multitude of ways. A handful of monasteries had made feeble claims to her relics, though none had received papal recognition. And since recognition from the Pope was necessary to establish veracity, Mary Magdalen's were still up for grabs. Geoffrey then saw it feasible to seek divine guidance and, since the legends said the Magdalen had come to Gaul, it was almost expected that her relics would soon be found, which indeed happened—miraculously, Mary's bones were found in Provence, just within reach of Vézelay. Armed with all of this, the good Abbot then set off to the papal court to persuade the Pope to proclaim Mary Magdalen as the patron saint of Vézelay.<sup>135</sup> The relics of the Magdalen at Vézelay and, therefore, the patronage were confirmed by not only Pope Stephen IX, but later by Lucius III, Urban III and Clement III.<sup>136</sup>

#### **1.4. Pilgrimage: the road to frenzy**

Once Mary Magdalen had been declared patron of Vézelay, Geoffrey set about reforming his brothers and transforming Vézelay into a full pilgrimage site, though he

<sup>134</sup>Garth, 29. This story also could explain why John dealt with Mary Magdalen so often and so tenderly.

<sup>135</sup>Haskins, 115. She places him in the court for six months.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 116.

died before he could see this through and it fell to another, Abbot Artuad, to set things in place. Artuad wanted something magnificent to offer the pilgrims at the end of their long journeys and so began the ambitious project of building an immense Roman style church to house the Magdalen's relics. To fund this (and other projects geared toward hospitality for the thousands to come), the abbey assessed increasingly higher taxes on the townspeople and it was with a great deal of controversy that the building commenced. Hostilities eventually became so heated, between town and abbey, that in 1106, Artuad was assassinated in a riot over the issue.<sup>137</sup> Nonetheless, the project was completed and for the next two hundred years Vézelay held prominence as the most popular shrine in France and fourth most important in all of Christendom, only behind the holy cities of Rome, Jerusalem, and Compostela.<sup>138</sup>

#### 1.4.1. A miracle-worker

During its height, pilgrims flocked to Vézelay from all over to worship at the shrine of the Magdalen. Many came seeking forgiveness, like the woman who laid a detailed list of her sins on the altar hoping the penitent Magdalen could help her with her heavy load. Astonishingly, after her fervent prayers, the list of sins was erased!<sup>139</sup> Others came to be healed, receive help with fertility, and childbirth. In one story, the Magdalen even helped a convicted murderer escape from prison. But just as the Magdalen could mete out blessings, she could also impart punishment and rumours of her retribution were well known. For example, in the town of Viviers in northern France, a peasant, who had been admonished by his priest to refrain from working in his field on the Magdalen's feast day, barely escaped death when lightning struck and killed his oxen. Yet, once punishment had been exacted and repentance secured, the Magdalen showed her compassion by healing the farmer's burns.<sup>140</sup> Like other saints, the Magdalen kept busy with all manner of miracles and she even turned her hand to the raising of the dead.<sup>141</sup> One day, a man rushed into the church wildly

<sup>137</sup> Abou-El-Haj, 22.

<sup>138</sup> Haskins, 98.

<sup>139</sup> Sumption, 103. According to Sumption, this was a common practice based on a legend of Charlemagne which claimed he had written his sins on a sheet of paper, presented it to the altar of St Gilles and they were wiped clean. Another case was a man whose sins were so depraved that his bishop would not even absolve him, was sent to Santiago and there they were similarly wiped away.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 69. Perhaps this is the same Aquitanian knight who, in the twelfth century, made annual visits to Vézelay out of a deep gratitude for the saint's protection and miraculous life-giving ability.

<sup>141</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body*

proclaiming that his friend, a knight, had just died on the battlefield, but after praying to the Magdalen, the dead man was resurrected.<sup>142</sup> The Magdalen also became the patron of any number of guilds including gardeners due to her presence in Gethsemane, and ointment-mixers, scent-makers and apothecaries who all claimed her as patron saint because of her jar of anointing nard.<sup>143</sup> Prostitutes even set up their own guild with her as the patron saint.<sup>144</sup>

#### 1.4.2. Pulpit for the powerful

Because of the notoriety of Vézelay, its patron saint, and its divine connections, it was at times chosen as the site for major international events. The great Cistercian spiritual and ecclesiastical leader, Bernard of Clairvaux, chose Vézelay as the site to launch the second of the great Crusades on Palm Sunday, 31 March 1146. The successes the crusaders were then attributed to the protection of the Magdalen.<sup>145</sup> And in 1166, Thomas Becket, Bishop of Canterbury, chose Vézelay as the site in which to give his popular continental sermon on the Feast of Pentecost. "All types of men and women gathered in the Magdalen's church at Vézelay to hear the archbishop: pilgrims, holiday makers, and locals enjoying a day out, devout worshippers at the shrine of a great saint, the pious and not-so-pious of Vézelay itself, the community of monks. Clearly their experiences, hopes and agendas were diverse and complex."<sup>146</sup>

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*in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone books, 1992), 189.

<sup>142</sup> Sumption, 69; Haskins, 125; Abou-El-Haj, 23.

<sup>143</sup> Haskins, 135.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>145</sup> ca 1090-1153, St Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Treatise of St. Bernard, Abbat of Clairvaux, concerning grace and free will: addressed to William, abbat of St. Thierry*, trans. Watkin W. Williams (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), 235, 265. For additional reading on Bernard of Clairvaux see Watkin Williams, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935). Other ecclesiastical leaders were taken by the idea of the Magdalen. For example Peter of Abelard and also of Hugh of Semur (1109), the vibrant leader of Cluny who "brought devotion of the apostolic Magdalene to that great monastic foundation." And on her feast day he used Gregory the Great's 33rd homily to instruct the nuns of Marcigny. As Jansen says: "[H]e refers to the Magdalena as the sinner who was so glorified that she was worthy to be called *apostolorum apostola* of the Resurrection." Jansen, "MMAA", 61.

<sup>146</sup> Brooke, 83.

### 1.4.3. Trouble brewing

In every corner of France Vézelay was known and Mary Magdalen was venerated, her blessings invoked and her patronage sought. The frenzy over her miraculous powers was thick and, luckily, the miracles were plentiful. Inevitably, the influx of pilgrims required huge levels of hospitality and this put enormous demands on the locals of Vézelay. Inevitably where the crowds went, there was money to be made and as the town drew the throngs of pilgrims, it also heaved with tradesmen, conjurers, and thieves. "Hawkers shouted their wares and rickety food stalls were surrounded by mobs of hungry travellers. Pilgrims hobbling on crutches or carried on stretchers tried to force their way through the crush at the steps of the church."<sup>147</sup> And 'crush' was the word for it. On the Magdalen's feast day, 22 July,<sup>148</sup> the crowds were perilously dense, treacherous in fact. As the hoards pressed in, people were smashed together and with only a few exits and no ventilation or safety measures, the holy site became a death trap. So when a rampaging fire broke out one feast day, 1,127 pilgrims were incinerated.<sup>149</sup>

## 1.5. Fourth Lateran Council

### 1.5.1. A reform on relics

Vézelay demonstrated to the Church authorities both the good and the bad that could happen at a pilgrimage site. On one hand people were healed and penitence was sought. On the other hand, the popularity of the shrines meant increased burden of taxes and more catastrophes and riots. In addition, the frenzy for relics and the practice of *furta sacra* had reached epic proportions. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran

<sup>147</sup> Sumption, 211.

<sup>148</sup> The exact date remains somewhat ambiguous, her feast day was established some time in the ninth century. C.R. Cheney, "Rules for the Observance of Feast-Days in Medieval England," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* XXXIV.90 (1961), 119, cites Thomas Clobham, subdean of Salisbury cathedral, who in the early part of the thirteenth century offers evidence that, among those "enjoined on penitent days," "*et festum Magdalene*," was fully established in England. Jansen tells us that "prayers for Mary Magdalen's feast-day are found as early as ninth century, but a complete mass dedicated to the saint does not appear until the eleventh or twelfth centuries, at about the same time that offices in her honor appear." Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 35.

<sup>149</sup> Abou-El-Haj, 24. She notes that this number was recorded in the *Chronicle of St Marian of Auxerre*, and the *Minor [Annals] Chronicle of Vézelay*, folio 14v, under the year 1120, as reproduced by Scott and Ward, 87–88. Also discussed in Haskins, 115. Many died in the suffocation of the crowds and as Stephen Kutter, ed., *Medieval Councils, Decretals and Collection of Canon Law: Selected Essays* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 130, tells us this happened in other shrines as well, such as in Amalfi, where Bishop Matthew was crushed in his own church.

Council finally addressed the problem of relics and Council members determined that since the display of relics provoked “the most spectacular of all outbursts of mass piety,” for good or for ill, they were at the root of the problems.<sup>150</sup> Though public displays of relics were not all that frequent, the Council must have concluded that if people could not touch or see relics, there was less chance for religious frenzy, numbers might decrease, crowds would become more manageable and robberies would be less frequent.<sup>151</sup> The result was the decree requiring relics to be placed in a guarded reliquary as section 62 states:

The christian religion is frequently disparaged because certain people put saints' relics up for sale and display them indiscriminately. In order that it may not be disparaged in the future, we ordain by this present decree that henceforth ancient relics shall not be displayed outside a reliquary or be put up for sale. As for newly discovered relics, let no one presume to venerate them publicly unless they have previously been approved by the authority of the Roman pontiff.<sup>152</sup>

In his study on the implications of councils in the Middle Ages, Adriaan Bredero discusses the intent of the Council's findings was to decrease pilgrimage, frenzy and attendance at shrines.<sup>153</sup> But the decree actually had the opposite effect and only exacerbated the problem. The Council further instructed: “Prelates, moreover, should not in future allow those who come to their churches, in order to venerate, to be deceived by lying stories or false documents, as has commonly happened in many places on account of the desire for profit.”<sup>154</sup> In light of this, it would seem that shrines containing legitimate relics would be perceived to be more trustworthy and have an even greater spiritual power—so rarely were they seen, and so powerful were their miracles, that pilgrims were all the more keen and the numbers and chaos only increased.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Sumption, 214.

<sup>151</sup> Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 88–94.

<sup>152</sup> John Evans, *The Statutes of the Fourth General Council of Lateran* (London: L&G Seeley, MDCCCXLIII), 72.

<sup>153</sup> Bredero, 159.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 174; Sumption, 215. He suggests that it also increased “doubts as to the authenticity or even the existence of some relics.” This was the case in Vézelay.

## 1.5.2. Canon 21

Sumption agrees that the findings of the Fourth Lateran Council spurred more of the faithful into pilgrimage, but he cites a further reason. Canon 21 stipulated that in order to take communion a person was now required to make an annual confession.<sup>156</sup> It states:

**21. On yearly confession to one's own priest, yearly communion, the confessional seal.** All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the eucharist at least at Easter unless they think, for a good reason and on the advice of their own priest, that they should abstain from receiving it for a time. Otherwise they shall be barred from entering a church during their lifetime and they shall be denied a christian burial at death.<sup>157</sup>

In a typical mediaeval village, lives were lived under the microscope of neighbours. There was neither opportunity nor possibility to preserve any sense of privacy, and not much opportunity for escape or anonymity. Because much of village life revolved around the local church, the priest was often the most knowledgeable person in town. With this new decree, he might have been the most dreaded.

Sumption writes:

Confession, the most personal act of piety which the ordinary man performed, was far from being the anonymous ceremony found in the modern Roman Catholic Church. It is true that the actual words spoken were inaudible, but the sacrament itself was held in public, especially in the case of women.... Moreover the parish priest was expected to probe for further, undeclared sins, and to inflict lengthy cross-examination on the penitent.... Dignity and privacy were not concepts dear to the hearts of mediaeval men. ... This was particularly true of breaches of sexual morality.<sup>158</sup>

It would not take much to appreciate the frustration of this situation. Making a pilgrimage would provide a tangible opportunity to, not only get away from the stifling environs of village life, but also to take advantage of making an anonymous confession on the journey. Depending on the list of sins, it may have been more

<sup>156</sup> Francis Dvornik, *The General Councils of the Church* (London: Burns and Oats, 1961), 54. He adds this must be done at Easter-time and that the decree is still valid. Also see Katherine L. Jansen, "Mary Magdalen and the mendicants: The preaching of penance in the late Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval History* 21 (1995), 3.

<sup>157</sup> Evans, 37.

<sup>158</sup> Sumption, 12.

liberating to confess to a priest who was a stranger with little or chance of making indiscretions public to a pilgrim's hometown. Vézelay, despite its crowds, violence and crime, may have been a rather welcome option. If we look at the text of Canon 21, we find that perhaps the Council was attempting to address the widespread abuse of the priestly office in confession that pilgrims were trying to escape.

Further, he [the confessor] is to give earnest heed that he does not in any wise betray the sinner by word or sign or in any other way; but if he needs more prudent advice he shall seek this cautiously without any divulging of the person, since we decree that he who shall presume to reveal a sin made known to him in the adjudication of penance, is not only to be deposed from the priestly office but to be thrust into a strict monastery to do perpetual penance.<sup>159</sup>

Since confession was now required, it stands to reason that the Council was here attempting to dissuade those priests who were prone to gossip. The deterrent was strong—removal from duty and subject to “perpetual penance.” However, we cannot be certain what sort of oversight was given to enforce the Canon, nor can we know how strictly local parish priests adhered to the new rules, let alone the full intent of the Council. We do know that the problem had been serious enough for the Council to address it and as such, it changed the way of pilgrimage in the mediaeval era.<sup>160</sup>

## 2. An Angevin coup

### 2.1. The vision of Charles of Salerno

In October of 1279, a vision of a young prince, the son of Charles I, King of Naples, would mean a fateful change for Vézelay, and for the political fortunes of Europe. In his vision, Charles of Salerno was told that the bones of Mary Magdalen were not, in fact, in Burgundy as the monks of Vézelay claimed. Instead, they were still in Provence and they lay in a nearby crypt in the Church of St Maximinius in Aix-en-Provence. In May 1280, the prince, joined by an embassy of clerics, archbishops, and other noble dignitaries, validated his vision when he found the decayed bones of a woman wrapped in copious amounts of hair lying in the crypt at St Maximinius. In case there was any question concerning the identity of the bones, a

<sup>159</sup> Evans, 37.

<sup>160</sup> The findings of the Fourth Lateran Council also had far-reaching effects in other areas of doctrine, which were to influence the Reformation. However, that is outside the scope of this project. For further inquiry into the subject see Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang, *Bishops and Reform, 1215–1272* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

charter lay alongside the body confirming that this was indeed Mary Magdalen. With great ceremony her relics were placed in beautiful gem studded and golden reliquaries and translated to a church in Provence.<sup>161</sup> But could this even be possible after the last centuries of pilgrimage and all of the miracles performed in the presence of her relics that were in Vézelay?

By the later part of the duecento, Vézelay was in decline. Pilgrimage numbers had dwindled and too many taxes had been imposed upon the townspeople. The chronicles of Hugh of Poitou, a monk of the Abbey at Vézelay (ca 12<sup>th</sup> c), relay a picture “of a proud, self-centred community, harshly jealous of its rights, tyrannical to its tenantry, at odds with superiors, in conflict with its secular neighbours and the local nobles.”<sup>162</sup> Geoffrey hope had been the making of his abbey and its undoing. There had even been questions over the authenticity of the relics themselves, and it now looked like the vision of the Charles of Salerno, son of the King of Naples and nephew of the late St Louis, King of France, confirmed these suspicions. Legends had located the Magdalen in Provence and consequently, she was the centre of cult adoration in Gaul. Now a new papal bull declared the relics found by the saintly prince to be the actual relics of the saint.

With the relics in their proper place, Charles of Salerno had laid groundwork for the entrepreneurial Angevin dynasty led by his father, Charles I. Magdalen scholar, Katherine Ludwig Jansen, comments somewhat cynically: “Who better for a new and ambitious dynasty to ally itself with than an intimate of the Lord who had brought Christianity to the heart of the Angevin empire and whose remains (and therefore intercessory powers) still resided there?... Saint Mary Magdalen would protect and legitimate the house of Anjou in the Mediterranean.”<sup>163</sup> And that is exactly what happened.

<sup>161</sup> Sumption, 38. He attributes the finding of the relics to the monks at St Maximin and dates the announcement to December 1279. Recent scholarship (Jansen, Abou-El-Haj, Haskins) offers stronger evidence for the October date. On the charter found with the relics, Haskins suggests that it was “to have been written by the ‘once-most illustrious king’ Charles the Bald, giving royal confirmation to the authenticity of the relics. However, this was later shown “to be a forgery based on a true document of Charles the Bald dated 31 August 842 in Vézelay’s collection.” She concludes that some monks, fearing the visit of the papal legate wanted to make certain that there was no doubt of the authenticity of the relics. Haskins, 125, citing Victor Saxer, *Le Culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident des origines à la fin du moyen âge*, (Paris: Auxerre, 1959), 195–196.

<sup>162</sup> Brooke, 92–93. According to Brooke there had been many conflicts with the nobles of Nevers who were both jealous of the lucrative pilgrimage site and angered at being taxed and bothered by unruly pilgrims passing through their lands.

<sup>163</sup> Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 42.

## 2.2. Charles of Anjou

In 1263, the papal legate had offered to Charles of Anjou, youngest son of King Louis VIII of France and brother of the pious Louis IX, the kingdom of Sicily if he could get rid of the Hohenstaufen and the Aragonese kings and princes (who inherited from Staufen the claim to the *Regno* in Naples) who threatened the sovereignty of the Papal State. Though he would never be totally free of the pestering remnants of the Aragonese, Charles, with the authoritative, if not financial, backing of the Church, wiped out the dynastic heirs of the Hohenstaufen and by 1268, declared himself Charles I, King of Naples. An ambitious and strong leader, Charles amassed a large kingdom around the Mediterranean, basing his court in Naples. The Pope made him the imperial vicar of Tuscany and in 1277 he bought for himself the title of King of Jerusalem. While there is little evidence that he was any more religious than any contemporary royalty,<sup>164</sup> it is clear he was intimate with the Church, especially the Franciscan movement. His oldest brother, Louis IX, predisposed toward a pietistic morality, had rallied his brothers to join him at the Franciscan provincial synod at Sens in 1248. Though Charles “did not necessarily encourage friars to join his household,”<sup>165</sup> records show that he was neither foe nor stranger to them, for example he provided the funds for Bonaventura to go to the council of Lyons (1248).<sup>166</sup> He was also known to give occasional financial assistance to the Church, and when his son, Charles of Salerno, fell ill in 1271 (the year his beloved brother, Louis IX, died), the king donated large amounts of wax in the shape of his son to churches through Europe and asked for intercession. Upon his son’s recovery, the delighted father made a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to St Nicholas at Bari.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>164</sup> Jean Dunbabin, *Charles I of Anjou: Power, Kingship and State-Making in Thirteenth Century Europe*. (London, New York: Longman, 1988), vii. Dunbabin offers a thorough examination of Charles’ life, religious and otherwise, including his financial patronage to the Church, 219–228. For more on Charles I see: T.S.R. Boase, *Boniface VIII* (London: Constable and Co, 1933); Norman Housley, *The Italian Crusades: The Papal-Angevin Alliance and the Crusade against Christian Lay Powers, 1254–1343* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Steven Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers: A History of the Mediterranean World in the later Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

<sup>165</sup> Dunbabin, 230.

<sup>166</sup> The year Bonaventura received his licentiate that enabled him to teach. Rosalind B Brooke, *The Coming of the Friars* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), 132; John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: from its Origins to the Year 1517*, Special Sandpiper ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1998), 167.

<sup>167</sup> After his brother’s death, Charles I worked tirelessly on his canonisation. Since his brother died on Crusade, he believed him to be a martyr. He also lobbied for the canonisation of his two other brothers, Robert d’Artois and Alphonse of Poitou.

### 2.2.1. Father and son

The relationship between Charles of Salerno and his father seems to have been a fairly good one. While some claim that Charles I was an “unloving and domineering” father, others highlight the fact that Charles I respected and trusted his son by regularly calling the prince to court to act as vicar-regent when he had to leave on other business.<sup>168</sup> In 1279, Charles sent his son to govern Provence, the land his brother, Louis IX, had given him as a protectorate, and so entrusting to him “the revenues and judicial rights of Provence for two and half years.”<sup>169</sup> When he recalled Charles of Salerno back in 1282, the king did so to give his son control over the *Regno* during a vital time of diplomacy, suggesting that the king “could not have demonstrated his confidence in his namesake more plainly.”<sup>170</sup>

With a both royal father and a royal uncle, Charles of Salerno would have had ample opportunity to learn what it meant to rule. At the time he was sent to Provence, his father was in a frantic search for more money and more men to fight the endless Angevin battles. The Church had backed Charles I to get relief from the Hohenstaufen, but once that was over, papal patronage dried up and the new king had relied on local Italian nobles called the *secreti*, mostly from Amalfi, to collect taxes to support his new kingdom and its armies. These *secreti* served him well and he had rewarded them in turn, but by 1279 the Italians had become very unpopular because of their ruthless measures in both increasing and collecting revenues. Charles I recognized the time had come to distance himself from these men and so relieved them of their duties. But now he needed to look elsewhere for funding his Angevin pursuits.

### 2.2.2. In need of a patron

It was at this crucial time that his son, now in Provence, saw he could help his father by finding another, more powerful patron, one with fewer strings and one with even divine connections, one of international import and notorious power. With the

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<sup>168</sup> Runciman, 206.

<sup>169</sup> Dunbabin, 185.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

examples of the fearless leadership of his father and the dogged spiritual devotion of his uncle, Prince Charles now turned his tenacity toward God and called on faith to provide a patron: one who could protect, heal, raise the dead, sanctify and ensure that the Angevin dynasty and his father would remain in power.<sup>171</sup> But, like Abbot Geoffrey, the prince needed a saint who could rally the troops and inspire the masses as well as nobles. It would not be a surprised if he now looked to his uncle, Louis IX, for inspiration.

### 2.3. Louis: the sainted king

Louis IX was a king who saw his kingship as calling by God, as Fawtier so eloquently describes:

Kingship for him [Louis IX] was not a mere opportunity of lording it over other men, or making his subjects happy, or conquering kingdoms, or feathering his own nest. He approached it—as he approached everything else—with his Christian faith as his guide, a faith which was his lifelong inspiration, and was founded not on convictions reached through theological ponderings, but on the deep and sure belief that lies beyond all questionings and is marked by the tranquil joy which only those who experience religious certainty know.<sup>172</sup>

Louis IX's devotion to God and His Church compelled him to uphold the honour of Christendom reflected in his resolve to carry the cross into Jerusalem in the fervour of the crusades (though he had to settle for a crusade to Egypt, which he successfully led in 1249–1252).<sup>173</sup> However, Louis was also driven to promote peace and the end of conflict and this was no doubt due to the influence of the Mendicants he kept near, for Dominicans and Franciscans were always to be found in his entourage. He wanted these holy men on hand for advice, conversation and regular confession and penance for both him and his children. He also supported “the establishment of Franciscan and Dominican convents and he donated heavily to the

<sup>171</sup> Housley has a whole section dedicated to the church's financial sponsorship of the Italian crusades in which Charles I and II feature prominently. Housley, 173–189.

