

On Friday, Pope Francis issued an order to raise the celebration day of Saint Mary Magdalene to the liturgical rank of a feast. Previously, it had held the rank of what is called an obligatory memorial, which meant that the prayers of Saint Mary Magdalene are to be used that day, July 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Raised to the rank of a feast day – this is important. Apostles have feast days and other special celebrations are the rank of feast like the Visitation and the Birth of Mary and the Transfiguration. There is an even higher liturgical rank, that of Solemnity, reserved for the highest liturgical days like Christmas and Easter. But the raising of Saint Mary Magdalene to a feast has great significance.

The spokesman for the Vatican said that this order by Pope Francis calls for a deeper reflection on the dignity of women, the New Evangelization, and the greatness of the mystery of Divine Mercy. So regarding this I would say a few things.

First, remember, she was the first witness to the Resurrection of Jesus, she was the first one to see the empty tomb, she was the first to see and speak to the Resurrected Jesus. It is amazing that God would choose a woman for this because in those days women were not even allowed to testify in court. The culture at that time considered a woman's word as not trustworthy. Yet here we see what God thinks of women. He entrusted the first message of the resurrection to a woman, and not only a woman, but someone who had been a most sinful woman. Tradition says she had been a prostitute, although this is not in the Bible, but the Bible does say that Jesus had expelled seven demons from her as we heard in the Gospel today.

So we see the power of God's great mercy not only that she was forgiven, but also, in spite of her many sins and having been held in the grip of the devil, that she was transformed by the power of God into one of His most devoted followers, and given the privilege of being the first announcer of the Resurrection. The message to all of us, men and women, no matter what we've done, no matter what kind of person we were in the past, we are not beyond God's mercy not only to forgive us, but also to transform us and even to use us for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The second point I want to make about Saint Mary Magdalene which has implications for all women in the Church is her role as Evangelizer. It is not proper to think of Saint Mary Magdalene as one of the Apostles and yet so awesomely powerful was her role as an Evangelizer that Saint Thomas Aquinas would call her the "Apostle to the Apostles." She brought the first message of the Resurrection to the Apostles – it was her witness that brought them to the tomb to believe. So in the Church today, women are not called by Christ to be priests or bishops, but this does not diminish their role in the Church to be awesome and powerful witnesses of the Gospel for those in the Church and to those outside the Church.

And Saint Mary Magdalene gives us the model of how this is to be for all women in the Church. First, receive God's mercy. It is through a clean heart that God's power flows. Second, stay with Jesus. In the Gospel we heard it said that Saint Mary Magdalene accompanied Jesus along with the Apostles and she was at the foot of the cross to stay with Jesus through constant prayer, listening to the Word of God, and receiving the sacraments. Then, third, to go forth and proclaim the Gospel in the way Jesus calls you to do. For many, this is in the home. For some,

more specifically in the Church. For all women, in the multitude of different ways that God could use you within and outside the Church.

I just want to point out the particular spiritually feminine beauty of the “apostle to the apostles.” Think about this, how risky was her proclamation. She risked being written off by the male Apostles as just a foolish woman when she told them that Jesus had been raised. This is such a great trait of women who have been transformed by the power of Christ, with unbridled love, they have no fear of looking foolish for God. This kind of vulnerability mixed with absolute confidence in God rooted in unbridled love for God, I think is the particular picture of a holy woman.

So, receive God’s mercy.

Stay with Jesus.

Go forth to proclaim the Gospel.

This is the lesson of Saint Mary Magdalene for all Catholic women. Indeed, it is the lesson for all of us.

**Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2016.**