

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
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kind of spiritual conversation. For many people it is the only place they can be themselves, and can speak freely about their feelings, their moral dilemmas and their spiritual life. This is particularly the case for emigrant Poles, far away from their loved ones and friends (even though Poles are less likely to go to the sacraments when abroad). The seal of confession is here a powerful encouraging factor.

Actual confessions sometimes seem quite schematic or superficial; nevertheless, they create the possibility for the confessor to invite the penitent to unload his or her burden. Then the flood gates often burst open, many things emerge and the real agenda comes up. There is a mixture of one's failures, sins, disturbing emotions, confusion, and lack of religious education. The conversation can begin and should begin now, so that a personal, concrete direction towards conversion can be found together, and new, life-giving ways can be opened.

The great factor in Poland is availability of confession. Priests are obliged to be available for confession at least half an hour before every Mass, especially on Sundays and feasts. Before feasts priests stay the whole day long, often until late at night in the confessional box. In the convents, basilicas and cathedrals one can avail oneself of confession at most times of the day. In this way the faithful can access confession easily. When we remember what a struggle it is sometimes to go to confession, we can fully understand the advantages of having a priest waiting patiently for penitents.

But also the person on the other side of the confessional box, that is the priest, can profit hugely from hearing confession. I learned that confession is a privileged place for me as a pastor to grow in faith and in the knowledge of my people. The priest can get in touch with a daily and authentic experience of normal people. Refraining from hearing confessions, neglecting them, may easily lead to losing contact with the people. It runs the risk of being irrelevant to what they really go through in their lives, and the preaching of such a priest is bound to go over people's heads. My experience tells me there is a deep link between hearing confessions and preaching. The confessions challenge the priest to be more authentic in his proclamation of the Good News. But also good preaching makes people trust God's mercy and the priest's proclamation and they are attracted to come to confession. Furthermore, priests should grow in skills and confidence in leading a person on a one to one basis on their spiritual ways. The approach to confession is a great test of the depth of spiritual life of the priest himself.

I refer to the findings of a survey on confession of a represen-

tative probe of practising Catholics conducted by the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church and published in the Polish weekly, *Niedziela* (March 2008).

**Remembering Mary Magdalene.** *Professor Kieran Scott, Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education, Fordham University, New York, writes:*

Mary Magdalene has historically received endless bad press. She has been misrepresented as the 'fallen woman', caricatured as the 'reformed prostitute', depicted as 'the temptress', and rumoured as 'the mistress' of Jesus. Historically, we've never given her a break! We have even confused and blurred her identity with a number of other Marys in the Scripture – particularly Mary of Bethany, who anointed the feet of Jesus, and with the unnamed 'sinful' woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair.

Who is the real Mary of Magdala? What is her true authentic identity? Mary was an ardent disciple, a leader in the early Church, an apostle to the apostles, the first witness of the resurrection, the first proclaimer of the Easter message, a woman healed by Jesus of severe illness. All four gospels focus on Mary's role during the passion and resurrection. They testify: she did not flee, did not play it safe until the rumblings subsided. She remained, dug deep and, with a rich presence, was a faithful companion at the cross, at the empty tomb and at the first encounter with the risen Jesus.

Mary of Magdala was a supportive presence during Jesus' ministry in Galilee. She (and her women companions) offered body nourishment, financial support and love overflowing to Jesus and his disciples during their ministry. She remained at his side waiting patiently through his trials and tribulations. And, finally, proclaimed and gave witness to new resurrected life.

On July 22, across our country and throughout the world, thousands of people gather in over 300 celebrations to honour Mary Magdalene. Why this surge of new devotion? Why these new devotees? What does it represent? What does Mary represent that rings a bell in peoples' lives today? In a word, she represents *presence* – a loving profound presence in her relationship to Jesus. For us, she has become our representative, our icon – that we can look in and through and see the face of the living God.

The first time I saw Mary Magdalene was when I was seven years old. I was in bed fast asleep. My parents woke me (and my older brothers and sisters) to alert us that grandpa was dying. Grandpa was 93 and had lived in our home the final ten years of

his life. We all gathered around his bedside – family, some neighbours and nurse Kathleen Kelly. Kathleen Kelly was a longtime and dear family friend. We recited five decades of the rosary. At its conclusion, nurse Kelly tested grandpa's pulse, closed his eyes and said he's gone. It was my first experience of death. Nurse Kelly would proceed to wash the body, shave the body, clothe the body in its finest garments and lay it out to be waked in my parents' bed – where I was born seven years earlier. Kathleen Kelly was Magdalene to me: her supportive presence, her waiting presence, her faithful companionship to my family, always at-our-side. When I remember her, I can say with Magdalene: 'I have seen the Lord.'

The second time I saw Mary Magdalene was watching my parents grow old together. How they companioned each other, how they were faithful in sickness and in health, how they remained at each other's side. On one occasion, in her 80s, my mother tripped in her bedroom and fell unconscious. My father was too weak to lift her. No telephones were available to call for help. 'What did you do?', I asked him later.

'I sat on the floor', he said, 'cradled her in my arms and sang to her – until she regained consciousness'. They were Magdalene to each other. When I *remember* them, and their unconditional love for each other, I can say with Magdalene: 'I have seen the Lord'.

What lessons can we learn from our remembering and our forgetting Mary Magdalene? We can learn, I believe, three indispensable lessons for our time.

1. First, is how important the recovery of *memory* is.

Henry Chadwick, the renowned Anglican theologian, recently deceased, focused his life's work on finding answers in history. During a debate at the Anglican General Synod in 1988, Professor Chadwick said, 'Nothing is sadder than someone who has lost his memory, and the church which has lost its memory is in the same state of senility'. Contemporary feminist theologians have indicted our Christian churches for our historical forgetfulness and selective remembering.

Women's history has not been well told. The stories of many women have been either forgotten or distorted. There has been a 'flight from memory' in our religious tradition. We must never forget: women also journeyed with him – listening, speaking and responding. Women were among his closest disciples. In the early Church, they served as apostles, prophets, teachers, stewards, deacons and more. An authentic conservative, I believe, is one who remembers and honours the *whole* tradition. Remembering in this way can have healing power. It

can reconcile us to the past, and be the basis of hope in the future. So, it's back to the future.

2. The second vital lesson from the Magdalene story is the reclaiming of our bodies. Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection. She did not witness a resuscitated corpse. She gave witness to a resurrected body – a body with new, transformed life. What is the lesson here? The lesson of the body is sacred space. Our human bodies are where we hold the divine life within us. Bodily life is where we 'hear' God, 'see' God, 'grasp', 'sense', 'feel', 'taste' something of God. The body is our common ground – where we feel 'the stirrings within', 'inner proddings', and 'the holy longing' for the mystery. This is what Magdalene gave witness to – transformed incarnational life.

3. Finally, the ultimate lesson of the Magdalene story is the vital need for a new religious imagination in our time. Magdalene's gift was her gift of presence to everything and everyone. She was able to see the divine within the human, the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal. She sensed the unknown in the known. She sensed the sacred in the secular and the divine in the details of our ordinary, everyday lives. This is the religious and sacramental imagination so desperately needed in our time.

Jesus told and commissioned Mary, 'Go and tell others'. Likewise, this is the commission Mary of Magdala gives to each one of us. Go and tell others what you have seen and what you have heard. Tell them you have seen the Lord. Tell them you believe in a revealing God.