<sup>172</sup> Robert Fawtier, *The Capetian Kings of France: Monarchy & Nation 987–1328*, trans. Lionel Butler and R.J. Adam (London: MacMillan Press, 1960/1972), 30.

<sup>173</sup> For a full accounting of the life and kingship of St Louis IX see *Ibid.*; Jean Richard, *Saint Louis: Crusader King of France*, trans. Jean Birrell, 1st English ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983/1992); Jean Richard, *Saint Louis: Crusader King of France*, trans. Jean Birrell, English ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23.

construction of the church of the Franciscans in Paris and the Conventual buildings of the Parisian Dominicans.”<sup>174</sup>

In keeping with the Mendicant’s mission, Louis was always concerned to give to the poor, the sick and to those of religious calling,<sup>175</sup> often giving up to 10% of his household economy to the poor and setting up regular and widespread food distribution campaigns. In his practical manner of understanding his moral obligation, the benevolent king was also aware that women, when faced with poverty, often turned to prostitution. He addressed this social evil by making it possible for such women to be taken in by a women’s religious order called the Daughters of God.<sup>176</sup>

### 2.3.1 Passion for relics

Another manner in which the saintly king expressed his religious conviction was his passions for relics. For him, pilgrimage and veneration were “an essential form of devotion” and part of his regular Christian practice.<sup>177</sup> In fact, he amassed his own rather large personal collection. As a Magdalen devotee, Louis had twice been to Vézelay on pilgrimage (1244, 1248) and twice to the grotto where the Magdalen was to have done penance in the wilds.<sup>178</sup> His devotion to the penitent was so widely regarded that in 1259, when there was concern over the validity of the Magdalen’s relics in Vézelay, Louis was called upon to verify them. On 24 April 1267, joined by his brother, brother-in-law, three sons, and a large entourage, the king took part in the translation ceremony during which he not only received a large quantity of the Magdalen’s relics, but in keeping with his munificent way, gave chunks of the bones away to the crowd.<sup>179</sup> This devotion and delight in the veneration of the Magdalen and her relics Haskins calls “naive and credulous,”<sup>180</sup> but Richard regards as humble and devout and in keeping with the character of the saintly king.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Richard, *Saint Louis*, 229.

<sup>175</sup> Richard claims this as one of the chief features of his religious attitudes. Fawtier, 239–244. For information on Louis’ extensive patronage activity see Daniel H. Weiss, *Art and Crusade in the Age of Saint Louis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>176</sup> Fawtier, 241.

<sup>177</sup> Richard, *Saint Louis*, 239.

<sup>178</sup> Voragine, 83. This story is found in Voragine and will be developed later in this project.

<sup>179</sup> Haskins, 126.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>181</sup> Richard, *Saint Louis*, 234.

## 2.4. The Magdalen: an odd choice

With this in mind, it seems extraordinary that St Louis' nephew, Charles of Salerno, would have a vision that seemed to discredit his uncle's good name. Just twelve years after the translation involving his uncle at Vézelay, and only seven years after his uncle's death, the prince's vision and consequent discovery of the Magdalen's relics would, in effect, declare Vézelay to have been a farce. But why would he do a thing that would so discredit his uncle who his father had worked to canonize, and what was so important about the Magdalen that he could not have just asked Vézelay for her relics instead of finding them anew?

### 2.4.1. What about Uncle Louis?

Louis's love of relics and obvious devotion to the Magdalen surely had an effect on the actions of his nephew. Haskins attributes the 'discovery' to the covetousness monks of St Maximinius who were given the divine tip from Charles. Though he took an incredibly active role in searching for the relics, Haskins argues that the monks cooked up the whole idea in hopes of establishing a pilgrimage site of their own. Jansen attributes with idea to Charles and the Angevins. Perhaps we might be content with the resignation of Victor Saxer, a French authority on the cult of Mary Magdalen: "It would be nice to know what had inspired the prince's devotion."<sup>182</sup> Yet instead of finding relics, could not Charles have just piggybacked on the fervour of Magdalen devotion already established and merely built a shrine to her? Or he might have settled on another saint—perhaps even his uncle, Louis IX, who had been both a martyr, and the leader of a successful crusade. His uncle was clearly faithful and religious, a noble, and growing mystique surrounding him might have provided just the right spiritual leadership needed for an Angevin patron. However, two things might have kept Louis from the honour. He had been the king of France—not terribly appealing to the nobles of the Mediterranean; and he was never associated with any miracles of repute. This is something the Angevins needed in a patron, one to undergird them with miracles of the highest calibre.

The Magdalen, however, was politically neutral and known for the sorts of miracles which would benefit a dynasty so enmeshed in battles and war, especially at a time when Charles II was trying to raise money and recruit soldiers. Additionally,

<sup>182</sup> Saxer, 208, as cited in Haskins, 126.

the Magdalen had once lived in Jerusalem and Charles I had purchased his kingship over Jerusalem just two years earlier. A divinely linked figure from Jerusalem who had known and loved Jerusalem's own King of Kings would go a long way in legitimising the Angevin title to the monarchy there.<sup>183</sup> Like Louis IX, she was attributed with a noble birth in the Holy Land, but as a miracle-worker and an intimate of Jesus, the Magdalen may just have been too irresistible.

#### 2.4.2. The need for the miraculous

Perhaps Charles also took the gamble that his miraculous discovery would capture the imagination of his father's men, giving them the same protection and success as she did in the second Crusade. Charles would have known the impact of the cult of the Magdalen at Vézelay. Perhaps he hoped to revive some of that in Provence and Naples. Keen on helping his father build up a treasury and army, the Magdalen's relics could show potential financial supporters (including the papacy) that the Angevin cause was worthy of the patronage of someone of her stature. In the end, what we know for certain is that the prince, Charles of Salerno, son of Charles I and nephew of Louis IX, was inspired to search for and find the relics of the Magdalen and eyewitnesses of both the papacy and civic authority were on hand to confirm this. The result was the Magdalen's patronage of the Angevin cause.

### 3. Conclusion

We have seen how the work of one man, Abbot Geoffrey, began the transformation of a monastery and helped to change the culture of a country by introducing the legends and consequently the cult of the Magdalen to the town of Vézelay. Not only did Vézelay spend more than two centuries at the heart of the Magdalen fervour, but because of Geoffrey's need for a penitent saint as a model for his wayward monks, fortunes were made and lost, people were healed and absolved, and the whole of Gaul adopted her as a patron to venerate and adore. It by no means

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<sup>183</sup>Julian Gardner discusses the nuances of depictions of crowning in the Trecento in which normally a member of the Trinity, an angel or a divine agent would be depicted crowning a monarch, thus legitimizing the rule of the monarch by God. On occasion for example in the Napalese depiction of Robert of Anjou, it is his holy great-uncle St Louis, Louis IX who crowns him. Julian Gardner, "Saint Louis of Toulouse, Robert of Anjou and Simone Martini," *Patrons, Painters and Saints* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1979), 25-26.

follows that Geoffrey was solely responsible for the Magdalen's prominence and popularity: a multitude of factors, including the renewed focus on penitence, the mediaeval predilection for the miraculous, and the general cultural interdependence with Christianity dovetailed to set it off. However, when Geoffrey's needs met with the miraculous discovery of the relics at Vézelay, a new future was on the horizon.

The agenda of another man, Charles of Solerno, was to also influence the fate of the Magdalen in the mediaeval mind. In his vision in 1280, the prince not only saw the relics, but saw the Magdalen's influence on the Angevin world. Some might argue that the Angevin's own agenda did the community at Vézelay a great favour, for though the penitent Magdalen had been "their patron, the source of all their wealth, their guide on the path to heaven; her community, [Vézelay] was the very symbol of tyranny in the age of communes."<sup>184</sup> The vision of Charles saved them from the midst of their demise.

In the end, Abbot Geoffrey helped to birth the fanatical adoration that exploded into the legendary Magdalen, and later Charles of Solerno forever linked her with Angevin dynasty. With this, we are one step closer to understanding the mysteries of the frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Church of the Basilica of Francis at Assisi. As Italy, in general, and Assisi, in particular, is the geographic location of our project, let us now travel there. The time is the end of the thirteenth century; the place Umbria; and our first subject is the eminent painter Giotto di Bondone.

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<sup>184</sup> Brooke, *Popular Religion*, 93.

### Chapter III. Contextualizing the Magdalen Chapel

#### Assisi

Norman MacCaig

The dwarf with his hands on backwards  
Sat slumped like a half filled sack,  
On tiny twisted legs  
From which sawdust might run,  
Outside the three tiers of churches  
Built in honour of St Francis  
Brother of the poor,  
Talker with birds  
Over whom he had the advantage  
Of not being dead yet.

His look owed its slyness  
To the fact  
That he had no neck.

A priest explained how clever it was of Giotto  
To make his frescoes tell stores  
That would reveal to the illiterate he goodness  
Of God, and the suffering  
Of his Son.  
I understood the explanation and  
The cleverness.

A rush of tourists clucking contentedly  
Fluttered after him as he scattered  
The grain of the word. It was they who had passed  
The ruined temple outside, whose eye  
Wept pus, whose back was higher  
Than his head, whose lopsided mouth  
Said *Grazie* in a voice as sweet  
As a child's when she speaks to her mother  
Or a bird's when it spoke  
To St Francis.<sup>185</sup>

#### 1. Painter, prophet and patron

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundational understanding of the Magdalen Chapel at the Basilica of Francis in Assisi. To begin, we will look at the artistic significance of the painting style of the chapel and then we will look at the life of the founder of the Franciscan movement and the radical approach to faith he

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<sup>185</sup> Norman MacCaig, "Assisi" *Surroundings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 35.

brought to the Church. In doing so we shall compare the revolution of the emergent artistic style, represented by Giotto di Bondone, and the revolutionary transformations of the Franciscan way, represented by Francis of Assisi, and trace the changes in the movement just after the death of Francis, which led to the building of the basilica back to the Magdalen Chapel. We then will consider the images of the chapel itself in order to demonstrate the links between the Magdalen and Francis in the midst of the birth of Renaissance painting. Finally, to understand the images we will tease out the agenda of the chapel's patron and attempt to reconstruct how one would have viewed the images and what kind of visual catechism it would have conveyed. This last task is difficult given that we are looking back through time with twenty-first century eyes and minds, however, we shall proceed in the hopes of suspending some of our modern prejudice by learning more about the men connected with the Magdalen Chapel.

### 1. The painter

The eminent art historian, Giorgio Vasari, tells us a story of the celebrated late mediaeval painter, Cimabue, who was one day walking on the outskirts of Vespignano, a village just fourteen miles outside of Florence. Here he happened upon a young boy who, instead of attending to his shepherding duties, was scratching out a figure that utterly astonished Cimabue because of its life-like quality. Cimabue convinced the boy's father, Bondone Giotto, to let him take the boy to his workshop in Florence as an apprentice. Bondone, aware his son was "drawn instinctively to the art of design, was always sketching what he saw in nature, or imagined in his own mind, on stones or on the ground or the sand,"<sup>186</sup> was happy to let him go and so began the fabled apprenticeship of Giotto di Bondone, the man destined to become the founder and father of Renaissance painting.<sup>187</sup>

While Vasari's tale is charming, many art historians question his accuracy. As little is known about Giotto's early life or exactly how a boy, born circa 1276 in the

<sup>186</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 57. Much is indebted to Vasari as the first biographer of Giotto and the other artists.

<sup>187</sup> In the past century the validity of Vasari's accounting of Giotto (and all of the artists in his work) has been widely contested. Maginnis argues that what Vasari was striving for in his comprehensive, if inaccurate account of art was a "conception of the fraternity of art" in which he "intertwined painters, sculptors and architects ... in a manner that attached many of them to the Cimabue/Giotto tradition, to the core of Florentine art, and thus to the core of his vision regarding the origins of what we call the Renaissance." Hayden Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 17. Additionally see Cole, and Laurie Schneider, *Giotto in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

village of Vespignano to a family of modest and rural origins,<sup>188</sup> came to painting, it is likely that he was apprenticed to another artist, quite possibly, as Vasari tells us, to Cimabue. Giotto would have been introduced into the duecento world of the artistic craftsmen and respected tradesmen with their own guild in the marketplace of the Italian city-states, and here begun his work in his teens, by mastering simple tasks such as grinding pigment, making brushes, preparing panels or walls, and gilding. He then would have learned to draw and paint, until he could perfectly mimic his master's style.<sup>189</sup> Cole explains that for apprentices, "[i]t was important to submerge the individual style into the master's not just for training, but when a large scale commission was given, the master could not complete it all on his own and often the workshop was called in to execute the work based on the master's plans and drawings."<sup>190</sup> Thus Cimabue's discovery of Giotto and taking him as an apprentice is a likely account as any, whatever the truth of it.<sup>191</sup>

It is also highly likely that Giotto was significantly influenced by Cimabue's methods, style and advancements and Giotto then built upon these techniques to develop an unprecedented realism in painting that was to revolutionise the world of art. To understand why Giotto was so revolutionary, and why we must bear him in mind in regards to the Magdalen Chapel, let us briefly look at the world of art during the late mediaeval period.

### 1.1. From icon to realism

Through the Middle Ages, artistic figures might seem to the modern eye a bit flat and rather unlife-like, but the Byzantine iconography was hugely important in shaping both the art world and devotional and religious life of the culture. The Europe into which Giotto was born was steeped in the religion of Christianity. It was also an Italy full of wars, plague, sickness and exceedingly short life spans. With misery and death all around, it is not hard to imagine that people would hope for some freedom from the melancholy. The Christian religion offered just that: a hope for something better, something to counter the fear of death. Death itself became the means of

<sup>188</sup> Cole, 7, dates Giotto's birth at 1267. It is widely held that the Bondone family were shepherds.

<sup>189</sup> Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook: the Italian "Il Libro dell' arte"*, trans. Jr. Daniel V. Thompson (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 17.

<sup>190</sup> Cole, 9. On Italian workshops see Cennini, 3–15; John Larner, *Culture and Society in Italy, 1290–1420* (London: Batsford, 1971), 285–348.

<sup>191</sup> Vasari, 80.

freedom. In the midst of such despair, the promise of heaven and resurrection was a welcome focus found in iconographic depictions.

### 1.1.1. Byzantine transcendence

Painted images in icons helped viewers transcend their existence into a world of beauty and peace. Through icons, individuals “surrounded themselves with their saints, invisible but constant companions, whose bodies were made visible by dreams, by visions, and by art,” all of which “made the unseen world real.”<sup>192</sup> Icons offered a window, a breaking through, to another reality in which Jesus victoriously reigned in peace and honour over and beyond earthly pain and suffering.

In the two dimensional grounding of mediaeval iconography, the surface functions as a support for the paint that lies on the surface in illustrative chiaroscuro—or play of light and shadows—in order to communicate a story, prayer or devotion. Though to our modern eyes, we are presented with a stiff, unlife-like and inverted plane, we must remember that icons are not meant to depict figures in space, proportion or perspective, rather they depict everything on an equal level surface. The purpose is to provide not a realistic image, but a mystical frame drawing the viewer into another world, like a window draws the gaze from inside a room into another reality outside. Production of mediaeval iconography was a highly specialized and stylized art that required years of training and devotion, and the goal of the (anonymous) artist was to reveal the transcendent, or the world beyond, rather than to reflect the immanent, present reality.<sup>193</sup> Bellosi puts it well:

Mediaeval painting is perfectly connatural to the transcendental concept of the world, which during the Middle Ages had reached the point of attributing to the concept of realism a meaning which is precisely the opposite of what it means to us. True reality was the reality of the other world, where the essences of things were believed to exist, essences which would be present in this world only in the form of imperfect incarnations. The abstractive formulations of mediaeval painting which, in the thirteenth century, were codified in such commonplace things as the Y-shaped bridges of the noses, hooked noses, fork-shaped hands and two or three-bellied abdomens, are justified in relation to this concept. Even the great painter Cimabue keeps to this concept.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Henry Maguire, *Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>193</sup> Paul Endikov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Fr. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publishing, 1990), 73.

<sup>194</sup> Bellosi, 4.

This iconic tradition hugely influenced the world in which Giotto trained; yet in a daring move, Giotto figured a way to move beyond the two-dimensional mediaeval world, and into dynamic realism. Exactly how and why this genius broke from such steeped tradition and went on to artistically develop his innovative thought and skill remains vague, but it has earned him a reputation as one of the most controversial of artists; and the attempt to define his artistic personality has spawned the most divisive of art-historical debates.<sup>195</sup>

While the Florentine, Cimabue, was undoubtedly an influence, Giotto would have also known the work of the Roman artist, Cavallini who, like Giotto was “interested in a coherent, convincing, well-articulated pictorial world.”<sup>196</sup> Additionally, he would have been familiar with the work of Florentine sculptors such as Nicolas Pisano, Arnolfo do Cambio and Giovanni Pisano, sculptors working with the realism and naturalism in the sculpture of the antique world of sculpture which had emerged from the stiff figures of ancient Egypt to the supple forms of the Greeks. But in painting no such journey had been made. Yet, standing on the shoulders of Cimabue, Giotto somehow developed the technique to convey depth and space to painting on a flat surface: to inspire weight, space and motion, a thing never before seen or done. Giotto was clearly compelled to bring human emotions and the feeling he saw in ancient sculpture into the figures he painted and from this he developed a way to paint that was foreign to the Byzantine style. Moleta writes:

Where the sculptors brought out distinctive human features and gestures in high relief so as to convey a mass of emotion swirling round the central episode regardless of perspective, the painter, unable to match that immediate tactile sense of body and surface depth, strove to create an illusion of space by framing each scenes so as to recess it in the wall, as if the viewer were looking through a window, and he placed his figures against an enveloping landscape or architectural setting. Giotto showed his mastery by painting that setting to highlight and expose the interior states of this figures and he concentrated on simple forms and volumes so as to strip each narrative incident to its dramatic core.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Maginnis, 79.

<sup>196</sup> Cole, 52–53. It is likely the Roman School was also an influence as indicated by Luciano Bellosi, *Giotto*, Scala Group (Milano: KINA, 2000), 4.

<sup>197</sup> Vincent Moleta, *From St Francis to Giotto: The Influence of St Francis on Early Italian Art and Literature* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 95.

For the untrained modern eye it is difficult to understand this, for when we look at the paintings of Giotto and Cimabue, there seems to be a degree of difference, but only a degree. So let us quickly look at how Giotto breaks from Cimabue.

### 1.1.2. Cimabue to Giotto old school

The early twentieth century art historian, Bernard Berenson, dramatically esteems the genius of the Florentine artists in general, and Giotto in particular, calling him “supreme master.”<sup>198</sup> For Berenson, the point of departure from Cimabue comes, as for Cole, in a comparison of the two depictions of the Madonna in Cimabue’s *Maestà of Santa Trinita*, circa 1280–1290, (*Figure 1*) and Giotto’s *Ognissanti Madonna* circa 1305 (*Figure 2*), both hanging in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In the former, the angels surround the throne two-dimensionally stacked on top of one another; the Virgin is there but removed from us; the throne static, occupying flat space equal to any other figure in the painting. As such, all figures “exist outside our experience, serving as reminders of a higher but inaccessible space” in line with Moleta’s comments.<sup>199</sup>

When we turn to Giotto’s *Ognissanti*, we see that, unlike that *Maestà*, the figures seem to occupy real space. The angels are appropriately and dimensionally located behind one another, with the halos of those in the front blocking those behind them, instead of suspended on top of each other as in the *Maestà*. They crowd together around a throne that occupies real perspective space, clamouring to gaze at the Madonna who proportionally sits back into the depth of her throne, rather than as in the *Maestà*, being pasted onto it. The child Jesus with weight, depth, and positioning is on her lap: a lap that bends and moves back into space. Berenson claims that “[o]ur tactile imagination is put to play immediately. Our palms and fingers accompany our eyes much more quickly than in presence of real objects, the sensations varying constantly with the various projections represented, as of face, torso, knees...”<sup>200</sup> This is Giotto’s ability to use “rudimentary light and shade, and functional line” to render forms and colours thus creating types—simple, large-boned and massive—depicting material reality, and invoking the “tactile imagination.” It is this tactile imagination that, for Berenson, makes all the difference in the genius of

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>199</sup> Cole, 6.

<sup>200</sup> Berenson, 44.

Giotto's work.<sup>201</sup> With this in mind we can begin to understand the radical changes Giotto's work now brought into art, and the ingenuity of his yearning to paint realistically.

### 1.1.3 New school

However, it is important to understand that modern art scholarship is less willing to embrace such a grand view of Giotto. As Anne Derbes reminds us, the contemporary inclination is "to resist the grand proclamations" of the sort Berensen makes, suggesting that scholars often "find litanies of admiration suspect...[and are much] more comfortable referring to the 'myth' of Giotto than to the dazzling accomplishments of a single genius."<sup>202</sup> Derbes readily admits that "for all our misgivings about perpetuating the cult of the genius, Giotto's contemporaries clearly did not hesitate to name and celebrate the artists they judged to be most highly skilled of the day."<sup>203</sup> We see this in Giotto's contemporary and friend, Dante, who marks the dramatic innovation in the eleventh Canto of *Purgatorio* giving evidence Giotto's innovation over that of Cimabue.

Once, Cimabue thought to hold the field  
In painting; Giotto's all the rage today;  
The other's fame lied in the dust concealed.<sup>204</sup>

And another contemporary art historian, willingly admits that "even the most cautious scholar today would not deny his brilliance."<sup>205</sup> It is clear that his style was part of an artistic revolution that not only made significant artistic innovations, but it also has major theological implications. Giotto's realism advocated a shift in theological focus from heaven toward this world. So with a careful eye we look to the work and legacy of Giotto as a important move from the tradition of the past yet rooted in the innovations that have only recently been discerned and attributed to earlier works of the Roman artists.<sup>206</sup>

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 45. He has an extensive discussion of the tactile imagination often referred to as the beginning of modern scholarship on Giotto, 39–49.

<sup>202</sup> Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, "Giotto Past and Present: An Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Giotto*, ed. Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>204</sup> Dante Aligheri, *The Comedy of Dante Aligheri, the Florentine: Purgatorio*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1955, 1983), 192.

<sup>205</sup> Sandona, 2.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 2.

