



FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND

Honoring St. Mary Magdalene as Apostle of the Apostles Through Art

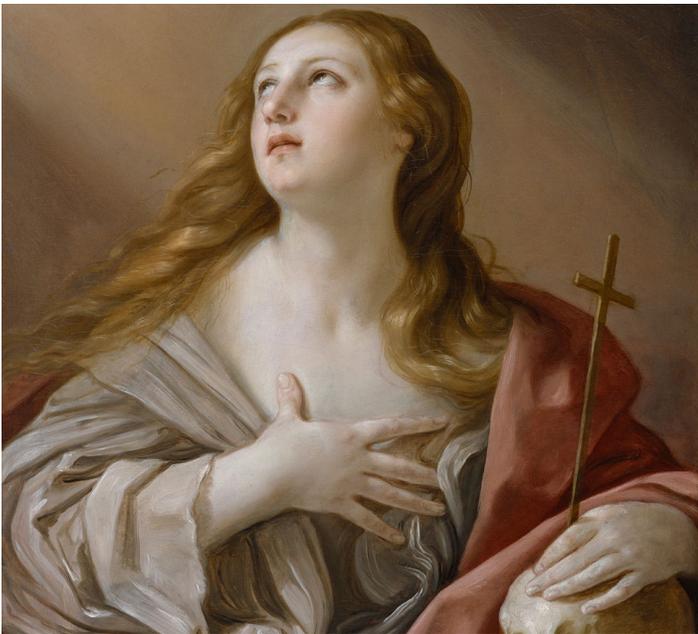
For over 2000 years, Christians have depicted the Word of God and the stories of salvation history through art. In every era, artists created images that responded to the currents of their time, images that reflected and reinforced commonly held understandings of faith, but also the major figures Christians sought to emulate.

Current scholarship recognizes the importance of visual art as evidence for understanding Christian history. It also recognizes the potential for visual art to express Gospel values and aspirations today. Focusing on the figure of Mary Magdalene, the Feeding Five Thousand Project, not only recognizes the way art has effectively misrepresented her over the centuries, but, more importantly, seeks to overturn those inaccurate representations by offering a contemporary portrait of her as the “Apostle of the Apostles”, a role that has been uncovered by modern theology and, officially, since 2016, by the Pope. By making art that correctly reflects her role in salvation history more widely available to all Catholics, but especially to Catholics students in grades K – 12, in universities, and in seminaries, recognition of her evangelizing role can be more fully appreciated in the life of the church today.

Inaccurate Art Portraying Mary Magdalene

Art has played a major role in informing contemporary understandings of Mary Magdalene. Unfortunately, centuries of inaccurate portrayals of Mary of Magdala as a penitent prostitute and sinner have prevailed in the collective Catholic imagination reducing her to nothing more than a woman in need of forgiveness. Even more damaging to her authentic status as a leader and evangelizer, many of the artistic renditions of her as a sinner border on salacious and do an injustice to her memory.

Titian's *Penitent Magdalene* (circa 1565) or Guido Reni's 1635 portrayal (below) would likely shock the real Mary of Magdala and those close to her.



Further, devotional works by artists such as 16th century Caravaggio (next photo)) portray Mary of Magdala as the downcast penitent grieving her life of sin, a far cry from the biblical story of Mary Magdalene.

The Penitent Magdalen was just one of the popular motifs whereby art literally painted over Mary Magdalene's apostolic role -- making her a begging woman in need of forgiveness, rather than a strong woman who led Peter and the



other disciples to a greater understanding of Jesus Christ.

Recovering Mary Magdalene, Apostle of the Apostles, through Art

Contemporary scholarship has rightfully restored Mary Magdalene to her role as a key witness of the Resurrection, a primary evangelizer, and an early Christian leader whose courageous faith outshone her brothers. Clearly she was an equal to them.