## 1.2. In their eyes

Perhaps it may still be difficult to comprehend the huge advancement made by Giotto's ingenuity. Inundated by contemporary images, photographs, movies, advertising and all in three-dimension, we still might only see Giotto's realism as a small step. But if we remember that in Giotto's time visual images of any kind were not nearly as common as they are today. Many people would have only seen the few icons in or wall paintings in their local village church. Perhaps a few more might have been seen on pilgrimage. But for the majority, any exposure to images was rather restricted.

Now, imagine walking into the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, an entire chapel painted by Giotto devoted to the life cycles of Anne (the mother of the Virgin Mary drawn from apocryphal accounts in Voragine), the Virgin Mary, and Jesus. Prior to coming to Padua, you would have only seen Jesus and the other depicted in two-dimensions, flat and unlife-like, rimmed with gold and angel; never as real humans with movement and shape. Now Jesus is spread across the wall in full living colour, dimension and perspective—realistically. Imagine how this could change a person's concept of Jesus. To this point Jesus was visually made to look otherworldly, transcendent, a god-like figure from a story. Now one encounters his human likeness and he is more real than ever thought or imagined. He has weight and muscles. He gestures with an arm of flesh and bone, reaching out across the wall. His dead body droops and presses into the flesh of others. He is a man, fully human. Giotto has given his perspective of Jesus in the context of this world as a real living person. David Brown offers insight about the place of the visual in mediaeval theology, he explains:

Two innovations in particular were of enormous importance for the future of Christianity: new attitudes to creativity and to God's identification with humanity. Though both derive from the doctrine of the incarnation, neither, in my view, can be wholly explained by appeal to Scripture. Instead their history and significance are best explored through the history of pre-Reformation art.<sup>207</sup>

Whether he realised it or not, Giotto, in addition to bringing enormous innovation into painting, also acted as theologian by depicting the Word that had become flesh—a God who became man, just like any other human being.

<sup>207</sup> Brown, *Tradition & Imagination*, 322.

### 1.3. Giotto and Francis

Art historians are at odds in trying to sort out all of the work that was done by Giotto's hand and his workshop. Clearly he focused on theological themes and if we look at the whole corpus of work attributed (whether rightly or wrongly) to Giotto, there is an immense amount of work involving the life of Francis of Assisi. This is due, in part to the desires of the patrons who had hired him who wanted to be a part of the emergent Franciscan trend. Yet there may be a different reason for it. Perhaps the life and teachings of Francis also made an impact on Giotto and the other artists of the time in a way that substantially influenced their work, resulting in the breakthrough into realism. Brown addresses this point stating "Francis' stress on the value of the particular and on observation likewise helped generate new attitudes that were to feed themselves into art. It has been argued that it is no accident that Giotto was patronized by the Franciscans..."<sup>208</sup> Brown's project does much to bolster ours, but before we explore this further in depth, let us stop and look briefly at the life of Francis.

### 2. The prophet: Francis of Assisi

Francesco Bernardone was born the son of a middle class cloth merchant in Assisi in 1182. He grew up a ruddy and cheerful lad, always quick with a joke, gay in his dress, and making merry.<sup>209</sup> Impassioned by the ideas of chivalry and knighthood, he joined the armies of Walter of Brienne who was organizing to uphold the Pope's interests in the warring between the southern Italian city-states. But on the first night of his military career, Francis had the first of his many divine visitations that would eventually lead him down a very different path. Soon after this first divine experience, Francis was captured and imprisoned for a full year, during which he thought deeply about his visitation. When Francis was released and returned to his friends, he was a bit older and more reflective on his chosen life of gallantry.

His second divine visitation occurred one night when he was out with his fellow revellers. He was shown a "bride nobler, richer and fairer" than had ever been seen before. Thus inspired, he began to withdraw from his frivolous lifestyle, and

<sup>208</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 357.

<sup>209</sup> This section on Francis' life derives from several texts that overlap in their biographical information. Where specific information relates to one citation I have noted that. Otherwise, the information can be found in the following sources: Moorman, 4-7; Father Cuthbert, *Life of St Francis*, 3rd ed. (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1933); G. K. Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (London, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1924); Marion A. Habig, ed., *Saint Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources*, vol. II, II vols. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1991).

instead spent more and more of his time in prayer and contemplation. His love for and attentions to the poor and infirmed began to flourish and on one occasion, he was so compelled toward loving the outcast, that he kissed a leper, an event which had a massive transforming affect on him. Though his religious conversion occurred over time, his increasing devotion to God and his willingness to participate in the plight of the poor eventually led him to turn his back forever on riches, pride and self-righteousness.

Francis' third divine visitation, which happened outside the walls of Assisi at the site of the ruined church San Damiano, came through a mystical experience at the altar crucifix. This visitation convinced him that God was calling him to rebuild His Church. Taking this literally, he set about restoring the church ruins by begging and borrowing alms and materials. This act of zealousness finally compelled his father to put a stop to his son's eccentric behaviour. At first, his father threw him into a dark closet in hopes of changing his son's behaviour. Then, he appealed to the city magistrates, and finally to the bishop and church authority to stop Francis' wild behaviour. Called to a public forum at the bishop's palace where his father hoped he would be shamed into ceasing his activity and return to the life of a merchant's son, Francis responded by undressing and embracing the bishop, renouncing his own family and calling the Church, father. In leaving his father's house, Francis relinquished his father's, and consequently the world's wealth, and gave himself over completely to the protection of God. From this point on, Francis denied everything worldly and embraced a life of poverty and chastity. He was intent on wandering as a beggar and to preach God's goodness to anyone who would listen.

And so Francis began a new life dependant on God as he begged alms, gave to the poor and preached the good news of the risen Christ. This new way was so radical and so captivating that others began to join him and within a few years Francis applied to the Pope to begin his own order. The Rule he submitted to Pope Innocent III called for a life of penitence, obedience, and complete poverty: he and his followers would go without possessions, owning only one cloak of the most meagre quality; they were not to own books, furniture, or even a building in which to house themselves, but instead to live on what God provided through begging; and they were to preach the love of God. After much deliberation, the Pope finally granted them permission to organize and follow Francis' Rule for the *friars minor* in 1209.

## 2.1. Spirituals and Conventuals

The fervour of the Rule and the Order of the *friars minor* ran across Italy like wildfire and by the time of his death, Francis' followers numbered in the thousands, and spread through Italy, France and all of Europe. Franciscan schools were established in Oxford (1224) and Paris (1238) and there were Provincial Assemblies and a biennial General Assembly that met regarding governance, housing and changes to the Rule.

Toward the end of his life, Francis grew increasingly distressed with the reforms happening within the Order. In conflict with Francis' original vision, the Order accepted the use and ownership of property and goods given to them, including books, fine clothes and buildings, a move that caused a deep rift in the Order moving them into opposing camps, the Spirituals and the Conventuals. The Spirituals shared Francis' apprehension that the Order was rapidly moving away from his original calling, which was to absolute poverty. Francis had always taught his followers to leave behind every worldly distraction that might hinder them from God's call and creation, including any luxury, no matter how small. The Spirituals were in wholehearted agreement and tried to bring the Order back to this original way of thinking. However, the Conventuals were better organized and had practicality on their side. They argued that they could not have thousands of men wandering around Europe begging and being a public nuisance, so they needed buildings to house the growing number of *friars minor*. They argued the friars needed books in order to effectively communicate the Order's ideals in appropriately. They also legitimised the ownership of property by alleging that patrons gave funds and property as a part of their penance, an act not only sanctioned by the Pope, but considered necessary to secure the salvation of the patrons. The leadership of the Order passed a new Rule in 1221, which cut out much of the heart of Francis' original vision and in the end, the practicality of the Conventuals won the day.

By the time of his death, Francis' voice had been all but muted by the masses of *friars minor* working out the Franciscan way through study and service that mandated the conveniences he fought so hard against. In October of 1226, he lay on his deathbed, battered by dropsy and the effects of living a life of abject poverty. The holy man, stripped and bare to God's fate, reminiscent of the life he had committed himself to all those years ago in the bishop's palace, died at the Church of Portiuncula

outside of Assisi, the site of his third visitation where it all had begun so many years before.

## **2.2. The Basilica of St Francis in Assisi**

Soon after the death of Francis, the Order embarked on building a grand monument to honour their founder. To this day the Basilica of Francis stands on the hillside of Assisi, an ironic testimonial to all Francis had been and done. The basilica boasts an architecturally exquisite Gothic structure and has a vast Upper Church and Lower Church packed with brilliantly coloured frescoes, and downstairs there is vault with Francis' relics. This Assisi landmark, not only pays homage to the founder of the Franciscan Order, but is also one of the great works of the late mediaeval period, and the architecture and fresco paintings within have given it the reputation for being the birthplace of the Renaissance. The palpable irony of the magnificence of this place is that it is built over, around, and for a man whose primary claim in life was the call to simplicity and poverty.

### **2.2.1. Brother Elias**

The basilica was the brainchild of Friar Elias who had been with Francis since the early days of the Order and was kneeling beside him when he died.<sup>210</sup> As Vicar of the Order, Elias instigated the building of the basilica to honour his friend by rallying for the support of the recently appointed Pope Gregory IX. After winning a small power struggle with the newly elected leader of the Order, a Spiritual named John Parenti (one of the first to join with Francis), Elias set about making his beloved town of Assisi a grand pilgrimage site that would parallel the splendour of any other in Christendom, including Rome and Jerusalem. Acting on his belief that Francis was the first person since the apostles to have attained such a high degree of sainthood and eminence in the holy realm, Elias believed the highest earthly honours ought to be given to him. In an ironic twist, Francis had once told the bishop of Assisi "If we have possessions we shall need arms to protect them." Now, because of his fame, Francis' own poor body became an extremely valuable possession requiring protection.<sup>211</sup> Elias claimed that this justified caution, against the determination of the Spirituals, to

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<sup>210</sup> Moorman, 96–97. He dates his admittance to the Order in 1211.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

build a fortress to preserve and protect the body of Francis (canonized in 1228) intact. This fortress was to be the great basilica of Assisi.

On the strength of the papal bull issued by his friend, Pope Gregory IX,<sup>212</sup> Elias lost no time in choosing a site, breaking ground and completing the work in near record time (1228–1230). The celebration of the conveyance of Francis' body from the Portiuncula to the basilica was set for 28 September and thousands travelled from all over Christendom to be present to honour this great man, who was surely sitting among the most blessed in the heavens. However, Elias, fearful that someone might try to steal the body during the preparations or procession, had the body secretly transferred and buried a few days earlier.<sup>213</sup> an action which angered many who had come to see the body of the saint, not to mention infuriated the town, Order, and Church officials who had gathered to be present. But the deed had been done and Francis was already buried, and the basilica built in his honour would come to be known not only as the shrine of the most beloved of mediaeval saints, but as the site in which the emerging art of late mediaeval artists, and especially Giotto's transformational concepts, were to flourish "no less the cradle of a new and revolutionary art."<sup>214</sup>

### 2.2.2. The cradle of the Renaissance

The basilica generally, and the frescoes of both the Upper and Lower Churches specifically, have drawn the attention, accolades, and devotion of pilgrims, artists, and scholars alike. Alastair Smart claims this enormous Gothic structure, the first non-monastic one of its kind,<sup>215</sup> to be "the first and most splendid of all the monuments of that cultural renaissance which the memory of the Saint's life and ministry was to nurture."<sup>216</sup> Another Italian art historian, Bellosi, begins his analysis of the frescoes in the basilica by reminding us "the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi was one of the greatest centres of attraction of Christianity, if not *the* most important one." As such, most pilgrims of the early Renaissance would have visited it in their lifetime and the ideas within the frescoes "served as visible embodiments... [which]

<sup>212</sup> Smart, 6. Not to mention the indulgences Gregory granted to all who contributed to the costs.

<sup>213</sup> Moorman, 91–92.

<sup>214</sup> Smart, 3.

<sup>215</sup> Bellosi, *Giotto at Assisi*, 1.

<sup>216</sup> Smart, 3.

would leave a vivid an imprint ... of saintliness on the imagination of visitors,”<sup>217</sup> and would have spread throughout Europe fairly rapidly.<sup>218</sup>

For the purposes of this study we will focus on the import of particular frescoes that adorn the walls of the Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Church in this 800-year old landmark. The chapel is downstairs, adjacent to the right transept of the Lower Church just beyond the stairs to the crypt of Francis. To try to gain an understanding, let us turn to Teobaldo Pontano, Bishop of Assisi and patron of the Magdalen Chapel.

### 3. Patronage of the Magdalen Chapel

#### 3.1. Authorship and dating

Contemporary art historian, Hayden Maginnis calls the basilica “a pantheon” of those of the Cimabue/Giotto pedigree.<sup>219</sup> If this is true, then not only pilgrims would have flocked to the saint’s shrine, but artists and art historians would have also been drawn to the frescoes and architecture to study the new styles and techniques represented here.<sup>220</sup> Surely many of the finest painters of the late mediaeval and early Renaissance visited and worked in Assisi and different people at different times have argued that one set of frescoes was done by one artist’s workshop, while another would claim the same frescoes for another artist. Exactly who painted what when remains somehow mysterious and Cole suggests “the problem of the attribution of the frescoes [at Assisi] is now one of the most animated in the history of Italian art... In truth, the whole Assisi question has become one of the classic problems in the history of art.”<sup>221</sup> The Magdalen Chapel features in that debate. Berenson attributes the Magdalen Chapel to Giotto; Offner does not. Cole argues that if we look at the colours we can be assured that Giotto was not involved; Flores d’Arcais argues that Giotto orchestrated it and his workshop did most of the work. Others, like Stubblebine, are uncommitted, while Bellosi is adamant that Giotto did it—end of

<sup>217</sup> Jeraldine Wood, *Women, Art, and Spirituality* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>218</sup> Bellosi, *Giotto*, 2.

<sup>219</sup> Maginnis, 18.

<sup>220</sup> Lorraine Schwartz, “Patronage and Franciscan Iconography in the Magdalen Chapel at Assisi,” *The Burlington Magazine* 133.1054 (1991), 32.

<sup>221</sup> Cole, 148. Richard Offner, “Giotto, Non-Giotto,” *The Burlington Magazine* LXXIV (1939), 259–268, reprinted in James H. Stubblebine, *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 135–155.

discussion. In the end, most modern scholarship outside of Italy alleges that not only is it virtually impossible that his hand ever touched the walls, but that he had nothing whatsoever to do with the chapel.<sup>222</sup> It would be helpful if documentation were found to shed light on the artist and the dates of commission and completion. Unfortunately, no such records exist, so the confusion and debate continues, but though the origins of the frescoes are allusive, they remain poignant for the scholar, the casual tourist, and everyone in between.

Art historians fluctuate on the date of the chapel in Assisi, with suggestions that it could have been done as early as 1296 or as late as 1320 and some recently discovered fragments suggest that the patron, Teobaldo Pontano, was in Assisi as early as 1296, which places him there at a time Giotto may have been in Assisi.<sup>223</sup> But any attempts at dates and the artist are guesses at best and the debate rages on. While it is a worthwhile and exciting debate, it is too expansive for our purposes of theological consideration. Whether or not Giotto had any direct involvement with the chapel, it is important to recognise that the technique and ideology of Giotto's work are closely connected to the Magdalen Chapel because the way the images were depicted greatly affected the way the ideas presented in the images were viewed.

There is clear link between the frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel and those we know in Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua. Thanks to a contract between Giotto and Enrique Scrovegni for the chapel in Padua, we know that Giotto and his workshop painted the frescoes of the Arena Chapel and as two of the seven main frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel, the *Raising of Lazarus* and the *Noli me Tangere*, are duplicates of those of the Arena Chapel, the chapel in Padua gives us clues to the timing and artistry of our chapel at Assisi.

The realism which marked the influence of Giotto's technique is obvious in the Magdalen Chapel and these images were apt reflections of Francis' emphasis on

<sup>222</sup> Flores d'Arcais argues that a document put Giotto in the Umbrian city before January 1309. Francesca Flores d'Arcais, *Giotto*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, London, Paris: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1995), 272; Cole's extensive work on dating the whereabouts of Giotto do not have him in Assisi at a time that convinces him that Giotto took the Magdalen chapel commission. Cole, 7-15. Since Bellosi places Giotto as working on the St Francis cycle in the Upper Church in Assisi as early as 1290, there is the possibility that Giotto could have received the commission when the patron first arrived in 1295. Bellosi, *Giotto at Assisi*, 1.

<sup>223</sup> 1314 was widely accepted as the date of the commission because that was the date it was assumed Teobaldo Pontano, the patron, took up residence as Bishop in Assisi. However, recently discovered documentation has placed him in office as early as 1296. Schwartz, 34. A papal letter records the friars of San Francesco lent the patron 600 florins to refurbish the Magdalen Chapel. All furnishings were repossessed, as Pontano still owed 150 florins at the time of his death. Louise Bourdua, *Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29.

the creation and living the Christian life in *this* world. In contrast to most artwork of the time, the images tell stories of life in this world and only allude to the afterlife in the final image of the series. They also provide a real sense of viewer interaction with the figures by depicting innovative similarities between those *in* the frescoes and those looking *at* the frescoes. They are images of real people, in real space and time and, as such, viewers can identify with and relate with the figures in the frescoes in a way that was (and is) not really possible with two-dimensional transcendent iconography. In this chapel, Mary Magdalen is depicted as a real figure on which to model one's life. She has weight, breath, and expression. From the legends we can assume that a viewer would know her to have faced all the experiences of a real living person, and was even guilty of the vilest sin, and yet was depicted actively steadfast in her adoration and penitence. Up to this point, most images in art were of holy figures, such as the Virgin Mary, Jesus, even Francis, and that were somewhat removed from the human condition. Mary Magdalen, this holy woman, as depicted on these walls, is very human.

I again appeal to Brown's work on the role of the imagination in theological development of this era. In *Tradition and Imagination*, Brown argues that "for most of Christian history with the great mass of the population illiterate, most Christians' primary experience of their faith will have been visual..."<sup>224</sup> He goes on to discuss the importance of the visual in the development of theological concepts, such as the Incarnation, and the engagement in the visual for spiritual growth, discipleship, even revelation; and he makes this point by citing the impact the great painted crucifix at San Damiano had on the conversion of Francis (the third of the divine visitations).<sup>225</sup> Through an exploration of artistic innovation, mediaeval attitudes toward creativity, the potential for art to capture the spiritual imagination, and artistic depictions suggesting Jesus' identification with humanity (the Isenheim altarpiece), Brown effectively argues that the visual not only changed and amplified perceptions of biblical understanding, but also impacted the very content of the Christian faith. In doing this, he affirms the substantial value of the artistic role in continuing revelation.<sup>226</sup>

<sup>224</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 322.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 322-364.

As our undertaking is to develop an understanding of the artistic and theological content of the Magdalen Chapel frescoes, I refer to both Brown's project and conclusions in support of the claim that the Magdalen Chapel frescoes were not simply a beautiful place to visit, but rather the Chapel itself was a visual sermon, offering a new interpretation, a different dimension of what it meant to be a disciple in the pattern of the Magdalen. We have spoken of both the painter and the prophet associated with the Magdalen Chapel. Now let us meet the patron, Teobaldo Pontano, Bishop of Assisi.

### 3.2. Teobaldo Pontano

We can be certain that Teobaldo Pontano was the patron for two obvious; his face and figure is twice painted onto the walls of the chapel. In one fresco he is kneeling at the feet of and clasping the hand of St. Rufinus, patron saint of Assisi, and in another, he is kneeling before the Magdalen. While Bellosi suggests the possibility of dual patronage in a strange reference to these being two different men, Pontano and a Pietro Barro,<sup>227</sup> Lorraine Schwartz, in her helpful work on the matter addresses this possible confusion when we compare the "the realistically rendered sharp nose and jaw" of both figures which "leaves no doubt that both are portraits of the same man."<sup>228</sup> In every work of art in this era there is always something of the artist and always something the patron wants to communicate as well. We have seen that the artist's voice is expressed in both the realism and narrative aspect of the frescoes. But, the patron, Teobaldo Pontano, to, had something to say.

#### 3.2.1. Angevin links

Pontano was made Bishop of Assisi sometime in 1296 and while not much is known about him, fragments have surfaced to indicate that, prior to his arrival; he spent twelve years as Bishop of Castellmare di Stabia in the Kingdom of Naples.<sup>229</sup> There, it appears he formed an alliance with the Angevins, who as we know were ardent practitioners and promoters of the cult of the Magdalen and had "virtually kidnapped the cult" of the Magdalen away from Vézelay.<sup>230</sup> It is very probable that

<sup>227</sup> Bellosi, *Giotto*, 59.

<sup>228</sup> Schwartz, 35.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>230</sup> Julian Gardner, *Patrons, Painters and Saints: Studies in Medieval Italian Painting* (Norfolk:

during Pontano's time near the Angevin court, he would have become familiar with both devotion to the Magdalen and French art, which by this time was rife with figures of her.<sup>231</sup> Pontano was apt to have brought with him a predisposition toward the Angevins and it is probable that he hoped to fortify ties between the Umbrian city-state of his new bishopric with that of his former office. Lorraine Schwartz offers evidence of this showing that in 1297, the year after Pontano's transfer to Assisi, Naples and Assisi signed an accord and the latter began sending the Angevins funds to Assisi in support of their war against the Aranogese.<sup>232</sup>

Further Angevins links are clear as we see that the Franciscan cardinal, Gentile de Montefiore, sent to Hungary in 1307 to resolve the Angevin succession issue, funded two chapels in the Lower Church nearby the Magdalen Chapel.<sup>233</sup> And in the early fourteenth century (circa 1312–1317), Simone Martini painted the Elisabeth Chapel in the Lower Church, dedicated to Elisabeth of Hungary, a female tertiary canonized in 1235, seven years after Francis, the Elisabeth Chapel, located in the right transept of the Lower Church on Angevin patronage, and included Francis and Clare (founder of the Second Order Franciscans, the Poor Clares), Louis of Toulouse, Louis of France (Brother of Charles I, image is now lost), and Elizabeth of Hungary, all Angevin rulers devoted to the Church and to the teachings of Francis.<sup>234</sup> According to Adrian Hoch, the Elisabeth Chapel was meant to “memorialise the dynastic perimeters of the Franciscans’ first royal saint, descended from a line of holy monarchs, and establish Árpáadian sanctity within the institutional realm of the *friars minor*.”<sup>235</sup>

### 3.2.2. Conventual leanings

Conventual sympathies also play a role in demarcating Pontano's characteristic as seen in the chapel. In the history of patronage, especially during this time, it is odd that two portraits of a donor appear in one commission.<sup>236</sup> This could

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Variorium, 1993), 186.

<sup>231</sup> See previous section.

<sup>232</sup> Schwartz, 35.

<sup>233</sup> Gardner, *Patrons, Painters and Saints*, 186.

<sup>234</sup> Moleta, 111.

<sup>235</sup> Adrian S Hoch, “Beata Stirps, Royal Patronage and the Identification of the Sainted Rules in the St Elizabeth Chapel at Assisi,” *Art History* 15.3 (1992), 279. As the daughter of the Árpád king, Elizabeth was the first monarch to be made a saint within the Franciscan tertiaries.

<sup>236</sup> Giotto did this in his Stefaneschi altarpiece (circa 1320) now in the Pinoteca Room II of the Vatican Museums. This piece takes its name from the patron cardinal Jacopo Caetani degli Stefaneschi, who

be attributed to Pontano's ego, but a more tangible answer is that perhaps he was exercising partisan politics. In one portrait (Figure 3 *Pontano and the Magdalen*), he wears the dress of a *friar minor* kneeling at the hands of the Magdalen. Here he demonstrates his support of Franciscans and pays homage to the ideal of penitence the Magdalen represents and the Franciscans so loved. In the act of giving Pontano her hand, the Magdalen, in effect offers her patronage. In the other portrait (Figure 4 *Pontano and St Rufinius*), Pontano kneels at the hand of St Rufinius, the first bishop of Assisi who wears a highly brocaded cope, golden habit and gloves. While the Spirituels would have been considerably distressed to see such a display of fine clothing and adornment so clearly at odds with the sentiment of the Order's founder, the Conventuals would have delighted in the depiction of the holy figures in the frescoes in such finery;<sup>237</sup> for it is possible that church authorities felt it necessary to avoid any sleight to gracious, benevolent donors who provided such clothing and on whom they were dependent. Accordingly, Pontano has himself depicted as both a humble friar in Figure 3 and an honourable and fashionable Bishop in Figure 4. Schwartz says that "[b]y picturing [himself] winning the saintly protection as both a friar and a bishop, the portraits imply a celestial sanction of the Conventual position."<sup>238</sup>

### 3.2.3. A tertiary appeal

A third aspect of influence on Pontano could also have been the Roman noblewoman Jacoba di Settesoli who appears in many of the early biographies of Francis. Evidently *frate Giacomina*, as Francis called her,<sup>239</sup> had befriended him early in the life of the Order, was one of the early tertiaries and was often referred to as "another Magdalene, always full of tears and devotion, moved by love and sweetness of Christ."<sup>240</sup> She remained high in Francis' estimation and when she learned he was

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had it painted for the old St Peter's Basilica. Painted on both sides as it was to be seen both by the priest and the faithful. Robert Oertal, *Early Italian Painting to 1400* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 97-98.

<sup>237</sup> David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: from Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 89. They invoked the principle of *usus pauper* set forth by Nicholas III, which enabled them to use goods given to the Order such as buildings, clothing, books, etc without compromising the vows of poverty.

<sup>238</sup> Schwartz, 35.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>240</sup> "A Mirror of the Perfection of the *Status* of a Lesser Brother (1318)," *The Prophet*, ed. Paul Sabatier, Sabatier ed., vol. III, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 2001), 360.

near death, she immediately went to Assisi to comfort him.<sup>241</sup> Upon her arrival she discovered Francis' stigmata and reportedly kissed his feet and bathed them with her tears, re-enacting the devotion of Mary Magdalen at the feet of Christ.<sup>242</sup> Those who saw this named her '*quasi altera Magdalena*,' and in 1239, she was buried in the Lower Church at Assisi, directly across the nave from where Teobaldo founded his Magdalen Chapel. The proximity of the chapel to this shrine of the '*altera Magdalena*' would certainly have enhanced and excited the Franciscan passion.<sup>243</sup>

#### 3.2.4. Magdalen as Franciscan icon

Finally, the choice of Mary Magdalen as the saint to whom the chapel is dedicated would have been an appropriate choice for Pontano in light of the significant cult of the Magdalen developing among the *friars minor*. While there is little of Mary Magdalen specifically in any remaining writings of Francis, the popularity of her cult in Northern Europe would have presented her legendary attributes as a perfect match for the ideals of the Franciscan Rule. The dual aspects of penitence and contemplation represented by the amplified legends of the Magdalen aptly dovetailed with the life of Francis. God had appeared to Francis and called him to repent from his former ways and take up a new holy life of penitence: Jesus had forgiven Mary Magdalen of her former worldly ways then called her to repent and turn to a life of penitence. Francis had travelled into the seclusion of nature seeking the quietness of the contemplative life; the legendary Magdalen had travelled into the wilderness after a full life in search of the contemplative life. Pontano, very much a political animal, would have seen that since the Magdalen represented the dual virtues of penitence and contemplation, attributes much favoured by the Order in general, and the Spirituels in particular, the dedication of the chapel to her would satisfy and exemplify the sentiments of humility, penitence and poverty, *and* represent all that was fine and beautiful in the world of art.<sup>244</sup>

<sup>241</sup> Moorman, 44.

<sup>242</sup> Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio, "The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions (1328-1337)," *The Prophet*, vol. III, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 2001), 473.

<sup>243</sup> Schwartz, 35. In recent years the relics of five individuals were moved to be interred in the tomb of St Francis. *Frate Giacoma* was one of five others and as such the only woman.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

#### 4. Conclusion

All in all, it appears that Teobaldo Pontano was a very astute politician. He may very well have been a man with a strong devotional life and pure faith, but we can assume that his purposes for commissioning and choosing the subject matter of the Magdalen Chapel also had roots in his diplomatic motivations, both within the Order and among the city-states, and we cannot discount his obvious self-promotion. It is no wonder that he would have sought out an artist of Giotto's magnitude, if not the artist himself. Such a commission would have certainly enhanced his standing among the elite. Whether or not Giotto actually had any part in the chapel, it is clear that the mind that conceived of the overall idea, and the style in which it was painted, kept very closely to that of Giotto in which case, Pontano's reputation would have benefited. Additionally, we have seen that Pontano had stuck upon a central figure for the chapel which would both appeal to the Franciscan sensibilities and to the Angevin dynasty. We see the chapel frescoes are located in the heart of the Franciscan world, a thriving pilgrimage site and a remarkable artistic hub. Among the chapel's frescoes is a first in the genre of narrative painting (*Voyage to Marseilles*) and characteristics that play a role in establishing the early canon of Magdalen imagery. The theology communicated by these frescoes was wrapped in the stylistic innovations of the artists and the agenda of the patron who, through the chapel, could satisfy secular and church authorities.

We have seen the reasons for building the basilica and the conflict between the simple life of Francis and the movement's (especially Brother Elias') desire for a monument built to honour him, as well as the links of the patron which brought the Magdalen to Assisi. That leaves us to ask why the Magdalen was promoted so specifically in a place of prominence in this pantheon of the Franciscan world. What further connections can be drawn between Franciscan theology and the Magdalen and why would her cult feed into the devotional needs of the time? In the next chapter we will consider just these questions.

## Chapter IV. Theological analysis of the frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel

The Burden  
*Rudyard Kipling*

One grief on me is laid  
Each day of every year,  
Wherein no soul can aid,  
Whereof no soul can hear:  
Whereto no end is seen  
Except to grieve again-  
Ah, Mary Magdalene,  
Where is there greater pain?

To dream on dear disgrace  
Each hour of every day-  
To bring no honest face  
To aught I do or say:  
To lie from morn till e'en-  
To know my lies are vain-  
Ah, Mary Magdalene,  
Where can be greater pain?

To watch my steadfast fear  
Attend mine every way  
Each day of every year-  
Each hour of every day:  
To burn, and chill between-  
To quake and rage again-  
Ah, Mary Magdalene,  
Where shall be greater pain:

*One grave to me was given-  
To guard till Judgment Day-  
But God looked down from Heaven  
And rolled the Stone away!  
One day of all my years-  
One hour of that one day-  
His Angel saw my tears  
And rolled the Stone away!*<sup>245</sup>

### 1. The Magdalen Chapel

In the Lower Chapel of the Basilica of Francis in Assisi a chapel is dedicated to Mary Magdalen. Much of the rest of the Upper and Lower Chapel frescoes are images of the lives of Christ and Francis, accented by an assortment of cameos of important

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<sup>245</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Debts and Credits* (Hammondsmith: Penguin Books, 1987), 288.

papal and biblical characters. However, as the only chapel solely dedicated to a woman from the biblical canon, the Magdalen Chapel is unique. When we look at the images that adorn the walls of this chapel, we see the biblical stories associated with Mary Magdalen. Visually, characteristics emerging from the art of the Middle Ages define her as she is the woman in the red cloak, with golden hair, uncovered hanging luxurious and loose. She is always at Jesus' feet: 1) as Luke's sinner; 2) at the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11); 3) in the *Noli me Tangere* and with the resurrected Lord at the tomb (John 20).<sup>246</sup> But then, we turn and are confronted with rich greens and blues that tell stories we cannot find in the Gospel narratives or anywhere else in the Bible. Some of the stories we know from the cult of Vézelay, others are not so easily identified. In one fresco we see a ship of people sailing toward a pink castle. In the sea, to the right of the ship is a woman asleep on a rock with a shadowy figure of a baby by her side. In another, angels lift a woman cloaked in her own hair. We turn and see a woman kneeling before a man receiving a blessing. The same woman is also inside a cave receiving a red cloak from an old man in monk's habit. And finally she is holding the hand of a man in a Franciscan habit kneeling at her feet. We know this basilica was a prominent mediaeval site of pilgrimage. We know that the stories here both reflect and preach themes integral to the time and people for whom they were painted. But why were they painted?

In this final chapter we will explore the significance of the frescoes the Magdalen Chapel of the Lower Chapel at Assisi. In doing so we will look at the

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<sup>246</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Dictionary of Women in Religious Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 224. The red cloak and her uncovered long golden hair are universal identifiers of Mary Magdalen throughout the visual and plastic arts, especially during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Both symbolise her promiscuous past; red, the colour of sin. On page 313, Apostolos-Cappadona discusses the ambiguous symbolic meaning of the colour at "The colour of passion, blood, and fire. The emotional passion and lust of Venus, the spiritual love of John the Evangelist and the true love of the [Virgin] Mary. As a symbol for blood, red represented the life-sustaining energy of the Christian Eucharist..." which accounts for depictions of Jesus in red cloaks—see Giotto's *Presentation in the Temple, Raising of Lazarus* (in which Magdalen is also in red) et al in the Arena Chapel, Padua. Red was also seen as a symbol of sovereign power, i.e. the colour Roman Catholic cardinals wear, as well as the feast of Pentecost. In the case of Mary Magdalen, red is associated with passion and lust as was Venus, the Roman goddess of love. Her uncovered head signifies a prostitute, her golden hair, that she was a woman great beauty. Even though she repented of her sinful ways, the symbolic meaning of the red cloak and uncovered hair identify the character to be Mary Magdalen (i.e. the Virgin Mary almost always shown in blue, signifying, great worth, as the pigment was the most expensive, a form of adoration the heavens, as the Queen of heaven, spiritual love, constancy, fidelity and truth "the deeper the colour the truer the characteristics exemplified by the individual," head covered, symbolising purity, 50). Miles, 80, suggests these symbols do not trap the Magdalen in her sinfulness, rather they allow her to retain her former identity transformed by her faith which is seen in her unique location of devotion as habitually depicted at Jesus' feet. Perhaps the red cloak also has connotation that the Magdalen is always covered by the blood of Christ that dripped down from the cross.

qualities and characteristics of the Magdalen in early Franciscan literature and piety and how this translated to the frescoes images in a way that further shaped the theology of the Magdalen in the fourteenth century. It is curious that so little has been written about the Magdalen Chapel in Assisi's basilica. One of the few to do scholarly work on the chapel is Lorraine Schwartz who has written primarily about patronage and not at all about the theological implications of the chapel's artistry.<sup>247</sup> This chapter is then a kind of new endeavour, a first attempt at trying to sort out what might be going on in the frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel and what visitors might have learnt from the works in the chapel. Discerning theology from art may seem a questionable proposition. As we see from Brown's work in *Tradition and Imagination* that in the Middle Ages "access to the written word remained the privilege of the few, and so, though sermons in the vernacular no doubt played their part, it was the visual which had the decisive role [in shaping pre-Reformation Christianity]." He goes on to say that "artists, like expositors of the word, operated within a tradition of interpretation, yet one that was no less 'a moving text': a gradually changing content whose images had the latent power radically to reshape the nature of the faith they were expounding."<sup>248</sup> And so Brown directs his readers to consider images as a way to transmit and thus transform theological ideas. The Magdalen Chapel, commissioned sometime in later thirteenth/early fourteenth century, was just the sort of 'moving text' Brown is talking about and the images served as a visual sermon for all those who visited the Lower Church. In describing each painting, we will in effect be acting as exegetes, uncovering and discerning the meaning which would have shaped the faith and theology (and arguable still does) of a viewer. Since the pilgrims of the Middle Ages would have been far more familiar with the stories connected with the images as well as far more visually-oriented than we are, it is likely that they would have understood the details of the frescoes much more easily and certainly more deeply than we can.

In previous chapters we saw how the Gospel story of the unnamed penitent sinner in Luke 7 and several other New Testament figures were conflated into the figure of the Magdalen during the early mediaeval period, and then how she became the great penitent and centre of cult following at Vézelay. Since the flourishing

<sup>247</sup> Lorraine Schwartz, "Patronage and Franciscan Iconography in the Magdalen Chapel at Assisi," *The Burlington Magazine* 133.1054 (1991), 32-35.

<sup>248</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 323.

Mendicant orders of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were founded on the principles of penitence,<sup>249</sup> it is understandable that the Magdalen should become a model for the Franciscan movement. While we find her only once mentioned by Francis himself,<sup>250</sup> she is referred to throughout the early Franciscan writings as both an alter ego of Francis and that of key followers such as Lady Jacoba Settistoli and John of La Verna. Additionally, she served as a model for the Second Order Franciscans, the Poor Ladies (or Clares) of San Damiano established by Clare of Monetfalco.<sup>251</sup>

Because the legendary Magdalen was so inextricably identified with the virtues of Franciscanism, she was an appropriate figure for the Basilica of St Francis. The relative anonymity and thus flexibility of her story served various purposes for individuals wishing to employ her for exhortative purposes, as Gregory the Great, Odo of Cluny and others did. Since the basilica had become a significant pilgrimage site, a chapel built off of the nave would have provided a prime opportunity employ a figure of this type to spread theological and political dogma.

In addition, the Magdalen's visual canon was in the development stages and this fresco series was foundational in creating her visual identity. The chapel then provided then artist and patron with the opportunity to establish this canon and consequently establish any particular agenda within it. By the time of the chapel commission, Pontano's Angevin ties and recent appointment as Bishop of Assisi put him in the centre of both political and Franciscan conflict at a time when the Italian Inquisition was gaining momentum. Pontano's commission served to condone the use of worldly goods, justify indulgent lifestyle choices and demonstrate his finesse in the

<sup>249</sup> Moorman, see chapter on "Origins of the Third Order" and "Expansion," 41–80.

<sup>250</sup> In regard to the "Religious Life in Hermitages" found in "various codices, especially: Ognissanti (14<sup>th</sup> c.); the manuscript at the Capuchin monastery at Foligno (15<sup>th</sup> c.); the Vatican MS 7650 (15<sup>th</sup> c.); and others. Habig, ed., 7.

<sup>251</sup> Saint Bonaventure, *St. Bonaventure's Writings Concerning the Franciscan Order*, trans. Dominic Monti, ed. George Marcil (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure University, 1994); Habig, ed., ; J.A. Wayne Hellman Regis J. Armstrong, William J. Short, ed., *The Saint*, vol. I, III vols. (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 2001); J.A. Wayne Hellman Regis J. Armstrong, William J. Short, ed., *The Founder*, vol. II, III vols. (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 2001); J.A. Wayne Hellman Regis J. Armstrong, William J. Short, ed., *The Prophet*, vol. III, III vols. (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 2001). As model for Poor Clares see *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, trans. Isa Ragusa, 1st Engl. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 14th c.1961) and Bonaventure, "The Evening Sermon on Saint Francis, Preached at Paris, October 4, 1267," *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. J.A. Wayne Hellman Regis J. Armstrong, William J. Short, vol. II (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 1267); Bonaventure, "The Morning Sermon on Saint Francis, Preached at Paris, October 4, 1267," *The Founder*, vol. II, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 1267).

emerging world of art (by hiring likes of Giotto, if not Giotto himself).<sup>252</sup> The images also functioned three-fold: to advance diplomatic ties with the Angevins, promote the Conventual cause while placating the Spirituals, and institute acceptable behaviour for religious women, i.e. to live cloistered and penitent lives, and to act in full submission and obedience to church authority in line with the findings of the Fourth Lateran Council. However, this chapel must be seen in the context of the basilica and the contemporary imagery of Francis found in the Upper Church, which closely identified many of the Magdalen's actions with those of Francis. The result was that the images of the Magdalen would easily have served to establish a theology rich in repentance, mysticism and obedience, all characteristics of the legendary Magdalen, and all characteristics of Francis.

## 2. Context of the Magdalen Chapel

To begin our interpretation of the Magdalen Chapel, we must first understand the context in which the chapel is situated. Built on the initiative of Brother Elias in conflict with the then Minister General of the Order, John Parenti, (chapter 3), we know that the grandeur of the basilica was a point of contention between the Spirituals and Conventuals from the beginning, and the opulence of the decoration of the basilica throughout the trecento only exasperated this. Situated on the Assisi hillside in two levels, the bright, expansive Upper Church and darker Lower Church are both laid out in cruciform style with a long nave leading to an altar. Above each of the altars of the Upper and Lower Churches hangs an immense panel crucifix with magnificent transepts stretching to the left and right. In the Upper Church, stained-glass windows brighten the crown, nave and transepts, illuminating the hundreds of frescoes of the life of Francis of the nave in three registers, and in the transepts of the Upper Church, enormous frescoes attributed to Cimabue tower from the second register.

**Figure 5** Vaults of Cross transepts of Lower Church of the Basilica of St Francis

**Figure 6** Right transept, Lower Church of the Basilica of St Francis, Assisi

The Lower Church, known as the pilgrim's church, does not have the towering ceiling or bright windows of the Upper Church. It is darker, closer and contains a

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<sup>252</sup> Whether or not it was Giotto, the artist and his workshop painted in the exact style of Giotto.

number of individual chapels along its nave, commissioned by local gentry and other wealthy patrons. The transept walls are full of images of the life of Jesus and the ceiling is covered in the deep star-filled, royal blue and lavish gold gilding of the vaulted roof which emitting an intense feeling of awe. Beneath this is dimly lit, quiet tomb of Francis to which pilgrims (both past and present) flock hoping to see the relics of the famed saint.

By the time the Magdalen Chapel was conceived of and painted, the artists involved in the decoration of the basilica were among the greatest of their time. Consequently, the basilica is often called the cradle of the Renaissance.<sup>253</sup> Regrettably, much of the design and painting was damaged in a recent earthquake (1998). Thus it is fortunate that most of the Lower Church has remained intact, including the first chapel off the nave to the right, the subject of our query.

## 2. The Magdalen Chapel

The Magdalen Chapel has three entrances, the first is right off of the nave (facing the altar), used by pilgrims and the public; the second is from the right transept, which the friars or clergy would have used; and the third is through the right wall of the chapel itself, likely built to give the friars a private entrance into the adjacent chapel. The main (pilgrim's) entrance is set off by a five foot thick stone arch, painted with images of twelve church fathers, including Augustine and Dionysius the Aeropagite. Four steps lead a visitor up to an iron gate which serves a screen dividing the chapel from the nave. Once through the door of the screen, a visitor is inside the small world of the Magdalen.

### Figure 7 Entrance to Magdalen Chapel from nave, pilgrim's entrance

The frescoes we will deal with involve the majority of painted figures in the chapel: seven main fresco scenes and four portraits—two of the patron and two of women. Each of the frescoes shows important events in the life of the Magdalen: three from the Gospel narratives and four from the legendary material. All of the frescoes of the chapel show her crowned with golden aureole, and all but one (*the Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen*) show her draped in her red cloak. Angels appear in four of the scenes, Jesus in three, rocks or mountains and trees are in all but one (that of her

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<sup>253</sup> Smart, 3.

before Maximinius) and three frescoes depict quite realistic architectural structures. In three of the images the Magdalen's golden hair is flowing loose, though in four of the images, the artists depicts her with her hair tied up; and more remarkably, in *Lazarus* and *Noli*, a thin gossamer veil covers her usually unbound hair. The frescoes always depict the Magdalen in profile with only a few characters' faces shown frontally (Jesus and the angels in *Noli* and two of the men in *Pharisee*).<sup>254</sup> In the three scenes with Jesus, Mary is kneeling at his feet: in *Pharisee* she looks down and holds his feet, in *Lazarus* she looks directly up into his face; in *Noli* she looks up and reaches out to him. She appears in a similar position in the four extra-biblical images: kneeling (seated in *Voyage*) with her hands held together in prayer, gaze focused upward toward the angels or men ministering to her. She faces right in all of the images except *Lazarus* in which she faces left. *Lazarus* is also unique in that it shows words painted in gold coming from Jesus' mouth.

Multiple layers of framing hold the whole chapel together with an outer frame encasing the whole work and each individual scene encased in three detailed internal frames that serve to distinguish each scene from the others. Unlike the portraits, the seven main scenes remain thoroughly contained within their frames, with only the very edges of the Magdalen's cloak spilling into the first frame in *Pharisee*. This serves to present the images as self-contained narratives, like paragraphs in a chapter of a book. The larger outer frame holds all of these individual narratives or paragraphs together as a sort of chapter. In our chapel, Mary Magdalen is clearly the central figure, understood and interpreted through the images of the chapel as a whole much the same way as the panel painting of the Magdalen and that of Francis from in the thirteenth century. In these panel paintings, smaller narrative paintings tell stories about the central figure which they surround.

**Figure 8 The Master of the Magdalen, 1250–1290**

**Figure 9 St Francis Panel Painting**

### 2.1. The programme

Stepping back let us take a moment to look at the entirety of the program of the seven main frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel beginning with the Gospel accounts attributed to the Magdalen on the left, second register, moving clockwise. The first is

<sup>254</sup> It could be argued that *three* of the men sitting at the table in *Pharisee* are forward facing.