On June 3, 2016, Pope Francis made a remarkable move. By decree, he officially elevated Mary Magdalene's July 22nd memorial to a liturgical feast having "the same level of festivity given to the apostles in the General Roman Calendar, and that the special mission of this woman be highlighted, as an example and model to every woman in the Church."

The importance of that single official act cannot be overstated.

Essentially, the June decree, *Apostolorum Apostola*, not only elevated the importance of Mary Magdalene's role in the early Church, but it also overturned centuries of inaccurate portrayals of Mary of Magdala as a contrite prostitute and sinner.

In the letter accompanying the decree, Congregation Secretary Archbishop Arthur Roche wrote, "St. Mary Magdalene is an

example of true and authentic evangelization, that is, an evangelizer who proclaims the joyful central message of Easter.”

He also recalls that St. Thomas Aquinas gave Mary of Magdala the title “apostle of the apostles” because she was commissioned by Jesus to go and tell the apostles the good news of his resurrection. As stated previously, Roche concludes, “Therefore it is right that the liturgical celebration of this woman should have the same level of festivity given to the apostles in the General Roman Calendar, and that the special mission of this woman be highlighted, as an example and model to every woman in the Church”

With the decree, “Apostle of the Apostles”, the official Church has recovered the memory of Mary Magdalene’s first century role for twenty-first century disciples.

New Art for a New Era

The artwork *Mary Magdalene Proclaims the Resurrection* was commissioned by Rita L. Houlihan of New York City. Margaret Beaudette, S.C., a well-respected artist whose art has inspired thousands of Catholics, created the relief.



St. Mary of Magdala Proclaims the Resurrection
Sta. María de Magdala Proclama la Resurrección
Ste. Marie de Magdala Proclame la Résurrection

36 x 24” Sculpted relief panel, painted resin from a clay model by Margaret Beaudette, SC, 2014.

The sculpted relief captures the moment in John 20:18 when St. Mary of Magdala first shares the

news of Christ's Resurrection.

Sr. Beaudette began her design by first rendering the figure of Mary of Magdala. Then, after much study and meditation on the Scripture passages, she created other figures in the scene with expressions and postures she imagined for the disciples as they received the life-giving news.

Although the figures are not explicitly named, the viewer is invited to imagine their favorite early disciples hearing the Resurrection news.

Commissioner Rita L. Houlihan offers her interpretations of the figures in the relief .

Far Left: St. Mary of Magdala, commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the Resurrection, returns to a group of disciples. Determined and dignified, she raises her hands to proclaim the good news.

Center: Peter and his wife are in front. His face reflects astonished joy mixed with the grief of denying Jesus three times (Jn 18:17-27) and leaving the tomb too soon (Jn 20:10). Peter's wife, a disciple (1 Cor 9:5) and, later a martyr,* comforts Peter while reaching out for the good news.

James and John (with his arm raised), sons of Salome (Mk 15:40) and Zebedee (Mk 1:19-20) stand behind her in awe.

Standing Middle Right: Mary of Jerusalem (Acts 12:5-17) stands behind and above James and John. She was an early disciple and some scholars think she may have hosted the Council of Jerusalem in her upper room. Her son, John Mark, stands below and to her left, astonished, his hand on his face. He was a missionary with his cousin Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:5, 2 Tim 4:11, Col 4:10, Philemon 24). Barnabas, Mary of Jerusalem's nephew (Col 4:10) stands at her shoulder. He was the disciple who recruited Paul (Acts 11:22-30) for the mission to Antioch.

Standing Far Right: Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42), two outsiders of faith, listening, deeply alive to Jesus' presence; they represent all who have engaged, questioned and believe.

Kneeling lower right, left to right: Mary of Bethany, the disciple who prophetically anointed Jesus, the Christ (anointed one) in anticipation of his death (John 12:3-7). She listened and heard Jesus tell them he would be put to death. Next her brother Lazarus (Jn 11:1) and sister Martha. Martha's faith allowed her to see and declare that Jesus was the Messiah. In John's gospel Martha is the disciple who offers the Christological statement: "She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'" (John 11:27).