*Supper at the House of the Pharisee*, then *The Raising of Lazarus*. Across the chapel from *Lazarus*, *Noli me Tangere* is next to the *Voyage to Marseilles* (across from *Pharisee*), which is the first of the four non-biblical accounts of the Magdalen. Moving upwards to the third register, directly above *Noli* and *Voyage* is the next image in the cycle, the *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen*,<sup>255</sup> (the chronological elements tied to the legendary material that tells of Mary Magdalen leaving her ministry in Marseilles to pursue a life of penitence as a desert contemplative where, in the rapture of her penitence, she feeds on heaven's mysteries). The cycle continues clockwise, above the main entrance, with *Zosimus Giving a Cloak to the Magdalen*<sup>256</sup> and we end back on the left wall, above *Pharisee* and *Lazarus*, with the image of *Mary Magdalen Kneeling before Maximinius*.<sup>257</sup>

## 2.2. Description and content

### Figure 10 Magdalen Chapel left wall

To enter into the catechism of the Magdalen Chapel, let us focus first on a few of the images of the chapel. First we will look at *Supper at the House of the Pharisee*, which is on the left wall of the chapel as you enter from the nave and then we will look at *The Raising of Lazarus* and the *Noli me Tangere* in comparison with Giotto's most notable works, the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. This exercise will give us a sense of the style, technique and basic sort of context of the chapel.<sup>258</sup>

The *Supper at the House of the Pharisee* sits above the image of Bishop Pontano Teobaldo who is receiving a blessing from St Rufinius, and below *Zosimus Giving a Cloak to the Magdalen*.<sup>259</sup> To the right is *The Raising of Lazarus*. Four layers frame the fresco. Moving from the inside out: the first is yellow; the second, red

<sup>255</sup> Or *Mary Magdalen in Communion with the Angels*.

<sup>256</sup> The content of these four frescoes derives from the legendary material already covered in previous sections. See Voragine, 61–79.

<sup>257</sup> Bellosi, *Giotto at Assisi* adds to the title "*And Her Assumption into Heaven*", 9. Though there is little evidence support that this was the intent of either the artist of the patron.

<sup>258</sup> All future references to the images will be described from this perspective with the entrance from the nave as the starting point.

<sup>259</sup> Bellosi titles this *St Mary Magdalen receives Holy Communion from Saint Maximinus and her assumption into heaven*. Because of the lack of primary contracts or ensuing work on this fresco there is confusion on the title. The man could be Maximinius or it could be Zosimus, who is named by both Lunghi and Bellosi in another of the frescoes in the chapel. Elvio Lunghi, *The Basilica of St Francis in Assisi* (Antella; Florence: SCALA Group, 1996), 143; Bellosi, *Giotto at Assisi*, 9. If one were taking the legend from Voragine, it would be St Maximinius—though it was Zosimus who found Mary of Egypt in the desert, gave her a cloak, and offered her last communion. With the confusion and conflation of Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalen, the name of the man in the fresco may also be confused. Voragine, 63.

marbling; and the third (top right) a blue, yellow and red alternating pattern with elaborate yellow markings on the left; and the fourth is a thick outer frame around the top right and bottom with a repeating blue and red diamond-honeycomb pattern on white. This fourth frame serves to connect the scene to Pontano's portrait and *The Raising of Lazarus*. The border on the outer left rises along the corner and curvature of the chapel and connects the fresco to the larger schema of the chapel encompassing the entire arch of *The Magdalen Receiving Communion*. Lighting in the chapel is muted on a sunny day, and relatively dim otherwise though the candelabra that hangs (and is likely to have hung) lights this fresco better than most of the frescoes in the chapel.

**Figure 11 *Supper at the House of the Pharisee***

The scene of *Supper in the House of the Pharisee* is situated in a five-panelled portico which offers a commanding sense of perspective. The portico shelters the figures and, while many similar architectural structures are painted in the Upper Church above, it is also striking in its similarity the same scene at Santa Croce (also Franciscan) in Florence, by Taddeo Gaddi, though, the detail of both the architecture and the decoration in Assisi are much more elaborate.<sup>260</sup>

**Figure 12 Detail *Tree of Life and Christ* Taddeo Gaddi**

*Pharisee* identifies the Magdalen as Luke's unnamed penitent (7:36–50).<sup>261</sup> From reading Luke's text, we learn the entire story associated with this fresco. It is clear that she has entered uninvited and fallen at the feet of Jesus. Responding to the unspoken dismay of his host, Jesus has allowed the woman to smother his feet with tears and kiss his feet. From Luke we know that Jesus' responds to the others saying: "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." (Luke 7:47) Then he says to the woman at his feet. "Your sins are forgiven." (Luke 7:48) At this, the host and his guests begin to grumble asking: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" This is the moment of tension captured in the fresco. Jesus extends his hand perhaps as a gesture of hope for his listeners, or to demonstrate his trust or even to further emphasize his point. One man ponders. Two men confer and another man grips his knife. Mary, seemingly unaware,

<sup>260</sup> According to Canali, *The Crucifix with the Tree of Life*, the overall subject, is based on a text by Bonaventure who is the man sitting in the far left bottom corner around which the fresco of interest is painted, resting a scroll across his lap. Ferruccio Canali, *The Basilica of Santa Croce*, trans. Julia Weiss, ed. Barbara Bonechi, 2003 ed. (Florence: Bonechi Edizioni "Il Turismo", 1997), 95.

<sup>261</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 31–43; and David Brown's scene of anointing.

kisses Jesus' feet in devotion and humility, overwhelmed by Jesus' mercy, acceptance forgiveness, and blessing.

The artist places the Magdalen kneeling on the far left so that the part of her cloak that covers her feet edges up against the lower left corner of the painting allowing her hem to drape over the interior yellow frame. This gives the feeling that she is not wholly contained in the frame, but edging out into the space of the viewer, a fairly unusual device for its time. In keeping with tradition, she is cloaked in red with her golden hair unbound and draping over her hand which holds Jesus' feet. Jesus, sitting almost languidly in profile on a masterfully detailed wooden chair, wears a cloak with patterning echoing that of the Magdalen weeping at his feet,<sup>262</sup> his gaze drawing ours across the scene. His left hand is opened toward the critical Pharisee, his right hand points (dangles?), two fingers extended downward toward the hunched shoulders of Mary as if in a blessing. Her focus is steadfast, not on the action of the room, but on his feet. His focus is on the men grumbling at the impropriety of an ill-famed woman in the Pharisee's own house, touching the guest of honour. The three servants in the foreground seem oblivious to the anything going on, as they concentrate on their task of serving bread. Yet while the action takes place between Jesus and the Magdalen on the far left, the backs of two of the servants turn away from one another and serve as a frame for the man in the centre, Simon the Pharisee, who wears blue and yellow with a gold aureole. This man, master of the house and host to his invited guests, turns a notably aggressive look at Jesus, clutching in his right hand a (barely noticeable) knife prefiguring the violence of the Crucifixion yet to come.<sup>263</sup> To the left of Simon, a man in white with a broad gold strip about his neck and down his tunic, faces (left) away from Jesus toward a third man with an aureole. These two, perhaps startled at the events, exchange glances of dismay. The viewer's gaze is directed, not necessarily at Jesus or Mary, but rather at Simon the Pharisee. The slanting backs of the servant, the posture of the five figures at the table, even the layout of the bread and knife upon the table, all call attention to Simon.

<sup>262</sup> It seems as she has taken off his shoe in order to wash it. This may hold significance later as we discuss the importance of Francis identifying with the poverty of Christ. Remarking on his foreshortened aureole, Bellosi calls our attention to similarities of these images with those "sacred figures seen either in profile or in a very pronounced three-quarter turn" at Padua and claims that this "is yet another of Giotto's *spatial* ideas." Bellosi, *Giotto at Assisi*, 12.

<sup>263</sup> The blade on the table is also worn, possibly due to someone scratching the silver off. Another possibility is that the hostility toward Jesus represented by the presence of the knife could have been distasteful for some pilgrim or friar who took it upon themselves to remove it.

To continue with a detailed description of each fresco (as I have done above) and then offer a thorough description of each detail within each fresco would be outside the scope of this paper and it is likely that it might not be a true assessment of the intentions of the patron and artist(s). Instead, we will step back from intensive descriptive engagement with the individual fresco and move to analyse the Chapel as a whole work. It may seem a less satisfying route, but it is the route that I believe will prove worthwhile in the end.

### 3. Agendas: a fresco approach

#### 3.1. Angevin politics

One of the issues brewing at the time the chapel was commissioned was the need to link the Angevin dynasty more firmly with Italy and with the authority of the Church. The Franciscan movement was pivotal in gaining the hearts and loyalties of the people and pilgrims and with the Magdalen Chapel situated in the pilgrim's church, near the altar and so near the entrance of Francis' tomb, Pontano could establish the historically French and Angevin patron, the Magdalen, at the heart of the Franciscan world and thus at the heart of Italy.<sup>264</sup> This inclusion of the *Voyage* would remind the mediaeval viewer that the Magdalen travelled to Gaul and landed at Provence, where the Angevin king (at the time the chapel was commissioned and painted), Charles II, had found her relics. This would line Gaul and the Angevines with the Magdalen.

From the early Franciscan writings we know that Francis was deeply associated with the Magdalen, and regularly depicted sharing, even taking her traditional location at the foot of the cross. These representations, found throughout fourteenth century Italy, were prevalent in both the Upper and Lower Churches of the basilica, in close proximity to the Magdalen Chapel. The first of these such images (attr. Pietro Lorenzetti) is found in the right transept of the Lower Church, immediately outside the left entrance of the Magdalen Chapel where Mary (left) shares the space at the foot of the cross with Francis (right).

**Figure 13** *Crucifixion* attr. Pietro Lorenzetti circa 1300

**Figure 14** *Crucifixion* Cimabue

<sup>264</sup> Along with its brother Mendicant movement the Dominicans.

The second of these depictions is a fresco attributed to Giotto's predecessor, Cimabue, in which Francis actually replaces the Magdalen at the foot of the cross. This enormous fresco is located directly above the Lorenzetti crucifix in the right transept of the Upper Church, thus directly above the left entrance to the Magdalen Chapel. As Pontano was appointed bishop of Assisi after the painting of both these and most of the other frescoes in the Upper Church, he needed only to capitalize on what was already in place to further entrench the patron saint of the Angevins at the heart of the Franciscan world and thus link Francis, the Magdalen and the Angevin kings in the eyes of the of pilgrims who would visit the church each year.

### 3.2. Church as authority

Another clue to Pontano's church-and-state agenda is the dual depiction of the patron, the two images we looked at in chapter 3. The first image (first register on the left) is the first image a pilgrim would see upon entering the chapel from the nave. This is a portrait of Pontano in full bishop's garb receiving a blessing from St Rufinius, the original patron saint of Assisi. In it Pontano's head is bowed, his eyes diverted and his gloved hands held in prayer which demonstrates Pontano, as the good bishop, humbly revering the authority of the Church. In it he kneels before a bishop who carries Peter's shepherd's crook and so represents the Church and all of the power and authority that goes along with it. The freico demonstrates that Rufinius has passed on the apostolic succession to Pontano, therefore instilling him with the weight and backing of Church authority—authority over and above the Franciscans.

**Figure 3** *Pontano and the Magdalen* (Chapter 3)

**Figure 4** *Pontano and Bishop Rufinius* (Chapter 3)

Diagonally from this portrait, immediately to the right of the altar, Pontano is again depicted, this time wearing a Franciscan habit and kneeling before the Magdalen, patron saint of the Angevins. This portrait indicates that his relationship with the saint, and perhaps all she stands for, is different from his relationship with the Church. He does not bow his head and humbly receive her blessing. Instead, he looks directly up into her eyes reaching up to grasp her hand in a gesture of fellowship. Though they are not quite equals, he is not under her authority. He kneels before her in honour, not seek her blessing, but accepting her patronage. This Magdalen, as patron, represents the ideal of penance in the forefront of the Franciscan mind. Clad in Franciscan robes, Pontano shows his participation in and unity with the movement.

Taking the two portraits together, we see what he desires us to know about his relationship with the Church, the Angevin king and the Franciscan movement. He looks into the eyes of the Magdalen, acknowledging her friendship and patronage, but he bows before, humbly serving the Church, receiving her blessing and authority. He has the backing of the Angevin kings, the oversight of Assisi, and the authority of the Church which supersedes that of the Franciscan Order.

In another fresco, *Mary Magdalen Kneeling before Maximinius*, we see a strong visual of the Magdalen and all she represents—Angevins, Franciscans, discipleship—kneeling before the Bishop Maximinius, the representative of the Church.<sup>265</sup> With her hair properly tied back and eyes closed, the Magdalen, like Pontano, kneels before the authority of the Church. Bishop Maximinius, standing before her on an altar holding a chalice, reaches out to bless her. By the imagery of the portico symbolising the Church, the whole scene encircles her, symbolic of her dependence on and containment within the Church. Maximinius, acting for the Church, communes her, and four tonsured men who stand behind her (one in the brown of the *frate minore*) demonstrate the primacy of the Church represented in the figure of the Bishop, and the secondary place of the Franciscans. Clearly the Church is in authority and, as such, the Magdalen complies with, and humbles herself before the man representing the Institution.

**Figure 15** *Mary Magdalen kneeling before Maximinius*

### 3.3. Spirituals and Conventuals

We have seen that by the beginning of the fourteenth century, troubles between the Spirituals and Conventuals were coming to a head. Each side had concerns that inevitably forced a standoff and the Spirituals were losing ground. Their leaders were being tried and burned at the stake by the newly established Italian Inquisition, and anyone connected with the Spirituals were forced into hiding.<sup>266</sup> As Minister General, Bonaventure had tried to bridge the chasm, as pope, Celestine V had polarised the factions, and both Boniface VIII and Charles II made attempts to preserve the Order for political gain. With all of this in play at the time Pontano moved to Assisi, it seems feasible that he saw the commissioning of the Magdalen

<sup>265</sup> Perhaps suggesting Pontano himself?

<sup>266</sup> David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: from Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 67–110.

Chapel as a way to appeal to both Spirituals and Conventuals, as well as the Poor Clares, women who followed the Franciscan way after Clare.<sup>267</sup>

### 3.4. The *usus pauper* controversy

Now we turn to evidence in the Magdalen Chapel concerning the major theological tensions between two Franciscan factions concerning the call to *usus pauper*. The Spirituals claimed that the Order had abandoned the truest and purest form of Francis' ideal, the privilege of absolute poverty. In their zeal, they refused housing and all comforts and in every way sought to impoverish themselves. The Conventuals, better organised and savvier to the ways of the mediaeval patron, had no problem welcoming gifts of buildings, clothing and books to benefit the pursuit the Order's calling. They argued that the concept of *usus pauper* was still present within the Order, just in a more practical way.

The year before Pontano was sent to Assisi (1295), the saintly hermit Peter of Morrone, a man of "little literary culture and of absolutely no knowledge of worldly affairs, [was] sent as a Spiritual emissary to wait on the Pope in hopes of easing the persecution the Spirituals were experiencing."<sup>268</sup> With no prior warning and to the horror of many, this unworldly man was appointed Pope Celestine V, the election was reputedly owed to influence of the Angevin king Charles II (Charles of Salerno) who, in return, received significant incomes from papal lands in France, England and the imperial dioceses, which he used to fund the Italian crusades.<sup>269</sup> In the five short months he was the Pope, Celestine V split the Franciscan order and established a new order for the Spirituals called 'the Poor Hermits of Pope Celestine,' a move that all parties violently opposed.<sup>270</sup> When Boniface VIII became pope after Celestine V abdicated in December of 1294, Charles found he had much less influence on the new pope who was eager to prove he was nobody's fool. Boniface was quite aware of the

<sup>267</sup> These women, upon joining the Poor Clares, severed all ties with the outside world, took the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and (perhaps unwittingly) gave themselves over to utter dependence on their somewhat reticent brothers.

<sup>268</sup> Moorman, 194.

<sup>269</sup> Housley, 199. Celestine was reputed to be very close to the Angevin king, as well as the future king, Robert the Wise of Naples, and future saint, Louis of Toulouse. Charles' links with Spiritual leaders did not stop there. Peter Olivi, the Spiritual radical who would be later burned at the stake for his fight for *usus pauper*, was asked by Charles' three sons to visit them when they were held hostage in Catalonia. Though he was unable to make the visit for fear of his own life, Olivi shared Charles' concern for both their spiritual and political welfare, and sent a letter of spiritual encouragement and direction. Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty*, 109.

<sup>270</sup> Moorman, 194-195. David Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 113.

popularity of the penitential movement among the masses and the emergent Franciscan Order and he was also aware that both Spirituals and Conventuals had zealous followers and each in their own way wielded a good deal of popular influence. Though he had no great love of the Spirituals, Boniface recognised the benefit of having a cohesive Franciscan movement behind his “ecclesiastical policies” and so was anxious to re-unite the Order.<sup>271</sup> Perhaps Pontano’s move to Assisi had something to do with these policies: perhaps not. But Pontano made the move to Assisi soon after Boniface VIII took power. And just when the Pope was most desirous of uniting the Spiritual and Conventual factions, Pontano commissioned a chapel that would appeal to both the Spirituals identification with the poverty of the Magdalen, and to the Conventuals sense of practicality. The Magdalen Chapel was either divinely inspired with miraculous timing or had been an ingenious work of diplomacy by Pontano.

#### 3.4.1. Spirituals undermined: a pauper’s finery

The Spirituals, by definition, were against the Franciscan ownership of property and saw the colossal structure of the basilica as an outright offence to Francis’ teachings. Nothing about the grand and ostentatious basilica hinted in the slightest toward the ideals of poverty, simplicity and humility. In addition, no one with strong Spiritual leanings would have the money to commission anything like the Magdalen Chapel. The mind of those embracing *usus pauper* would argue that the money used to decorate the walls of the basilica could be put to significantly better use feeding the poor and caring for the infirm. The extravagance of the Magdalen Chapel, depicted by the extensive gold and silver leafing on the clothing of Pontano, Jesus, the angels and the Magdalen, would have been outrageous. Use of elegant, colourful clothing anywhere would have baffled the Spirituals, but to use such opulence in a chapel dedicated to the Magdalen, the very representative of penitence and poverty who turned her back on worldly riches, would have been at complete odds with Spiritual sensibilities.

Yet, an offence to one faction, was beauty to the other and many among the Conventuals would have deemed it only appropriate to depict angels, saints and Jesus in a grand manner and with due honour. As such, the chapel offered a catechism of

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<sup>271</sup> Moorman, 195. His portrayal of Boniface is one of a ruthless and political ruler.

the penitent's life that not only allowed for, but represented her clad in gold and fine clothing.

### 3.4.2. Men of learning

Along the entrance of the chapel there is a sizeable arch, along which are painted portraits of some of the most learned men in Christendom including Augustine and Dionysius of Aeropagite. A pilgrim entering from the main nave of the Lower Church would have been welcomed into the chapel by the vibrant images of these men who embodied philosophical and theological learning. Just outside the entrance off the right transept, if one looked up and to the left, one would see the image of the Lorenzetti fresco of the Magdalen and Francis at the foot of the cross. On the right of the entrance is a friar smiling benignly holding a book in one hand a book and further along the wall to the left are three individual with books in their hands. Looking through the doorway into the chapel, one would see Pontano kneeling before the Magdalen and above that, Jesus and Mary from the *Noli me Tangere*. Both entrances make it clear that learning and books are encouraged in the Franciscan way. To the eyes of a Conventual, this would have been a normal and appropriate sight, as books and study were by this time, a part of the friars' world. A Spiritual, on the other hand, would have fumed, for Francis' own denial of the need for and ownership of books, with the claims that they contributed to the sin of intellectual avarice, surely went against the intent of the Founder. If a Spiritual had brought himself to enter the basilica in order to worship in the penitent's chapel, he would have balked at the sight of the frescoed aureole of learned men at the entrance.

**Figure 16** *Augustine and Dionysius the Aeropagite*

**Figure 7** Entrance to Magdalen Chapel from nave, pilgrim's entrance

### 3.4.3. A penitent's grotto

Another aspect of the Magdalen dear to the hearts of the Spirituals was the stories of the Magdalen's hermitage in a grotto, which would remind a visitor of Francis' own love of escaping into the solitude of a grotto.<sup>272</sup> Throughout his religious life, Francis encouraged his followers toward contemplation.<sup>273</sup> He himself was often known to withdraw to the solitude of grottos for mystical contemplation. For the

<sup>272</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *The Saint*, 187, 190, 326, 436, etc.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, "A Rule for Hermitages", 61.

Spirituals, contemplation and the hermit's life symbolised the ideal of turning from worldly trappings to embrace poverty and total dependence upon God for everything. It was a way to *usus pauper*. The tradition of wilderness spirituality extended back to the beginning of religious communities and included people like Anthony, Jerome and Mary of Egypt. This lifestyle not only appealed to Francis, but it was in a grotto in spiritual contemplation, that Francis received his stigmata, the mark of the *alter Christus*. The years the Magdalen was believed to have spent in penitent contemplation in a grotto was a significant part of the legend of the Magdalen and further established the links between her, Francis and his followers (including the Poor Clares).

The fresco of Mary in a grotto as a contemplative hermit is a scene from the end of her time in the wilderness.<sup>274</sup> Painted off-centre and high above the main entrance behind the candelabra, it is difficult for a visitor to notice. One would have to move into the chapel toward the altar, then turn and look up high through the candelabra to see it. For those in the fourteenth century, the candlelight in the chapel would have further obscured a clear view of the image and, if the chapel were at all dim, whether because the clouds darkened the sky or it was dark out, the image would have been all but invisible. In light of its location, perhaps the image was only then included as a dry bone thrown to the Spirituals.

**Figure 17** *Mary Magdalen receiving her Cloak from Zosimus*

This one image among the frescoes significantly establishes the poverty of the Magdalen exemplifying *usus pauper* so dear to the Spirituals, and consequently paid homage to the Franciscan ideal of poverty is, in effect, tucked out of sight.

#### 3.4.4. Mystical lightness

When we turn to our next fresco, we see the Magdalen strangely suspended in the clouds. This is an allusion to her divine, mystical lightness. Francis himself was well known to have had many mystical encounters and in a sermon to the Poor Clares of Paris, Bonaventure preached on the humility of Francis that was so pure that he was actually physically lifted off the ground in ecstasy and divine communion with

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<sup>274</sup> Voragine, 73.

God.<sup>275</sup> Citing Ezekiel 3:12, *Then the Spirit lifted me up*, and Job 7:15, *My soul would choose to be suspended*, Bonaventure then preached:

Saint Francis was raised on high by this purifying, strengthening, and uplifting spirit. When he went to Rome a priest saw him lifted a few feet from the ground into the air to about the height of a barrel, and the brothers often saw him lifted from the ground. All this happened because of his utmost purity. The angels lifted him into the air,<sup>276</sup>

This story of Francis lifted in ecstasy in the Upper Church at Assisi is depicted in fresco on the wall almost directly above the Magdalen Chapel.

**Figure 18 *Francis in Ecstasy*—nave, Upper Church, Assisi**

In the legendary material of the Magdalen, there is a story in which she leaves the ministry in Marseilles, breaks any ties she had with the world and goes into the wilds as a penitent and contemplative.<sup>277</sup> There she shelters in a cave and, having taken no food, she devotes herself to feeding on the mysteries of Jesus. As Voragine tells us, “Every day at the hour canonical she was lifted up in the air of angels, and heard the glorious song of the heavenly companies with her bodily ears. Of which she was fed and filled with right sweet meats, and then was brought again by the angels unto her proper place, in such wise as she had no need of corporeal nourishings.”<sup>278</sup> When she was returned to her cave, the Magdalen wept, delighted and contemplated on her beloved risen Lord. Because of her perfect devotion and absolute humility, God had miraculously sustained her and it was to this legend that Bonaventure turned as he likened Francis to the Magdalen. He writes: “as it is recorded, they lifted Saint Mary Magdalene while she was at prayer. Such graces are given only to those who have set themselves about worldly desires.”<sup>279</sup>

**Figure 19 *The Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen***

The visual of this story is found at the top right hand side of the chapel above the *Noli me Tangere* and the *Voyage to Marseilles*. The Magdalen, the faithful

<sup>275</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *Founder*, Bonaventure “The Evening Sermon on Saint Francis, Preached at Paris, October 4, 1267”, 760.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> The late 9<sup>th</sup> century legendary material of Victor Saxer offers two histories of Mary Magdalen: the *vita apostolica* and the *vita eremitica*. In the *vita eremitica*, Mary’s identity is conflated with the 4th century figure of Mary of Egypt, a penitent and desert contemplative. Ross, ed., 133. Jansen credits the journey of the story of Mary of Egypt coming to Europe from Egypt to Byzantine monks fleeing to southern Italy from the Eastern iconoclasm controversy. Jansen, *Making of Magdalen*, 65. Though Voragine gives Mary of Egypt her own chapter in his hagiography, her characteristics provide the basis for some of the Magdalen legendary material. Voragine, 89.

<sup>278</sup> Voragine, vol. I, VI vols. 83.

<sup>279</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *Founder* “Evening Sermon”, 763.

disciple who saw the risen Lord and then travelled to Gaul to bring the Good News to the pagans there, is here depicted feasting on the “sweetmeats of heaven” and as such, the female disciple and evangelist becomes a contemplative. Francis, like the Magdalen, was worthy of such a mystical experience—worthy because of tears, extreme humility, and perfect devotion to Jesus. Both Francis and the Magdalen rejected worldly desires and penitently turned to Jesus. Both wept out of contrition for their sins and from a grateful heart for Christ’s penetrating mercy.<sup>280</sup> Both had gone into the wilderness to seek a deeper relationship with Christ. Bonaventure drew attention to their common “graces,” so pure and mystical that they were actually physically “lifted up” into the air. The Magdalen Chapel’s fresco, incidentally just below that of Francis’ *Ecstasy* in the Upper Church, was one more visual and spatial link between the Magdalen and Francis.

#### 3.4.5. A woman’s teachings

The affinity of the Spirituals toward the Magdalen was well known, as was their penchant to seek spiritual direction from certain holy women with mystical and prophetic giftings. Angela of Foligno, an early Spiritual, was just such a woman. Formerly a woman of the world, she became a Franciscan tertiary through Francis’ influence and soon began to have mystical experiences and prophetic visions. These she dictated to her brother, then distributed among her disciples in a book entitled *The Book of Virtues and Instruction*.<sup>281</sup> One of these disciples, Ubertino de Casale, not only identified himself with holy women linked with Francis and the Magdalen, but, it is said, that it was under Angela’s teaching and discipleship he became so dedicated to the cause of *usus pauper* that, in 1318, he was burned at the stake under the Italian inquisition.<sup>282</sup>

Angela was not the only tertiary mystic. Others famed as spiritual advisors included Umiliana Cerichi of Florence and Margaret of Cortona. Both of these women had turned their backs on worldly living and embraced a ministry of spiritual direction in the pursuit of the *vita apostolica*.<sup>283</sup> It was forbidden for women to speak

<sup>280</sup> *The Little Flowers of the Glorious Messer St. Francis and of his Friars*, trans. W. Heywood (Santa Maria degli Angeli: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1982), 23. As such we learn that “The most devout servant of the Crucified, Messer St Francis by the severity of his penance and by his continual weeping, had become almost blind and saw but little.”

<sup>281</sup> Other wise known as *The Book of Angela of Foligno*, Moorman, 263.

<sup>282</sup> Burr, *Spiritual Franciscans*, 82.

<sup>283</sup> Bernard Schlager, “Foundresses of the Franciscan Life: Umiliana Cerichi and Margaret of Cortona,” *Viator* 29 (1998), 142–150.

theologically outside of the convent, as a teacher, minister or scholar. However, they were allowed, even encouraged, to employ their humble prophetic and mystical gifts. Thirteenth century Europe was a visually oriented culture and, as such, learning and development happened primarily through images. As such, mystical visions would have been a very culturally appropriate and acceptable way of interacting with God.

### 3.4.6. The Magdalen and the Church

The mystical influence of women connected with the Franciscan way, the fight for poverty and the input of certain Franciscan-linked women were becoming a nuisance to the Conventuals and church at large. Under the guise of rooting out heresy, the Inquisition played its role in quelling the movement and stifling the voice of such women.<sup>284</sup> Though it could be argued that the *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen* would have encouraged the mystical behaviour of women—after all the artist depicted, and consequently condoned, a woman who was in deep communion with heaven in a mystical way—I believe that the images in the Magdalen Chapel provided a pictorial exhortation, even warning, to those friars and women who used mystical experiences as a form of subversion to the Rule and desires of the Order and Church.

#### **Figure 15** *Mary Magdalen kneeling before Maximinius*

Across from *Ecstasy* is the final image of the fresco cycle *The Magdalen before Maximinius*. In it we see a rather pale matronly Magdalen clothed and coiffed and kneeling before the bishop, Maximinius. The Magdalen is again depicted as the ideal penitent, and the ideal woman who is subject to the Church and as such confirms the position of the Fourth Lateran Council that in one must receive communion from the Church in order to be in a state of grace. The Church is represented by both the architectural structure and the bishop. This authoritative depiction of the bishop administering the Eucharist was a likely reminder that as bishop, Pontano had this authority, even over and above the Franciscan movement. As such the Church, the bishop and consequently Pontano had the right to administer or withhold the Eucharist, now, in accordance with the Fourth Lateran Council, required for salvation. Without the Eucharist, no amount of penance or mystical experience would get the Magdalen into the heavenly realm. The angels in the top centre of the fresco confirm this interpretation. Three of the four angels and the woman (possibly the Magdalen in

<sup>284</sup> Roger Schroeder, "Women, Mission, and the Early Franciscan Movement", *Missiology: An International Review* XXVIII.4 (2000), 416.

a state of grace after her death) look upwards and to the right in anticipation of heaven. In order for the Magdalen to get there, she must receive the Eucharist as her last act on earth. Therefore, Mary, regardless of her piety, penance, humility, mystical encounters and relationship with the earthly Jesus, must bow before the Church, and the Bishop, submitting to this authority.

### 3.4.7. Margaret of Cortona—the “new Magdalen”

#### **Figure 20 Margaret of Cortona**

Another female mystic was Margaret of Cortona, whose portrait appears on the right side of the Magdalen Chapel on the first register on the left hand side of the chapel across from the image of St Rufinus and Pontano, directly underneath *The Raising of Lazarus* and next to the image of Mary of Egypt. Depicted wearing a full nun’s mantle and habit of brown with a golden aureole, she is identified with the religious life and the mark of sainthood.<sup>285</sup> Like the portrait of St Rufinus and Pontano to her left, she stands in front of the lower frame around her portrait, as if in a doorway. This technique functions to bring her out into the chapel space creating the sensation that she is not contained within the frescoes, but is emerging from the wall, as if alive. Margaret, as a recent contemporary of the viewer, was not a the same sort of legendary figure as the Magdalen, but a more immediate example. Like Pontano, on the other side of the doorway, she receives her blessing from the Church, though it was a Franciscan tertiary, devoted to Francis’ teachings that she spent her last years withdrawn, serving the secular clergy.

The reason Margaret was included may seem obvious. After all, she was a well-known penitent who had turned from a worldly life of sin to a life of eremitical penitence. Born in Tuscan village to a tenant farmer, she was early sent begging by her stepmother. As she grew, a young nobleman saw her, fell in love with her and took her to be his lover. She gave him a son and he gave her a life of luxury. After nine years, the young nobleman died in a hunting accident and Margaret fled to the home of her father, but was turned away by her stepmother. According to her biographer and confessor, Fra Giunta da Benegna, the devil, then, attempted to drive her into prostitution, but she made her way to the home of two Franciscan women

<sup>285</sup> Margaret was canonised in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century after it was confirmed that miracles connected to her relics had occurred from the time of her death. Lucy Menzies, *Saints in Italy* (London: The Medici Society Limited, 1924), 291.

who took her in. In their care, Margaret embraced the penitent life and sought to become a tertiary. After first denying her because of her youth and beauty, the authorities relented and Margaret joined the religious life of the Third Order with great enthusiasm. Well known for her care for the sick (she founded the extant hospice Casa S. Maria della Misericordia) and poverty-stricken mothers and children, she also gained notoriety as a mystic and contemplative.

Guinta recounts Margaret's many visions of the Magdalen and Christ, as well as her mystical participation in the events of the Passion as another Mary Magdalen. According to Guinta, Margaret's mystical relationship with Christ had grown so intimate and her devotion so pure, that Christ gave her numerous special names. Among his favourite for her was "the new Magdalen," a title adopted throughout later Franciscan writings.<sup>286</sup> She also had an active ministry as a mystic, advising many within the Franciscan family including friars, Poor Clares and male and female tertiaries, and there is clear evidence that she, like Angela, was a friend of the Spiritual leader, Ubertino de Casale, as well as other known Spirituals.

Margaret was also known to have had a number of visions in which Christ told her of troubles within the Franciscan Orders, and others that portrayed the Pope and the Antichrist joining forces. Burr tells us these experiences coincided with her decision to move from her cell near the local Franciscan church to a hilltop around Cortona so she could pursue a "more eremitical existence." According to Burr, the move was opposed by the Franciscans fearful of losing the recognition of her commitment to their cause, as well as her body, which they anticipated would eventually become valuable relics. Margaret responded by ignoring the demands of "her external masters, the friars," and following the call of her "internal master, Christ himself."<sup>287</sup> Eventually, she moved into closer fellowship with the secular clergy and spent her last days helping to rebuild the church of Basil. When she died in 1297, it was this new church that took her body for burial and promoted her cult and canonisation.<sup>288</sup>

<sup>286</sup> *The Life and Revelations of Saint Margaret of Cortona, written in Latin by her confessor, Fra Giunta Bevegnati*, trans. F. M'Donogh Mahony (London, Dublin: 1883), 65-68; Haskins, 186-187; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 415; Schlager, 164.

<sup>287</sup> Burr, *Spiritual Franciscans*, 325.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 326. This canonisation process began in 1318 but was not completed until 1728. She dies just about the time Giotto was known to have been in Assisi and about the time Pontano moved to Assisi.

Regardless of how she spent her last days, the Church was determined to write and therefore control her official *vita legenda* and Giovanni di Castiglione, “inquisitor of heretical depravity,” issued the directive during the Spirituals’ persecution by the Order’s leadership. Such involvement of an inquisitor meant that the Church as well as the Franciscan Order approved it. So while Margaret enjoyed friendships with the Spiritual leader, Ubertino di Casale (who, incidentally, condoned the official *vita*), it seems that the Church, while hostile to the Spirituals, was interested in preserving her place within the Franciscan world, which Guinta did. Consequently, the *legenda* established that Margaret’s holiness was a result of her perfect obedience to her Franciscan spiritual advisor and the Order of the *friars minor* and the Church, and it was only through her devotion to the teachings of Francis and Franciscan institutions that Margaret “progressed in holiness and, in time, achieved sanctity.”<sup>289</sup>

Along the same register to the right on the wall at a 45-degree angle is the image of Mary of Egypt, also a woman with a promiscuous past whom, upon learning about Jesus, repented and embraced a life of poverty and eremitical contemplation. Margaret was what the *Meditations* called an active-contemplative while Mary of Egypt was a cloistered meditative-contemplative. These two women, whose identities are intermingled with the Magdalen, represent two models of a worldly-life turned to penitence, of debauchery turned to obedience, and the two sides of the ideal religious life, meditative and active-contemplative, the Mary-and-Martha, of a devout woman.

The common theme represented among the three women of this chapel, the Magdalen, Margaret of Cortona and Mary of Egypt, involves turning from wickedness and sexual debauchery, to a life of penitence and isolation: the Magdalen in her grotto, Mary of Egypt in her desert, and Margaret in her cell on the hilltop of Cortona. All three are examples of a holy woman’s extreme devotion and penitence, obedience to the Church and the cloistered life. We have already seen how the frescoes portray both concepts of penitence and obedience to the Church. In *Pharisee* we saw the Magdalen as the devoted penitent, an image she retains throughout the chapel frescoes: kneeling as the penitent (*Lazarus, Noli, Maximinius*), weeping (*Lazarus, Noli*), and praying (*Ecstasy, Maximinius*). The viewer never forgets the Magdalen is the penitent and her ever-present red cloak and her luxurious hair are reminders of her past sins as seductress. Yet, they also serve as reminders of the hope of being covered

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<sup>289</sup> Schlager, 165.

in the redemptive blood of Christ, forgiveness and discipleship. We have also seen how the concept of obedience to the Church is portrayed through the portraits of Pontano and Margaret of Cortona, and the image of *Mary Magdalen kneeling before Maximinius*. A natural conclusion to draw is that one of the theological statements made by the Magdalen Chapel situated in the centre of the Franciscan movement is that women desirous of emulating the great penitential women of legend in the Franciscan way should do so as cloistered penitents, women who had taken to the religious life as Franciscans in the footsteps of Clare of Assisi.<sup>290</sup>

### 3.5. A woman's place

#### 3.5.1. Devotion

##### **Figure 21** *Raising of Lazarus, Magdalen Chapel, Assisi*

In the following two images we will look at the concept of devotion exemplified in the Magdalen. In the *Raising of Lazarus*, the Magdalen kneels, head covered, eyes fixed on Jesus' words that float in gold lettering above her head. This image has fuelled much of the debate about the authorship of the chapel in light of the extreme similarities to a fresco of the same name by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padua. Subtle differences between the Assisi and Padua frescoes, found in the lack of suppleness of Lazarus' wrapped body, Jesus' facial features and the general stiffness in Assisi, have led most contemporary art historians to conclude that Giotto's hand did not paint our chapel. Another greater difference between the two is the energy and focus. At Padua, all of the energy goes toward linking Jesus with Lazarus; that is the miracle, the raising of the dead man and in Padua, the Magdalen is barely visible, grovelling behind her sister, Martha. Contrasting this with Assisi, the Magdalen takes centre stage. The energy focused on her is so tangible in her gaze toward Jesus' lips that the miracle involving her brother is almost lost in the background. Her devotion is the star of this fresco in Assisi, even if Jesus' sight-line is elsewhere.

##### **Figure 22** *Raising of Lazarus Arena Chapel, Padua*

Another difference is the gold lettering. Perhaps a holdover of a common device in mediaeval works mostly found in illustrated manuscripts and panel painting,

<sup>290</sup> Susan Heine, *Women and Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987), 187. Often the women who joined the Poor Clares in particular and monastic movements in general did so for a variety of reasons religious and secular—piety, religious devotion, poverty, death of husbands or fathers, fear of childbearing, and in certain cases the brutality of husbands. If a woman was unable to bear a child she was often abandoned by her husband or sent back to her parents. Regardless, she was considered an outcast.

the printing of words in a fresco is not a common device among the early Renaissance painters and is virtually non-existent in the Renaissance. The gold lettering is meant to demonstrate the divine nature of the words coming from Jesus' lips. In this case it was perhaps also used to link the action from Jesus to Lazarus. Otherwise, because the figure of Lazarus appears on the far right side near the darkened far corner the story of the miracle could have been lost to a fourteenth century viewer if the chapel was poorly lit. Another possibility is that it is an allusion to the Old Testament passage of Daniel's interpretation of the writing on the wall (Daniel 5), or perhaps a reference to Mary's inability to read. Conversely, the lettering could suggest that she is drawn to his lips precisely because she is *reading* the words rather than *hearing* them. Each possibility offers ample room for speculation, but whatever the intention was, we can be sure that Mary's single-minded devotion is the central theme.

**Figure 23 *Noli me Tangere*, Magdalen Chapel, Assisi**

The same theme of devotion emerges in the *Noli me Tangere* opposite, which also has a Giotto likeness in Padua. As in Padua, angels sit on the open tomb, trees are barren and new sprigs of foliage are growing, representing new life. Again, the Assisi figures are less supple than in Padua, yet there is more detail on the physical surroundings which create a much more intimate terrain than in Padua. The fresco in Assisi has two additional angels flying over Jesus, but is missing the sleeping Roman soldiers and the banner Jesus holds in the Paduan fresco. Another striking difference is that in Assisi, the focus is again on the Magdalen. In Padua, while she is a main figure in the frame, Giotto included her among many of the figures along the bottom, as if he were attempting a narrative fresco and she was only one of the elements of the story. In Padua, the angel on the far left of the empty tomb points to Jesus standing above Mary and the other angel, poised just above her to the left, is in a delighted ecstasy of his own.

**Figure 24 *Noli me Tangere* Arena Chapel, Padua**

In the Assisi fresco, both angels on the tomb face toward the Magdalen and the one nearest points down at her. With her cloak about her shoulders and her hair tucked up under a sheer veil, Mary spans much of the lower centre of the frame. The energy thrown from her shoulders, through her arms toward Jesus, suggests desperation, grasping at his glory. Her eyes stare directly at his, and his divert only slightly above her toward the empty tomb. Her devotion is steadfast.

The images of *Lazarus* and *Noli* face each other, one on the left wall, one on the right, acting as a kind of mirror which would explain why she faces left in *Lazarus* alone. In both, Jesus stands closest to the entrance of the chapel, arm extended across Mary's head, gazing toward the empty tomb and, consequently, toward the altar. On the left wall, Jesus looks at the newly resurrected Lazarus and the empty tomb left behind; on the right, he looks at his own empty tomb, signalling the power of his own resurrection. Mary kneels, never diverting her gaze, staring intently at Jesus. From both sides, she is single-mindedly devoted to every word, look and movement of her miraculous Lord. A visitor standing between these mirror images is drawn into the focus, the devotion, as if called to reflect back the devotion.

### 3.5.2. Silence

#### **Figure 25** *A Voyage to Marseilles*

The fresco that sets up the Magdalen as an eremitical model is *Voyage to Marseilles*. Though the legend exemplified in this fresco is about travel and even preaching, I argue that the intent of the fresco on the viewer is to establish that, as Mary voyaged from her life in one world (Jerusalem) to another (Gaul), she symbolised the journey from her old life to a new more complete life. As a first step toward the cloistered life, this fresco may seem an odd beginning since it depicts a ship packed with five other people. However, the scene includes images that suggest three things: first, the journey from her old life to her new one; second, crossing through water, perhaps an allusion to baptism; third, her miraculous powers indicated by the woman and the baby on the rock. In what is perhaps the first-known presentation of the device of narrative painting, we see a sequence of events from the legendary material through time.

In the centre of the fresco, the ship is sailing to Marseilles under the protection of ministering angels. To the right, the ship has landed and the last of the servants are unloading the goods. Just left of centre, a shadowed figure and a child are lying on a rock in the middle of the water. This last image tells the story of a prince and princess of the province who had been offering sacrifices in hopes that the idols would help them conceive a child when they heard the Magdalen preaching.<sup>291</sup> Later the

<sup>291</sup> Some texts say Lord and Lady or King and Queen. Garth, 45; F.J. Furnivall, ed., *Digby Mysteries* (London: New Shakespeare Society, 1882), 115.

Magdalen appeared to the woman in a vision asking the princess why, when so many of the Lord's children are poor, cold and hungry, does she not use her wealth to help them. The next night she appeared to the princess again with the same message. On the third night the Magdalen severely rebuked the couple for not adhering to her calling. Then when they finally repent and agree to give up their sinful lives they would do so only if the Magdalen would help them conceive a child. The Magdalen consented to their request, blessed them, and sent the repentant couple to Rome for Peter to verify the truth of her preaching.

While at sea, the princess conceived. But when her time came a big storm caused her to swoon and she died in childbirth. Neither able to keep her body with him, nor take care of his beloved newborn son, the grief-stricken prince, unable to cast them both into the sea, left them on a small island and continued on to Rome where he joined Peter as a disciple for the next two years. On his return voyage, the prince sailed past the place he had left his family and he miraculously found the boy had been kept alive by his (dead) mother's milk. He praised the Magdalen for this miracle, and she, in return, resurrected the princess. The family returned to Marseilles to find Mary still preaching, and, in gratitude, they commanded the destruction of all of the idols and temples to other gods in their realm and built churches to honour Christ. In due course, they appointed Lazarus, Bishop of Marseilles.<sup>292</sup>

In addition to showing the Magdalen and other sailing from Jerusalem and landing at Marseilles, *Voyage* portrays the part of the story just before the prince stops at the rock on the way back from Rome, though significant time has elapsed since the other events depicted occurred. While scale and sequence are a bit jumbled, and technical execution is not nearly as fine as the work of the patron's portraits, the concept of a narrative painting make this fresco worthy of being in the birthplace of the Renaissance.

At this point, we might stop to consider why, in light of the legendary material that attributes to the Magdalen the preaching and conversion of Gaul, there are no images of her in such a role. For along with these other legends, the idea of the Magdalen as apstotless and evangelist were universally known, "And when Mary Magdalen saw the people assembled..., she arose up peaceably with a glad visage, a discreet tongue and well speaking, and began to preach the faith and law of Jesu

<sup>292</sup> There was a Bishop of Marseilles named Lazarus and so, in the medieval mind, this Bishop Lazarus was the same Lazarus from the Gospels, brother of Mary and Martha. Moltmann-Wendell, 79.

Christ...”<sup>293</sup> One could say that the image of the woman on the rock indicates a fairly tangible reference to the Magdalen’s preaching in Gaul, however, the image of the child and her mother on the rock only directly demonstrates her ability to perform miracles for those who trust her message about Jesus. Here it is what the fresco and, in fact, the whole of the chapel do not include that makes the point. The absence of any image of the Magdalen preaching or in any teaching capacity is significant, a concern which we considered in the first chapter and was expressed in more general terms by the feminist theologian Jane Schaberg.

Throughout France, the Magdalen was already depicted in art preaching, but that image is missing in Assisi.<sup>294</sup> As such, the chapel offers no visual statement on whether or not the Magdalen did any preaching or converting. The exclusion of such images and the consequent images of her in the wilderness appear to exclude that role from the Magdalen’s story. It seems that while male leaders of Gaul were perfectly happy with attributing preaching, teaching and conversion to the Magdalen, either the artist, or Pontano, or both were not as comfortable with the idea. Instead, what we have in the chapel are images of her penitence, devotion, journey, enclaustration, dependence and obedience. There is no scene of her telling the disciples, her preaching in Gaul, her acting as an apostle. This could be because of the lack of space in the chapel or perhaps the Magdalen is not shown preaching because the legends attribute her with the conversion of Gaul, not the conversion of Umbria. Another possibility is that the religious renewal which began in Umbria was attributed to Francis, and since the whole Assisi project was about Francis preaching and teaching, perhaps Pontano or the painter did not want the Magdalen to be given credit due to Francis.<sup>295</sup> Whatever the intent was, we need to keep in mind the charge levied earlier by Schaberg and others, that women were in general silenced and in as much as these images do not include her in these vocal roles, these images bears this silencing out.<sup>296</sup>

### 3.5.3. My sister’s keeper

The next two frescos in the cycle represent the Magdalen as the ideal female penitent after her conversion and journey. She is depicted as a solitary, silent,

<sup>293</sup> Voragine, 78.

<sup>294</sup> Moltmann-Wendell, 78–79. At Chartres, Bourges, Auxerre and Sèmur, Primarily in stained-glass windows.

<sup>295</sup> In the Upper Church are multiple images of Francis preaching and teaching (to the birds).

<sup>296</sup> Schaberg, 112.

contemplative hermit who left ministry behind (as had Margaret of Cortona) to pursue a life of continual penitence and devotion to Christ in the wilds (as had Mary of Egypt). As such she took little or no food, clothing, books, or any other personal possessions. She had no one but God to teach, feed, or clothe her. She did not even ask for communion while she was in the wilderness. Instead, she feasted on God.

*The Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen* (Figure 19) shows that she voluntarily and willingly left the rest of humanity to find shelter in a cave. With no food or drink she was left only to rely on the sustenance of heaven. By the time the time chapel came into existence, there had been decades of controversy over the practical and spiritual care of the Second Order Franciscans, the Poor Ladies (or Poor Clares). The argument swirled around the demands on the time, resources and obligation of the *friars minor* in providing for the burgeoning communities of the claustrated Poor Ladies. When Clare first began her order, Francis made the faithful promise “that he and his successors always would care for her community of San Damiano.” Initially, the brothers ministered to the practical and religious needs of the Poor Clares. But as the numbers of Poor Ladies grew, “the friars began to protest that the need to minister to these women prevented them from fulfilling their own vocations,” arguing that Francis never intended for the support to go beyond the house of San Damiano.<sup>297</sup>

When a woman joined the Poor Ladies, she took a vow of personal and corporate poverty.<sup>298</sup> According to the Rule of Clare, as determined by the Pope, these women could not leave their enclosure and were consequently forced to rely upon the good will of others to bring food and supplies, and to give religious instruction.<sup>299</sup> The Rule of the friars stipulated that all *friars minor* beg alms to secure food for themselves which meant that thousands of men were going about towns and countryside begging for their keep. But by the time of the Pisa chapter in 1263, the friars no longer lived in the dire straits of complete poverty like the friars of the early movement. Though the friars were no longer wholly dependant on daily begging, they still needed to secure their provisions and they were busy with other activities of the calling including study, preaching, caring for their monasteries, etc. The *friars minor*

<sup>297</sup> Lezlie Knox, “Audacious Nuns: Institutionalizing the Franciscan Order of Saint Clare,” *Church History* 69.1 (2000), 42.

<sup>298</sup> The “privilege of poverty” was affirmed by the Rule and confirmed by the Papal bull of Innocent IV on 10 August 1253. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66.

<sup>299</sup> Ignatius C. Brady Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 212.

felt that providing for their own needs was quite enough and they did not want to be saddled with the obligation of procuring alms for entire monasteries full of women.<sup>300</sup>

A second issue of concern for the Poor Ladies rested on the 21st Canon of the Fourth Lateran Council. The canon declared that in order to retain salvation, confession *must* be heard at least once a year.<sup>301</sup> Though the Poor Ladies were forbidden to leave the walls of their abbey, they still needed to be confessed and so required a priest to come in and provide the office. In fact, Innocent IV had approved Clare's Rule, which required the sisters go to confession "at least 12 times a year."<sup>302</sup> But, as women they could not officiate confession or communion. They could not even carry out basic preparatory duties such as handling the chalice or carrying the incense. They were really only allowed to ring bells, sing psalms and light candles. This meant complete dependence on outsiders to come in and provide for them.<sup>303</sup> Since Francis had made a promise to Clare and her Ladies, the Poor Clares believed that those followers of Francis should, in turn, honour the promise in the same way.

In addition, the cloistered women needed theological exhortation and spiritual direction. Because of the strident interpretations that barred women from theological or spiritual authority generally, and because of their desire to be taught and exhorted in the way of Francis specifically, the Clares needed the brothers to teach and direct them.<sup>304</sup> Only on a rare occasion did a woman enter a convent able to read and write, and regardless, the ownership of books was prohibited by their Rule. To avoid falling into spiritual bankruptcy or heresy, the Ladies needed teaching, training, and exhortation, as well as spiritual care. Once again, they were dependent on their spiritual brothers.

Regardless of the dangers of starvation, heresy and the loss of salvation the Poor Ladies faced, the *friars minor* at the General Chapter of Pisa in 1263 made it clear that they wanted freedom from any obligation which tied them to the cloistered nuns. They argued that these anonymous women not only took the friars away from other

<sup>300</sup> See footnote 34.

<sup>301</sup> This is reconfirmed by Francis in his "Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance" c. 1220. Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *The Saint*, 47.

<sup>302</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *Complete Works*, 214.

<sup>303</sup> Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *A History of Women in the West*, vol. II, II vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), Suzanne Fonay Wemple, "Women From the Fifth to the Tenth Century", 190.

<sup>304</sup> Most women were forbidden to learn to read or write as we see in Philip of Novara in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently most of the women entering the Poor Clares needed the help of someone who could read to be able to properly interpret biblical scripture. *Ibid.*, 191. Casagrande, "The Protected Woman", 101.

duties, but also subjected those who attended them to lustful temptation. Perhaps in anticipation of this, Francis had addressed how a *friar minor* should refrain from any conversation with a woman that was not about spiritual things and how they should keep the body pure and dedicated to God. In the Rule of 1221, Francis took steps to ensure that there would be no abuse of the power of spiritual authority over another, especially the power of cleric over nun:

Wherever they may be or may go, let all brothers avoid evil glances and associations with women. No one may counsel them, travel alone with them or eat out of the same dish with them. When giving penance or some spiritual advice, let priests speak with them in a becoming way. Absolutely no woman may be received to obedience by any brother, but after spiritual advice has been given to her, let her do penance wherever she wants.<sup>305</sup>

Despite these precautions, the friars wanted nothing to do with the Poor Ladies and at Pisa they got their way and this put the Poor Ladies in a rather difficult position. They were utterly dependent on the outside world to remember them and feed them, completely reliant on the good will of priests to act as confessors to secure salvation, and entirely dependent on the good will of their Franciscan brothers to provide spiritual guidance and proper Franciscan teaching.<sup>306</sup> And for those brothers who truly pitied the women, how could they provide counsel, direction and exhortation to so many creatures that even Francis warned them of?

A delegation of women went to Pope Urban with a two-fold plea: 1) to be able to return to the "primitive rule" created by Clare, or 2) to adopt the Isabelline Rule which "called upon the brethren to supply confessors and visitors, and made clear that the sisters who professed the rule were subject to the Franciscan Minister General."<sup>307</sup> The Isabelline Rule would tie the sisters to the First Order by requiring pastoral care from the men. The outcome of this request is still a bit vague. Lezlie Knox, in her work on the issue, points out that there is some evidence to prove that most Italian monasteries did not in fact adopt the Isabelline Rule, though there are no records to

<sup>305</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, ed., *The Saint* "The Earlier Rule (The Rule Without a Papal Seal 1209/10–1221), 73. Early on he had been in close relationship with Clare and a frequent visitor to the 'Poor Ladies of San Damiano' (as they were originally called). Celano tells us that though Francis loved them and was committed to giving them "his help and counsel always diligently carried out as long as he lived," he believed that to be a good example to his brothers in fighting any temptation, he ought to greatly diminish the frequency of his visits. Habig, ed., Celano, "Second Life", 526.

<sup>306</sup> Casagrande, 85.

<sup>307</sup> Knox, 51. The Rule was named after Princess Isabelle, sister of King Louis XI of France who took to the convent to free herself from a contracted marriage. This would have reminded Urban of his concern for the welfare of women from royal families who had joined the Order. Klapisch-Zuber, ed., Opitz, "Life in the Late Middle Ages", 273.

indicate any further formalised protests. It seems that “in practice uninterrupted pastoral care came to satisfy the sisters.” While quelled for a time, the dispute continued to rumble and where Francis had once envisioned harmony and devotion to his fellow creature centred in God, there remained frustration and discord. In the end and despite repeated attempts by Bonaventure (during his tenure as Minister General) and interventions by various popes, including Boniface VIII, the plight of the Poor Clares remained unsettled.

#### 3.5.4. A naked mystic

In light of the problems outline above, the image of the Magdalen in the clouds is intriguing. Here was the most penitent of women, the most devoted to Christ, second only to the mother of Jesus, in honour and friendship with Christ, and she willingly took on a life of starvation and deprivation in a gesture of total dependence on God. Even though her clothes disintegrated, God provided clothes for her by covering her with her hair. Even though she had no food, the heavens opened and fed her. For women who would see the chapel and then take to the cloister, the fresco might have been an inspiration or at least intended as one. If one submitted herself fully to a fervent life of penitence and devotion then God would provide for her just as he did for the Magdalen. This painting suggests that by trusting God as the Magdalen had, those who planned on entering the cloisters could be assured that God would provide. For the friars who would see the chapel, they could console themselves knowing that if the women followed in the footsteps and faith of the Magdalen, God would take care and they need not feel any guilt about it.

On one hand we could argue that any woman wishing to take on the life of poverty in the Franciscan way would understand the life she was embracing. Poor Clare’s welcomed the life of deprivation and could have possibly seen the cloister as a chance to fast and achieve the same kind of spiritual enlightenment as had the Magdalen. On the other hand we could see this image as a manipulative move by men who were trying to coerce women into living a life that would certainly silence them and perhaps leave them to even starve them to death; which begs the question—was the image about discipleship or deprivation? It is hard to tell. Certainly the arguments I have made would seem to favour the latter. However, it is also likely that the

pilgrim's who saw the images might have been encouraged and inspired toward a more fervent relationship with God because of them.

Another issue addressed by this image is that of the female mystic as director. Earlier I suggested that the images of the chapel help to dissuade viewer from seeking the guidance of women spiritual leaders. The fresco suggests that the Magdalen, as a mystic, did a holy thing by removing herself from the world and feeding on God. The message here could have easily been that women, who were supposed to be holy, such as Angela de Foligno, might do well to stop influencing men with hurtful ideas like *usus pauper*. Instead, such holy women might do better to embrace their own spiritual counsel and leave others well alone. The images could also be suggesting that the holiest of women, those like the Magdalen, were not really intended to be spiritual directors. The Magdalen is shown three times with Jesus, once en route to Gaul, twice in the wilderness and once at the feet of the Church. She is never shown to be directing, teaching or publicly influencing anyone. If we pay attention to the frequency of these categories, the most important thing about the Magdalen is her relationship to Jesus, then her time in the wilderness and then her journey to Gaul. This implies that her role in converting Gaul or as a spiritual leader is not as important as the story of the monk bringing her red cloak to her. Perhaps in light of the popularity of women such as Angela of Foligno who advocated *usus pauper*, this silencing of the Magdalen was intended to undermine the influence of female spiritual mystics, suggesting that it might be a better act of spiritual worship to take their own advice and adopt the concept of the privilege of poverty in the wilds.

### 3.5.5. A hermit's cloak

*Zosimus giving a Cloak to the Magdalen* (Figure 17) comes from the legend that a humble priest saw the Magdalen's heavenly feastings in a vision. Recalling the stories about her, he wanted to see for himself if his vision was true and set out to find her. After a lengthy search he discovered her cave but as he approached he began to tremble. His legs swelled, his whole body shook so violently that he could go no closer. Though he was himself, devout, the Magdalen's superior holiness and purity was what kept him from going any closer. But in the end the Magdalen was happy to see him. She had contentedly lived in the grotto for more than thirty years and she had

longed for one last opportunity to feast on the holy sacrament. She asked the priest to send Maximinius to her, who, delighted upon hearing his dear friend was still living, went to her immediately. In another version, Zosimos finds the Magdalen's red cloak and takes to her, then leads her to her friend, Maximinius for the eucharist.

Here again the name of the fresco however gets its name from the legend of Mary of Egypt and we see the conflation and confusion surrounding the figure of the Magdalen. She had been the one in the desert grotto that the hermit Zosimus had stumbled upon. Mary of Egypt's last wish was that she receive communion and so he returned shortly and communed her. Remembering her a year later, Zosimus returned to the grotto and found Mary of Egypt dead. The confusion between the stories is compounded by the fact that Mary of Egypt is painted on the opposite wall, but the sentiment remains—holy humble women can depend on God to provide clothing, shelter and food and need to depend only on the Church's authority and the administration of the Eucharist to ensure that salvation is secure.

### 3.5.6. In the end

We have now looked at the main frescoes of the Magdalen Chapel in concert and suggested a number of ways that these frescoes work together for a variety of purposes. Unable to extract one fresco out from among others to derive the full meaning of the work, we have looked at the chapel as a whole to discern its thesis. First we have seen it in context with the whole of the basilica, the Angevin links and more importantly the ties between the Magdalen and Francis. Then we have understood the ideal of devotion and penitence the Magdalen represented to the visitor, both male and female. And finally, we have seen that its purpose was largely to inform and instruct women considering the cloistered life—they, like the Magdalen, should be thoroughly devoted to Jesus by willingly leaving behind any hope of the world and ministry and entering into the model life of privation (read starvation) as the Magdalen, Mary of Egypt and Margaret of Cortona had. This life was to focus on meditating and contemplating Jesus with no regard to personal health, shelter, religious instruction, or correction. Such women were encouraged toward a mystical experience of the heavenlies, which could even be inspired by the lack of food whether from fasting or starvation; however, in light of the absence of depictions of the Magdalen sharing that experience with another, female or male, we can assume

that mystical experience was intended for the penitent alone, not a spiritual director. Finally, all that women were to embark on was to be in accordance with the Church; Bishop, Pope and priest were all masters of the woman's fate and a woman pursuing penitence should devote herself to Jesus in accordance and through the power of the Church, for in the end, it was the Church who controlled the offices of confession and communion and thus controlled their salvation.

#### 4. Conclusion

This has been an exercise in suspending twenty-first century eyes in order to see the world of the Magdalen Chapel in a fourteenth century context. We have attempted to do this by interacting with the frescoes as a means of a politically charged theological catechism on par with that of written word. The visual and cultural sensibilities present in Assisi and the pilgrims and religious men and women who would have encountered the Chapel would have been far more developed than ours, with a much deeper understanding of visual cues that not only told a story, but, in effect, preached a visual sermon.

I must be careful to refrain from casting all of the church leaders at the end of the thirteenth century-beginning of the fourteenth century in a bad light. It is certainly untrue that all churchmen in authority were out to silence and manipulate women, especially women in holy orders. Regardless of what was painted in the Magdalen Chapel or what was the intent of our artist and/or Pontano, pilgrims who visited the chapel would have interpreted the frescoes in multitude of ways. The images are beautiful and despite the agenda of any particular person, the ideals of the penitent captured here are inspiring.

It is important to remember that the Magdalen Chapel would have been seen by both men and women. As such, the ideas in the chapel would be absorbed by both sexes. As pilgrims travelled back to their homes, they would take with them the ideas they encountered in the images. Not only would women see the frescoes as a visual sermon, but men would as well and both would reinterpret the ideas found in the frescoes in their own way. It is hard to tell how these ideas played out. Perhaps this is what Brown meant when he said that "images had the latent power radically to reshape the nature of the faith they were expounding."<sup>308</sup> For both good and bad, images can get under the conscious level and burrow down into the psyche. As

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<sup>308</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 323.

pilgrims travelled home, the images would have worked in the mind, gradually altering the way both men and women thought about the Magdalen and the role of holy women. So “just as the written text acquired new meanings, so too did the visual.”<sup>309</sup> The context of the Chapel and its role in establishing the visual canon of the Magdalen made the theological impact of these images all the more powerful in shaping the popular conceptions of what the Magdalen stood for.

In concluding, it is apparent that the Magdalen was identified with and integrated into the Franciscan psyche, both by identifying her with Francis and with Francis’ followers. In our discussion of relationship between the *friars minor* and the Poor Ladies, we have seen how the claustrated nuns struggled for teaching, basic needs, and salvation against the apathy and unwillingness of their Franciscan brothers and then how the legendary and material about the Magdalen and the chapel frescoes could have been intended to shape the theological understanding of the women in the midst of this struggle. Our engagement with the images of the chapel itself has brought a deeper understanding of the intentions of the patron regarding garnering favour with the Church and secular authorities, as well as with the Franciscan community at large, even in the midst of such controversies as the conflict between the Spirituals and Conventuals and between the Poor Clares and the *frate minore*. While using the Magdalen and thus appealing to the Spirituals, the overall agenda to the visual catechism of the chapel favours Conventual preferences regarding personal property, finery, and learning. And finally, it is clear from the images that the minds behind the art used the Chapel frescoes as a tool of theological dogma compelling women to serve Jesus in specific ways, calling for complete subjection to the authority of the Church in a way that would keep them out of sight and mind of the rest of the world, with the consolation that the loneliness, starvation, deprivation and fear of the Church would be offset by a rich interior life with Christ.

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 322.

## Conclusion

Mary Magdalen is a timeless figure. She was a real woman who lived more than two thousand years ago, blessed with the privilege of knowing Jesus while he walked the earth. She also has the special honour of being the first witness to the resurrection, the event that changed the course of history. In the past two thousand years, her name has been one of the most widely known throughout Christendom, yet who was she and what bearing does she have on the identity of the woman on the wall of the Magdalen Chapel? We began this project asking just that question and in many ways we have satisfied the inquiry. According to Luke she was healed of seven demons. According to John she was the first to tell the disciples of the risen lord. Mark places her at the foot of the cross and Matthew with the other Mary's. The early church fathers confused her with the sister of Martha and Lazarus and Gregory the Great boldly claims she was Luke's sinner.

The Magdalen was the centre of a cult following that began out of a need to reform wayward Cluniac monks in Vézelay. Out of that need came a legendary vita that filled in the details of a scarce biography. Legend had her travelling from Jerusalem to Marseilles, preaching to the pagans, converting a nation, and retreating into the wilderness as a contemplative. After two centuries of an active ministry of miracles, healings and resurrections, the cult at Vézelay waned, but a visionary young Prince reclaimed her as the true patron of the Angevin kings and her relics were discovered anew in Provence. The legends had made their way down to Italy during the time of the Francis of Assisi and, as the Franciscan fervour grew more and more popular, the ideals represented by the Magdalen—penitence, poverty, devotion, chastity—were fitted to reflect those of Francis.

As the trecento turned to the fourteenth century, there was a good deal of controversy among the Franciscans, and a focus of that was the split between two factions: the Conventuals and the Spirituals. The Spirituals fought hard to maintain their privilege of poverty and were disgusted at the opulence in which many of their Conventuals brothers lived. They were particularly appalled with the shrine at the basilica of Francis at Assisi, because of its' lavish imagery and artistry. Ironically, one of the artists to influence much of the work of the basilica was Giotto, whose revolutionary painting style was in part due to the influence of Francis. The frescoes

painted of Francis showed his poverty, holiness and simplicity; they showed his great love and devotion.

These frescoes were part of the inspiration that led Teobaldo Pontano to commission the Magdalen Chapel in Lower Church at Assisi. His political ties to the Angevins, exposure to French art and a new role as bishop in the Franciscan world of Assisi gave him the challenge to find a figure who would adequately represent and fully satisfy all parties concerned. The Magdalen was a brilliant choice: she was the Angevin patron; the Franciscan ideal and she had been close to Jesus. The frescoes served not only to appeal to these entities, but they also served to provide a theological catechism for those who would see them.

I have suggested that two of the theological applications which ring out from the paint are Conventual sympathies and this issue of women's claustration. The first is easier to demonstrate, for the figures are clothed with fine garments with gold embroideries and there is a good deal of luxurious decoration. Moreover, a visitor would be prepared to see a Conventual viewpoint for the outside of the chapel is decorated with images of books and scholars of the Church, both of which represent the Conventual view. The second is a bit more ambiguous, however, when seen in light of the struggle faced by women at the time of the commissioning, it is easier to comprehend. At the time the chapel was painted women among the Poor Clares were utterly dependant upon the charity of their Franciscan brothers for food, confession and other provisions. The frescoes demonstrate that if the women modelled themselves after the great penitent, Mary Magdalen, then they should trust God to provide food, shelter and confession, and not force the *friars minor* or any other body to provide these needs for them.

It must be said that the images would have just as easily affected the calling of men as well as women. The Magdalen was a type of Francis and the frescoes of our chapel are also representative of Francis life in many ways. By the time of the chapel commissioned the Magdalen had been a popular figure and was patron to any number of guilds, institutions, and ministries. For several hundred years Assisi was one of the primary pilgrimage sites and continues to be one. It is quite possible that many more men have seen the chapel than have women.

Though as it is one of only two chapels in the basilica dedicated to women and as the rest of the basilica is filled with images of Jesus, Francis and male role models, it is a safe assumption that male pilgrims would have identified more strongly with

the other images of men. Whereas the Magdalen Chapel offered to both men and women a theology of what it meant to be a woman of fervent religious devotion. By the time the chapel was painted, there were very few other depictions of women other than the Virgin Mary. From our discussion about the Virgin Mary, we can see that she was not a figure many humans could identify with. The Magdalen Chapel was one of the first chapels dedicated to a woman who was in some way realistic. As such, it was rather foundational in providing Christian imagery of women at all. In *Discipleship and Imagination* we have seen Brown's advocacy of the mediaeval Mary Magdalen as an ideal disciple.<sup>310</sup> Our chapel offered the mediaeval world a more comprehensive view of the Magdalen as an ideal disciple. For Brown the two primary scenes/actions which establish the Magdalen as a more realistic model disciple are the resurrection and anointings (washing Jesus' feet). The Magdalen Chapel includes both of these and offers five more though none of them can be found in the New Testament. The model of discipleship suggested here is associated with the trappings of a patron's agenda, church and dynastic politics, and male and female identity. Nevertheless, the frescoes do offer one of the first visual discipleship models for women.

Today, the Basilica of San Francesco at Assisi plays host to millions of visitors, modern day pilgrims who pay homage to one of the great art wonders of the world. Ironically, the very thing Francis would have abhorred, honour and opulence in his name, exposes millions of people to the story of his life and the message he was trying to communicate. The Magdalen Chapel is nestled at the bottom of all of this, and it too tells stories. A visitor, if they know anything about the story of Jesus, can look up and read at least three of the images. It is the gateway into the rest of her story. She may always remain somewhat obscure, illusive even, but Mary Magdalen tells a story. Pontano, Giotto, art, Francis all play a part, but in the end she remains the red-cloaked, golden-haired beauty at the foot of her Lord.

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<sup>310</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 31–43.

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Figure 1 *Maestá of Santa Trinita*, Cimabue



Figure 3 Pontano and the Magdalen



Figure 4 Pontano and St Rufinius





Figure 5 Vaults of Cross transepts, Lower Church of the Basilica of St Francis, Assisi



Figure 6 Right transept, Lower Church of the Basilica of St Francis, Assisi



**Figure 7** Entrance to Magdalen Chapel from nave, pilgrim's entrance

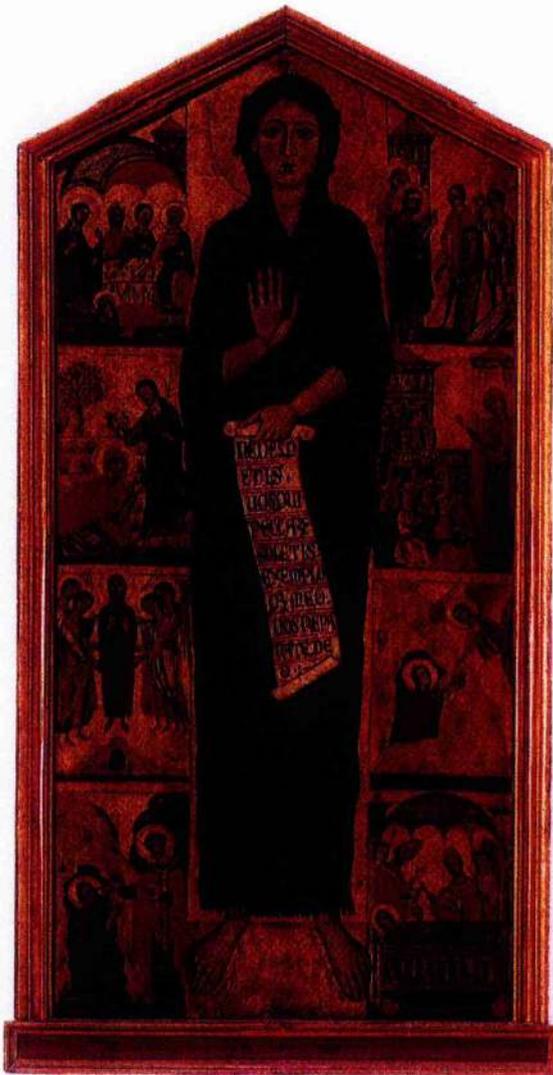


Figure 8 The Master of the Magdalen, 1250–1290

Figure 9 St Francis Panel

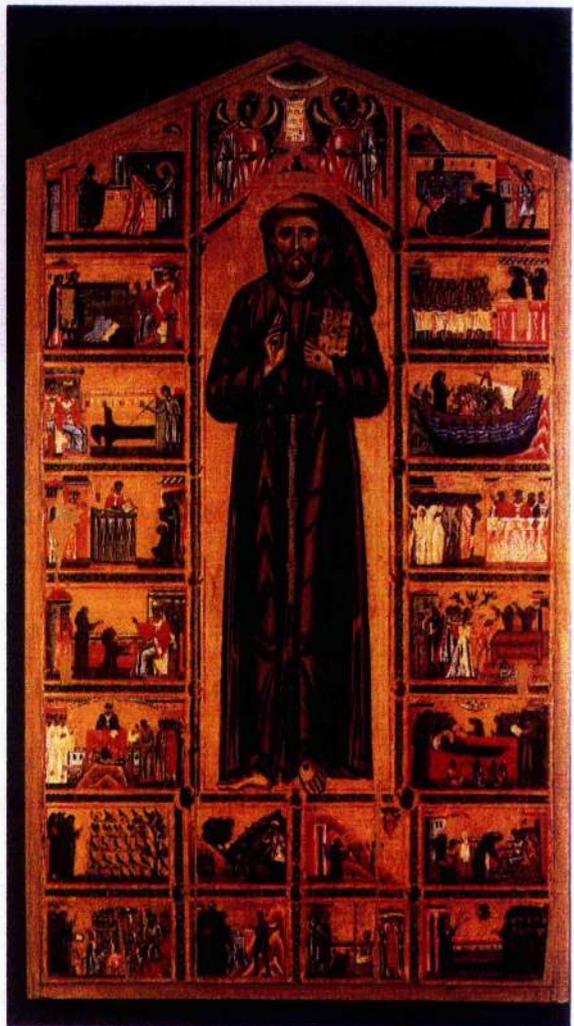




Figure 10 Magdalen Chapel left wall

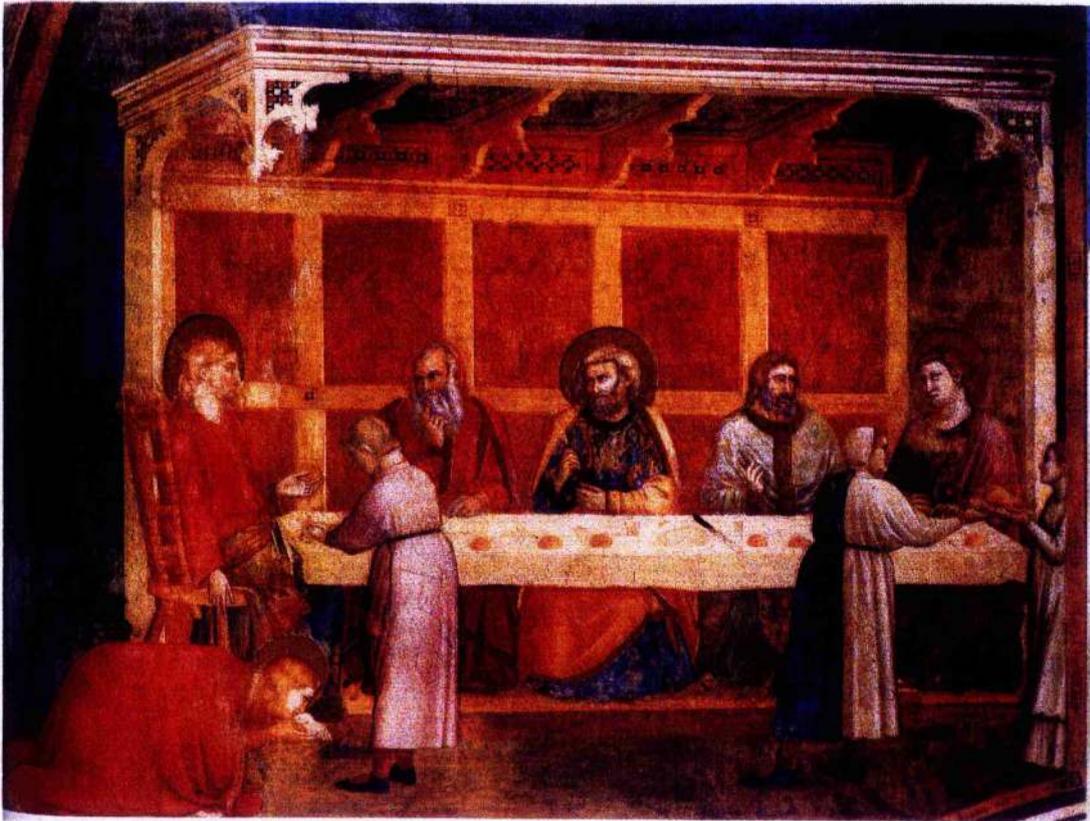


Figure 11 *Supper at the House of the Pharisee*



Figure 12 *Detail Tree of Life and Christ* Taddeo Gaddi

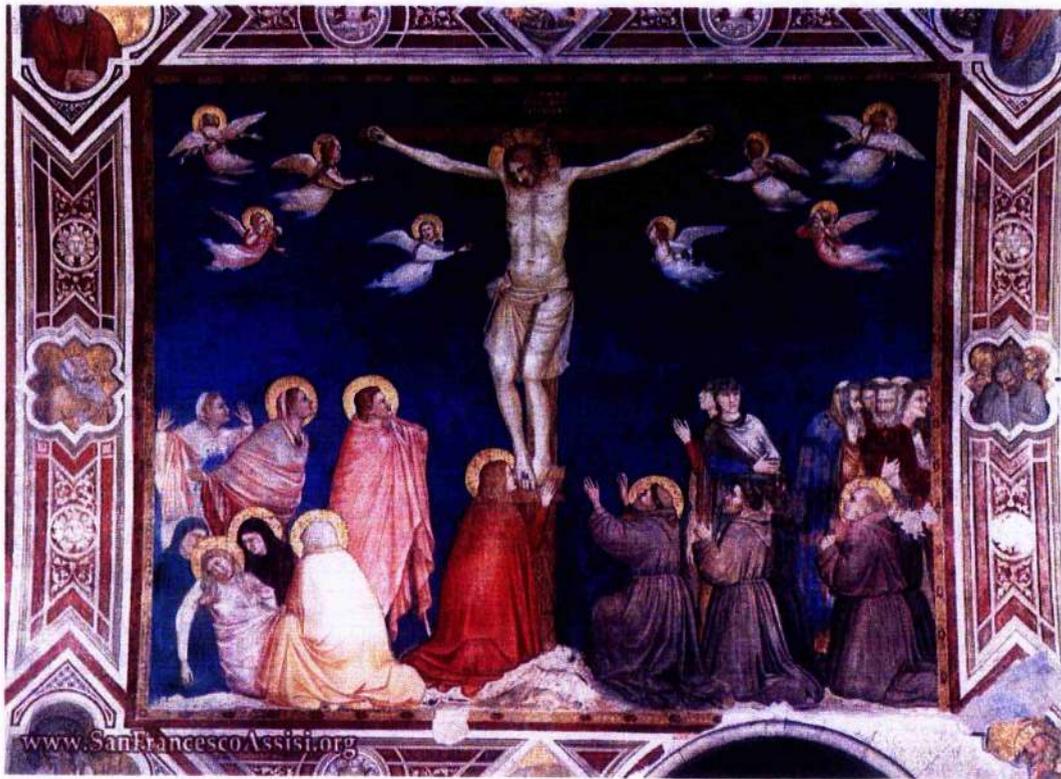


Figure 13 *Crucifixion* attr. Pietro Lorenzetti circa 1300

Figure 14 *Crucifixion* Cimabue





Figure 15 *Mary Magdalen kneeling before Maximinius*



Figure 16 *Augustine and Dionysius the Aeropagite*



Figure 17 *Mary Magdalen receiving her Cloak from Zosimus*

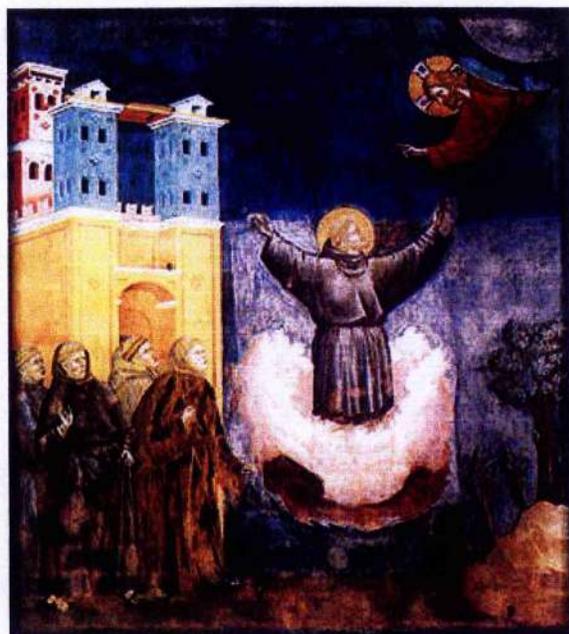


Figure 18 *Francis in Ecstasy* nave, Upper Church Assisi



Figure 19 *The Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen*



Figure 20 *Margaret of Cortona*

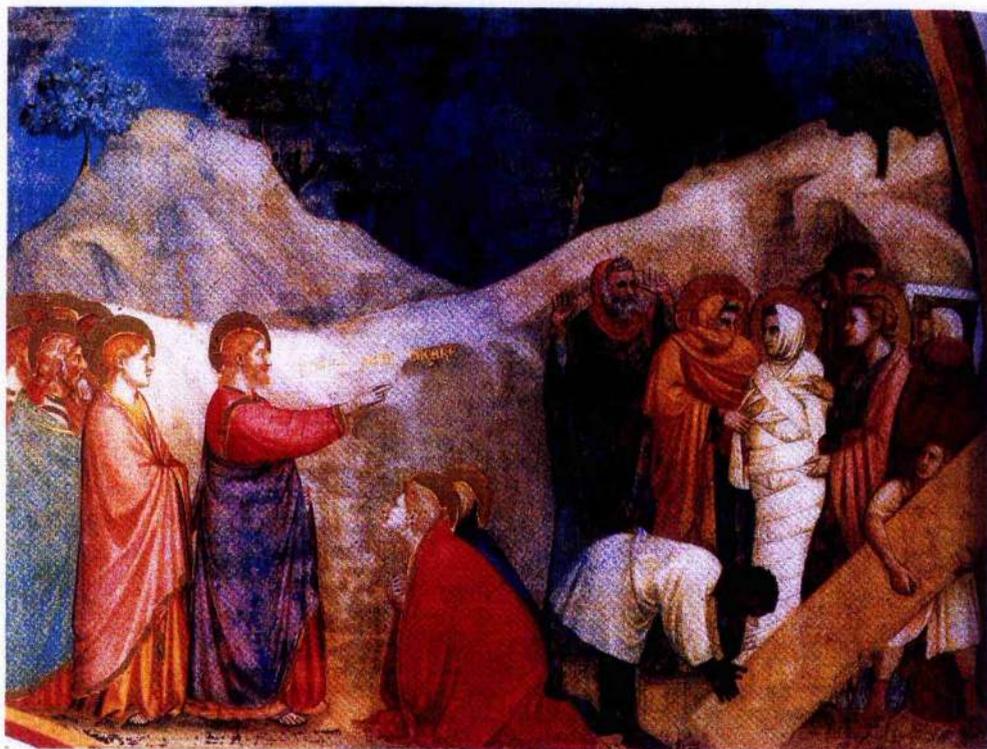


Figure 21 *Raising of Lazarus* Magdalen Chapel Assisi

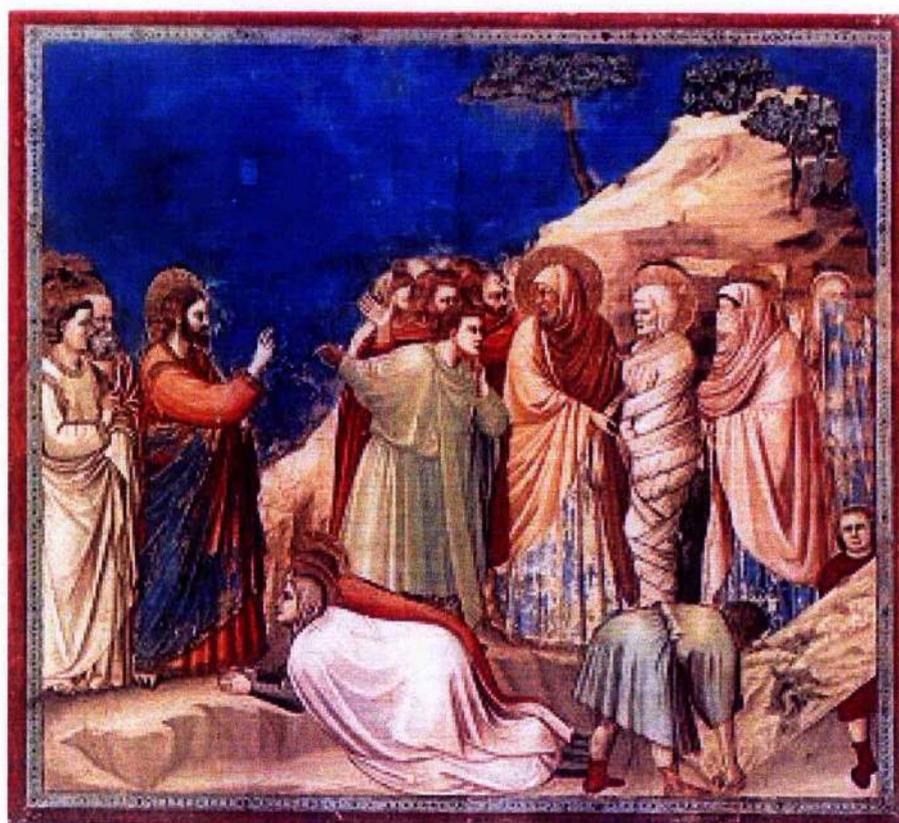


Figure 22 *Raising of Lazarus* Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 23 *Noli me Tangere*, Magdalen Chapel, Assisi

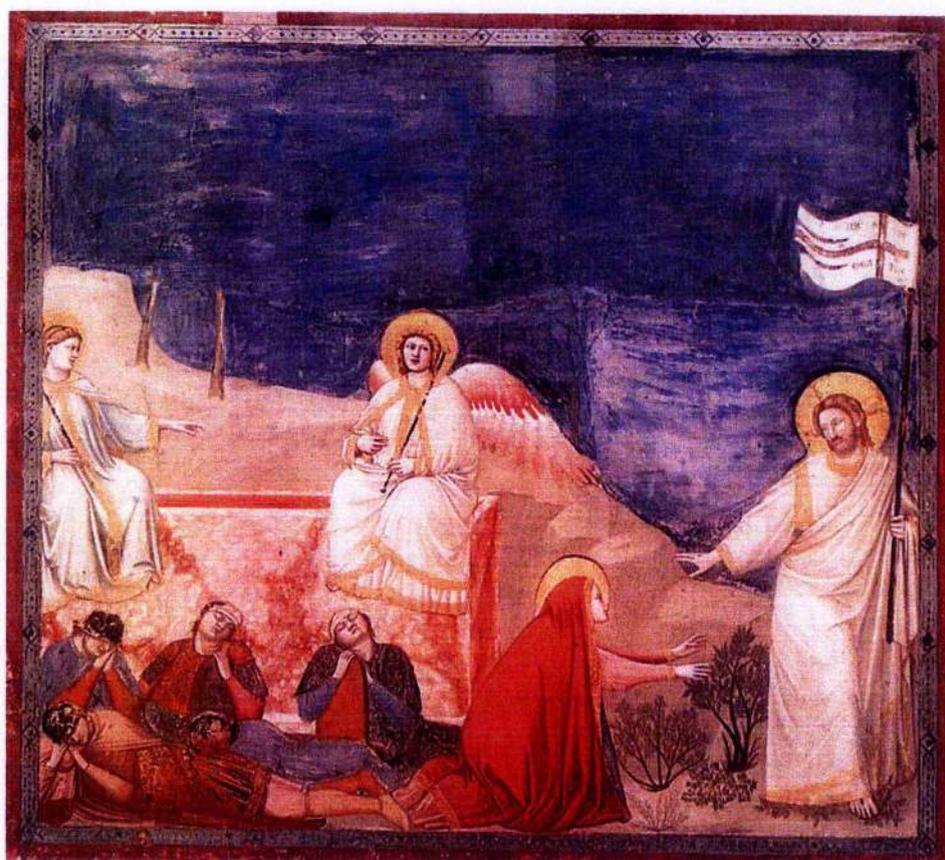


Figure 24 *Noli me Tangere*, Arena Chapel, Padua

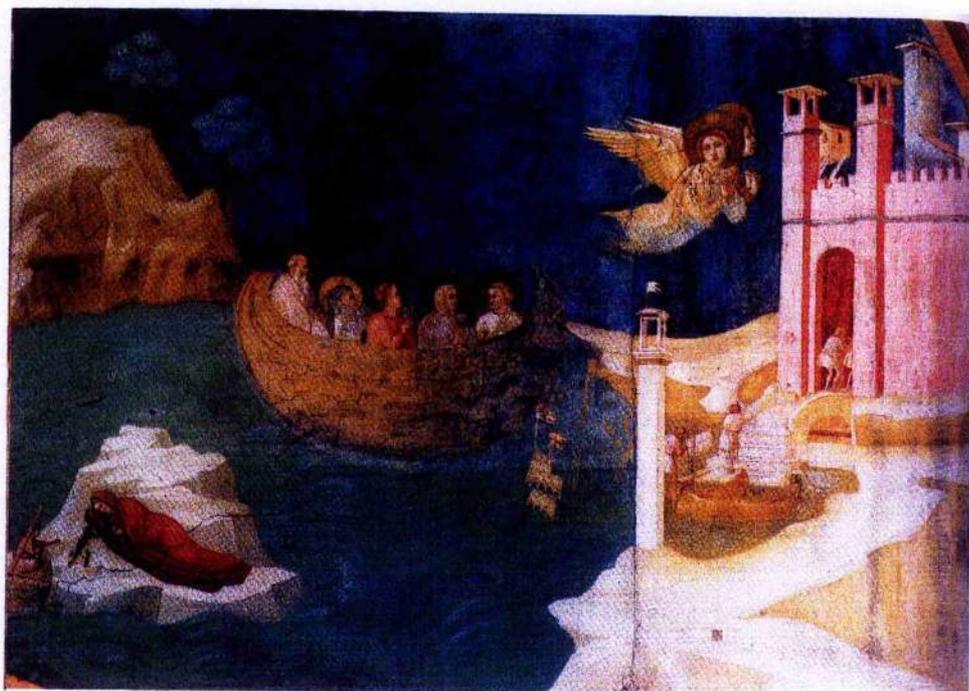


Figure 25 *A Voyage to Marseilles*

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